

Taiwan: Invasion is hard

by GWYNNE DYER

On Donald Trump's flight home from his visit to China, all the journalists wanted to know was whether he had talked to President Xi Jinping about Taiwan. China has been pushing hard for the United States to cancel its military commitment to the island state, and Trump has been hinting that he may at least downgrade it.

So the journalists popped the question, focusing on the \$14 billion US arms sale to Taiwan that is currently awaiting approval. He must have known that question was coming, but he replied as follows: 'I have to speak to the person that right now is, you know, you know who he is, that's running Taiwan.' (The president of Taiwan is Lai Ching-te.)

Trump couldn't even remember the man's name ? and he also seemed to say that he was in two minds about delivering on the previous \$11 billion arms sale to Taiwan. So the following few days have seen a noisy debate in the US about whether Trump is selling Taiwan out to China, but it's a bit late. Any US commitment to defend Taiwan militarily died years ago.

To be specific, it died on 24 February 2022, when Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the United States did not come to its defence. True, Ukraine is not officially an American ally, but then neither is Taiwan. (Joe Biden often forgot and said that the US was committed to defend Taiwan, but his aides and advisers would quickly walk it back.)

What used to exist was an unwritten understanding that the United States would defend Taiwan against an invasion by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Initially it was only unwritten because Beijing gets cross if Washington uses those words, but by Biden's time there was real doubt that the US would fight for Taiwan. And then came the war in Ukraine.

Biden probably made the right choice. Four years later Ukraine is still standing, and there have been no direct confrontations between Russian and American troops. But if the United States won't even risk a war with Russia because it might spiral out of control and go nuclear, then it certainly won't risk one with China, which is a far more formidable opponent.

In Europe, the United States has an entire alliance to back it up (although Mr Trump is now talking about leaving NATO). It has allies in Asia too, but I can't see any of them sending troops to save Taiwan.

Actually, I can't see the United States committing its forces to another ground war in Asia either. The logistics are insane: it is 11,000 km. from Los Angeles to Taiwan, and only 300 km. from Xiamen in Fujian province to the same destination. Taiwan is on its own, and Xi Jinping regularly says that he might resort to force to 'reunite' Taiwan with China.

So is Taiwan doomed? Not necessarily, although the odds against its long-term survival as a separate country have definitely worsened. Taiwan's numbers seem hopeless (23 million Taiwanese vs. 1.4 billion citizens of the People's Republic), but they have a secret weapon.

They live on a big island, with 300 km. of open ocean between them and the PRC.

'Oh God! Not another Strait!?' I hear you cry, but the Strait of Taiwan works to the country's advantage. In terms of sea conditions you might as well be in the open Pacific, and the island gets hit by three or four typhoons every year. The Strait is quite shallow and easy to mine, and the beaches are a nightmare for any attacker trying to land troops.

Where the Normandy beaches of D-Day were wide and flat, Taiwan's coastline has mud flats, cliffs and heavily urbanised areas. There are only fourteen stretches along the west coast where landing craft can come ashore, and everybody in the military knows where they are.

As for paratroops, forget it. They only carry light weapons and quickly run out of supplies.

Taiwan could not win a war against China, but a seaborne invasion against entrenched opponents is the most difficult military operation of all. If the Chinese regime will not use nuclear weapons against fellow Chinese (which one assumes they will not), it's perfectly possible that Taiwan could stay largely unconquered for weeks or even months.

Taiwanese certainly can't do that now ? they have long been free-riding on the imaginary American 'guarantee' ? but they could do it in two or three year's time if they are willing to spend the money and the US remains willing to sell them arms. (Nobody else will.)

They still couldn't 'win', but they could probably negotiate a lot better terms for a ceasefire. Look at what the Iranians did.