

# Taiwan: No panic

by GWYNNE DYER

?I hope I am wrong. My gut tells me we [the US and China] will fight in 2025,? wrote General Mike Minihan, head of US Air Mobility Command, in a private memo two years ago. There's still five months to go, but I'm going to go out on a limb and say that he's wrong.

Don't take my word for it, because my recent record in these matters is bad. I didn't think Russia's Vladimir Putin was crazy enough to invade Ukraine, although I knew he was largely detached from reality, and I was wrong. For a long time, I would not use the word ?genocide? to describe what Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu was doing in Gaza, and I was wrong again.

In my defence, I had not spent quality time with either man and I was reluctant to predict their actions based entirely on other people's estimates of their characters (especially since most of those people didn't know them personally either). I still felt compelled to weigh the pros and cons of the case, on the mistaken assumption that facts had some influence on their decisions.

The possibility of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is a far greater threat to the peace of the world (such as it is) than the relative sideshows in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. Aircraft carriers and nuclear weapons on both sides. A few poorly planned displays of ?determination?, and the US is in a war with China ? with the two Koreas and Japan not far behind.

China's President Xi Jinping will never rule out using force to ?recover? Taiwan, but the story that he has set a 2027 deadline for that terrifying gamble is just a Washington think-tank special. He does harp on about it a lot though.

Successive American administrations have practiced ?strategic ambiguity? (i.e. maybe the US would fight to defend Taiwan and maybe it wouldn't), and the fickle enthusiasms of Donald Trump muddy the waters even further. He is widely seen as a strategic coward (TACO), but he is sufficiently erratic that his response is really incalculable.

As for Taiwan, President Lai Ching-te of the cautiously pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) serves up the usual word salad: ?The message of history is clear. Today we share the same values and face similar challenges as many of the democracies that participated in the European war [1939-45].? Evasiveness as policy, so as not to rile China.

Hou Yu-ih of Taiwan's largest opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), is even fuzzier: ?The current status quo is that the Taiwan Strait is on the brink of war. So, to maintain close ties with the United States while also making peace with China is the solution to the problem.?

And although very few ordinary citizens want to be part of China, most people are not bothered by all this. Yes, Taiwan's military are a poorly trained, under-equipped shambles, but the public doesn't seem worried about a Chinese invasion. The United States is willing to sell Taiwan more and better weapons, but some parties don't want to spend the money.

So I will risk my reputation as a soothsayer once again and assume that both Xi Jinping and Lai Ching-te are rational men. In that case, it is unlikely that either man will risk everything on one roll of the dice. Xi will not set the machinery in motion for a sea- and airborne invasion of Taiwan, and Lai will certainly not declare independence for Taiwan.

No government of Taiwan, even back in the decades when the KMT (now reformed) was the tyrannical and maniacally anti-Communist single ruling party, has ever seriously considered abandoning the sacred fiction that there is only one China including Taiwan. There is just a persistent non-violent dispute over which government is legitimate, Beijing or Taipei.

As for Xi, who is effectively president-for-life, he faces no special deadline to claim his prize. ?Reunification? is his legacy project, but he has just turned 72 and there's lots of time yet. And always before him is the nightmare example of Putin's three-day ?special

military operation? to bring Ukraine back under the rule of the Russian ?motherland.?

Above all, there is Taiwan's ?silicon shield.? The island state manufactures 47% of the world's advanced semiconductor chips, including all of the most advanced ones. Even the United States is one generation behind, and so is China despite its ?Deep Seek? triumph in producing much cheaper high-performance AIs (on Nvidia chips made in Taiwan).

Invade Taiwan and all that is gone. It might be irrational, but even the Trump administration might feel that Taiwan is a treasure that it must defend come what may. The game is not worth the candle, and Xi will not invade for at least three years. He probably never will.

There! I said it! Now we wait and see.