

BRIEF

WHERE THERE IS NO WILL,
THERE IS NO WAYA PROGNOSIS FOR THE TAIWAN
STRAIT

| URMAS HÖBEPAPPEL |

Over the past few years, there has been much talk about an imminent conflict in the Taiwan Strait. As the CIA Director William Burns remarked in 2023, “We know as a matter of intelligence that he’s [Xi Jinping] instructed the People’s Liberation Army to be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion.”¹ Although he immediately qualified his statement, saying it does not prescribe an attack in 2027, some still think a conflict is imminent.²

Yet surprisingly, the threat levels in the Taiwan Strait seem lower than a few months ago. Recent changes in the leadership of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and developments in Taiwan’s domestic politics suggest that 2027 may not be the year that China and Taiwan go to war. Nor will the attack commence in 2028, or perhaps even the year after that, for China may be losing its ability as well as a sense of immediacy to attack Taiwan.

LOSING THE ABILITY: CRISIS IN
THE PLA

In January 2026, the highest-ranking general, Zhang Youxia, was accused by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of “serious violations of discipline and law.”³ The rationale behind this enigmatic accusation is anybody’s guess, yet it is clear that China’s military is facing a leadership crisis. Zhang was the vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the top military leadership body of the CCP. If Taiwan is to be taken by force, it is the CMC that will make the decision and bear responsibility. As of now, however, the CMC has only two members left, its Chairman, Xi Jinping, and a Vice Chairman,

General Zhang Shengmin—a historically low number. Liu Zhenli, another member of the CMC and the chief of staff of its Joint Staff Department, was fired alongside Zhang. The next full selection of a new CMC is expected at the 21st National Congress of the CCP, scheduled for late 2027.⁴

In its heyday, the CMC was populated by more than 50 high-ranking political appointees, all tasked with leading the Party’s armed wing, including the PLA and the People’s Armed Police. Today, the CMC heads 15 departments and five theatre commands through which it supervises all branches of the PLA. This is a huge burden for just two men who, in their other capacities, have

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to maintain order in the Party and keep China’s economy on track (Xi Jinping) or lead China’s top anti-corruption agency (Zhang Shengmin). It is unlikely that the CMC will launch an attack against Taiwan in such circumstances.

Unless, of course, this is precisely why Xi has decided to get rid of Zhang Youxia. China’s top general could have been fired because he deemed an immediate attack against Taiwan infeasible. He disagreed with Xi on the PLA’s reform plans and was not committed to the 2027 target year, instead preferring a 2035 deadline.⁵ The PLA has not adopted its new joint training model, which must be put in place to enable the level of coordination and command integration required for a blockade or amphibious invasion to succeed.⁶ Even though PLA’s technological

capabilities are rapidly improving (and Zhang's successors in the CMC are likely to fulfil Xi's wishes with more gusto), the PLA will not be ready to attack Taiwan in the near term.⁷ It will take a few years until new appointees to the CMC implement the necessary policies and learn to wield PLA's newly acquired technological capabilities, which make an attack against Taiwan realistic. For the time being, China seems to have lost its ability to take Taiwan by force.

LOSING THE WILL: SHIFTS IN TAIWAN'S DOMESTIC POLITICS

But being unprepared has not stopped the CCP from going to war in the past. In 1950, only a few months after the Chinese Civil War (1927–50) had ended, Chairman Mao Zedong decided to send light infantry to Korea against much more formidable US forces. In 1962, the PLA was pitted against Indian forces despite the PRC having just suffered the worst man-made famine in history. Mao believed he had no other choice but to fight. Xi may likewise attack Taiwan if he comes to see it as unavoidable. In both historical examples, however, the trigger for war was an immediate threat to China's security, real or perceived. It stands to reason that if Taiwan does not declare independence or attempt to shift other red lines defined by Beijing, Xi is likely to refrain from attacking Taiwan in the coming years.

The probability of an attack decreases with a potential shift in Taiwan's domestic politics. Taiwan's current president and the head of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Lai Ching-te, is in trouble. He is facing a divided population and an even more divided legislature (Legislative Yuan). Despite defining his mission as "bring Taiwan together for greater solidarity and a stronger nation," Lai has not been able to mobilise widespread support for his policies.⁸ If he cannot turn his fortune around, he will be out of office by 2028, if not earlier.

Lai is even more unpopular in China than he is on his home island. The staunchly anti-China members of the DPP—Lai among them—have repeatedly drawn Beijing's ire with outspoken remarks suggesting that Taiwan is already a sovereign, self-governing state and should not move closer to political integration with

mainland China. In his 2024 inaugural speech, Lai declared that Taiwan and China are "not subordinate to each other," signalling that Taiwan is de facto independent.⁹ Holding the office of the president from 2000 to 2008 and again since 2016, the DPP has overhauled Taiwan's history education to stress its 400 years of colonial heritage and define the island as separate from the mainland with considerable success.

The Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party, KMT) and its newly elected leader, Cheng Li-wun, could not be more different. The 55-year-old firebrand is a staunch advocate for Taiwan's ties to the mainland. She accuses the DPP of fabricating a historical narrative that artificially alienates Taiwanese from Chinese culture. Politically, she supports the 1992 Consensus, an agreement between the KMT and the CCP that there is only one China, and has made it her political priority to stabilise cross-strait relations and work toward "goodwill and mutual trust."¹⁰ As a candidate for the KMT leadership in 2025, she declared, "In the future, all Taiwanese will be proud and confidently say 'I am Chinese'"¹¹ and, perhaps in an effort to pay lip service to Xi Jinping's Global Civilisation Initiative, that "Taiwan and the mainland should join forces to reach new heights in human civilisation."¹²

The 2008 elections open an intriguing possibility for peace

Such statements are music to Beijing's ears. Xi Jinping congratulated Cheng for winning the KMT chairmanship and expressed hope that "the CCP and the KMT strengthen their common political foundation and unite the vast majority of people in Taiwan to enhance the Chinese ambition."¹³ Cheng desires to meet Xi in person, ostensibly for the sake of peace. Chinese officials have agreed to welcome Cheng to Beijing but have set several conditions, including that the KMT will "eradicate [Lai's] provocative attempts to achieve Taiwanese independence." Cheng has reportedly accepted the terms.¹⁴ She is due to visit Beijing sometime in 2026. This may put cross-strait relations on a more amicable track, giving Xi a reason to hold off the PLA's attack against the island until the 2028 election results are in.

But whether Cheng's appeasement efforts resonate with the Taiwanese voters is a different matter. On the surface, she seems to swim against the current. People who identify themselves as Chinese represent a tiny minority of Taiwan's population (2.5%). A majority consider themselves as primarily Taiwanese (62%) and may reprimand Cheng electorally for her ties to the CCP.¹⁵ She has already been accused of receiving support from Beijing for her KMT chairmanship campaign.¹⁶ Yet many Taiwanese still feel culturally affiliated to China because "being Chinese is not a political statement," as one young Taiwanese student explained.¹⁷ Indeed, 31.7% of the population seems to reflect this sentiment by identifying as both Taiwanese and Chinese. Cheng is well-positioned to rally this voter segment. It does not mean that the KMT is advocating reunification, which would be political suicide. Polls indicate that a vast majority of Taiwanese endorse the status quo in cross-strait relations, reject the "one country, two systems" formula, and disapprove of the CCP.¹⁸

The results of the 2028 elections will not be determined solely by identity politics. Given that the DPP's anti-Chinese rhetoric has only enraged Beijing but done little to make the population feel safe, many people who identify themselves as primarily Taiwanese will be looking for alternatives. Cheng could appeal to centrist or status-quo voters, as well as to those who stand to benefit economically from better relations with the mainland.

Invasion may be postponed as long as Cheng Li-wun plays according to Beijing's rules

This opens an intriguing possibility for peace. If Cheng wins the presidency in 2028, she may again stand in front of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing as the democratically elected leader of the Taiwanese people, not merely as the head of the KMT. Apart from the huge symbolic significance—the last time the presidents of China and Taiwan met in person was during Ma Ying-jeou's presidency in 2015—this may cause a considerable shift in cross-strait

dynamics. Bombing Taipei after Xi has welcomed Cheng in front of the Great Hall of the People is not only bad optics but counterproductive to the CCP's ultimate goal of unifying the country. Xi may begin to hope for a peaceful unification, a much-preferred option, given the risks involved in launching a massive amphibious invasion over the choppy Taiwan Strait. Invasion may be postponed as long as Cheng plays according to Beijing's rules: opposing legislation seen as unfriendly to China; removing institutional barriers to unification; promoting pro-China identity messaging; and blocking increases in Taiwan's defence spending.¹⁹ As a result, Beijing may lose the sense of urgency to attack Taiwan, along with the ability to execute it.

BEIJING WILL NOT RELENT

Of course, this prognosis rests on several uncertain assumptions. Cheng may not win the presidency—she has yet to win the nomination to become the KMT's candidate. Xi may lose hope for a peaceful unification and initiate a full-scale invasion before the PLA is ready, or the US may invite a crisis in the Strait to which Xi has no other option but to react. But if all stars align, the next few years may be less volatile than we are used to. This time, Beijing may lack both the ability and—depending on who sits in the Presidential Palace in the centre of Taipei—also the impetus to bring Taiwan into its fold by military means. Taiwan can use this time window to boost its military and civil defences, even within the constraints imposed by the political dynamics between Taipei and Beijing.

Alas, the lull in the storm is only momentary. Xi Jinping has not given up on unifying the motherland and bringing Taiwan under his rule. He is likely to launch an invasion if he sees Taiwan moving further away. Xi has stressed that "the Taiwan question" should not be handed to the next generation and that the island will be compelled to yield by force if necessary.²⁰ Although the weather may become less turbulent in the Taiwan Strait than we have grown used to, the calm will not last forever. Taiwan should do all it can to seize this opportunity and prepare for the more troubled times ahead.

ENDNOTES

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