

Making sense of Xi's claim that the US is 'goaded' China to invade Taiwan

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A recent *Financial Times* report on comments Chinese President Xi Jinping made to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in 2023 is raising concerns among foreign policy and defence experts. Particularly troubling was Xi's extraordinary claim that the United States was goading China to invade Taiwan – while Xi was refusing to take the bait.

The comments have prompted fears of a 'warped' decision-making environment in Xi's increasingly insular inner circles – one that could lead to a catastrophic strategic miscalculation.

Yet the more troubling reality is that rather than reflecting niche views, Xi's claims have evolved from long established and now widely held Chinese elite perceptions of nefarious American motives in relation to what Beijing calls the 'Taiwan question.' At the centre of these is the decades old, frequently repeated, claim that Washington is 'using Taiwan to contain China.'

Chinese views on Washington's 'using Taiwan to contain China'

The notion that Washington is 'using Taiwan to contain China' began to gain traction in Beijing after the third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1996), when Beijing conducted missile tests in retaliation to Taiwan's then-president, Lee Teng-hui, visiting the United States. It was popularised by Li Jiaquan, a prominent Taiwan expert and contributor to the Chinese Communist Party's 1993 white paper, 'The Taiwan Question and China's Unification.'

Through the writings of Li and other establishment academics and media commentators, the idea quickly morphed from explaining decisions by Washington that angered Beijing to a paradigm for understanding the United States' calculus in relation to what Beijing calls the 'Taiwan question' in its entirety. It has become particularly prevalent in Chinese writings on Washington's Taiwan policy in recent years, with the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database showing that more than 150 journal articles mentioned 'using Taiwan to contain China' in both 2022 and 2023. In the 20 years prior the annual number rarely surpassed 50.

Most Chinese writings on this theme draw from a shared narrative. Since the end of the Cold War, the narrative goes, Washington started to see China as its biggest rival or potential rival, and, for the sake of maintaining US hegemony, wanted to leverage 'the Taiwan question' to obstruct China's rise. Precisely how Taiwan is supposed to have been used for these ends has been subject to various explanations. Many earlier sources focused on geostrategic containment and Taiwan-US military cooperation. But in recent years, there has been a greater emphasis on China's diplomatic, and especially economic containment. The latter has played

a key role in shaping Chinese views that a war in the Taiwan Strait would benefit Washington's containment strategy.

Qiao Liang on how a Taiwan Strait war could help Washington derail China's 'revival'

A common thread in Chinese economic containment narratives is that US 'provocations' – such as selling weapons to the island or having members of congress visit Taiwan – are intended to prompt bellicose rhetoric or retaliatory military exercises from Beijing. Washington, the narrative goes, then uses Beijing's responses to 'hype up' the 'China threat' to damage China's reputation, enabling the United States to justify, and solicit broader international support for, measures that damage China's economic interests.

Some of these measures, as listed in Chinese state media and academic writings, include raising perceptions of a 'China risk' to weaken the appetite of foreign lenders or investors, strengthening trade controls such as tariffs, and building multilateral coalitions around economic and [technological](#) containment measures, such as export controls targeting China.

But there has long been a fear in China that an invasion of Taiwan would exact far sterner and more widely supported economic and technological containment measures.

This idea was expressed most directly several years ago in an article by retired Chinese Air Force Major General Qiao Liang – perhaps best known in the West as the first author of 'Unrestricted Warfare,' a book that discusses how economic and political measures can be potent tools for winning modern wars.

In a 2020 article titled '[We shouldn't dance to America's tune](#),' Qiao lambasted hawkish Chinese commentators' calls for an immediate invasion of the island while the US military was weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, he noted that if Beijing decided to invade Taiwan before China had replaced the United States as the preeminent superpower, then the US response on the economic front, more so than its military response, could severely set back China's rise.

Qiao argued that 'as soon as war breaks out in the Taiwan Strait, America... will ally with Western countries to embargo and sanction China... China would be unable to import the resources its manufacturing sector needs and unable to export the products it produces, and at the same time, through the two great financial centres in New York and London, [the US will] rupture China's capital chains.' In the wake of such measures, he added, 'China's revival might not be cut off, but it will definitely make the road ahead harder.'

The theory of Taiwan as the next instrument of a 'proxy war'

The above explanation that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan could help Washington contain China's rise was soon succeeded by a growth in prognostications that Washington might actually want this to play out. Helping propel this shift was the widespread view in China that the Russia-Ukraine War is a 'proxy war' that was instigated or at least opportunistically exploited by Washington to contain Russia – an idea built on other accusations of a US tendency to engage in 'proxy wars.'

Notably, a 2020 [article](#), reprinted by the Development Research Center of China's State Council, said that Washington was already engaged in a milder 'proxy war' against China through its alleged involvement in the 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Bill protests in Hong Kong, and that there were foreboding signs of it doing the same through Taiwan-US military cooperation. As the damage done to Russia's military machine by Ukraine's Western-backed resistance was complemented by US-led sanctions, asset freezes, and other economic measures, Chinese scholars and commentators combined the proxy war and economic containment narratives, postulating that Washington might apply the same strategy against China, which is more economically reliant on the West than Russia, through instigating a war over Taiwan.

It is important to note that examples of this narrative are not confined to Chinese chat forums, populist blogs, or military entertainment magazines, but appear in state-backed publications and reputed academic sources. One [article](#) in a journal supported by the Shanghai Taiwan Institute, one of the major Chinese think tanks

dedicated to analysing Taiwan affairs, said that Washington aims to ‘copy and paste the measure it applied in the Ukraine conflict to Taiwan,’ adding that this would help it ‘impose on China the full-spectrum sanctions it applied to Russia, pulling a rising China back into a ‘development trap.’”

Another 2023 [article](#) in the Unification Forum, a publication sponsored by the Chinese Communist Party’s China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR), stated ‘in recent years, America’s desire to arm Taiwan to fight a proxy war in the Taiwan Strait is increasingly clear,’ adding that Washington’s aim was only frustrated by Taiwan’s military’s failure to meet ‘America’s requirements for fighting a proxy war.’

Even in the absence of direct accusations of a US plan to goad China into a war in the Taiwan Strait, others have assumed that the logic of these ideas – which perhaps, due to an increasingly stifling political atmosphere, have faced little scrutiny – is so self-apparent that they would have equal currency in Washington. For example, an [article](#) titled ‘America’s proxy war in Ukraine,’ written by a scholar from the National University of Defence Technology, stated, ‘We definitely cannot count out the prospect that [the US] will use and support Taiwan’s independence forces to fight us in a proxy war.’ Another [academic article](#) addressing the topic of America’s alleged ‘proxy wars’ said, ‘America’s use of Chinese Taiwan as a proxy to deal with the Chinese mainland could potentially instigate a proxy war.’

The mutual ‘threat theories’

What is worrying about writings of this ilk is that even assessments that the United States might want to provoke China into invading Taiwan exist against the backdrop of an elite discursive ecology that often demonises what many Chinese scholars and analysts see as a ‘[hegemony-obsessed](#)’ Washington that has an amoral disinterest in the potentially catastrophic effects of realpolitik machinations. In this sense, Beijing’s ‘American threat theory’ is far more extreme and vituperative than the Western ‘China threat theories’ that Zhongnanhai often castigates. This, in turn, looms as a strong impediment to developing the strategic trust both sides will need to navigate growing tensions.

For instance, an article [titled](#) ‘Tirelessly ‘destroying Taiwan,’” which was published in a journal sponsored by China’s Taiwan Affairs Office’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits, said that sacrificing the island, as opposed to ‘saving’ it, is ‘objectively, substantively and systematically, America’s attitude towards Taiwan.’

An older [article](#) published in the state media outlet Xinhua bizarrely claimed that the US wants to stop China and Taiwan’s unification so that Washington can intervene militarily in the region, ‘compelling China to sustain a substantial military capacity and making it unable to focus its efforts on modernisation.’ A 2023 [Xinhua article](#), quoting the deputy director of the Information Bureau of the Taiwan Affairs Office, Zhu Fenglian, said that in order to retain its hegemonic interests, the US ‘creates problems across the globe, causing divisions and conflicts... Whether Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan, it then withdraws and reaps the benefits, leaving behind turmoil, division, displacement and death.... Now America wants to copy this in Taiwan.’

In these and many other articles, what could be described as Washington’s policy oversights or strategic failures – not to mention the ramifications of other states’ own decisions – are often buried beneath conspiratorial narratives that paint Washington as a geostrategic 4D chess master for whom human tragedy is not an unintended or unavoidable consequences but a strategic weapon of choice.

All this – and Xi’s statements to the European Commission president in particular – shows that the West needs to carefully revisit the often implicit assumption that the vituperative headlines such as those often targeting Washington in the Chinese state tabloid The Global Times, and harsh reproaches in other Chinese state media, official speeches, or public reports, are solely for the consumption of a popular domestic audience.

For Western domestic critics of the ‘China threat theory,’ it perhaps also reflects the reality that despite the voluminous writings both sides of the Pacific have accumulated on the other’s foreign policy posture and strategic intentions, neither knows the other particularly well.

But the more important issue is that none of this rhetoric bodes well for the prospects of stabilising the security spiral playing out in the western Pacific. The near-bankruptcy of strategic trust between the two powers appears to be contagious, and is now having a deeper strategic and visceral impact on Pacific nations once invested in brokering peace in the region.

A recent national poll carried out by the University of Sydney's Australia-China Relations Institute (UTS:ACRI) and Centre for Business Intelligence & Data Analytics (BIDA), for example, [showed](#) that half of Australians see a 'serious threat' of a war breaking out with China within three years, while [poll results](#) published by Japan's Cabinet Office in early 2023 showed that more than 85 percent of Japanese feared that their nation could be dragged into a military conflict or outright invaded. While security anxieties have traditionally galvanised smaller nations to work with the greater powers to lower tensions, growing distrust has made both of these middle powers, as well as other regional stakeholders, either less willing or able to repeat earlier successes in helping the two superpowers mediate their differences.

To the extent that both superpowers share the intention of avoiding a conflict over Taiwan, the optimal way toward dismantling the crude mischaracterisations that are destroying strategic trust is thus for the two powers to take it upon themselves to get to know each better. This will require not only engaging in regular high-level dialogue, but also encouraging broader people-to-people contact between elites that have a voice in both nations' foreign policy, security, and international relations analysis spheres. With the security spiral in the Western Pacific threatening to deepen, this may not guarantee peace, but it might give it a better chance.

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