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In the West and parts of Asia, concern is mounting that China might invade Taiwan to distract from mounting domestic challenges or because Chinese leaders imagine that their window of opportunity to seize the island is closing. Facing an economic slowdown and rising unemployment, some analysts argue, Beijing might be tempted to launch a military offensive to rally popular support. In January 2023, for instance, Taiwan's foreign minister, Joseph Wu, speculated that Chinese President Xi Jinping might create an external crisis "to divert domestic attention or to show to the Chinese that he has accomplished something."

Other analysts warn of an impending war because China's rise is slowing. In their view, Beijing might try to seize the opportunity to use force against Taiwan while it has the advantage. Admiral Mike Gilday, chief of U.S. naval operations, suggested in October 2022 that China could try to take Taiwan as early as 2022 or 2023. Other U.S. officials, including Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and William Burns, the director of the CIA, have cautioned that Xi has not

yet decided to invade Taiwan. But there is growing concern among some Western security analysts and policymakers that once the People's Liberation Army (PLA) believes it has the military capability to invade Taiwan and hold the United States at bay, Xi will order an invasion.

Fears that China will soon invade Taiwan are overblown. There is little evidence that Chinese leaders see a closing window for action. Such fears appear to be driven more by Washington's assessments of its own military vulnerabilities than by Beijing's risk-reward calculus. Historically, Chinese leaders have not started wars to divert attention from domestic challenges, and they continue to favor using measures short of conflict to achieve their objectives. If anything, problems at home have moderated Chinese foreign policy, and Chinese popular opinion has tended to reward government bluster and displays of resolve that do not lead to open conflict.

If Western policymakers exaggerate the risk of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, they might inadvertently create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of worrying that Beijing will gin up a foreign crisis to bolster its standing at home or assuming that Beijing feels pressured to invade in the near term, the United States should focus on arresting—or at least decelerating—the action-reaction spiral that has steadily ratcheted up tensions and made a crisis more likely. That does not mean halting efforts to bolster Taiwan's resilience to Chinese coercion or to diversify the United States' defense posture in the region. But it does mean avoiding needless confrontation and identifying reciprocal steps that Washington and Beijing could take to lower the temperature.

The hard but crucial task for U.S. policymakers is to thread the needle between deterrence and provocation. Symbolic displays of resolve, unconditional commitments to defend Taiwan, and pledges of a surge in U.S. military power in the region could stray too far toward the latter, inadvertently provoking the very conflict U.S. policymakers seek to deter.

WAG THE DOG?

Although the logic of diversionary aggression has an intuitive appeal, there is little reason to think that domestic challenges will tempt China's leadership to launch a war abroad. In a 2008 review of cross-national

studies of international conflict, the scholars Matthew Baum and Philip Potter found little consistent evidence of world leaders starting military hostilities to whip up domestic support. Moreover, authoritarian leaders may be less likely than democratic ones to initiate crises in the wake of domestic unrest because they have greater latitude to repress their people, the political scientist Chris Gelpi has found. And rather than embark on risky military adventures, leaders facing domestic challenges often choose other means to quell discontent, including working with other states to address threats from within—for instance, by settling border disputes to calm unrest on their frontiers—or resorting to repression.

China's response to once-in-a-generation protests against its draconian COVID-19 restrictions late last year is a case in point. After demonstrators took to the streets in dozens of cities carrying sheets of blank paper—symbols of resistance in the face of censorship—the Chinese government did not seek to deflect attention from domestic discontent with aggressive foreign policy measures. Instead, it eased its COVID-19 restrictions, detained and interrogated protesters, and continued its post-pandemic efforts to reassure foreign investors.

Chinese leaders have given few signs that domestic insecurity might prompt them to lash out against Taiwan. On the contrary, Xi and the Chinese Communist Party leadership have sought to project an image of confidence and patience in the face of growing international risks and challenges. Despite pessimism in China about trends in public opinion that show Taiwan pulling away from the mainland politically and culturally, Xi told the CCP's 20th Party Congress in October 2022 that "the wheels of history are rolling on toward China's reunification."

Xi has sought to project an image of confidence and patience.

Historically, Chinese leaders have tended to temper their foreign policy during times of domestic turmoil. Sometimes, they have engaged in harsh rhetoric and saber rattling, but they have only rarely launched military operations in such periods. Even Chairman Mao Zedong, who ordered the shelling of offshore islands in 1958, sought to mobilize the Chinese population while avoiding an outright war

over Taiwan, warning that China must only fight battles it is sure of winning.

According to the political scientist M. Taylor Fravel, China has compromised in 15 of the 17 territorial disputes it has settled with its neighbors since 1949—most of them during periods of regime insecurity arising from domestic political challenges, including unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, and renewed unrest in Xinjiang in the early 1990s. In an analysis of Beijing's behavior in militarized interstate disputes between 1949 and 1992, moreover, the political scientist Alastair Iain Johnston found "no relationship between domestic unrest and China's use of force externally." If anything, the frequency of China's involvement in militarized interstate disputes declined when domestic unrest increased. On the whole, in other words, Chinese leaders have done the opposite of what many analysts are warning: they have sought to reduce external tensions in order to tackle domestic challenges from a position of greater strength while attempting to deter foreign efforts to exploit internal tensions.

Beijing's behavior in the East and South China Seas has followed this pattern. During two flare-ups with Tokyo in the 1990s over the island chain known as the Senkaku in Japan and the Diaoyu in China, for instance, Chinese leaders quashed expressions of popular antipathy toward Japan with the aim of preserving economic ties with Tokyo, according to the international relations scholars Phillip Saunders and Erica Downs. And the political scientist Andrew Chubb has shown that between 1970 and 2015, Chinese leaders tended to be less aggressive at sea during periods of internal strife. When Beijing did act assertively in these maritime territorial disputes, it did so mainly to thwart perceived challenges with new capabilities, not to distract from heightened domestic insecurity.

BARK NOT BITE

Claims that Beijing is looking for opportunities to lash out for domestic political purposes aren't just wrong. They are dangerous because they

imply that U.S. actions have no bearing on China's calculus on Taiwan and that the only way to deter Beijing from diversionary aggression is to deny it the ability to prevail in such an endeavor.

Domestic considerations and the military balance of power are not the only factors Xi will weigh when deciding whether to attack Taiwan. Even if he prefers to avoid a near-term conflict and believes that China's military prospects will improve over time, he might still order a military operation if he and other Chinese leaders perceive a sharp increase in the risk that Taiwan could be lost. As Fravel has shown, China has often used military force to counter perceived challenges to its sovereignty claims in territorial and maritime disputes.

Such challenges, including U.S. actions that endorse Taiwan as an independent state or suggest that Washington might be on the cusp of restoring a formal alliance with the island, might trigger such a reaction from China. Even so, Beijing has less risky ways to respond to perceived provocations, including rhetoric and actions that could burnish its nationalist credentials without escalating to military conflict. As I have previously argued in *Foreign Affairs*, China's leaders frequently engage in rhetorical bluster to appease domestic audiences and minimize the popular costs of not using military force. They may also choose from a variety of escalatory measures short of war to signal resolve and impose costs on Taiwan, including military, economic, and diplomatic efforts to squeeze the island and deter it from pulling away from the mainland. Behavior of this sort should not be mistaken for preparations for war.

KEEP CALM

In any society, there are people who go looking for a fight. But among the ranks of China's top leaders, those people still appear to be less influential than those who recognize that it is better to win without fighting. Although Xi warned in 2021 that China would take "decisive measures" if provoked by "forces for Taiwan independence," the CCP reiterated in 2022 that "peaceful reunification" remains its "first choice." Even the hawkish Qiao Liang, a retired major general in the Chinese air force, has cautioned against the tide of nationalist agitation for action against

Taiwan. "China's ultimate goal is not the reunification of Taiwan, but to achieve the dream of national rejuvenation—so that all 1.4 billion Chinese can have a good life," Qiao said in a May 2020 interview. He went on to warn that taking Taiwan by force would be "too costly" and should not be Beijing's top priority.

At present, Chinese leaders are still pressing the PLA to prepare for a possible war over Taiwan, which indicates that they are uncertain about their ability to win. So long as these doubts linger, the use of force to take the island will remain an option of last resort. These leaders cannot count on a swift victory to bolster their domestic popularity, and there is no evidence that they are preparing for an imminent invasion. As John Culver, a former U.S. intelligence analyst focused on East Asia, has noted, preparing to seize Taiwan would be an enormous, highly visible effort. In the months before an invasion, such preparations would be impossible to keep secret.

For now, the best way to prevent a showdown is to recognize that mutual efforts to show resolve and threaten punishment are not enough to keep the peace. China, Taiwan, and the United States must resist analysis that could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy and make sure that alternatives to conflict remain viable.

To that end, Washington should assure Beijing that it is not bent on promoting Taiwan's permanent separation or formal independence from China. U.S. officials and representatives should not refer to Taiwan as a country, ally, or strategic asset, or attempt to sow discord or encourage regime change in China, which would provoke rather than deter Beijing. Washington should help bolster Taiwan's defenses, but it should do so without signaling dramatic changes in U.S. military support, which risk inadvertently creating the impression that Beijing has a limited window to invade. Beijing, Washington, and Taipei must avoid creating the very do-or-die scenario that they fear.