

Gathering Storm over the Taiwan Strait

Su Chi

United Daily News(聯合報), December 8, 2019, p. A12

Due to her dismal domestic performance over the past three years, President Tsai Ing-wen has chosen to build her election campaign upon total hostility toward Mainland China and seizing advantage of the turmoil in Hong Kong. The question is, after a year-long fire and fury, what is next?

At the beginning of October, this author wrote of “five ifs and five sureties” that were deeply troubling: 1) if the November Hong Kong District Council election turned out to be unfavorable for Beijing, 2) if Tsai succeeded in being re-elected, 3) if Beijing concluded that the DPP would enjoy “one-party rule” for a long time to come, 4) if Beijing determined that there is a substantive connection between Tsai’s re-election and the US, and 5) if Xi Jinping were to come under enormous domestic pressure due to the failure of his Taiwan and Hong Kong policies, then the possibility of something “earthshaking” occurring in the Taiwan Strait would increase.

As of now, the first of these “ifs,” concerning Hong Kong, has already happened, and the other four are gaining in severity and depth. As for the “if” regarding Taiwan’s election in January 2020, if Tsai Ing-wen (who has pursued a barely concealed agenda for Taiwan Independence over the first three years of her term in office followed by an entire year’s worth of overt invective against China) and her partner on the DPP ticket, William Lai (who styles himself a “pragmatic Taiwan independence worker”) win the election, I am afraid no one on the Mainland will give credence to the hollow claims of her “goodwill” anymore. They will be utterly convinced that Ms. Tsai and Mr. Lai are dead set on a course toward Taiwan Independence.

As for the “if” regarding the DPP’s “one-party rule,” one need just look at how Tsai has kept an iron grip on the executive and legislative branches of government, having them do her bidding at will in the last three years. The reach of the DPP has even extended into education, the media, the military, and what should be strictly non-partisan government institutions, such as the Central Election Commission, the judicial, supervision and examination branches of government, and the National

Communications Commission. If Tsai is re-elected, Taiwan will most likely enter into a new dynasty, if not a new nation.

As for the "if" regarding Beijing's perception of the U.S. role, recent statements by relevant US officials and think tanks, the brash ideas of members of Congress, and the odd Wang Liqiang case all reveal that Tsai and some of her American friends are actively playing the American and Taiwan cards. If Tsai is re-elected, Beijing may well feel that it has not only "lost Taiwan," but also suffered a major setback in the US-China relationship.

The fifth "if" is most crucial. Should his Taiwan and Hong Kong policies fail, Xi Jinping will be caught in an awkward position. Seemingly at the apex of power, Xi may still be vulnerable to other forces ganging up on him, using Taiwan as a pretext. Otherwise more inclined toward peaceful reunification, Xi may feel compelled to do something to deflect the pressure.

What makes the unknown "ifs" so dangerous are the "five sureties" that lie behind them: 1) the Chinese Communist Party is supremely confident that China's military might is on par with that of the United States in the Strait, 2) President Tsai is firmly convinced that the Chinese Communist Party is not spoiling for a fight and that, in any case, the United States will come to the rescue; 3) Tsai Ing-wen will do anything it takes to secure a second term, and ditto Xi Jinping for his third term; 4) there are no high-level communication between the two sides of the Strait; and 5) the "strategic dialogue" between the US and China has been suspended over a year. During the past few decades, the "five ifs" and "five sureties" have never fallen into complete alignment. Unfortunately next year they may all line up in a perfect storm, every single one of them.

If Tsai is re-elected, next year the two sides of the Taiwan Strait will be like two goats in a faceoff on a narrow wooden bridge, one DPP and one CCP, without any buffer such as the HK Government in the middle. One of the goats (Tsai Ing-wen) said five years ago that "if we win (the election), even China will change its course to accommodate the DPP." Since then she has indeed not backed off one bit, and doing so next year upon reelection appears even more impossible. The other goat (Xi Jinping), stronger and sturdier, will certainly not back down or countenance inaction. Both goats most likely will barrel toward each other, believing they will win. Both

blare their teeth, bluster and posture provocatively at the other without actually communicating. And one of them even has cheerleaders on the sidelines egging it on.

We only need to look back at 2008, when most of the "five ifs" and "five sureties" had yet to appear. Even though Ma Ying-jeou's odds of winning were extremely favorable, Beijing still mobilized a large force across the Strait in preparation for an attack on Taiwan depending on the election outcome. How does this allow us any optimism about the Taiwan Strait next year?

An increasing number of international experts have expressed concern over this situation. Former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert O. Work of the U.S. wrote in June this year that the Pentagon had simulated several US-China wargames, all of which showed U.S. defeat¹. In September, the *New York Times* revealed the number of wargames on Taiwan scenario. The Pentagon conducted 18 wargames in recent years and the U.S. lost 18 times².

In June, US Department of Defense officially released its "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report" stating that "If our competitors decide to advance their interests through force, they are likely to enjoy a local military advantage at the onset of conflict. In a fait accompli scenario, competitors would seek to employ their capabilities quickly to achieve limited objectives and forestall a response from the United States, and its allies and partners."³ This means that the current political situation in Taiwan would be completely changed before American intervention could take place. The RAND Corporation, the University of Sydney and other think tanks have all reached the same conclusion.

In mid-November, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission established by authority of the US Congress submitted a more than 500-page report to Congress after holding eight public hearings and consulting 77 experts.⁴ The report

¹ Robert O. Work and Greg Grant, "Beating the Americans at their Own Game," *Center for a New American security*, June 6, 2019,

<<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/ beating-the-americans-at-their-own-game>>, p.15.

² Nicholas Kristof, "This is How a War with China could Begin," September 4, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/opinion/china-taiwan-war.htm>>

³ The Department of Defense, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report- Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," <<https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>>, p.18

⁴ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "2019 Report to Congress of the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission," November 2019, <<https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-11/2019%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf>>

noted that, “The cross-Strait military balance has decidedly shifted in China’s favor in recent years.”⁵ It also asserted that “Beijing could decide to initiate a military conflict even if it calculated the United States would intervene due to its confidence it would be able to effectively deter or defeat intervening US military forces.”⁶ The 2019 “Report to Congress” further stated, “The altered military balance has led China to act toward Taiwan with growing impunity, increasing the incidence of aggressive acts such as the March 2019 median line crossing. This could result in an accident or miscalculation leading to unintended conflict, or even see Beijing seek an outright military confrontation to press for resolution of its political differences with Taipei.”⁷

If these are not warning signs, then what are they?

No wonder Foreign Minister Joseph Wu in an exclusive interview with Reuters on November 7th of this year also declared that "...we need to be very careful" lest Beijing use force against Taiwan.⁸ Note, however, that he merely attributed this potential use of military force to "an economic slowdown" or "internal instability" on the Chinese mainland, not the DPP itself.

The Taiwan public, who has enjoyed modest blessedness for quite a while, remains totally oblivious to the fact that the situation in the Taiwan Strait is more dangerous than ever. However, the Tsai Administration, which is fully aware of the situation, still continues to goad the people of Taiwan into taking high risks. All one can do is gasp in despair!

(The author is the chairman of the Taipei Forum and former secretary general of the National Security Council)

⁵

⁵ Ibid. p. 470.

⁶ Ibid. p. 303.

⁷ Ibid. p. 470.

⁸ Yimou Lee, Fabian Hamacher, “Taiwan warns of possible attack if China’s slowdown ‘become serious’,” *Reuters*, November 7, 2019,

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-diplomacy-china/taiwan-warns-of-possible-attack-if-chinas-slowdown-becomes-serious-idUSKBN1XH0H5>