

The Gathering Typhoon

Taiwan, Xi Jinping, and America's year of danger

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The smoke rising over Kyiv reminds us that the international order is subject to nonconsensual revision, and that the revisionists most likely to mount a violent challenge are nationalist dictatorships with a sense of grievance. I am less concerned about Vladimir Putin, however, than I am about a despot equally unaccountable, who rules a stronger country, and whose opposition to the West is [more fundamental](#). I am thinking of Xi Jinping.

Some say he holds more power than any Chinese ruler since Mao Zedong, though he's arguably more powerful even than Mao. Though he hasn't established as strong a personality cult, he is equally skilled at cowing or eliminating potential rivals, and the improved technology of surveillance, communication, and data processing has let him centralize control more effectively than Mao could dream of doing, and over a nation with vastly greater resources than Mao's China enjoyed.

In his public appearances, Xi comes across as phlegmatic and dull. When he became General Secretary, there was amusement at his [mispronunciations of the literary language](#) employed by his speechwriters, who then started [spelling out unusual ideograms phonetically](#) on his teleprompter. He had earned a doctorate from a prestigious university in Beijing with a dissertation [subsequently found to be](#) both ghostwritten and plagiarized. In his capacity as Chairman of the Central Military Commission, he affected camouflage fatigues when visiting the troops, but he was perhaps not fully prepared for the part:

at a major military parade, he repeatedly [saluted with his left hand](#). So many citizens have mockingly compared him to Winnie-the-Pooh that even mentioning that bear of little brain [can now trigger automatic deletion on the Chinese internet](#).

But for all his foibles, Xi shares a trait with the greatest conquerors in history: he resorts to extreme solutions, unconstrained by convention or law or compassion. He has repeatedly done what no one imagined could be done, and his audacity has served him well.

Collective leadership has been the watchword of Chinese politics ever since Deng Xiaoping. The ruling elite had learned that one-man rule with a personality cult was bad for the country and (recalling how many senior officials were purged and persecuted under Mao) dangerous to themselves. Never again, they said. Factional rivalries would now be ended by comfortable retirements instead of incarceration or death. The Premier now exercised genuine authority with a division of labor between himself and the General Secretary. It appeared that there really was rule by consensus of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. The highest offices were subject to term limits, and those limits were scrupulously observed. Xi Jinping has swept all this aside. He anointed himself the "Core" of the Party, gradually reduced the Premier to a stage prop, locked up Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang for life, and rewrote the Constitution to let himself retain power indefinitely.

Ethnic tensions in Xinjiang, home to a Turkic people in China's Far West, have long seemed ineradicable. Beijing was never going to grant the Uyghur people independence, so the problem just had to be managed. But Xi Jinping may have found a final solution. He constructed [internment camps](#) for at least 1.5 million Muslims, from which shocking tales of mistreatment have emerged. Aspects of the program (as

described [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#); for a staggeringly complete compilation of testimonies, see the work of Cornell's Magnus Fiskesjö [here](#)) have led to serious [accusations of genocide](#).

Consider how Xi solved the problem of Hong Kong. In the agreement preparing the 1997 handover from Britain, China agreed the former colony would enjoy a high degree of autonomy—most significantly, a Western-style legal system—for fifty years. But early in the new century, the younger generation began to identify as “Hong Konger, not Chinese.” Up to two million people marched to protest an extradition law. Many thought Beijing was caught in a dilemma. But Xi Jinping found a way out: flout the Sino-British Joint Declaration by imposing a new, retroactive National Security Law; [arrest leading dissidents, independent journalists, and artists](#); impose tight [censorship](#) and [curriculum control](#); and let [malcontents emigrate](#). Hong Kong is being transformed into just another drab second-tier Chinese city. Even its quirky language is [on the chopping block](#).

Xi shatters precedents to annihilate opposition. It takes an effort of imagination to foresee what he will do next.

But he will do something next, something big. By arrogating so much power to himself, he has made it not only possible but necessary for him to accomplish great things. The expectations of the multitudes intoxicated with [nationalism](#), as well as the resentment of colleagues harmed or irked by his high-handedness, require him to maintain the pace and keep delivering ever greater installments of the Chinese Dream. A placid, steady-state dictatorship may be possible for his successors, but not for him.

And everyone knows the next place he is likely to impose his will.

Taiwan

Taiwan has never been, and its people [don't want to be](#), ruled by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Until the brief, vigorous administration of its first provincial governor (1887-1893), the island was only weakly connected to the center during its two hundred years as a prefecture of the Qing Empire. There followed fifty years as a Japanese colony (1895-1945) that would be remembered with a surprising lack of bitterness. Taiwan's experience of authoritarian rule by the Republican mainland (1945-1949) and then by the mainland's Kuomintang (KMT) refugees (1949-1987) was [nasty](#). But by a series of small miracles, the people have developed a complicated and independent identity, a sincere commitment to [human rights and the rule of law](#), and a vibrant (if [sometimes immature](#)) democracy seated in a culture expressive of [humanity](#) and tolerance.

Having spent seven decades shaping an image of Taiwan into a fetish of lost national honor, China is resolved to erase the island's identity. Its conquest would be Xi's apotheosis, and he has promised to achieve it.

Unfortunately, the Taiwanese ([the loyalty of whose senior officers is uncertain](#)) have long been [feckless about their own defense](#), relying on the protection, [hinted but not promised](#), of the United States.

Never has that protection been more doubtful. Our navy [is in disarray](#). The Pentagon prioritizes [everything except military preparedness](#). Bucks [are passed](#). Politicians of both parties are [compromised by financial relationships](#) with Chinese state-owned enterprises. [Big Tech is in symbiosis with tyranny](#), and [has been](#) for [a long time](#). Many American academics have been coopted or, in some cases, [suborned](#). Citizens of the class that would bear the greatest burdens of war have

come to distrust their government after multiple foreign adventures that proved costly, futile, and ignominious. Most sadly, no one can expect Americans to defend others' liberty after [failing to preserve their own](#). Finally, for executive leadership in international affairs we depend on the office of the President, with the Vice-President as backup. These positions are now held by individuals whose inability is evident from afar.

And yet, those who are making decisions for [the titular President](#) will be loath to abandon Taiwan. They know what would ensue: a thorough and disadvantageous realignment of all East (and probably South) Asia, incidentally delivering into an adversary's hands [the apex of the semiconductor industry](#). And because many of those who steer our ship of state take nothing seriously but themselves, they may think that a show of force and a press conference will burnish their image. I can envision a scenario in which our armed forces receive hasty orders to frustrate the takeover of Taiwan.

If this happens—or even if the Chinese anticipate it may happen, or think they can plausibly assert it was going to happen—we may see another demonstration of Xi Jinping's penchant for dramatic action. He may seize an opportunity to eliminate United States influence in Asia once and for all.

Such an opportunity probably exists. The technology of the precision strike has advanced since smart bombs made their mark in the First Gulf War. Ballistic missiles have improved accuracy, drone swarms are relatively cheap, and autonomous target-acquisition systems can pursue anything that takes evasive action.

We might reflect on Iran's ability to briefly cripple the Saudi oil industry

with a handful of drones and cruise missiles in 2019 and, four months later, to [hit specific buildings on a U.S. airbase](#) in Iraq with ballistic missiles.

Future War

China's resources are incomparably greater. Its "Rocket Force," elevated in 2015 to become a branch of the military on a par with the Army and the Navy, [has been practicing on desert targets](#) laid out to mimic the runways, fuel tanks, command centers, and berthed warships at U.S. bases in Japan. In their sobering 2017 [analysis](#), Shugart and Gonzalez estimated that every military runway, every command center, more than 200 warplanes, and virtually every docked American naval vessel in Japan could be destroyed in less than half an hour. American bases in Japan are especially vulnerable [because, for political reasons, they are concentrated in a few relatively small areas](#). Guam, too, is vulnerable: longer-range missiles would be required, but [the Chinese have them](#). While a missile strike on Hawaii might be eschewed as too gross a political provocation, unattributable acts of sabotage at Pearl Harbor could paralyze a largely disarmed Pacific Command. Our alliances would crumble, their security guarantees having become worthless.

At that point, what options would Washington have? After a non-nuclear attack that did not touch the homeland, nuclear retaliation would not even be considered. But we would have little else left with which to fight in the Pacific, and security challenges will continue elsewhere. At a time when shelves are already bare, our tower of debt is tottering, and most of our manufacturing base has been lost, America would be unlikely to undertake such [rearmament and mobilization](#) as we carried out in the Second World War. If, after wiping

out our Pacific bases, China announced a pause and offered a peace agreement (some of whose clauses would not be made public), Washington would take the deal.

It is necessary, though painful, to ponder what would be the *domestic* consequences of American disengagement, after losing thousands of service members to a sneak attack. The armed forces would either explode with disaffection or sink into despondency. An already unpopular administration would suffer a crisis of authority so acute that it might get resolved by extra-constitutional means. Or perhaps—if those Americans who deplore our nation as racist and hegemonic should manifest their satisfaction at its discomfiture—the U.S. could fracture with chaotic violence along fault lines that are already visible.

I am in no position to *predict* a preemptive Chinese attack throughout the Pacific, leading to the collapse of the U.S. (for such events depend on free choices not yet made, factors unknown to me, and chance); but Xi Jinping's past performance, combined with the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presented by an America divided and rudderless, makes this development a realistic possibility. This essay will offer no recommendations. I seek here only to persuade you of the magnitude of the danger.

Bad Calculations

Let me address some possible objections to this scenario.

It would be too risky for China to undertake a large-scale surprise attack: they know coordination could fail or the secret could leak. With [vivid object-lessons](#), the western strategic tradition warns against gambling on such attacks. But the Chinese come from a different

tradition. The appendix on strategic culture in [a monograph by Burles and Shulsky](#) is illuminating. On the question that concerns us, they found sources in Chinese military scholarship of the 1990s which "argue that a preemptive or surprise assault against enemy forces is a logical, perhaps even necessary, military option for China when confronting an adversary like the United States." And we should remember that sneak attacks *did* score notable successes in the twentieth century: the pre-emptive air strikes which launched Operation Barbarossa and the Six-Day War wrought more damage than the raid on Pearl Harbor. Note that secrecy can be preserved while aiming missiles more easily than while moving surface ships or large bodies of troops. We cannot count on our intelligence services to give warning: since [the negligent exposure and consequent execution of dozens of Chinese informants ten years ago](#), it is unlikely the CIA is receiving much valuable *humint* out of China.

Surely there would be signs that Beijing was conditioning its people for war with the U.S.? Consider [the blockbuster Korean War film](#) depicting a Chinese victory over American troops, which Beijing brought out last summer and which Carice Witte helpfully [puts in context](#).

In our economically interdependent world, surely such a war would prove ruinous to all? Xi Jinping may think he has that angle figured out. Economists such as [George Magnus](#) say China's development strategy has accomplished about all it can, and high-value-added industries are the key to future growth. It is therefore remarkable that in 2021 the Party [moved forcefully against large private businesses](#) and celebrity entrepreneurs in innovative high-growth sectors of the economy. Why did Xi persecute the cream of China's high-tech industries, sowing fear and uncertainty among entrepreneurs and subjecting them to tighter

bureaucratic control? Even with a heightened emphasis on nationalism, the Party's legitimacy still depends on delivering prosperity.

I speculate that Xi Jinping hopes to boost national income in an old-fashioned way that does not require entrepreneurship or vibrant markets. For if America should be permanently removed as a factor in Asia, no countervailing force would limit China's hegemony there. While Taiwan is being digested, the other nations of East Asia will enter varying degrees of vassalage. Weak, already compromised states like [Cambodia](#) and [Laos](#) would degenerate into colonies to be exploited. Stronger states would suffer an adjustment in their terms of trade. Elite capture and an existing architecture of media control allow client states to be managed without overt imperialism. It would be hard to exaggerate the economic benefits of this new order. Already notably productive, the region could only improve with what Xi would consider rationalization, and in their commerce with the West the nations of East Asia could be made to function as a cartel under Chinese discipline. If, as has long been rumored, there are ample oil and gas fields beneath the South China Sea, no political friction would any longer delay their development.

That is why Xi might not be content only to seize Taiwan, though Taiwan would be a great prize. If he can drive the U.S. from the region, he can hope to establish an Asian empire that will make his country richer without the risk to the Party that freer flows of capital and information entail.

But we have the most powerful military on earth! This couldn't happen! In the history of warfare, the advantage has alternated between offense and defense. Someday, anti-missile defense will be as strong as or stronger than offensive missiles—but for now, the attacker has the

edge. When [hypersonic glide vehicles](#) become operational, they will exacerbate this imbalance. At present, America's network of Pacific bases, all whose details have been mapped by satellite and espionage, has become a target highly vulnerable to a foe contemplating a surprise attack.

Surely two can play at that game, you might think. Aren't *they* just as vulnerable to *us*? Curiously, they aren't: in their case, it is less clear where the critical targets lie. Citing several sources, Burles and Shulsky reported, "decoys and electronic countermeasures can be used to deceive or defeat U.S. attempts to locate and target Chinese assets. The PLA's capabilities in this area are very real." Millions of square miles of their land represent a large haystack in which their needles can be hidden among decoys, and they use road-mobile launchers for intermediate-range missiles. (The number of those launchers has increased in recent years by a factor between [four](#) and [eight](#). As for the missiles themselves, China built an arsenal during decades when both Russia and the U.S. were barred from doing so by the INF treaty.) They have gone to great lengths to protect naval assets from missile strikes: they built a submarine base on Hainan Island *under a mountain*. There are hints in the literature that the PLA has buried and hardened its command-and-control centers, and is prepared to instantly transfer encrypted military communications traffic onto various civilian networks if their primary network is damaged. Finally, the situation exhibits the classic "first-mover advantage" that would reward a pre-emptive attack. The Chinese are more likely than the Americans to make such a move because they can frame it as a defensive response to the "attack" on their sovereignty and "core interests" constituted, in their view, by U.S. non-acceptance of their ownership of Taiwan. And against a non-nuclear attack on military targets, deterrence based on

mutual assured destruction does not apply.

It is often said that the U.S. possesses the most powerful military in the world, but—even in the absence of a decimating surprise attack—that claim is misleading. Military power is context-dependent. The United States has gained experience and developed weaponry to conduct counterinsurgency and to engage adversaries who have primitive missiles or none at all, and little or no airpower. American logistics span the globe, but depend on depots and staging areas presumed safe from attack, right up to the vicinity of the combat zone. The Pentagon's style of combined-arms warfare makes intensive use of satellite imagery, G.P.S., and high-bandwidth channels through communication satellites and computer networks. As a result of this excellent technology and a bureaucratized culture, U.S. military leadership has come to lean toward micromanagement from the rear. These premises, requirements, and methods will prove poorly matched—dreadfully so—to an adversary with [first-rate aerospace technology](#) and an experienced [cyberwarfare arm](#). When enemy action thickens the fog of war to the point of blindness, we will not have prepared our men as Nelson did: "When a captain should be at a loss he cannot do very wrong if he lay his ship alongside of the enemy." And we will need not only clarity, but a prodigious supply of fuel and munitions, at a great distance from home.

Moreover, our military posture seems to have been determined less by strategists than by lobbyists for arms manufacturers. We continue to devote the [lion's share of naval procurement to aircraft](#) and [aircraft carriers](#), more than a decade after [realizing](#) the carriers' acute, and probably irremediable, vulnerability. It was recognized at least six years ago that [Guam was a likely target for missile attack and that its](#)

[defenses were inadequate](#). Since then, the addition of a Marine base has made the island an even more attractive target, but improvements to its defense seem incremental and piecemeal. It has a few legacy Patriot batteries, an experimental installation of a unit borrowed from Israel's Iron Dome, and a tracking radar [that can sweep only 120 degrees of the horizon](#) because it was designed against threats from North Korea. One might suspect—incorrectly, I hope—that the amortization of existing products and technologies carries undue weight in these decisions. That seems true of our weapons sales to Taiwan, of which the [two billion dollars' worth of main battle tanks](#) will prove useful if that country relocates to northern Europe.

An imperialist posture would go against decades of CCP propaganda and the Chinese self-image.

China's privatization of much state property and its opening to market forces in the 1990s gave rise to a degree of economic inequality that belied the ideals of the Communist Party. But these changes were beneficial to enough people (or enough of the people who had influence) that the cognitive dissonance proved manageable with the right terminology: "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The same thing could happen with the change to empire (or, as Tibetans and Uyghurs might prefer to call it, the extension of empire). Soothing terminology is already available: "[a community of common destiny for mankind](#)." This phrase, introduced a week before Xi Jinping became General Secretary in 2012 and promoted by him ever since, is loosely associated with "the tributary system of China," a framework in which ancient China is idealized as the lodestar to the other kingdoms of East Asia who, naturally, found ways to express their gratitude. Beijing's spokesmen take pains to contrast this benevolent arrangement with

the domineering and exploitative empires of western history. In short, the Chinese people have a lot of experience with cognitive dissonance and can be expected to take it in stride. One of their poets has written, "We have never been able to call things by their right names."

Trends are indeed concerning, but action is not imminent, because the Chinese military hasn't yet reached the necessary level of development. This might be true. Some of China's apparent power could be feigned or exaggerated. But consider how much faster [its civilian space program](#) advanced than most in the West expected; consider how the anti-satellite weapons and hypersonics were unveiled as unpleasant surprises. The pace of naval expansion has been [staggering](#). Does it not seem likely they will reach their goal before we expect? Remember: their military goal is not to be able to do everything we do. It is to be able to defeat us in the Western Pacific.

Some suggest that Xi is too preoccupied with domestic issues to pursue foreign adventures. This suggestion has merit. However, Xi Jinping might strengthen his hand at home by winning glory abroad. At a Communist Party congress later this year, he is to be designated for a third term of supreme power. A stunning victory shortly before the congress, or (perhaps more likely) shortly after it, would be useful to him.

Others think that with trends in their favor the Chinese, who are famously patient, can simply wait. China is patient when it has to be. With the 2008 financial crisis in America, the era through which Deng Xiaoping called for biding one's time and hiding one's capabilities came to an end. The manner in which the Party-State dealt with Hong Kong without waiting till 2047 suggests that the Chinese leadership feels patience is no longer required. And while it may seem that a decaying

West will fall naturally in due time, statesmen know that history rarely moves in straight lines. The U.S. might rebound, or at least find its way back from the edge of the abyss (as many feel it did in 1980, in less dire circumstances), but not if it is given a firm push at the right moment.

A subtext of American analysis has been "*We still have time!*" For the past 25 years, we did indeed have time. But the decline of great powers happens like the Hemingway character's bankruptcy: gradually, then suddenly.

It seems plausible that we have less than a year before China moves decisively against Taiwan and, very possibly, seeks to sweep the U.S. out of Asia. I have mentioned some Chinese domestic considerations that could influence Xi Jinping. There is also the expectation that next January the U.S. will have a legislature altered by the midterm elections, perhaps alleviating our political paralysis.

And to a Chinese decision-maker, the calendar itself would be suggestive.

As well as thinking in centuries, Chinese track historical time with a recurring cycle of 60 years. Some events such as the revolution which ended the Qing Empire are named after the place in this cycle occupied by the year in which they occurred. At the start of February 2022, we began the year of the Water Tiger, or more formally *Ren Yin*.

Four hundred years ago, in February of 1622, the Taiwan garrison of the Dutch East India Company surrendered to [a brilliant Chinese pirate](#) who had figured out how to defeat the superior Western technology of their fortifications and muskets. The year 1842, a *Ren Yin* year, witnessed China's defeat in the First Opium War, formalized with Britain in the

humiliating Treaty of Nanking. These are salient events in the history of China. To mainlanders attuned to their resonance, 2022 would seem a perfect year to repeat a triumph and requite an injury.