Title: ‘Assessing the Risk of Armed Conflict across the Taiwan Straits’

There is a wishful thinking over the future China-Taiwan relationship, based on their increasingly mutual-dependent economies. Despite that, all political and military circumstances suggest an increasing potential risk of armed conflicts.

First, China continues rapid military build-up, an annually double-digit increase of its military budget in the past decade.

Second, China’s rapid military build-up is not only in terms of quantity, but also more so in quality. Taiwan’s defense forces are losing its parity vis-à-vis China’s forces, and most analysts estimate that China’s military strength will surpass Taiwan’s defense capabilities by 2005 (ibid.). Taiwan is also losing its economic parity vis-à-vis China. Thus Taiwan’s economy will not deter China’s offensive intention.

Third, access to advanced technology has become the top priority of China’s national strategy, both in civilian and military areas. China’s recent active lobbying in the EU for lifting EU’s arms embargo against China, as well as intensive efforts for promoting China-EU cooperation in science and technology in general are all along the line with China’s strategic priority. Better military and technological capability will give China more confidence in its optimal calculation in favor of the use of forces against Taiwan, thereby making breakout of a military conflict more likely.

Fourth, other external factors are also, at least in Beijing’s perception, in favor of China’s optimal calculation for the use of forces against Taiwan, such as Taiwan’s in winning an observer’s status in the World Health Organization (WHO), the worldwide anti-American sentiment and thinly overstretched U.S. overseas forces since the 2003 Iraq War, and the international community’s weak support for securing Taiwan’s autonomy. Given the circumstances, Beijing might well calculate (or misjudge) that its military offence against Taiwan will not arouse much international protest and thus be paid off.

Finally, China’s adherence to the old-fashioned concept of sovereignty, particularly “territorial integrity” based on its claim deriving from the ancient Chinese dynasties’ loose hegemonic rules, makes any flexible or creative/forward-looking deals with Taiwan virtually impossible, unless Beijing changes its current position. China’s Anti-Secession Law of 2005 only confirms China’s rigidity. Since Beijing’s current position never accepts two political authorities representing China, what Beijing can provide is at most the “Hong Kong model”, which even Taiwan’s pro-unification faction may hardly accept, since it means much setback from Taiwan’s current autonomy and full-fledged democracy. To make the situation worse, both Beijing and Taipei have a sense of imminence: Beijing thinks if it waits Taiwan will merely and irreversibly intensify its orientation for independence; Taipei thinks the last chance for consolidating Taiwan’s current autonomy is the coming two or three years, before China’s military strength surpasses that of Taiwan. Such sense of imminence may encourage either of the parties to opt for an adventurous and risky option.

The above-mentioned circumstances imply that the international community may well prepare for a ‘unthinkable scenario’ in the coming years, and make a serious consideration how to prevent such a risk for sure. Since an armed conflict in the Straits inevitably escalate to an international affair (with the US, Japan and other neighbouring countries to get involved or affected), it is urged that the international community intensifies its preventive diplomacy over the cross-Strait issue.