
THE PRESENT DANGER

Last week, while many China experts inside and outside the Clinton administration were confidently predicting that China would not escalate the conflict with Taiwan, we warned that Beijing might well be contemplating an attack. This turned out to be correct. According to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, Chinese officials have been trying to gauge Washington's reaction to a possible Chinese attack on one of Taiwan's offshore islands.

Now, the conventional wisdom is that China won't launch such an attack for several months. According to the new logic of the China experts, President Jiang Zemin won't want to initiate a conflict before his scheduled meeting with President Clinton in the middle of September. Then China is holding a giant party for over 300 American CEOs in Shanghai later in September. Then on October 1, China will be staging a mammoth celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Communist party's victory. The same China experts who told us China would not escalate the conflict are now telling us that they won't want to do so until these events are out of the way.

We're not so sure. If the Chinese are going to carry out some form of aggression against Taiwan, it makes a lot of sense to do it in the next few weeks. First of all, the United States is now unprepared to respond quickly. From what we gather, the Clinton administration has gone out of its way to avoid "provoking" the Chinese by stepping up our military presence in the region. Meanwhile, everyone knows the U.S. government goes on vacation in August. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, which also took everyone by surprise, occurred in August. If the Chinese act quickly, they can present the United States with a *fait accompli*. Will the United States then respond militarily to evict Chinese forces? Will we respond militarily in some other way? Under the present administration, the odds are we won't.

In fact, the Clinton administration might just choose the opposite course. Why should the Chinese, or anyone else, assume that an attack on one of Taiwan's offshore islands, or even an attack on a couple of Taiwanese airfields, would necessarily derail

either President Clinton's meeting with Jiang or the CEO party in Shanghai? If an attack is carried out, China experts and administration officials will argue that what is most needed is intensive diplomacy to defuse the crisis. Our guess is that after an attack, President Clinton would declare it more essential than ever to meet with Jiang.

As for the CEOs, we doubt they would allow a little thing like an attack on Taiwan to get in the way of supping with high-level Chinese bureaucrats. Would the administration cancel talks on China's entry into the WTO? Don't bet on it. In the end, the

Chinese might wind up demonstrating to Taiwan, and to the rest of East Asia, that the United States cares more about doing business with Beijing than about defending some small Taiwanese island from attack. That would really give Chinese leaders something to celebrate on October 1.

Maybe we're wrong. But an August attack cannot be dismissed out of hand. And that means the United States must take steps to deter it. It's not too late for the Clinton administration to act with the necessary resolve. Some leaders in Con-

gress—notably Senate majority leader Trent Lott, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Jesse Helms, senator Robert Torricelli, and House International Relations Committee chairman Benjamin Gilman—have been strong in their support for Taiwan. Friday morning, senator John McCain issued a welcome statement criticizing the administration's "failed policy of pressuring Taiwan" and declaring, correctly, that "strategic ambiguity will not serve United States interests or values in this current crisis." McCain called on the administration to be "very clear with Beijing" that the "United States will do what it must to help defend freedom and stability in Asia." Gary Bauer has also been a strong supporter of defending democratic Taiwan.

Now it's time we heard from the other presidential candidates. If you aren't prepared to explain what we should do to defend Taiwan in the current crisis, why should anyone think you are prepared to be president?

—William Kristol and Robert Kagan, for the Editors

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