



We must avert cross-strait deadlines

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The Ministry of National Defense Wednesday submitted reports on the state of the PRC's military capabilities, as well as the R.O.C.'s own five-year military plans. China's military already has the ability to conquer Taiwan's outlying islands, the report says. But what is more important is the fate of Taiwan.

Worryingly, the report also says that China is asking its military to complete all necessary planning and capability preparation to conquer Taiwan by 2020.

This week local media widely reported on the words of Jin Canrong, Associate Dean of the School of International Relations at Renmin University. Jin made a prediction at a July 23 symposium that Xi Jinping will attempt to “solve” the issue through force by the year 2021 at the earliest, after “resolving” the South China Sea disputes through force in 2020.

This is a scholar who said in the same speech, “stay more than a month in Taiwan and you will become stupid” in disdain for the supposed low-quality of local media, but also as means of trashing “Taiwanese independence schemers,” whom he debated.

Jin's insults don't have to be taken seriously as they reflect poorly on him. His contempt for Taiwanese should also remind us of the sway of populism, though. Any fixed date for a settlement on the issue of Taiwan's status should be treated as a dangerous bottom-line against which Taiwan must utilize strategy and effort to prevent ourselves from being locked into the mainland's official policy.

“Since China has more at stake, it has an incentive to keep raising the costs of confrontation until the United States is no longer willing to absorb them. This argues for dropping Washington's pledge to come to Taiwan's aid,” Eric Gomez of the U.S. Think Tank the Cato Institute wrote last December.

Importantly, top Chinese leaders have been careful to not lay down a concrete date themselves for the “resolution” of the “Taiwan issue,” although they often repeat Deng Xiaoping's line that the unification of the “motherland” cannot be postponed forever. Much of the pressure that Taiwan faces in cross-strait relations arises from the backdrop of the threat to not maintain the status quo forever.

China expert Shen Dawei's analysis designating “five concentric circles” of mainland decision-making has indicated that the central decision-making “circle” is reserved for high-ranking members in the party apparatus and the State Council (國務院). Even the Foreign Ministry is a second-tier decision-maker in the PRC and the foreign affairs bureau state councilor is his superior.

Academia is tasked with researching and gathering information to formulate advice for the inner circles of power, but consultation is the maximum extent of their influence and they fall under the third “circle” of policy formulation, according to Shen's thesis as explained by Jiang Gushi in the article “Wu Jianmin battles The Global Times.

Chinese academia is often also constrained by the demands of populism, which are part of the feedback loop of forming strategy to satisfy national objectives.

For Taiwan, it is clear that the path to the future will need to be forged with an eye to planning against coercion. However, it is also a tactical maneuver in a treacherous international and cross-strait environment, with the goal of preserving the safety of the country's freedom of action.

How to do that is no easy task. First priority should be continued outreach to the mainland

with an insistence on “preserving the status quo,” as President Tsai Ing-wen already insists upon. For now, the mainland is not buying it, and demands a complete acceptance of the “1992 Consensus.”

The media have reported on the government's move to organize trade missions to explore and invite commerce and tourism to Taiwan. That is a proactive move that deserves encouragement in the face of widely reported setbacks in cross-strait commerce with the cooling-off of relations. More cultural and commercial exchanges are necessary and should be the continued focus of the government because the backdrop of any hostile conditions is the mainland's estimate that they have an excuse to resort to coercion.