

US Misinterpretation: Social anthropologist Dr. Ian Clarke reacts to article on Biden's Taiwan policy



Dr. Ian Clarke

In a recent article in the NYTimes (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fR22YKqv3XNf2caYiTtyEDreu6rEyfQBr/view>), journalist Peter Beinart raises an alarm. In it he says US recognition of Taiwan would be a dangerous move, certain to incite China to wage full-out war on Taiwan. Many in the West are deeply concerned over the current show of Chinese military force along its border on Taiwan Strait. But is the situation as dangerous as they would make it seem? We asked Dr. Ian Clarke, a social anthropologist living in Taoyuan, Taiwan.

Ian Clarke: The Chinese military regularly conducts drills that are aimed at intimidating Taiwan, and

they usually have a very large scale drill once a year. There are actual military reasons for this - their armed forces are modernizing rapidly, so they need to learn how to use all the new weapons and tactics they're developing. But it is also to show Taiwan that they are prepared to go to war if Taiwan crosses the line. This flag waving show of intimidation also helps them gather popular support among the Chinese population - and behind the scenes there's intense politicking and infighting among politicians and generals in China, so no doubt it plays a role in this as well, though this is very hard to observe.

Most Taiwanese don't take this very seriously. They don't believe this will turn into real military action, much less an invasion. A poll taken in October last year, when tensions were very high, showed that a large majority of Taiwanese believe there will not be a war with the mainland.

<https://taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/10/21/2003745529>. Similar polls in Chinese language sources show that most Taiwanese think there will never be a war with China.

Cathren Housley (Motif): Why does our US Military intelligence, and our media, consistently interpret these signs as a threat of real war?

IC: I think what's missing from many foreign media reports about China and Taiwan is the depth and breadth of relations across the Taiwan Straits. China is Taiwan's biggest trading partner, by a long way. There are thousands of Taiwanese businesses in China, and hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese living there. Before the pandemic, something like 10% of the population of Taiwan were in the mainland at any one time, working and studying, and thousands of Taiwanese go on holiday in China. Before the pandemic, China was the biggest source of tourists for Taiwan. Everyone here knows someone living in China. China produces more and more TV series, movies, music, books and games that appeal to Taiwanese because of the common language, and many Taiwanese stars are famous in China. The governments say nasty things about each other, and ultra nationalists on both sides scream at each other on the internet, but there is a strong relationship between people on both sides of the Straits. It's not increasingly close and friendly, but it isn't increasingly hostile either.

Things are a little more tense now, but not incredibly tense. The increasing number and scale of Chinese Air Force flights into Taiwan's self defense zone is reported in the media, but it's not the top headline. It's page 3 or page 5 stuff. The same is true of China's recent naval exercises with its carriers. Most people don't see this as a lead up to war.

CH: Is there any validity to Beinhart's article?

IC: The basic ideas of his argument all make a great deal of sense. The compromise of admitting no formal independence for Taiwan while its citizens enjoyed defacto independence has served everyone pretty well. The alternative is a war that would be disastrous for everyone.

The real problem today is how this agreement is being impacted by domestic politics, and by potential changes in the balance of power in the future. In the US and Taiwan there's a lot of domestic political capital to be had in annoying the Chinese. That is what I think the Biden's administration and Tsai Yingwen's are doing. They know that going too far will result in a war - and it definitely will. Maybe not a full scale invasion, but definitely a war at some level that will continue indefinitely. They're like a lion tamer, stepping close to the lion to make it roar and thrill the crowd. This is fine as long as they don't step too close.

China has a lot of domestic politics in play, but this all goes on behind closed doors and is very hard to observe. They can sometimes do rash and irrational things for internal political ends. At the moment

China is very secure. They've weathered the pandemic well, the economy is OK, and people are happy. If this changes, fighting with evil foreigners will become a very attractive option to keep everyone distracted. The same is true in Taiwan and the US.

CH: So, what is the real story here?

IC: I don't think the Biden administration is seeking to promote Taiwanese independence, and I don't think President Tsai would go along with it if they were; she's far more pragmatic and less ideological than many of her supporters. They both just want to be seen as standing up to China. The danger is the potential of a miscalculation or an accident that drags us into a war that no one wants.

I'm confident that the Chinese don't want to invade Taiwan. From their point of view, this is entirely unnecessary. The Chinese see power shifting inexorably toward them, and at some stage in the next 20 or 30 years they will be so powerful that resistance by Taiwan will be impossible, and they will be able to dictate terms that get them some form of reunification without a disastrous war. If this plan goes awry, they may be tempted to try their luck, especially if this helps rally domestic support in the face of some economic or political crisis. The same is true in Taiwan and the US. If they see advantage slipping away to China, why not have a war now before China becomes too strong?

There are hawks in both countries who are pushing for this, but the cost is seen as being too high at the moment. Hopefully this calculation won't change.