



Hearing on “Deterring PRC Aggression Toward Taiwan”

Thursday, February 18, 2021

Opening Statement of Commissioner Carte Goodwin

Thank you, Commissioner Talent, and good morning, everyone. I would also like to thank our witnesses for the time and effort they have put into their excellent testimonies.

As the Commission documented in last year’s Annual Report, the PLA significantly expanded its operations in the air and waters around Taiwan throughout 2020, increasing the chance of a cross-Strait crisis stemming from an accident or miscalculation. China’s imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong over the summer also raised real questions about whether Chinese leaders are now more willing to accept certain risks in the pursuit of their political objectives toward Taiwan, and less concerned about the costs they could incur as a result.

Many U.S. analysts have argued over the years that China will only use its military in the near-term to deter Taiwan’s leaders from declaring independence, but concerns are growing that Chinese leaders may soon use force to compel Taiwan to accept unification on Beijing’s terms. To be sure, initiating a campaign to annex Taiwan – the most ambitious of political objectives – would be fraught with risk for both the PLA and the Chinese Communist Party. It is often assumed that concerns about the PLA’s own preparedness, an effective military intervention by the United States, or international isolation would constrain Chinese leaders’ decision to use violence against Taiwan.

Yet over the last 5 years, China’s confidence in its own military has grown as General Secretary Xi Jinping has overseen a major reorganization of the PLA. China’s influence over many countries has also deepened as a result of the economic dependencies created by the Belt and Road Initiative and other trading relationships. Moreover, Chinese leaders have observed the international community’s reaction to its decisions to militarize the South China Sea and renege on its commitment to respect Hong Kong’s autonomy -- experiences that may lead Chinese leaders to conclude that they can pursue their political objectives toward Taiwan without prohibitive costs to their reputation or their access to the global economy.

Beijing’s actions have sparked a vigorous debate in Washington over how Chinese aggression against Taiwan could affect U.S. national security interests, and whether the United States should therefore alter its longstanding policy toward the island. Taiwan is strategically important because it serves as a barrier limiting the PLA’s freedom of movement throughout the Western Pacific, and its vibrant, free political system offers a model for democratizing countries around the world. For these reasons, it has been U.S. government policy for decades to provide for Taiwan’s defense and stabilize cross-Strait relations through

the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act while remaining publicly uncommitted to a particular course of action in the case of a cross-Strait contingency.

The logic behind “strategic ambiguity” has always been that, by declining to make clear whether the United States would become involved in a war over Taiwan, U.S. policymakers could create uncertainty among leaders both in Beijing and Taipei sufficient to deter moves by either side that might lead to a conflict. Today, however, there is growing debate regarding the continuing value of “strategic ambiguity” to deter PRC aggression toward Taiwan.

Before we begin, I would like to remind you all that the testimonies and a transcript from today’s hearing will be posted on our website, www.uscc.gov. Also, please mark your calendars for the Commission’s upcoming hearing on “U.S. Investment in Chinese Companies,” which will take place on March 19.