

On the Leaks of a War With China

by George Friedman - January 31, 2023

Over the past few days, two senior U.S. officials – Gen. Mike Minihan, the head of the U.S. Air Force Mobility Command, and Michael McCaul, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee – predicted that a war with China could erupt by 2025. I have been on record as saying **China's economic and political vulnerabilities make such a conflict unlikely**, but when a four-star general and one of the few politicians I actually respect go well out of their way to say something like this, I'm compelled to recheck my thinking. That the two are saying the same thing, moreover, suggests to me that someone in Washington has briefed them on the matter. Briefings are not the subject of random gossip.

I remain skeptical; the Pentagon has distanced itself from the general's remarks, and though McCaul may be a respectable politician, he is still a politician. But in reevaluating the likelihood of a war, some questions must still be answered.

Who will start the war? It's hard to believe the U.S. would initiate a conflict. Defeating the Chinese navy, though doable, wouldn't resolve the matter. So long as the Chinese homeland is intact, Beijing can rebuild its armed forces. For China, attacking the U.S. Navy would be a major gamble, and it would have to calculate what a defeat at sea would cost it, particularly domestically.

Why would they wait to start the war? It could be that U.S. intelligence learned that there was an attack planned and spread the news to signal to Beijing that it was wise to its plans. But if those plans were indeed for 2025, the U.S. would have plenty of time to prepare for it. Time and danger are the same in warfare, and the idea that China is planning that far out is hard to buy. No one wants to give the other side an advantage.

What does the aggressor hope to accomplish, and is it worth the risk? China wants to secure its eastern ports and ensure access to trade routes in the Pacific Ocean. The U.S. might want to move from a notional threat to a real threat.

Will the war be on land, in the air, at sea, or some combination of the three? The U.S. is not capable of waging a land war in China given its size and population. China can wage an air and naval war, but it would be doing so against a very capable enemy. Beijing's advantage is that the homeland is secure. The U.S. has the same advantage, of course, but it has the added benefit of

being able to draw deep into the Pacific and engage China far from home. In other words, the U.S. can to some degree determine where the war will be fought.

Are their respective economies healthy enough to support a war? Both economies are in precarious positions, but there's evidence to suggest America's downturn is a cyclical event, whereas China's is a structural event. Sustaining air and sea production would be more difficult for China than for the U.S.

Why would either side leak its intentions? The aggressor must have secrecy. The defender should advertise its preparations to deter the aggressor. So if China is the aggressor, leaking the news would be disastrous. But one of the reasons that the war can't be planned very far out is that the longer the windup, the more likely there will be a leak. If there was a real war being planned, it would be on a very short timeline.

I respect the general and the congressman, and obviously they have access to better intelligence than I do. But I find it hard to believe that China would plan a war so carelessly. Given the leak, a war could still be in the offing, but for China it would likely be short.

Perhaps I am reverting to bad habits. Answering my own questions with my old views is admittedly poor intelligence. Feel free to let me know which questions I didn't pose and which answers were insufficient. I will happily pout and respond.

Author: George Friedman

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