

Don't Ever Underestimate Your Opponents – Especially When They're Chinese

Americans couldn't care less about foreign policy until the national ass gets caught in a crack, usually in places we can't locate on a map. So it is today while Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi – third in line for the American presidency – cavorts around Taiwan. All while China threatens as never before to counter such an unpardonable insult to their sovereignty, pointedly telling President Biden not to play with fire. The bellicose Chinese rhetoric was met by a series of vacuous and self-serving excuses issued by the Biden White House: that Ms. Pelosi is a “legislative person” on an unofficial trip; that House delegations routinely visit the island nation; or even that she is just a shrewd business-woman checking her latest investments in Taiwanese electronic chip factories.

No matter: Ms Pelosi is swimming with sharks; indeed, she might count herself lucky if her junket ends with spectacular Chinese demos of their latest air and naval firepower, possibly even rehearsing an amphibious invasion stopping just short of Taiwan's beaches. While the Biden White House was pre-occupied with self-congratulations over the recent killing of Al Qaida leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri, cluelessness is their only consistency. They play checkers, savoring the occasional one-off triumph of eliminating a 70-year-old terrorist. Undaunted, our adversaries play a shrewdly orchestrated chess-match aimed at dominating nations and whole regions of the globe.

While ambitious Chinese investments in their conventional and nuclear forces are now attracting the breathless attention of national security analysts, I returned from a trip to Taiwan

in 1999 to be startled by a shocking new book, *Unrestricted Warfare*, written by two Chinese Colonels. Arguing that the American approach to warfare largely ignored its economic and cultural dimensions, the colonels suggested the following vulnerabilities: lawfare, economic warfare (including industrial espionage) network warfare and (2 years before 9/11) terrorism. In its largest sense, that book inaugurated a new pattern of information-centered warfare worthy of Sun Tsu. It has since become wearily familiar to American corporations, university laboratories and research centers as a weapon of industrial conquest. While the colonels assumed 20 years ago that American technology would remain dominant, few observers today would take that bet.

Resolutely focused on the here and now, Americans often identify lessons rather than truly learn them. This is nowhere more sobering than with the Korean War, now known as the Forgotten War and seldom emphasized by the history professoriat. Yet its sobering lessons might today be usefully studied by the Biden White House as it ponders whether the Chinese are really serious about Taiwan.

In July and August, 1950, General Douglas MacArthur had just reversed a desperate situation when American forces came close to losing their foothold on the Korean peninsula. Yet MacArthur delivered a gambler's master-stroke: charging ashore through the fearsome tides of Inchon and surprising a badly over-extended North Korean Army. With 3 American armies advancing well beyond the 38th Parallel, MacArthur had visions of winning the war by Christmas and re-unifying the entire peninsula. Not only was the 'American Caesar' the ranking "proconsul" in the Far East, his recent Inchon victory made him skeptical of Chinese intervention, despite the fact that strong American combat forces were rapidly approaching the Chinese border at the Yalu River. Sadly, the General's towering stature meant that few intelligence officers felt empowered to speak truth to that kind of power.

Although there were persistent reports of Chinese forces moving closer to the border, many military observers totally missed the implications of confronting “confident veterans of the successful civil war against the Nationalist Chinese forces. (These) forces were ...highly motivated, battle hardened, and led by officers who were veterans, in some cases, of twenty years of nearly constant war.” Eventually, “They came out of the hills near Unsan, North Korea, blowing bugles in the dying light of day on 1 November 1950, throwing grenades and firing their “burp” guns at the surprised American soldiers...” The Chinese offensive, thirty divisions strong, overran some American units while others, like the 8th Cavalry Regiment, ultimately lost over 800 men.

Douglas MacArthur and his subordinate commanders suffered from hubris, also known to the ancient Greeks. But he was more seriously deceived by what modern strategists call, “the culminating point of victory,” often the prelude to reversal. Every decent football team knows how it feels it to march all the way down the field and score – only to have the other team run the ensuing kickoff straight back the other way. So never, ever under-estimate your opponents, particularly when they are Chinese.