

Contemporary Taiwan Strait Situation and Global Security Order: India's role in maintaining 'Balance of Power'?

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Abstract

Security situation across the Taiwan Strait is quite precariously poised, with China having adopted an overtly proactive stance over the past couple of years. The current hardline stance of China which considers this time as “a new starting point for reunification”, create further Portends for Conflict. The overtly aggressive stance of Chinese military and maritime law enforcement agencies during a four-month period in 2024 (between the elections in Taiwan and the Presidential inauguration) indicate the firmness of the Chinese intent. In this context, this article assesses the contours of China-Taiwan conflict; provides a brief overview of evolving India-Taiwan relations; investigates the effect of such a contingency on India's interests in terms of quantum and intensity; and finally analyses the options available to New Delhi to mitigate, if not wholly address the consequential challenges.

Taiwan is geographically located in the Western Pacific Ocean between Japan and the Philippines. Its jurisdiction extends to the islands of Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu, as well as numerous other islets. The total area of Taiwan proper and its outlying islands is around 36,197 square kilometers. At about the size of the Netherlands, but with a population of about 23 million, Taiwan is more populous than three-quarters of the world's nations. Taiwan is a multicultural society comprising diverse Han subgroups, as well as indigenous Malay-Polynesian people and immigrants from all over the world. Currently, the number of new immigrants mostly from China and Southeast Asia is over 570,000. The country, with a nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US \$ 775 Billion (2021 figures), holds an important position in the global economy. Taiwan was the 16th largest exporter and 17th largest importer of merchandise in 2021.¹

The Background

Having faced the brunt of the protracted civil war with the communists in mainland China in the 1940s; the nationalist Party (Kuomintang) along with around 1.2 million loyalists and followers was forced to relocate to the island of Taiwan

across the Taiwan Strait. In order to ensure sustainability of its precarious geopolitical existence, and to brook no dissent to this singular objective, the Taiwanese leadership of that time immediately imposed martial law. It was finally lifted in 1987 after being in force for close to four decades, thus allowing the democratization process to unfold in its true sense.

Taiwan's efforts to continue being the sole political entity representing a unified China received a huge setback when the United Nations (UN), vide its resolution number 2758, recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only legitimate authority representing whole of China, and removed Taiwan from the membership of the UN.² Establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States (US) and the PRC with effect from 01 January 1979³, and consequent closure of US diplomatic mission in Taipei, further eroded the status of Taiwan as a sovereign country. It is therefore, quite apparent from the above sequence of events that there is great disenchantment in the Taiwanese political leadership with the global strategic community, as it perceives that considerable injustice has been meted out to Taiwan in geopolitical terms.

All this while, China, having always considered Taiwan as its own territory, harboured clear intentions to unify it at an opportune moment. China passed an 'Anti-Cessation Law' during the third Plenary of the 10th National People's Congress (NPC) to the effect that the "... *State shall never allow the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from China under any name or by any means;*"⁴ and will "...*use non-peaceful means and other necessary measures*" – albeit as a last resort – to prevent Taiwan's cessation.⁵

Notwithstanding serious challenges to its very existence – both on account of lack of formal recognition by majority of countries across the globe, as also threats of reunification by China – Taiwan continues to function quite effectively as a sovereign State. It maintains its own national defense establishment and independently manages its foreign affairs. The main objective of Taiwan's foreign policy is to engender a favorable environment for national preservation and long-term development. Within the geopolitical constraints imposed upon it, Taiwan has established quite formal economic and cultural relations with many countries of the world, including with India. As of March 2022, 170 countries and territories recognized the Taiwanese passport for the visa-issuance purpose. Taipei has full

membership in 40 inter-governmental organizations and their subsidiary bodies, including the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

China's Taiwan Unification Gambit – Portends for Conflict

Security situation across the Taiwan Strait presents quite a tenuous picture, with China having adopted an overtly proactive stance over the past couple of years, particularly after the visit of Ms. Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives in August 2022. The overt display of increased Chinese naval manoeuvres in the Strait, as also in waters surrounding Taiwan – with the PLA Air Force aircraft violating Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) and also flying across the median line virtually on a daily basis – has heightened the sense of alarm in Taiwan, and indeed across the entire Indo-Pacific region. High intensity of PLA's aggressive brinkmanship in Taiwan Strait was particularly evident on two consecutive dates, that is 17 and 18 September 2023 wherein a large number of PLA Navy ships were operating in the Taiwan Strait along with many PLA Air Force (PLA AF) aircraft of different types. On 17 September 2023, 103 PLA AF aircraft flew in the Taiwan Strait of which 40 crossed the median line and violated ADIZ in its south-western and south-eastern sectors. The intruding flight included Sukhoi-30, J-10, J-11, J-16 modern fighters, along with Y-20 refuelling aircraft and KJ-500 Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft.⁶

However, such a hard-line posture adopted by China has not emerged out of the blue. Various official pronouncements, media articulations and White Papers have progressively ratcheted up the issue of national reunification, in tandem with the increasing diplomatic, informational, military and economic heft of China. The Chinese White Paper of 1993 on 'The Taiwan Question and Reunification of China' sought to emotionally link the origin of Taiwan question to the country being subjected to aggression, dismemberment and humiliation by foreign powers during the last century.⁷ It avowed that the trauma of the nation would not be healed till the issue of Taiwan's separation was not brought to an end. The paper went to great length to convince the World that "*peaceful reunification was a set policy of the Chinese Government*", though with addition of a caveat that "*any sovereign state is entitled to use any means it deems necessary, including military ones, to uphold its*

sovereignty and territorial integrity.” The tone, tenor and language of that White Paper was almost entreating, seeking the understanding of the World towards Beijing’s interpretation of the vexed issue, and its justification for ‘reunification’. China, then headed by President Jiang Zemin, had a GDP of less than USD 450 Billion, with 157 countries having accepted the ‘One China policy.’

Immediately after Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan – which Beijing tried very hard to convince the US to put off through combined cajoling, threatening, and military-posturing, duly backed by a multi-pronged media, legal and psychological onslaught – China released another White Paper titled ‘The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era’, in August 2022. The very title of this White Paper connoted that China had undergone “historic transformation” in the intervening two decades; and that the ‘rejuvenated China of the new era’ considered this time as “*a new starting point for reunification*”. The aggressiveness of PRC’s intent could not have been conveyed in more unambiguous terms, as indicated by these assertions: (1) “*We will always be ready to respond with the use of force or other necessary means to interference by external forces...*” (2) “*Use of force would be the last resort taken under compelling circumstances. But we will not renounce the use of force.*”⁸

Comparison of these two white papers spaced about three decades apart, provides a great insight into the evolving harder-line resolve of Chinese intent vis-a-vis Taiwan. It is quite apparent that the contemporary China under President and Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, with a GDP exceeding USD 18 Trillion, maintaining diplomatic relations with 181 countries, based on ‘one-China policy’, and having reduced the international diplomatic support for Taiwan to just 11 countries; believes that this is perhaps the right moment for attempting ‘reunification’.

Taiwan elections and Presidential Inauguration (January-May 2024) – Critical Juncture

Taiwan went in for presidential elections on 13 January 2024; and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which was already in power for last eight years – since 2016 – managed to win an unprecedented third term. While the nominee of DPP, Mr. Lai Ching-Te was a clear winner, the DPP could not secure majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY), the equivalent of national parliament which is empowered with law-making functions. Since the Kuomintang (KMT) which traditionally has pro-China

leanings, managed to win 52 seats as against 51 by the DPP – with the newly formed Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) securing eight seats – in the 113 member LY,⁹ Beijing feels that this situation can be leveraged to push Taiwan towards greater acceptability of reunification idea from within.

China, possibly acting out of this presumption, rolled out its first aggressive gambit soon thereafter. Taking serious note of the death of two Chinese fishermen off Kinmen Island on 14 February 2024 when their fishing boat capsized while being chased by the Taiwanese Coast Guard; Beijing announced its intention to commence proactive patrolling, while asserting that there were no ‘restricted waters’ around these islands.¹⁰ The general layout of Kinmen islands with the Taiwan-promulgated ‘prohibited and restricted Zones’ marked therein, is depicted in Figure 1. Subsequently, the Chinese coast guard (CCG) officials also boarded a Taiwanese tourist boat for inspection on 19 February 2024 in proximate waters, causing the Taiwanese coast guard to confront them and escort the boat back to Kinmen Island.¹¹

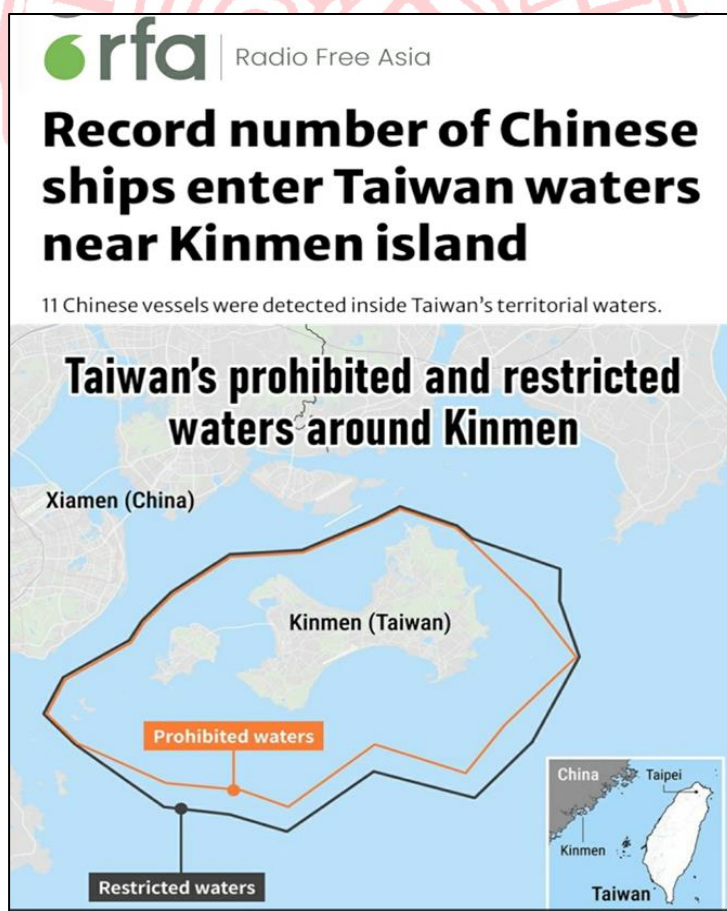


Figure 1: Taiwan’s Kinmen Islands
Source: Radio Free Asia

The CCG patrols around the Kinmen group of islands, have since then become a routine affair, with the intensity, and frequency being ratcheted up occasionally. For instance, a record number of 11 Chinese vessels – including seven CCG and fisheries ships from Fujian provincial administration – reportedly entered the “restricted waters” around Kinmen Island on 09 May 2024, just a couple of weeks before the Presidential inauguration. They conducted some sort of exercises with three Chinese fishing boats, coming as close as four nautical miles (NM) from the Kinmen shoreline.¹²

Concurrently, there was a noticeable increase in the number of PLA Navy warships in Taiwan Strait, and ever-increasing instances of PLA AF aircraft crossing the median line and intruding into Taiwan’s ADIZ. 444 such intrusions were reported in the year 2024 (till 13 May 2024), as against 1714 and 1737 incursions in 2023 and 2022 respectively.¹³ A particularly threatening posture on part of China was evident on 15 May 2024 — just five days before the new President took oath — when 45 PLAAF aircraft flew in the Taiwan Strait, of which 26 intruded into Taiwan’s ADIZ.¹⁴

When the Presidential Inauguration of 20 May 2024 passed off without any incident, amidst the prevailing security situation across the Taiwan Strait; an anxious global community in general, and the official administrative establishment of Taiwan in particular, heaved a collective sigh of relief. However, that sense of reprieve was quite short-lived; because the Chinese PLA presented a public display of aggressive brinkmanship, by conducting Exercise ‘JOINT SWORD 2024A’ on 23 May 2024 at an unprecedented scale, all around Taiwan. The exercise lasting 24 hours – from 0600 hours local time on 23 May 2024 to 0600 hours the next day – involved the PLA Army troops, PLA Navy ships and submarines, PLA AF aircraft, PLA Rocket Force units and the CCG ships for the first time. The scale of the exercise was much larger and covered many additional areas around the main island of Taiwan and its outlying islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin.¹⁵

In addition to 53 participating PLA Navy and coast guard ships, the PLA AF also played its part, with 111 aircraft supporting the exercise objectives, of which 82 aircraft crossed the median line and entered the ADIZ of Taiwan.¹⁶ A graphic released by the ‘Research Project on China Defense Affairs’ (RCDA) from Taiwan, which shows the extent and spread of the exercise, is placed at Figure 2.¹⁷

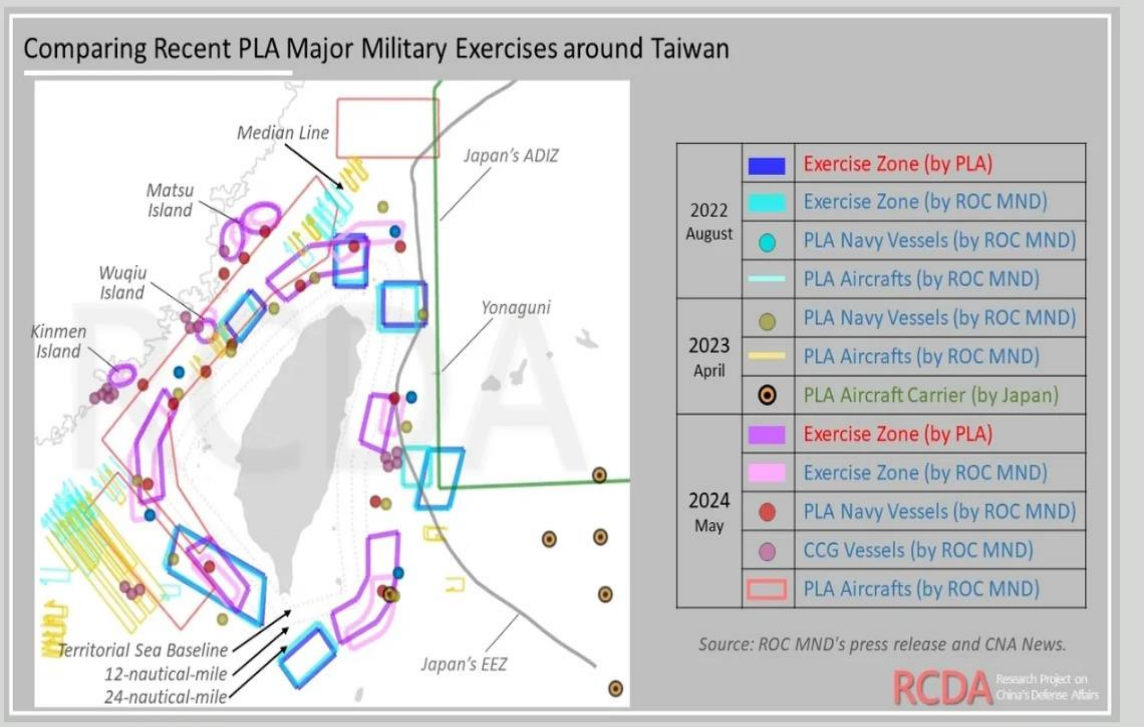


Figure 2: Comparison between JOINT SWORD 2024A and other PLA exercises
Source: RCDA

It can be seen from Figure 2 that as compared to the August 2022 exercise – during the visit of Ms. Nancy Pelosi – when the PLA Navy conducted exercises at six locations only around the main island of Taiwan; the current Exercises were carried out at nine locations encompassing all the outlying islands too. The much-publicized exercises – though conducted without any prior notice, either in media or directly to Taiwan – also released the routes of some CCG ships’ maneuvers in close proximity of the Wuqiu and Dongyin islands (Figure 3).¹⁸

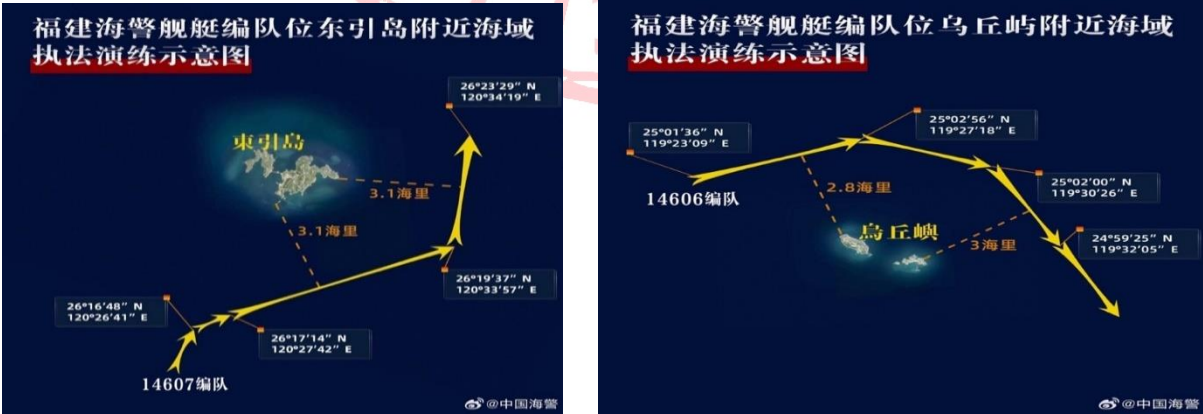


Figure 3: Track of CCG ships off Dongyin (Left) and Wuqiu (Right)
Source: The Global Times

The tracks of CCG ships maneuvering in the restricted waters around these islands, passing as close as 2.8 NM from the larger Wuqiu (Dawuqiu) island and 3

NM from the smaller one (Xiaowuqiu) – as depicted in Figure 3 – clearly connoted that China was ready to cut off these islands from Taiwan, if required.¹⁹ This blatantly coercive show of force by the PLA, heightened Taiwan's sense of territorial insecurity in like never before.

Whither Reunification?

Therefore, the question which has troubled the strategic community worldwide for sometime is: will China be emboldened by the 'special military operation' which Russia is progressing in Ukraine? The initial phases of conflict in 2022 wherein Russia brought about substantial damage to the Ukrainian war machine and national defense architecture – making huge inroads into the Ukrainian territory, dominating the Black Sea maritime arena and capturing offshore islands in the process – did suggest that China's could succeed by replicating a similar Russian model vis-à-vis Taiwan. However, both the warring parties continue to be engaged in a war of attrition with no indication of a clear winner despite the conflict raging well into its third year. This stalemate of sorts would certainly have sown the seeds of doubt amongst the Chinese leadership with regard to the current timeframe being right for attempting reunification. Yet another question that the top Chinese mandarins would be wrestling with is, whether the PLA was capable and ready to undertake the same with assured success. On the other hand, Taiwan would hopefully have inferred that staving off of the Chinese reunification effort through 'use of force' gambit was certainly feasible, provided the country and its defence forces prepared in right earnest, with assured military support of the US and the diplomatic backing of like-minded stakeholders.

But the self-doubt on part of Beijing does not take anything away from the long-cherished Chinese wish-list which sees 'reunification' as its unfinished agenda. When seen in the context of increasing conviction of the current Chinese leadership about the appropriateness of the timing and confidence in the nation's abilities to pull this off; it can be surmised that this would most likely happen, sooner rather than later. When and how are the only variables yet to be ascertained. There is though, considerable speculation in the global media with regard to this ominous event taking place within the timeline of 2027.²⁰ While there has been a considerable debate in the US strategic circles about whether this was a US-assigned timeline or did the

Chinese formally articulate it as such;²¹ the US military, on its part continues to persist with this estimate. In fact, Admiral John Aquilino, Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDO-PACOM), while demitting office in March 2024, reaffirmed his conviction about the 2027 timeline in these words:

*“All indications point to the PLA meeting President Xi Jinping’s directive to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027. Furthermore, the PLA’s actions indicate their ability to meet Xi’s preferred timeline to unify Taiwan with mainland China by force...”*²²

Ramifications for the Indo-Pacific Region

In the event that such a cataclysmic eventuality was to actually happen, then how would the global security order be impacted?

Since the Taiwan Strait and the adjoining East and South China Seas are critical sea lanes for global trade and energy flow; the emergent situation will have dangerous ramifications for the whole Indo-Pacific region. Most countries whose economies are tightly linked to the Chinese economic ‘panda hug’ – particularly the ASEAN nations – will be faced with a Hobson’s choice. The existing ‘balance of power’ model, wherein they looked for national security guarantee from the US, while still maintaining huge economic dependencies with China, will no longer be viable.

China would certainly use the territory of Taiwan and all its defence infrastructure to extend its military coverage and reach, much farther into the Pacific Ocean. This would consequently pose huge risks to the forward deployed US forces in various key islands in the Pacific Ocean. One is quite cognizant of Taiwan being referred to as an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’ in the US strategic discourse since the 1950s, when General Douglas McArthur first used this phrase to underscore its geostrategic importance by stating thus:

*“Formosa in the hands of the Communists can be compared to an unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender, ideally located to accomplish Soviet offensive strategy and at the same time, checkmate counter-offensive operations by United States Forces based on Okinawa and the Philippines.”*²³

In fact, the very concept of the ‘first island chain’, envisioned as the primary barrier to deny easy access to the Chinese defence forces into the Pacific Ocean, would be rendered irrelevant. Consequently, China, which many believe will not

cease its expansionist agenda after reunification, will certainly push southwards into the South China Sea (SCS) with an intention of enforcing even-tighter control within its unilaterally declared 'nine dash' lines therein. The world at large, and the SCS littoral states in particular, are already witnessing an extreme brand of 'grey zone' tactics adopted by the CCG ships and the Chinese maritime militia vessels against the legitimate maritime claims of the regional disputants under their 'benign-sounding' objective of "safeguarding maritime rights and interests". The precarious situation in fact, took a serious turn for the worse, when CCG ship 5205 deliberately and repeatedly collided with the anchored coast guard vessel, *BRP Teresa Magbanwa* (9701) of the Philippines at Sabina shoal on 31 August 2024, thereby punching large holes in that ship's hull.²⁴

It therefore stands to logical reasoning that a post-reunification Taiwan would certainly be used as a springboard for consolidating the Chinese control in SCS and its adjoining littorals. A historical precedent of this kind was already set, wherein a Chinese warrior chieftain named Koxinga (Cheng Cheng-kung) attacked Taiwan in 1662, and upon its capture, pushed the Dutch colonizers out of the Island. Using this new conquest as a base, he raided various locations in the Philippines and sought tribute from that nation.²⁵ While these threats did not actually materialize due to the demise of that crafty warrior; the idea of using Taiwan as a sheet anchor for southward expansion really took root, and continued to persist. Subsequently, the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Taiwan in 1874, and followed up its eventual capture by mounting its military and economic campaign into southern China and Southeast Asia by using Taiwan as an intermediate base.²⁶ Relevance of the above historical context in the current environment where China appears to be poised for a reunification push, is brought home quite starkly in the concluding para of this *Taipei Times* article:

*"That south-pointing history of Taiwan should be remembered whenever Taiwan's future under PRC occupation is discussed. History is not going to stop. It will continue, and like all history, it will echo what has gone on before."*²⁷

In such a situation, the US will have to contend with serious questions about its global credibility with respect to its ability and willingness to provide security umbrella to its treaty allies and similar assurance to its like-minded partners. In fact, there is already an ongoing debate about this issue in the US itself, and also in the

countries like Japan, South Korea and Philippines, all of whose national security would be adversely affected by the potential adversarial actions of China. In this context, the undermentioned 'key findings' of a recent study (2024) by the US-based Baker Institute for Public Policy, are quite instructive:²⁸

- The US could become an embattled “Fortress America” in a world which would come under increasing Chinese influence and control. This could lead to greater insecurity and economic deprivation for the US, and could possibly be a cause for China-US war in future.
- The US regional credibility could be crippled and its alliance relationships could be seriously damaged.
- A loss of confidence in the American security guarantees amongst the US allies in Asia could trigger multi-regional nuclear proliferation race, with Japan, South Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel becoming primary candidates for overt nuclearization.

India's Role in Maintaining 'Balance of Power'?

India, as the largest democracy in the world, has grown into a regional power of some consequence over the past half-century. The economic growth, military heft and diplomatic stance based on the principle of 'strategic autonomy' has lent it the comprehensive national power to be recognized as a credible proponent of the global stability matrix. In addition, India shares a long and largely disputed land border with China, and has recently displayed the political will and military resolve to stand up to the Chinese coercive military tactics therein. The country has not been shy of calling out the largely illegal and unlawful efforts of China and other revisionist states to unilaterally alter the status quo to the detriment of the interests of the larger global community. With these few unique attributes, India certainly sees itself as an important contributor towards maintaining global 'balance of Power' in the context of Taiwan contingency possibly playing out in near future.

India-Taiwan Relations

India-Taiwan interactions have generally been quite restrained, because India recognises the 'One China Policy' with Beijing's leadership at the helm. However, with the establishment of Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre (TECC) in

New Delhi in 1995 and the India-Taipei Association (ITA) in Taipei, both countries and their people started to engage more freely with each other.²⁹ After nearly a quarter-century of diligent perseverance from both sides, the restrictions in many facets of bilateral engagements have gradually diminished. Many bilateral agreements have been signed between the organisations and entities from both sides to bolster trade, connectivity and technology cooperation. Some important agreements/Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) are mentioned below:³⁰

- MOU on Scientific and Technological Cooperation – 2007
- Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement – July 2011
- Customs Mutual Assistance Agreement – July 2011
- MOU on Small and Medium Sized Enterprises – December 2015
- MOU between India's PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Taiwan Chamber of Commerce – June 2016
- Air Services Agreement – September 2016
- MOU on Taiwan-India Agricultural Cooperation – September 2016
- Letter of Intent for Cooperation on Railway Heritage in Chiayi City of Taiwan – December 2016
- MOU on Promotion of Industry Collaboration – December 2017
- MOU between Association of Indian Universities, and Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education of Taiwan – 2019
- MOU on Labour Force Cooperation – 16 February 2024

With the above policy initiatives providing the way ahead, India-Taiwan bilateral trade has grown considerably over past five years. The total trade figures for 2022 crossed USD 12.5 billion, rising from USD 10.5 billion in 2021, and USD 8.5 billion in 2020.³¹ The investment from electronics and semi-conductor industries of Taiwan in India has significantly increased from USD 1.5 billion in 2021 to USD 2.5 billion in 2022. Companies like Foxconn, Taiwan Semi-conductor Company (TSMC) and United Microelectronics Company (UMC) are assisting India in augmenting its

semi-conductor research, development and manufacturing capacity; and are also building technical skill-sets among the local human capital.

Significant progress was observed in the fields of trade, science and technology, critical supply chains, and education – particularly after the opening of a second TECC office in Chennai in 2012. Taiwan has now decided to open a third TECC office in Mumbai.³² This office in India's financial capital, which is likely to start functioning by end-2024, will further enhance bilateral trade and commerce.

Taiwan currently operates 26 Taiwan Education Centres (TEC) in different universities of India, which are mainly teaching Chinese language to Indian officials and students. Taiwan offers language and academic fellowships in Taiwanese universities and institutions to Indian scholars and students. University professors, geopolitical analysts and retired government officials from both sides have also been visiting each other's countries and organisations.

While the bilateral trade, investment and cultural relations have maintained a positive momentum; the conversations about the ongoing geopolitical dynamics, national security and maritime order have been rather muted. This is probably on account of the fact that both countries have chosen to operate within the confines of their existing foreign policy constraints. However, India, in recent past, appears to have adopted a more nuanced position on these issues while seeking greater engagement with Taiwan. A scholar in fact, posits that the emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct, onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and China's uncalled-for aggressive behaviour towards India, were the main drivers responsible for transformational changes in India-Taiwan relations since 2020.³³

Both countries have also shown the resolve to discuss the maritime security situation in the Indo-Pacific and the current challenges posed to the 'rules-based order' therein. Taiwan sees a great role for 'think-tank diplomacy as the fifth pillar' of its 'New Southbound Policy (NSP)' of 2016 for establishing regional connections. Accordingly, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF), a think tank affiliated to Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs', has built institutional linkages with India's National Maritime Foundation (NMF)³⁴ and Observer Research Foundation (ORF)³⁵ between 2020 and 2022. TAEF and ORF also held the first Taiwan-India Dialogue in October 2022 to discuss the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region, and the

prospects of India-Taiwan partnership in such a scenario.³⁶ The Chairman of NMF also participated in the 2023 edition of the 'Ketagalan Forum: Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue-2023' organised by Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁷ The visit of three former Chiefs of Indian Armed Forces to Taiwan for academic deliberations – albeit in their individual capacities – also coincided with the 'Ketagalan Forum'. Admiral Arun Prakash, former Chief of the Naval Staff and a scholar-warrior, also commented that this event certainly signalled mutuality of interest between the two countries, though he cautioned against reading too much into this issue.³⁸

Effect on Indian Interests

India being a major stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific, both, geopolitically and economically will also be affected to a great extent in the event of a China-Taiwan conflict – and possible reunification. The ongoing bilateral trade with Taiwan would certainly be disrupted in the short-to-medium term. Since more than 55 percent of India's bi-directional trade by volume passes through the international sea lanes (ISLs) of the Pacific Ocean, the resultant regional instability would pose serious risks to its safe transit. In addition, the fledgling technology collaboration and FDI – especially in semiconductor research, development, design and manufacture – would suffer huge setback. Needless to say, all the progress in building the educational, cultural and people-to-people linkages would also be lost.

However, none of these issues, borne out of forced decoupling between India and Taiwan due to circumstances beyond either country's control, can pose grave threat to India's national interests. An economically resurgent India – with aspirations to grow to a USD 5 Trillion economy by 2030 and having diversity in its supply chains – can certainly take this setback in its stride.

It is however instructive to note that the Indian maritime security interests in proximate waters may come to be adversely affected as an indirect fall out of the Taiwan reunification contingency. The benign-sounding role PLA Navy to 'conduct international cooperation in distant waters' first articulated in its 2008 Defence White Paper,³⁹ gradually evolved to "protection of its strategic SLOCs and overseas interests" by 2015.⁴⁰ This role was further reinforced in 2019, into "safeguarding of China's maritime rights and interests" – including those of overseas Chinese people, organisations and institutions – as a subset of the fundamental goal of China's

national defense to “resolutely safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and development interests”.⁴¹ The accelerated pace of Chinese warship-building continues to provide numerical superiority to the PLA Navy,⁴² so as to enable the Force to effectively undertake the above mentioned roles, far and wide across the Globe. While the PLA Navy, with more than 370 blue water ships has already surpassed the US Navy as the largest in the world in terms of numbers, it is projected to grow further to about 395 units by 2025, and to 435 by 2030.⁴³

In the contemporary geopolitical scenario, the bulk of this large Chinese naval force will be deployed in and around the Western Pacific Ocean to address the maritime security requirements closer home. The Taiwan issue and long-standing security guarantee offered by the US by way of forward- and actively- deployed US Navy in the Pacific Ocean are of course, the top concerns for Beijing. Considering the additional force requirement for dominance in other hotspots like the East and South China Seas, the immediate and emergent focus of the Chinese political and military leadership continues to be closer home.

The net effect on the ground is that a maximum of only 6-8 PLA Navy ships are generally present in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These numbers are often supplemented by 2-4 research, survey, hospital, intelligence collection and space-telemetry ships from time to time. This empirically works out to less than five percent of PLA Navy’s total force level – a number highly inadequate for any credible posturing, even though Beijing very well recognises the imperative for maintaining permanent presence in the region.

In the event of Taiwan getting reunified – timelines being immaterial – a major reason for employment of a large Chinese naval force in the Western Pacific Ocean would no longer exist. The obvious deployment of PLA Navy then, would be towards the Indian Ocean in large numbers. When this begins to happen in right earnest, the hitherto-before prominence that the Indian navy enjoyed in and around its primary areas of maritime interest, would come under serious challenge. When seen in the context of strained bilateral relations – on account of the flaring up of the India-China boundary question in the recent past – with the situation unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future – the Indian maritime security would definitely be threatened. To place the level of threat in perspective, even twenty percent of PLA Navy’s operationally employable warship inventory works out to more than 50 ships. China’s

pre-existing “*higher than mountains and deeper than oceans*”⁴⁴ friendship with Pakistan – which has been a troublesome neighbour all along in its own right – will further compound the threat quotient for India in the maritime domain. In this scenario, the capabilities and resolve of India’s maritime security apparatus would be severely tested.

Options for India

Possible China-centric Actions

It is therefore in India’s interest – both, geopolitically as also in terms of maritime security – to ensure that Taiwan continues to exist as an independent State, free from overtly aggressive threats of reunification. Since India is located so far away from the Taiwan, and also does not possess the naval capability to engage in effective warfare over such a long distance; it would be quite unrealistic for Taiwan, as also the larger global community, to expect New Delhi to contribute militarily in case of a China-Taiwan conflict. However unconfirmed media reports have speculated that the Indian Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) had ordered an internal study about the scenarios of China attempting a reunification by force, and the possible options for the Indian Defence Forces in such a scenario.⁴⁵

However, various other options to indirectly lessen the possibility of this ‘reunification’ contingency coming to pass, can certainly be considered. Some such options, which prima-facie come to mind, and may in fact, already be under unstated implementation are mentioned below.

The Indian defence Force level and heightened posture along the ‘line of actual control’ (LAC) on the India-China land border, which has been in place since mid-2020, may continue to be maintained. This level may occasionally be raised further to coincide with specific events, or when excessive Chinese brinkmanship in Taiwan Strait is observed. It will convey a strategic message of nuanced Indian solidarity with Taiwan, in addition to keeping the PLA second-guessing whether a second front from an opposite axis will come alive or not.

India has opposed the concept and implementation of the Chinese ‘Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) right from its inception, on the grounds of sovereignty, territorial integrity, transparency and equality, among other concerns. India has specifically

rejected the so-called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is a part of BRI because the project ignores India's core concerns on its sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁶ Since part of CPEC passes through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) and China believes a lot in symbolism – and often uses it as a tool for psychological warfare – India could formally start using the acronym CPOKEC (China- Pakistan-occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor) to convey its opposition in a symbolic riposte. In fact, the usage of this nomenclature (CPOKEC) is already gaining traction in the Indian geostrategic narrative.⁴⁷

Collaborative Activities as Possible Deterrents

India must also proactively join the international community in every possible forum to oppose the attempts by China to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea with regard to its illegal and unlawful claims on many features and associated maritime zones, in contravention to the established conventions. In this regard, India's nuanced change in position with respect to the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favour of Philippines, wherein New Delhi called for *"...the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for 'adherence' to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea ..."* is a substantial change of tack.⁴⁸

The issue of keeping the PLA busy on multiple fronts from different directions can be a point for active consideration in QUAD grouping's agenda, wherein Japan may be requested to become more proactive with respect to employment of its naval and Air Force assets off Senkaku islands, Chunxiao gas fields, and also in and around various straits separating its islands – the Tsushima, Tsugaru, Suoya and Miyako. The visible increase in Japan's proactive engagement with Philippines with nearly half a billion USD loan to build five patrol vessels⁴⁹ – in addition to providing two large ships to its Coast Guard – in light of Chinese aggressive posturing in the South China Sea, is also a step in right direction. Continual cross-strait passage of US naval ships coupled with the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) around the Chinese claimed features in the Paracel and Spratly chain of islands and air surveillance missions in the South China Sea will also continue to engage sizeable attention and effort of the PLA forces.⁵⁰

Rally the Global South against Possibilities of China Centric World Order

India commands reasonably genuine respect amongst the 'Global South', cutting across political systems and ideological divides, on account of its historical 'non-alignment' stand through the Cold War, and nuanced assertion of 'strategic autonomy' amidst the contemporary geostrategic upheavals, with their attendant pulls and pressures. The Country can therefore leverage this widespread goodwill to embark on the onerous task of spreading awareness amongst the 'Global South' about the pitfalls of the changed global order to the general detriment of the global community.

Prime Minister Modi, during the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, outlined India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region, being premised on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue, adherence to international rules/ laws, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the international seas. However, this noble vision can only come to fruition if the countries of the 'Global South' can first understand the perils of living in a China-centric world order; and then unitedly sally forth to prevent such a contingency from taking shape – with selfless guidance of India and due support from the good offices of countries like the US and 'Global North' wherever forthcoming.

Bilateral soft-cooperative activities with Taiwan

As for Taiwan proper, there is great merit in the Indian and Taiwanese think tanks working and writing together on issues of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly when there many points of convergence in scope and objectives between India's 'Look East Policy' and Taiwan's 'South-bound Policy'.⁵¹ A case in point is the participation of the Author in the '2024 International Conference on Sea Lane Security' organised by Taiwan's Ministry of Ocean Affairs Council in June 2024, where distinguished delegates from the United States, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, India, Australia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Maldives were represented.

It is also recommended that the frequency of visits of retired senior foreign service and defence forces officials from both sides for discussions on geopolitical and security issues in the Indo-Pacific region should be increased. In this context, the visit of Lieutenant General YK Joshi (Retired), Director General of the Centre for

Contemporary China Studies (CCCS), to Taiwan in September 2024, and his participation in the 2024 edition of the Taipei Security Dialogue (TSD), does merit a mention. This visit is as close as it can get to a bilateral ‘track-1’ engagement because the CCCS is an official think tank of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Further, for those who are not aware of his antecedents, he was the Commander in Chief of the Indian Northern Army Command which actively engaged the PLA in a military confrontation at the LAC on the India-China land border in Ladakh, in the year 2020. A Video grab of the Indian General’s participation in the TSD-2024 is placed at Figure 4.



Figure 4: Lt General YK Joshi (Retired), Director General, CCCS at 2024 TSD
Source: Author

The potential for such visits to convey strategic messages – whether unintended or otherwise as happened in case of August 2023 visit of the three retired service chiefs also – to the keen observers in the region should certainly be a consideration.

Conclusion

The US, of course, continues to remain Taiwan’s external bulwark against Chinese aggression, with the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 expanding the scope of arms transfer to Taiwan from being for “*defensive purpose*” to “*arms conducive to deterring acts of aggression by the PLA.*”⁵² However, it is imperative for Taiwan to be prepared to stem the initial Chinese offensive on the basis of two major postulates of “*securing territory with resolute defence*” and “*mount multi-domain deterrence by joint capabilities*”, as enunciated in its Quadrennial Defense Review of 2021.⁵³

When India decided to establish diplomatic relations with China in April 1950, that country had set a pre-condition that India must recognise the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China, and consequently not recognise Taiwan as an independent state. Over the years, India's One China policy has largely stood the test of time.

However, in recent years, there have been calls to revisit this policy in light of changing geopolitical dynamics. This narrative is growing stronger on account of factors like (1) Continuous disregard of India's core concerns by China; (2) rise of Taiwan as a major global economic and technological power; (3) China's growing military assertiveness and territorial claims particularly post Doklam in 2017 and culminating in Galwan skirmish in 2020; (4) India's growing economic and strategic ties with the US; and (5) the need for India to assert its strategic autonomy and defend its interests in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁴

Despite changing geopolitical circumstances, India continues to retain its official 'One China policy'. Replying to a question in Rajya Sabha in December 2021 on whether the Government was looking forward to augment its diplomatic, economic, trade and bilateral relationship with Taiwan to a strategic level; the concerned Minister replied that the *"Government of India's policy on Taiwan was clear and consistent. The Government only facilitates and promotes interactions in areas of trade, investment, tourism, culture, education and people-to-people exchanges."*⁵⁵

However, the reality remains that both, India and Taiwan face an increasingly overbearing adversary – albeit in different geographical domains – that believes in leveraging its comprehensive national power (CNP) to engage in a revisionist expansive agenda with regard to its 'territorial and sovereignty interests'. It is just not an option for either country to ignore or condone the efforts of the adversary to forge a series of 'new normals'. In such circumstances, it is for New Delhi to take a call whether or not there should be a significant change of stance in India-Taiwan relations; and also, to decide when, and by how much.

Meanwhile, India must find ways and means within the self-imposed confines of its existing foreign policy choices to safeguard its national interests by adopting a combination of twin approaches: (1) follow independent action-plan of its own, as

well as (2) lending its support to multilateral organisations/forums which call for rules-based order and resolution of international disputes through dialogue and peaceful means. The aim of the endeavour must be to make the antagonist realize that “*This is not an era of war*”, as the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has publicly articulated at various global forums.⁵⁶

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