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Taiwan and the Sino-US Relationship Amid Ukraine Crisis

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The Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Sino-US relationship, and the US strategic ambiguity around Taiwan have attracted much attention recently. The recent Ukrainian crisis has only alarmed the US of similar Chinese actions against Taiwan, which raised the pertinent question of how the US would respond to such a crisis. US President Joe Biden, on his first official visit to East Asia, proclaimed that if China invaded Taiwan, the US would respond militarily to thwart any Chinese aggression. For a long time, the issue of Taiwan was defined by the One-China policy, which further defines the Sino-US relationship.

In recent years, Chinese military activities in the Taiwan Strait and breach of Taiwan's airspace have only increased, which has alarmed the US. Furthermore, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's military activities in the Taiwan Strait have increased and become a serious concern regarding China's invasion of Taiwan. Meanwhile, China has refuted such claims and objects to any interference in its internal matters.

In recent years, cooperation between China and Russia has increased, as was witnessed in the case of Ukraine in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution. During the second in-person Quad Summit held in Tokyo, China and Russia carried out a joint flight¹ over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan. In such a situation when China is actively engaged in expanding its military capabilities, the USA's stand on the Taiwan issue becomes important.

Background

Communist Party of China (CPC) members view the existence of Taiwan as a reflection of divided China. Thus, they called for the full reunification² of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau with mainland China. On the 110th anniversary of the fall of the Qing Dynasty, President Xi Jinping argued that the "Taiwan Independence"³ forces were the greatest obstacle to the unification of China and wanted a peaceful unification of China. For a long time, China objected to external interference in the Taiwan issue and wanted to replicate the Hong Kong system of 'One Country Two System' in Taiwan too. To achieve this, President Xi Jinping argued that the Chinese people's determination⁴ shouldn't be underestimated, and such unification will be achieved.

Taiwan became a part of Imperial China⁵ a decade before the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War and became independent in 1949. As the 1972 rapprochement between the US and China normalised their bilateral relationship, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1972 addressed the Taiwan issue based on the 'One China Policy'. However, since then, such development has only acted as a guideline to address any Taiwan Strait crisis. Further, since 2016, the relationship and contact

between China under the leadership of President Xi Jinping and Taiwan under President Tsai Ing-wen have remained low and have become a matter of concern in the Sino-US relationship. As China regularly breaches Taiwan's airspace, the latter has called for enhancing its military capabilities⁶ to address any Chinese aggression.

In March 2021, Admiral Phil Davidson, a former Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, argued that the threat of unification of China⁷ would manifest in this decade, possibly in the next six years. On the other hand, Jin Canrong, Associate Dean, Renmin University of China, argues that China can defeat any US forces and unify Taiwan within a week, which they will attempt to achieve by 2027 to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the People's Liberation Army foundation⁸. Such a statement becomes alarming, and considering the Ukraine Crisis, the nature of the US response in the case of Taiwan has become critical, as it could further impact the Sino-US great power rivalry.

Will Taiwan become another Ukraine?

Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, a phrase like 'Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow' has started to redefine the Sino-US relationship. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the issue of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan has emerged. The current state of the Russia-Ukraine war has come out to be a warning for China to reconsider its goal of unifying Taiwan with China vis-à-vis how the US and European Union (EU) have reacted since the invasion of Ukraine began⁹. Meanwhile, China's economic relations with major trading powers like the EU is the top-most priority.

Will China invade Taiwan, and can the Chinese economy survive the economic repercussions? With the second-largest army in the world and continued tension in the Taiwan Strait, the probability of a Chinese invasion couldn't be ignored¹⁰. Although China recently conducted various military exercises mirroring the invasion of Taiwan, it could prove costly as such a victory will come at a very high cost¹¹. Taiwan argues that China cannot conduct an effective invasion of Taiwan as China lacks the logistical support capability for its forces¹². In such a situation, there is a need to protect the port and airport, and experience learned from the Ukraine-Russia conflict comes in handy.

Taiwan hopes that the threat of economic sanction will deter Chinese adventure in the strait.¹³ In the current global economic situation, a break of the US-China ties and an economic sanction on China resulting from the Chinese invasion of Taiwan could prove disastrous for the world in general and not only for China¹⁴. Removing Russia from SWIFT allowed Chinese President Xi Jinping to expand its alternate structure to compete with the international trade and finance system¹⁵. China

bypasses such a system by using small firms or institutions vis-à-vis North Korea, Iran, and now Russia to avoid an impact on its economy¹⁶.

To avoid such a situation, China is working towards making its economy sanction-proof by transforming it into a self-sufficient entity while addressing its food security¹⁷. China is engaged in enhancing its 18-month food supply as any economic sanction could lead to food scarcity¹⁸. In Chinese mythology, a ruler's authority is defined by his capability to address a food crisis, as his inability to do so could lead the ruler to lose the 'Mandate of Heaven'¹⁹. Moreover, the continuation of the threat of the Chinese invasion of Taiwan will militarise the Southeast Asian region, and China wouldn't want such a situation to arise.

Challenges Ahead

With the backdrop of how the US handled the Russian invasion of Ukraine, questions were raised about the US' capability to address any Chinese invasion of Taiwan. It further raises concerns regarding the validity of the One China Policy. In such a situation, there is no need to reverse US' strategic ambiguity and its One China Policy²⁰. Although questions are being asked regarding the capacity of the US to ensure they have an effective response to any Chinese invasion of Taiwan, a report by the Rand Cooperation argues that the US lacks the capacity to ensure it would have an adequate response ready in the event of China's invasion of Taiwan²¹.

The US would require a swift and heavy deployment of forces if they want their response to be effective. In such a situation, Taiwan's Foreign Affairs Minister, Joseph Wu, argues that Taiwan doesn't want the US to fight its battle and wants the US to equip them so that they can defend themselves²². On the other hand, China argued that whatever be the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine conflict; the US could use Taiwan under its Asia-Pacific strategy to contain China's rise instead of rebuilding a constructive interaction on the Taiwan issue²³.

Meanwhile, to ensure the US enjoys a credible advantage against China²⁴ to address the Taiwan issue, the US has taken appropriate strategic steps in recent years. The major concern for China includes the formation of AUKUS in 2021, strengthening the QUAD, and military policy adjustments made by Japan and South Korea in recent years to align with the US policy towards the Taiwan Strait. China argued that the US use of the Taiwan Card within its Indo-Pacific Strategy to curtail China's rise has created new challenges for China around its periphery and subsequently intensified the Sino-US great power politics.

NOTES

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