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- Security Sans Strategy?
Sumit Mukerji
- US Defence of Taiwan: Complexities and Challenges
Anil Chopra
- Assessing the Development and Challenges in
Pakistan's Civil Nuclear Programme
Zoya Akhter Fathima
- Wildfires and Climate Crisis: The Need
for International Cooperation
Megna Suresh and Dhanasree Jayaram
- Rentierism and the West Asian Economies: Case of Qatar
Anu Sharma
- India-US Relations: Convergences and
Divergences under the Biden Administration
Stuti Banerjee
- Deepening Indo-US Maritime Cooperation
in the Indo-Pacific
Rushali Saha
- Indonesia's Foreign Policy: Underlining Factors
of a 'Religious' State
Temjenmeren Ao

Book Review

US DEFENCE OF TAIWAN: COMPLEXITIES AND CHALLENGES

ANIL CHOPRA

“Twenty Chinese military aircraft intruded into Taiwanese air defence identification zone on March 26, 2021. It was the largest incursion ever, and marked a dramatic escalation of tension between the two,” Reuters reported.¹ Earlier, Taiwan was on high alert after major incursions by Chinese warplanes in late January 2021.² Were these raids meant to be a warning of China’s intent to the new Biden administration in USA? Is China getting all set to take Taiwan by force, as Chinese strongman Xi Jinping has been threatening? When Biden administration affirms that its commitment to defend Taiwan is “rock-solid”, can it actually implement it? It will be interesting to address these pertinent questions.

HISTORICAL POSITION

Taiwan was part of China during the Qing dynasty till 1887. However, following its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese

Air Marshal **Anil Chopra** PVSM AVSM VM VSM (Retd) is Director General, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. “Taiwan reports largest ever incursion by Chinese air force”, Reuters, March 26, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-security-idUSKBN2BI24D>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.
2. “Taiwan reports ‘large incursion’ by Chinese warplanes for second day”, BBC, January 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55788359>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

imperial government ceded Taiwan to Japan in perpetuity. Taiwan administration was transferred by Japan to China at the end of World War II in 1945. The subsequent split of China into two in 1949 as a result of civil war, resulted in two political entities.

CHINA'S GROWING STRENGTH AND ASSERTION

China has been growing rapidly, economically and militarily. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly stated that "We have sufficient abilities to thwart any form of Taiwan independence attempts." They have been willing to speak to Taiwan based on 1992 consensus which essentially reiterates the "one China principle".³ Clearly China's actions to use a sledgehammer to crush democracy in Hong Kong has shaken Taiwan and the free world. The People's Liberation Army is now strong. The PLA Navy has more ships than the US Navy, PLA Air Force is adding reach, and China has a huge missile inventory with longer ranges. It will make it difficult for the US forces to penetrate closer. Beijing nearly has technical parity with the US armed forces, and plans to overtake USA in capability by 2030.

TAIWAN—STRONG PRO-INDEPENDENCE LEADER

In 2016, pro-Independence leader, Tsai Ing-wen, and her DPP have had landslide victories. She has refused to accept the "1992 Consensus". Due to growing Chinese unification pressure, the Formosa Alliance was formed in April 2018. The alliance wanted a referendum for Taiwan's independence. The Chinese were upset, and responded with increased military activities. In January 2020 Tsai Ing-wen said that Taiwan is already an independent country. In March 2021, Taiwanese leaders rejected the once proposed "one country, two systems" model, knowing well how China curbed freedom in Hong Kong. Taiwan's strength is its resolve to defend itself. The Taiwanese are made of stern stuff and won't be easy to bomb or blockade into submission.

3. Austin Wang, Charles K. S. Wu, Yao-Yuan Yeh and Fang-Yu Chen, "What Does the 1992 Consensus Mean to Citizens in Taiwan?", *The Diplomat*, November 10, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/what-does-the-1992-consensus-mean-to-citizens-in-taiwan/>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

TAIWANESE ARMED FORCES

The Taiwan Armed Forces include approximately 300,000 personnel, and reserves reportedly totalling 3,870,000. Conscription remains universal for qualified males. Taiwan has more than 170,000 air raid shelters which would shelter much of the civilian population in the event of Chinese air or missile attack. At US\$ 13.1 billion (2020), Taiwan has a sizeable defence budget. Taiwan's military has fortified defences around key landing points and regularly conducts drills to repel Chinese forces arriving by sea and from the air.

US MILITARY SUPPORT TO TAIWAN

Taiwan has high-level military cooperation with the USA. The United States regularly sends personnel to Taiwan for both training and liaison. US Marines have also deployed to Taiwan. Most of the weaponry with Taiwan is of US origin, including the F-16 fighters and Apache attack helicopters, and since 2016, they have embarked on a massive military build-up. Clearly, Taiwan wants more ground-based, short-range missiles.⁴ Also, strong statements by nationalist Chinese leaders tried to put pressure on Taiwan, forcing Taiwan to seek more arms from the United States.

CHINA'S THREAT TO INVADE TAIWAN

For long, China has been threatening to invade Taiwan. Now it appears that it could actually be a reality. Would that mean a war with the USA?⁵ Chinese defence ministry spokesman, Wu Qian, defended Chinese military activities and said, "We warn those 'Taiwan independence' elements—those who play with fire will burn themselves, and Taiwan independence means war." China does not rule out use of force to take the island back. What China is currently up to, is more like a pre-war behaviour, and needs a close watch. China's preparatory military exercises have involved all the domains

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4. Michael Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, "Taiwan Wants More Missiles: That's Not a Bad Thing", *Defence One*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/03/taiwan-wants-more-missiles-s-not-bad-thing/172887/>. Accessed on April 4, 2021.
 5. Samson Ellis, Bloomberg, "Can China invade Taiwan? Here's what could happen if it really does", *Business Standard*, October 8, 2020, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/can-china-invade-taiwan-here-s-what-could-happen-if-it-really-does-120100800505_1.html. Accessed on April 5, 2021.

of sea, air, land, cyber, and in space. They are closely gauging the international responses.

CHINA'S LIKELY GRADED ACTIONS

China could start a graded action by just capturing one of Taiwan's many islands, instead of a full assault on Taiwan. They will first use cyber and electronic warfare. They will also target the ISR assets. This will be followed by a barrage of surface-to-surface missiles. Chinese aircraft will then carry out air strikes. The Chinese navy will try to enforce a blockade to cut off external support and supplies. China will surely target the political leadership. The Chinese military has been doing simulations and rehearsing with full-scale sand-model targets. It will not be easy for China to sustain a large force by sea and air to seize and hold an island of 24 million committed people. But, once lost, to take back Taiwan from a well-entrenched PLA through an amphibious invasion would be difficult.

ADVANTAGE OF PROXIMITY

China has a fundamental advantage of proximity to action, and ability to sustain. As the USA prepares to put all its energies to bounce back and counter China, is the window of opportunity for China a short one? In case of coercive use of force, the costs to Beijing would be lower, and in turn chances of success would be greater. A ballistic missile attack or a naval blockade will not be sufficient to occupy Taiwan. China would use "gray zone" operations, to influence Taiwan, something akin to what Russia did in Crimea. China could pressure Taiwan to submission, and subsequently wield the hammer.

WILL THE USA JOIN THE WAR TO DEFEND TAIWAN?

An invasion by China could be an ultimate snub to the free world. If the USA joins the war, there would be many losers. Despite many triggers, it should be remembered that the Soviet Union and USA never went to war during the Cold War period or even during other crises. In January 2021, as the US pledged support, China warned Taiwan that open declaration of independence 'means war'.⁶

6. "China warns Taiwan independence 'means war' as US pledges support", BBC, January 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55851052>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

President Biden has reaffirmed US commitment to Taiwan. The US military intervention could also be graded and need not be a full-blown war.⁷ Will such a war draw Japan and others into it? Can the USA deter such a war? How “rock solid” is US support for Taiwan remains a question. Can US aircraft carriers and a few bases in Japan and in Guam be able to match the forces that China can bring to bear from its mainland and some island bases? Can the USA stop a Chinese blockade of Taiwan? After the world watched helplessly when China usurped most of South China Sea, can we expect an aggressive military response? Is the USA ready for another war? All these questions are looking for answers.

ACTION AREAS—AIR AND SEA

The USA will not bring boots on the ground in Taiwan. Air assets that the US and Japan can bring to bear will be important. The United States Indo-Pacific Command⁸ (INDOPACOM) has a very significant air element that includes nearly 375 aircraft of USAF and 1,100 aircraft on five carrier groups of the US Navy. US Armed forces are battle hardened having seen combat in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. They have airbases in Japan, South Korea, Alaska, Pearl Harbour, and at Guam. There is already a proposal to have an Indo-Pacific fleet.⁹ The Andersen airbase at Guam houses B-52 strategic bombers. The US has a significant presence in Japan, including in islands just off Taiwan. There are basing facilities in Palawan (the Philippines), berthing facilities at Da Nang (Vietnam), naval facilities in Singapore and Darwin (Australia). The USA exercises regularly with Indonesia which many consider as the fulcrum for the Indo-Pacific region.

US FRIENDLY AIR ASSETS

The Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) are focused on China. They have acquired new equipment and hardware. The Japanese Air Force

7. Robert D. Blackwill and Philip Zelikow, “Can the United States prevent a war over Taiwan?”, *War on the Rocks*, March 1, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/can-the-united-states-prevent-a-war-over-taiwan/>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

8. US Indo-Pacific Command, <https://www.pacom.mil/>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

9. Abhijnan Rej, “US Navy Secretary Proposes New Indo-Pacific Fleet”, *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/us-navy-secretary-proposes-new-indo-pacific-fleet/>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

carries out combat air patrols around Japan, and also maintains a network of ground and air early-warning radars. It is estimated to have around 750 aircraft, approximately 375 of them fighter aircraft, mostly of US origin, including the F-35 Lightning II. Japan operates AEW&C and flight refuelling aircraft. The Royal Australian Air Force, is also 259 aircraft strong. The Vietnam People's Air Force has nearly 300 aircraft.

THE 1979 TAIWAN RELATIONS ACT

The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act does not guarantee that the USA will intervene militarily if China attacks or invades Taiwan, nor does it relinquish it. The act states that "the United States will make available to Taiwan such defence articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain sufficient self-defense capacity." The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis showed that the United States does not take its interest in Taiwan's security lightly. But is it time for Washington to abandon its policy of strategic ambiguity?

CHINA WINNING WAR-GAMES

"China's growing firepower casts doubt on whether the US could defend Taiwan,"¹⁰ write Dan De Luce and Ken Dilanian. The Pacific Ocean was once dominated by US forces. "In simulated combat in which China attempts to invade Taiwan, the results are sobering and the United States often loses," said David Ochmanek, a former senior Defense Department official who helps run war games for the Pentagon at the RAND Corp. think tank.¹¹ The outgoing head of the US military's Indo-Pacific Command, Adm. Philip Davidson, warned senators this month that, "the U.S. is losing its military edge over China, and that Beijing could decide to try to seize control of Taiwan by force by 2027."¹² Despite China's rise, the US enjoyed near total air superiority around Taiwan. However, this is no more the

10. Dan De Luce and Ken Dilanian, "China's growing firepower casts doubt on whether U.S. could defend Taiwan", NBC News, March 27, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/china-s-growing-firepower-casts-doubt-whether-u-s-could-n1262148>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

case. "Everything they (China) build can hit Taiwan. And a lot of stuff they build really can only hit Taiwan," said David Shlapak,¹³ a senior defence researcher at the RAND Corp. think tank.

TAIWAN'S RECENT ACTIONS

Taiwan Times reported, "To strengthen own defences, Taiwan has begun the reconstruction of a runway at Dongsha Island, which is expected to be completed by February 2022."¹⁴ Taiwanese government officials have claimed that "The Taiwanese Air Force no longer scrambles each time the PLA planes enter its ADIZ. Yet the intruders are tracked by the ground-based missiles", as per a Reuters report.¹⁵ *Taiwan News* reports¹⁶ have also claimed that, "there have been nearly forty-fold increase in cyber-attacks in 2020 on Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs".

USA OPTIONS?

If the USA cannot defend Taiwan, would it have formally ceded the bigger power slot to China? It is thus a time for the USA to devise a clear Taiwan strategy, because there is where the first showdown will occur. The USA's status quo approach could be to remain committed to defence of Taiwan without specific overt actions, and hope that deters war.

The USA has to choose its options. Strengthen Taiwan with military hardware and military advice. Let them fight out and defend themselves. Continue to posture that Japan and USA would come in for direct support if China invades Taiwan. Do not get into direct military confrontation. Another choice would be to provide indirect and defensive support, like ISR, communications, cyber and electronic warfare support. Also provide direct support for

13. Ibid.

14. Kelvin Chen, "Taiwan begins renovation of Dongsha Island runway", *Taiwan News*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4167720>. Accessed on April 5, 2021.

15. "Taiwan says tracks intruding Chinese aircraft with missiles, not always scrambling", Reuters, March 29, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-security-idUSKBN2BL0JS>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

16. Matthew Strong, "Cyberattacks on Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs increased 40-fold in 2020", *Taiwan News*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4164261>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

defence of Taiwan with air defence assets, etc. Japan and some other allies could also support this effort. This approach could mean Chinese attack on US and Japanese assets at sea or on Taiwanese mainland. Can the USA create the wherewithal for all this? Could this approach end up in a full war? Will the USA be able to muster political courage to face uncertain military outcomes, and even risk a humiliating defeat? Ultimately the strategy should be to limit the war to defence of Taiwan and not let it move to mainland Japan, the USA or China.

A few years ago the US had a defence strategy to deny China sustained air and sea dominance inside the 'first island chain' in a conflict; defend the first island-chain nations, including Taiwan; and dominating all domains outside the first island-chain. Have these already been overtaken by rising Chinese power?

A non-kinetic response could be a massive worldwide economic isolation of China, including freezing of its assets in the USA and Europe. With fractured global polity, and Chinese inroads across the world, will such a strategy work? Can the USA help create fissures within Communist Party of China? Considering their economic might, and increasingly totalitarian control, it is an unlikely option.

CONCLUSION

Reunification with Taiwan remains the top Chinese political objective. Could the Chinese military might and threats push Taiwanese into some settlement? If Taiwan were to capitulate, that would send signals of doubt to the free world on America's strength and reliability as an ally. It was going to be tough for the USA. China has been using pressure tactics and regularly flying fighters and bombers into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). Could this intimidation set in fatigue? At least three Taiwanese fighter aircraft have crashed in the last six months. Successive US presidents have approved arms sales to Taiwan. But is it really enough to take the Chinese missile barrage that will open at time-zero? How many air defence missiles will be enough for Taiwan to take on that barrage? Beijing would try to invade and achieve a quick success before the USA can even react or mobilise. Who will take on the Chinese amphibious and airborne invasion?

Yet the PLA is not invincible. To prevent Chinese invasion, the USA and its allies would have to position, very early, military assets to destroy Chinese amphibious ships and transport aircraft. “More sensors, missiles and other assets in the region will help deter China from a costly island invasion”, writes Elbridge Colby.¹⁷ He adds, “The U.S. would have to get its intelligence right, about intentions and build-up ... USA, Japan and Taiwan must pre-position long-range armaments at sea and at their bases in the region.” If Taiwan falls, China will become an uncontested military power in Asia, and this would lower American power and reliability.

To defend Taiwan would require heavy investment from both America and Taiwan. But it can be done. And that will be a small price to pay to make sure autocratic communist China doesn't start to rule the world.

17. Elbridge Colby, “America Can Defend Taiwan”, *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-can-defend-taiwan-11611684038>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.