



10 April 2023

RISING TENSIONS IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT
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As January 2024 -- the date for Taiwan's national elections -- draws closer, it is certain that China will be a factor in the elections. Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's stop-overs in New York and Los Angeles and meeting with US House Majority Leader McCarthy on April 5 amid steadily escalating Cross Strait tensions has also provoked "robust counter-measures" by China.

2. Ever since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)'s Tsai Ing-wen took over as Taiwan's President in May 2016, Beijing has been upset at the turn Taiwan's politics have taken. Tsai Ing-wen herself has been cautious, but deliberate, in her moves to preserve Taiwan's distinct political entity. She has, at the same time, adhered to the DPP's principles on Taiwan's status and not yielded ground on the '1992 Consensus'. Her Southbound policy, for instance, is non-confrontational and farsighted and seeks to broad-base Taiwan's diplomatic and trade interactions while diversifying its economy and reducing dependence on the People's Republic of China. These are long range moves, which will benefit Taiwan and its business community, but they are unlikely to yield political dividends in the short term. She has simultaneously been firm in preserving the identity of Taiwan and its people as a separate entity.

3. Tsai Ing-wen's caution has not met with an equally calibrated response from Beijing. Beijing has railed against her for not agreeing to the '1992 Consensus' and its warnings have ranged from intemperate threats of direct action against individual leaders -- including their decapitation -- to pressure on Taiwan's economy and Taiwanese businessmen residing in China. The growing warmth in Taiwan's relations with the US, at a time when Sino-US relations are deteriorating, are agitating Beijing and adding to tensions. There is concern in Beijing that the U.S. may change its policy on China. Chinese President Xi Jinping has also pursued a more aggressive policy towards China's neighbours, including Taiwan, since becoming President in 2012. At the 20th Party Congress last October and again at the National People's Congress (NPC) plenum last month, Xi Jinping reiterated his pledge for the reunification of China 'in the new era'. This has been accompanied by a strong implication of the use of military force.

4. China's new Premier Li Qiang, in his first remarks to the press after his appointment at the NPC, however, made no reference to the reunification of Taiwan with China. Instead, he focussed on people-to-people and business contacts. This would imply a re-energising by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of United Front tactics against Taiwan. An example is the ongoing visit of former Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou -- the first by either a serving or retired Taiwanese leader -- to China. Other visits by KMT and other politicians can be expected to

follow. It is anticipated that as part of China's two-pronged effort at reunification, there will be a pronounced uptick in the CCP Central Committee (CC)'s United Front Work Department (UFWD) activities in Taiwan.

5. There has been noticeably greater attention to activities of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) under Xi Jinping. After he took over as Chairman of the Central Small Leading Group on United Front in 2016, the UFWD's budget and personnel strength have doubled. The UFWD added four new bureaus responsible for 'overseas Chinese affairs' and absorbed the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the State Administration for Religious Affairs. As Mariah Thornton pointed out in her recent paper 'Countering United Front Work: Taiwan's Political Warfare System' published in 'China Foresight' of the London School of Economics, the UFWD's activities now target overseas Chinese, civil societies, governments, and economic operations of other countries. Taiwan has been a prime target for decades with successive Chinese administrations trying to effect Taiwan's reunification with the Chinese Mainland and Xi Jinping has reinforced these efforts. Despite these efforts, however, the large majority of the people in Taiwan now identify themselves exclusively as 'Taiwanese' as opposed to 'Taiwanese-Chinese' or 'Chinese,' and a vast majority of Taiwanese oppose unification with China. Alongside the strong consensus among Taiwanese that Taiwan and China are separate states, Taiwan has also become more entrenched in its commitment to democratic norms and values since its transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the 1990s.

6. US House leader Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei in 2022 marked a critical moment in China's relations with the US and Taiwan. Within days of her leaving Taiwan, China organised a massive air-sea military exercise to demonstrate the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s capabilities including to show it can effectively blockade Taiwan. Almost each day since then PLA Air Force (PLAAF) fighter jets and PLA Navy (PLAN) warships have entered the Taiwan Strait and often crossed the median line. As stated by Xi Jinping in the Work Report presented to the 20th Party Congress, the PLA "will enable us to shape our security posture, deter and manage crises and conflicts, and win local wars". The PLA has obviously begun "shaping" its security environment.

7. The PLA officer who planned and supervised the operations, General He Weidong, was "helicoptered" by Chinese President Xi Jinping into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo -- he wasn't even a member of the CCP Central Committee -- and appointed one of the two Vice Chairmen of the Central Military Commission (CMC). There are other indications of China preparing for a military offensive against Taiwan, like the Theatre and provincial-level war preparedness, military amphibious exercises and accelerated construction of amphibious landing craft.

8. Xi Jinping's declaration at the recently concluded 14th National People's Congress (NPC) asserting the importance of effecting the reunification in "the new era" points to a time horizon. The retention of 67-year old Song Tao as Director of the Taiwan Affairs Office --- similarly signals that the CCP, rather than the State Council, will play a dominant role in crafting China's policies towards Taiwan. China has also stepped up its cheque-book diplomacy and in recent weeks won over the Honduras, which had diplomatic ties with

Taiwan. But a major impediment to Beijing's plans is the US. Whether Beijing will launch an offensive against Taiwan depends on its assessment of whether the US will intervene on Taiwan's behalf.

9. Meanwhile, though US President Biden has said that the US will intervene if Taiwan is attacked, Washington continues to maintain strategic ambiguity. There is bipartisan consensus in Washington that China is a major threat and that any Chinese military action against Taiwan needs to be thwarted. Last month the US approved the potential sale of new weapons worth US\$ 619 million despite Beijing's protests. At least two bipartisan delegations from the US Congress have visited Taiwan in the last six months. US Navy ships occasionally transit through the Taiwan Strait and US aircraft carriers stay in the vicinity. A recent report by a Chinese think-tank, the 'South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative' (SCSPI) said the US had intensified military operations in the South China Sea in the past two years to promote its political and diplomatic agenda. The South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI) predicts forces targeting the Taiwan Strait. According to SCSPI statistics, there were about 1,000 sorties by large US reconnaissance aircraft into the South China Sea region with some as close as 13 nautical miles from the baseline of China's mainland territorial waters.

10. According to a South Asian Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) hacking group, the nuclear energy sector in China is being targeted in a recent cyber-espionage campaign. A group called "Bitter" was identified to have used updated first-stage trojan payloads in the recently observed espionage campaign. The group reportedly added an extra layer of script obfuscation and employed additional decoys for social engineering and obtaining critical systems information and gaining access to the infrastructure networks. US military commanders have recently made statements indicating that they assess a military showdown between the US and China is likely by 2025.

11. Aware of the deteriorating relationship with China, Tsai Ing-wen is taking precautions. She has increased Taiwan's military budget by 13.9 percent over the previous year and projected US\$19 billion in defence spending for 2023. She has announced that Taiwan will extend its compulsory military service from four months to a year starting in 2024, and plans to send Taiwanese troops to the US for training. Taiwan has also stepped up construction of warships and has plans to build a nuclear-powered submarine. Japan has extended support and its Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso stated in July 2021 that "If a major incident happened (over Taiwan), it's safe to say it would be related to a situation threatening the survival (of Japan). If that is the case, Japan and the U.S. must defend Taiwan together." This is the first such categorical statement by a senior Japanese official.

12. Meanwhile, tensions escalated sharply with Tsai Ing-wen's trip to the US. The Chinese announced 3-day Combat Readiness Patrol and "Exercise United Sword" war games around Taiwan from April 8-10. The exercises included "sealing off" the island. 42 Chinese aircraft and 8 warships crossed the strait's median line on April 8 and the first footage from the military exercises of April 8 around Taiwan telecast by the state-owned CCTV mentioned that Ground Force rocket launchers, PLA Navy destroyers and missile speedboats, PLA Air Force fighters, bombers, interference, and refueling aircraft, etc were involved. Taiwan's Defense Ministry said 42 Chinese planes and 8 ships crossed the strait's median line on April 8. Taiwan's Ministry of Defense said on April 11 that at least 8 PLA naval vessels are still

operating in waters near Taiwan. On April 9, Taiwan's defence ministry said that they had spotted 58 Chinese aircraft, including Su-30 fighters and H-6 bombers, as well as nine ships, around Taiwan. By late April 9, 71 PLAAF fighter aircraft and 9 ships were engaged in military exercises for what the Chinese military said was the "encirclement " of Taiwan. 13. The Chinese aircraft carrier Shandong was operating south of Miyako, one of Japan's southernmost islands, and was accompanied by three warships over the past three days. Japan said (April 10) that fighter aircraft took off and landed 80 times on the Shandong in waters east of Taiwan and south of Japan as of April 9 night, while helicopters conducted an additional 40 flights from the ship. The Joint Staff of Japan's Self-Defence Forces said "In response to the take-off and landing operations, the Air Self-Defense Force scrambled fighter jets". CMC Vice Chairman General He Weidong, who is credited with planning and conducting the large PLA exercises immediately after US House Leader Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan last year, would have supervised these exercises.

14. Taiwanese analysts and citizens are aware of the deteriorating Sino-US relations. They, along with many international observers, are apprehensive that this raises the chances of conflict between the two. The Taiwanese don't want to see Taiwan become another Ukraine and countries in the region would prefer not to have to take sides -- at least till they are sure of the winning side! Meanwhile, with the rapid deterioration in China-US ties there is growing probability of a clash at sea between the navies of the US and China in the near future.

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