

# The Taiwan Strait Crisis and the Indian Dilemma

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## Abstract

*The year 2020 will go down in history as a year steeped in crises especially the COVID 19 Pandemic, entangling human civilisation in an array of complex social, political and economic challenges of unprecedented scale. Apart from combating this deadly pandemic, India was confronted with another challenge caused by its troublesome neighbour China in the Galwan Valley situated in the Union Territory of Ladakh. This border skirmish between the two Asian Giants resulted in the martyrdom of 20 Indian troops. Contemporaneously, China in 2020 reinvigorated its vociferous claims on the self-governing island of Taiwan as part of its One China Policy. This has resulted in ignition of tensions in the waters and skies of the Taiwan Strait with incessant violation of Taiwanese airspace and territorial waters by Chinese military aircrafts and warships. As a result, the Taiwan Strait is at risk of turning into a flashpoint of conflict at a timewhen the world is already being ravaged by a Pandemic. These multitude of factors bring India the opportunity to display its assertions against China's unacceptable behaviour with its neighbours. India has always faced the dilemma of choosing between the path of appeasement and assertion with Chinain regard to its relationship with Taiwan. So far India has carefully opted to avoid igniting any diplomatic issues with China by having only informal relations with Taiwan. But owing to the events of 2020, India must contemplate the resolve of taking a more assertive diplomatic stance against China over the Taiwan Strait Crisis. This paper will explore dynamics of India's Dilemma in regard to its relations with Taiwan taking into consideration the changed regional security atmosphere.*

## Old Crisis, New Dynamics

For over half a century, the narrow 180 km wide Taiwan Strait has served as the thin red line of conflict and contradiction between the

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political ideologies governing Beijing and Taipei culminating in three crises since 1953. These three crises were the enduring legacy of the two-decade long Chinese Civil War between the Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP) that then ruled the Chinese Mainland and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that was led by Mao Zedong. This conflict ended in 1949, with the CCP gaining complete control of the Chinese Mainland forming the communist state of People's Republic of China (PRC) and the CNP retreated to the Island of Taiwan forming the Republic of China (ROC). Acknowledging the existence and official recognition of these two political entities that both claimed to be the legitimate government of China brought about a new global dilemma that continues to this date. This perhaps is one of the most complicated geopolitical dilemma of the contemporary world as it is the legacy of not one but two of the most enduring global conflicts based on capitalist vs communist ideology namely the Chinese Civil War and ensuing Cold War. As a result, all nations that sought to establish diplomatic relationship with China were inadvertently drawn towards this dilemma over recognition of two different political entities that both claimed to be the legitimate government of China. The differing administrative and political ideologies of the government made the dilemma extremely complicated to resolve.<sup>1</sup> The intricate dimensions of the dilemma continue to affect global politics to this date.

India made a significant diplomatic decision by becoming one of the first nations to recognise PRC as the official China in April 1, 1950. In fact, India further consolidated PRC's claim of the One China policy by stating that Taiwan as an inalienable part of China. However, India deviated from this initial diplomatic stand in response to China's aggression in 1962 and due to the PRC's issue of staple visas to Indian Citizens belonging to Jammu & Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh by establishing informal relations with ROC.<sup>2</sup> Contrarily the United States of America (USA) continued to recognise ROC as legitimate China even after the PRC attained control of mainland China in 1949. It was only in 1972 that the Nixon administration made perhaps one of the most significant diplomatic overtures to the One China Policy by deciding to establish formal diplomatic relations with the PRC, a far cry from the previous American administrations that for nearly 25 years maintained no official or unofficial diplomatic relations with mainland China. The outcome of this diplomatic overture was that USA's formal diplomatic relationship with ROC which existed until then transformed into an unofficial one governed by the Taiwan Relations Act enacted in the American Congress in 1979. But the most significant development in recent years has been the USA rethinking of this diplomatic stand owing

to PRC's aggressive behaviour in the international geopolitical environment. In 2018 under the leadership of the Trump Administration, the American Congress passed the Taiwan Travel Act once again making the USA Taiwan bilateral relations a more formal one.<sup>3</sup> This has caused enormous resentment to PRC and became a major diplomatic setback for its One China Policy. As far India is concerned its relations with China has receded to an all-time low over the last couple of years from the Doklam Standoff in 2017 to the recent Galwan Valley Clash in 2020 which resulted in casualties on both sides, the first time in over four decades. All these developments have compelled India to contemplate rethinking of its stance on the One China Policy akin to the USA.

### **Unravelling Prelude to a Fourth Taiwan Crisis?**

The first Taiwan Crisis erupted in 1954 as result of PRC's attempt to create a favourable demarcation line within the perimeters of the Taiwan Strait that defines mainland China's maritime boundary with the ROC-governed Taiwan. On September 1954 the People's Liberation Army (PLA) commenced the bombing of Quemoy which is one of the offshore islands Xiamen Island also known as Amoy Island. This was the triggering point for the first confrontation between PRC and ROC on the waters of Taiwan Strait.<sup>4</sup> The First Taiwan Crisis became the catalyst of the dispute over the Taiwan Strait and it has been the foundation of the contemporary dynamics of the conflict. Just four years after the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, the conflict erupted once again as the PLA attempted to carry out amphibious landing on the ROC-administered Dongding Island. However, by that time the Mutual Defence Treaty between USA and ROC had already been signed and ratified in 1955, as result of which the then Eisenhower Administration in USA was obliged to aid the ROC to confront PRC's aggression. The US Air Force (USAF) deployed many of its most advanced fighter jets like Super Sabres, Starfighters and Canberra bombers for the defence of ROC. Further, many of the American fighter jets of the ROC were modified to incorporate the then newly developed American Sidewinder air-to-air missiles that proved to be a game changer in the conflict. The ROC's fighter aircraft proved to be a tough match for the People Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF) Soviet-made MiG 15 and 17 fighter jets. As a result, in the crisis PRC failed to gain air superiority over the ROC which was crucial for its operations.<sup>5</sup> As result, PRC's attempt to carry out amphibious operations to gain control of ROC-administered Dongding Island failed. This conflict also showcased the American resolve to defend ROC in response to any aggression exhibited by the

PRC.

After an impasse of thirty-seven years, a crisis erupted in 1995 in the Taiwan Straits. However, this time also saw radical transformation in global geopolitics which brought in new dimensions to the crisis. These changes included the decision by the Nixon Administration to recognise PRC as the official China. Another development was the rapid economic progress by ROC, an era which became famously known as the Taiwan Miracle during 1960's to 80's, making the semi-recognised, self-governed island nation one of the four Asian tigers alongside Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong. Finally, the most important global development was the collapse of Soviet Union bringing the curtains down on the four-decade-long Cold War and marking the beginning of the new age globalisation era. It was amidst of these developments in 1995 that the PRC once again emphasised its '*One China Policy*' to the World by exhibiting coercion against ROC governed Taiwan which eventually became known as the Third Taiwan Crisis.

The roots of this crisis could be traced to the then ROC President Lee Teng-hui's visit to USA in 1994 and the subsequent 1996 Presidential Election of Taiwan which is considered a major democratic milestone in the history of ROC. Before 1996, the President of ROC was elected indirectly through the representatives of the Taiwanese National Assembly. But the 1996 election was the first fully-democratic presidential election where the Taiwanese people directly elected their President marking the complete transition of the self-governed ROC from semi-democratic to a fully-democratic political entity. The discourse of the election centred around the then incumbent Lee Teng-hui's pro democratic and pro-independence rhetoric. This ruffled PRC whose media labelled him a traitor to the '*One-China Policy*'. Further, Lee Teng-Hui's visit to the USA to address his Alma Matter in Cornell University further aggravated PRC who cautioned the Clinton Administration against allowing Teng-Hui's on American soil. Initially the American Government refrained from granting ROC's President permission to visit USA. But this differential treatment to Lee Ten-Hui caught the attention of many American lawmakers and eventually by the resolution of the American Senate, Lee Teng-Hui was allowed to address Cornell University on the topic of "Democratisation of Taiwan". This was the last straw that fully shook the PRC which decided to exhibit coercion against Taiwan to dissuade the Taiwanese population to participate in the upcoming election and support Lee Teng-Hui who by that time was dubbed by the Western Media as "*Mr Democracy*". On July 7, 1995 PRC commenced a missile test in behind an ROC-held Island and commenced large mobilisation of PLA troops in the Fujian

to threaten Taiwan from pursuing the path of full democratisation. The American Government immediately responded to PRC aggression by deploying two of its Aircraft Carriers and a large number of US Navy warships in the region, which eventually became the largest display of American Naval power in the region since the Vietnam War.<sup>6</sup> Overall PRC's attempt to dissuade the Taiwan's political leadership and population from participating in 1996 Election severely backfired as there was an over 75% voter turnout and Lee Teng-hui won the election with a margin of 54% of the votes. The 1996 Taiwanese Presidential elections showcased the resilience of Taiwan's political leadership and population against PRC threats and their commitment towards democratisation.

Two decades later the geopolitical developments since 2016 signal the probable prelude to another Taiwan Strait Crisis on the Horizon. The trigger point of this probable crisis is the telephonic conversation between the President of ROC, Tsai Ing-wen and the then American President-elect Donald Trump. What was historic about this telephonic conversation is the fact that it was the first time since 1979 when USA formally recognised PRC as the Legitimate China. This telephonic conversation certainly marked the departure from America's stand towards '*Once China Policy*' and as expected it outraged PRC. The Xi Jinping-led PRC reacted to this event through coercion by aggressive military posturing. After this telephonic call between Trump and Tsai, the Chinese military aircraft crossed the median line demarcating PRC and ROC more than forty times in two days. By 2020, the tensions in Taiwan Strait have spiralled with many observers pointing out it may certainly be the prelude to a Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for the escalation of crisis in the Taiwan Strait include the trade wars between USA and China and the indifferent attitude of China towards transparency with regard the COVID 19 pandemic that originated in its territory and continues to ravage the World with no end in sight. US Navy warships are constantly sailing through the Taiwan Strait since 2017 making their presence felt in the contentious region much to Beijing's dismay. The latest incident occurred in February 2021, when US Navy destroyer *USS John S McCain* transited to Taiwan. This incident is significant because it signals the incumbent Joe Biden administration's continued commitment towards maintaining presence in the Taiwan Strait akin to previous Trump Administration.<sup>8</sup> Another factor behind constant American naval presence in the Strait is because it sees it as an important flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific where tensions may flare-up anytime. Beijing has consistently protested over the American naval

presence and continues to stick to its One China Policy and reiterating to the global community that it can even consider the use of force to reclaim the ROC administered Taiwan. These developments certainly signal an imminent Fourth Taiwan Strait on the horizon that may have global implications.

### **Globalisation Dimensions and Indian Dilemma**

In the past three Taiwan Strait Crises there were only three parties in the conflict that including PRC, ROC and USA. But a probable Fourth has all the making the crisis attracting more parties including both regional and extra-regional players. The reason for this probability being higher is the fact that the Indo-Pacific Region of which the Taiwan Strait is a part has become an arena for Twenty-first Century power play. At the centre of this emerging crisis is the aggressive Chinese expansionism that has equally raised concern among both regional and extra-regional players. As for the regional players like India, Vietnam, Philippines, Japan and Australia the implications of Chinese expansionism are direct and tangible that has constantly resulted in border skirmishes and tense maritime confrontation. As for the extra-regional players like USA and other European states, the concern is over the threat to Freedom of Navigation (FON) in the busiest route of global commercial shipping. Apart from this the American concern for this region stems from its attempt at preserving its eroding status as the global hegemonic power which is challenged by the China is the emerging revisionist power.

As far as India is concerned it has remained non-partisan in the past three Taiwan Crises. But the contemporary geopolitical circumstances raise concern if India would continue to remain neutral in any future Taiwan Crises or the bigger question is whether India should remain non-partisan or take an active stand. It is this dilemma that needs to be assessed by evaluating the pros and cons of any direct or indirect involvement in the Taiwan Strait crisis. India and PRC are two largest and most powerful political entities of Asia and the scope for their joint growth is promising. But this prospect has been overwhelmed by the unresolved border dispute between these two Asian giants that often flare-up into violent border skirmishes like most recent Galwan Valley Clash. It must be noted that as in every other region, China has always been the aggressing party in all these border skirmishes which hugely undermines the scope of peaceful bilateral relations, which is a fundamental element for mutual progress. Despite being co-members of fora like BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Chinese aggressive behaviour at the borders with India have constantly

led to diplomatic and military standoffs. The Chinese turning a blind eye to its all-weather ally Pakistan's state sponsored terrorism that has the potential to destabilise the whole of South Asia is another concern. It is these factors that have prevented the two Asian Giants collaborating to become leading forces in the new multipolar World. China's aggressive behaviour has generated concern among India's academic and diplomatic circles who are debating the idea of India utilising Taiwan to counter threats posed by China against India's territorial integrity.

### **Envisioning a Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis**

Before forecasting the scope of Indian involvement in any future Taiwan Strait Crisis, it is first important to anticipate the nature of confrontation that might take place between PRC, ROC and USA in such eventuality. In the first two Taiwan Strait Crises there were direct and violent confrontations between the PRC and ROC with American assistance. But the third Taiwan Strait Crisis was more coercion than actual confrontation. The reason for this can be attributed to the fact that the geopolitical environment of the World during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis was radically different vis-a-vis the earlier two. This is because the Third Crisis happened amidst the onset of a globalised world where direct military confrontations between nations have taken a backseat owing to the overwhelming economic and material costs of modern warfare. Taking a cue from this trend, it can be safely predicted that a Fourth Taiwan Strait crisis will largely be sabre-rattling between the military forces of PRC and ROC with American naval assets in the forefront. According to Dr Arthur Ding from University of Taipei, PRC will certainly employ force principally for the purpose of deterring Taiwan from declaring independence and also dissuade foreign powers especially USA from intervening in any Chinese military action against Taiwan. According to Ding, another critical factor that may result in conflict is the fact that there is no diplomatic communication between the governments of Taiwan and China. As a result, any friction in the Taiwan Strait has the potential of escalating into a full blown crisis as each side respond to the worst case scenario. Dr Ding further goes on to state that in an eventuality of a full-blown conflict, the PRC would certainly have an upper hand over ROC. This is due to the fact that the PRC over the past few decades has been heavily investing in developing amphibious landing capabilities of Marines along with other arms of the PLA and much of these developments have been made with Taiwan as focus.<sup>9</sup> In such a scenario there is absolute certainty that the Fourth

Taiwan Strait could pull foreign powers like USA into action but a full blown conflict may be unlikely. It is now important to evaluate the nature of Indian involvement and its possible repercussion on the relationship between India and China.

### **India's Options**

In an attempt to understand India's possible course of action pertaining to a probable Taiwan Strait Crisis, it is vital to understand India's historical stance with regard to this matter. Despite being thriving democracies India and Taiwan have been unable to take full advantage of their bilateral relations politically due to the One China Policy. Also the roots of India-Taiwan relations go back to the early Twentieth Century. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had long expressed solidarity with the then Chinese nationalist government that controlled mainland China. But since India became the first nation to recognise the PRC-governed mainland, it has resulted in side-stepping India's relations with Taiwan. To this day, India has no formal diplomatic relationship with Taiwan. The informal bilateral relations were shaped by the establishment of India Taipei Association (ITA) in Taipei and simultaneously the establishment of Taipei Economic and Cultural Center (TECC) in New Delhi in March 1995. But the greatest relevance of India and Taiwan's relationship emerges from India's Look East Policy and its successor the Act East Policy which seek to dynamically improve India's political, economic and cultural relationship with the South East Asian Nations.<sup>10</sup> But India's reluctance to more formally recognise Taiwan which happens to be one of the Asian Tigers and the leading economies of Southeast Asia crucially undermines India's prospects of tapping the full potential of Act East Policy.

This being the history of India's complex relationship with Taiwan, the tumultuous onset of third decade of Twenty-first Century brings several compelling reasons for India to reassess its relationship with ROC and at the same time show more assertiveness with the PRC. The recalibration of relationship between New Delhi and Taipei can be used as trump card to counter China's periodic boundary aggressions, its support of Pakistan and its constant claim of Indian territories like Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, in the eventuality of an outbreak of conflict in Taiwan Strait, India can consider the following options:

1. Signalling Coercion to China through diplomatic and political support to Taiwan: Here India without directly getting involved in military coercion with China can rather resort to diplomatic and



political coercion through its support and acknowledgement of Taiwan's sovereign rights. This would be definitely a far cry from India's historic stance with regard to the China's One China Policy and would certainly antagonize China to some extent. However China may not resort to any military aggression due to India's nuclear capability but certainly view India's assertiveness with caution and that could prompt the PRC regime to think before instigating any future border skirmishes with India.

2. **Aligning with Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD):** For long, India had been sought by USA, Japan and Australia to join the QUAD initiative for the purpose of showing more commitment in countering China's ever-increasing threat to FON in SCS. Observers view that the new Joe Biden administration may further promote the Quad initiative as a tool to counter China in the Indo-Pacific Region. This was reflected by Joe Biden's first call to India after taking over as US President where he along with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated their commitments towards continuing their close cooperation to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, including support to FON, preserve maritime territorial integrity and a more proactive regional coordination through the QUAD.<sup>11</sup> Now any probable crisis that may erupt in the Taiwan Strait due to Chinese aggression will certainly be high on the QUAD agenda. The presence and pro-activeness of India as key partner in the QUAD will act as a deterrent towards any Chinese misadventures against Taiwan. This would certainly be an aspect of India's change in its stance towards the One China Policy.
3. **Convergence through Act East Policy and New Southbound Policy:** In 2014 with the election of National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in India, the regime signalled the continuation of their predecessor regime's Look East Policy upgraded into a more proactive-themed Act East Policy (AEP). Incidentally just two years after this the election of Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Tsai Ing-Wen as Taiwanese President exemplified the democratic inclination of the Taiwanese people. DPP's New Southbound Policy (NSP) aims to robustly improve Taiwan's economic ties with 18 nations of Southeast Asia, Oceania and South Asia including India. The larger strategic purpose of NSP is to dramatically reduce Taiwan's economic dependence on China by diversifying its economic relationship with other nations whereby ultimately Taiwan can resist PRC's attempt at reunification. Taiwan's export oriented economy and interests in diversifying its targets of investment makes it an

apt collaborator with India. India's AEP and Taiwan's NSP find convergence. Contrary to this, India's current adherence to the Once China Policy deeply undermines this great opportunity of progressing through the common ground of AEP and NSP.<sup>12</sup> Hence the Indian leadership can express its renewed stance on Once China policy by becoming a leading player in Taiwan's NSP and simultaneously allowing Taiwan to become a focal point in its own AEP.

## Conclusion

Taking into consideration these options that lie in front of India, she could express her assertive stance on One China Policy to her powerful and troublesome northern neighbour. Through this, India can convey a tough message to China that could act as a deterrent on its repeated aggressions over our borders; its support to Pakistan a nation that has been globally condemned to promote radical terrorism and its propaganda of showing Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh as territory belonging to China.

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