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## THE U.S. DEFENCE OF TAIWAN – COMPLEXITIES AND CHALLENGES

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“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 <sup>1</sup>. Earlier, Taiwan was on high alert after major incursions by Chinese warplanes in late January 2021.<sup>2</sup> Were these raid 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 strong man 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.

### Historic Position

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

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### 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”.<sup>3</sup> Clearly China’s actions to use a sledge-hammer 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 U.S. Navy, PLA Air Force is adding reach, and China has a huge missile inventory with longer ranges. It will make it difficult for the U.S. forces to penetrate closer. Beijing nearly has technical parity with the U.S. 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. 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. Taiwanese are made of stern stuff and won't be easy to bomb or blockade into submission.

### Taiwanese Armed Forces

The Taiwan Armed Forces include approximately 300,000 personnel, and reserves reportedly total 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 defenses around key landing points and regularly conducts drills to repel Chinese forces arriving by sea and from the air.

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### The U.S. Military Support to Taiwan

Taiwan has high level military cooperation with USA. The United States regularly sends personnel to Taiwan for both training and liaison. The U.S. Marines have also deployed to Taiwan. Most of the weaponry with Taiwan is of the U.S. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 USA?<sup>5</sup> 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 behavior, and needs a close watch. China's preparatory military exercises have involved all the domains 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. 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 also rehearsing with full-scale target sand-models. 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 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.

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## Will USA join the War to Defend Taiwan?

An invasion by China could be an ultimate snub to the free world. If USA joins the war, there would be many losers. Despite many triggers, it should be remembered that Soviet Union and USA never went to war during the cold war period or even during other crisis. In January 2021, as the US pledged support, China warned Taiwan that open declaration of independence means war.<sup>6</sup> President Biden has reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to Taiwan. The U.S. military intervention could also be graded and doesn't need not be a full-blown war.<sup>7</sup> Will such a war draws Japan and others into it? Can the U.S. deter such a war? How "rock-solid" is the U.S. support for Taiwan remains a question mark. Can the U.S. 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 U.S. 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 USA ready for another war? All these questions are looking for answers.

### Action Areas - Air and Sea

The U.S. will not bring boots on the ground in Taiwan. Air assets that the U.S. and Japan can bring to bear will be important. The United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) has a very significant air element that includes nearly 375 aircraft of USAF and 1,100 aircraft on five carrier groups of the U.S. Navy. The U.S. 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.<sup>9</sup> The Andersen airbase, at Guam houses B-52 strategic bombers. The U.S. has significant presence in Japan, including in islands just off Taiwan. There are basing facilities in Palawan (Philippines), berthing facilities at Da Nang (Vietnam), naval facilities in Singapore and Darwin (Australia). USA exercises regularly with Indonesia which many consider as the fulcrum for the Indo-Pacific region.

### The U.S Friendly Air Assets

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

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 the U.S. origin, including the F-35 Lightning II. Japan operates AEW&C and flight refueling 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 a sufficient self-defense capabilities". The 1995-96 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 U.S. could defend Taiwan" writes Dan De Luce and Ken Dilanian.<sup>10</sup> Pacific Ocean was once dominated by the U.S. 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.<sup>11</sup> The outgoing head of the U.S. 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".<sup>12</sup> Despite China's rise, the U.S. enjoyed near total air superiority around Taiwan. However, this is no more the case. "Everything they (China) build can hit Taiwan. And a lot of stuff they build really can only hit Taiwan," said David Shlapak<sup>13</sup>, a senior defense 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".<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Taiwan News reports have also claimed that, "there have been nearly forty-fold increase in cyber-attacks in 2020 on Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs".<sup>16</sup>

### USA Options?

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

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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 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 the U.S. and Japanese assets at sea or on Taiwanese mainland. Can USA create the wherewithal for all this? Could this approach end up into a full war? Will 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, USA or China.

**To prevent Chinese invasion, the U.S. and its allies would have to position very early, military assets to destroy Chinese amphibious ships and transport aircraft.**

Few years ago the U.S. 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

world-wide economic isolation of China, including freezing of its assets in USA and Europe. With fractured global polity, and Chinese inroads across the world, will such a strategy work? Can 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 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 last six months. Successive U.S. presidents have approved arms sales to Taiwan. But is it really enough to taken Chinese missile barrage that will open at time-zero? How many air defence missiles will be enough for Taiwan to take on that barge? Beijing would try to invade and achieve a quick success before USA can even react or

mobilize. Who will take on the Chinese amphibious and airborne invasion?

Yet PLA is not invincible. To prevent Chinese invasion, 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.

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