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## **TAIWAN: A TURNING POINT BETWEEN GREAT POWERS**

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**Abstract:**

China has pursued economic development and military modernization for three decades. It has resultantly achieved parity with U.S in many areas including military. Consequently, this has led to an erosion of the deterrence of an ambiguous security guarantee which the U.S had given to Taiwan in case it should come under attack. Uncertain times are upon us. On one hand, precursors to great power rivalries between the U.S and China are being given. On the other, we have unprecedented economic interconnectivity between the aforementioned great powers. Alongside these trends, the increase in Chinese power has led to an increased chance of a Chinese military attack on Taiwan at a time during when the U.S is drawing down its forever wars. What will follow will be the most important challenges to a system which has relatively remained unchanged since the Berlin Wall came down. This research paper will endeavor to understand the possibility of whether China can use the military option on Taiwan as well as the possible options for the U.S if China does do so. This paper will help to understand the contemporary situation if we are brave the storm which is coming.

**Key Words:** U.S, China, Taiwan, great power competition, Indo-Pacific, military modernization.

**1. Introduction:**

“We have upheld the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus”, said Chinese President Xi Jinping in his address to the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) (Jinping, 2017). Since Xi Jinping

rose to power in 2013, there has been a noticeable change in the ways of China in its dealing with Taiwan, considered by China as a renegade province. While from a wider point of view, President Xi has not deviated much from his predecessor Hu Jintao's policy for Taiwan which was to prevent Taiwan's de jure independence. However, President Xi has opted for another approach which is to box Taiwan in (Huang, 2017, pp. 239-248) or develop such close relations which makes independence untenable and gradually leads to reunification. For Xi Jinping, the goal of reunification is non-negotiable and any opposition in Taiwan will be responded in kind with, "If you move one step forwards, I will move two steps." (Huang, 2017, p. 245) To that end, Xi has continued to revive the One-China framework to which had gone desolate since 2005 the institutionalization of which will make Taiwan return to the embrace of its motherland according to Xi.

Although, we have outlined Xi's policy for Taiwan but where does that leave the U.S which is the main benefactor and patron of Taiwan in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979. The most important aspect of the act is without a doubt Section 3 Clause (c) of the Act which provides an ambiguous guarantee of defense for Taiwan in case the island ever came under attack. This ambiguous guarantee has worked splendidly for decades, keeping the Taiwan Strait free of conflict and conditions ripe for economic development. However, the guarantee only worked owing to the difference in military prowess between the U.S and China which worked as a deterrent. The only time which can be categorized as a crisis which could have evolved into a full-blown conflict was the 1995-96 third

Taiwan Strait crisis. The crisis resulted from Chinese military exercises in very close proximity to Taiwan's territorial islands. It resulted in U.S. President William J. Clinton deploying a carrier battle group to the international waters near Taiwan. The crisis was averted in all likelihood due to U.S. intervention (Cole, 2017) but that was the closest these two powers ever came to war in decades.

Fast forwarding to the contemporary era, China has economically developed by leaps and bounds which consequently, also led to huge leaps in military sophistication and technology. This means that the once operating ambiguous security guarantee from the U.S. to Taiwan which was kept afloat by the difference between military prowess is eroding and so is the deterrence which came with it. Hence, military action by China against Taiwan will be a turning point in international affairs. This will be the central theme of this paper and to provide evidence to this statement, the paper will endeavor to answer two questions. First, how likely can the matter of Taiwan lead to a flareup of tensions and resultantly, a wider conflict? Second, what can be the strategies and options for both major powers in relation to Taiwan? To that end, the paper will first present a brief history of the Taiwan issue which will be followed by whether the issue has the possibility to escalate into a conflict between the major powers. If the Taiwan issue has the probability to evolve into a greater conflict, the paper will in that case present the possible options which the U.S. can employ as well as possible repercussions for China it takes the military approach after which it will present its conclusion. If not, the paper will in that scenario directly present its conclusion and the

hypothesis will then henceforth be null. However, the former will in most likeliness be the case keeping in view available evidence.

## **2. Historical Background:**

The history of Taiwan has been conflicted owing to the lack of work done because of the restrictions imposed by the Chinese Nationalistic regime which ruled Taiwan until 1988. Although afterwards work has begun to emerge on Taiwan but it only covers Taiwan from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it has been difficult for scholars to go beyond it given the lack of written material which can show what the island of Taiwan was before the 17<sup>th</sup> century if it ever was a historical part of China. However, the period after the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Dutch came to the island has much written on it in different languages which were translated to English a while after the history of Taiwan began to gain traction in Democratic Taiwan. An important summary of the history of Taiwan by J. Bruce Jacobs is quite straight forward and simple to understand. “From the arrival of the Dutch in 1624 until the death of Chiang Ching-kuo in 1988.” Jacobs wrote, “Taiwan was ruled by a sequence of six foreign regimes: (i) the Dutch (1624-62), (ii) the Spanish (1626-42), who ruled for a time in north Taiwan simultaneously with the Dutch, (iii) the Zheng family (1662-83), (iv) the Manchus (1683-1895), (v) the Japanese (1895-1945), (vi) the authoritarian Chinese Nationalist regime (1945-88).” (Jacobs, 2011)

Out of these six regimes, we will only be discussing the last two of them for convenience as the rest while important are not so consequential in view of this paper. The era of Japanese control over Taiwan is important because notwithstanding the abuses and oppressive policies by the

Japanese, Taiwan developed into a modern society during Japanese colonial rule (Tsai, 2011). A few years after Japan's defeat in WWII when the Chinese Nationalists were defeated by the Communist forces, the nationalists retreated to Taiwan where they came into power and would continue to do so for decades until 1988 when Lee Teng-hui started the process of democratization in Taiwan. However, it was during the Nationalists rule that Taiwan lost its permanent seat to China and as a result led to the promulgation of the Taiwan Relations Act 1979 by the U.S which as mentioned earlier provided the ambiguous security guarantee which kept peace across the Taiwan strait. Although now, that peace can be more accurately characterized as the calm before the storm. Nonetheless, after Taiwan became democratic, it has developed economically and has significant trade ties with other states although it does not have diplomatic relations with many of them. As mentioned earlier, democratic rule in Taiwan was what led to renewed interest in Taiwan's history. The number of books on Taiwan increased at an exponential rate while thesis at the MA level more than doubled (Wang, 2005).

### **3. Possible Options for the U.S:**

Conflict or even skirmishes are highly probable between China and Taiwan in the next decade or so. The benefit of Taiwan to the U.S is quite simple, if it deters China from military action against Taiwan then its hegemony will be sustained and so will the unilateral world after the cold war. However, the question arises as to what the U.S will do; will it come to Taiwan's aid in accordance the Taiwan Relations Act 1979 or will it go

with sanctions and diplomatic salvo? Let's first outline the options available to the U.S in case China undertakes a military adventure over Taiwan. Fundamentally, the U.S will have two options; either to come to Taiwan's defense and take military action against China or to not use the military options but rely on economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure and support from the international community. However, while the U.S is confronted with only two options, the irony is that both these options have little to no chances of success and the reason is rooted in the U.S own policies.

First, let's analyze the military option as whether it is feasible or not. First of all, both nations are nuclear armed so the idea of a total military strike is ludicrous. That leaves only the limited military option which can be repelled owing to the fact that the battle if it happens will be on the waters of the South and East China Sea. Other routes to China which are feasible and highly unlikely include, from the south; the Karakoram Highway from Pakistan, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India and the border with Myanmar, from the north; Mongolia and Russia, from the west; the Central Asian Republics and from the East; the East China Sea. The only probable locations for navy ships to come through would be the East China Sea adjacent to the Pacific Ocean or through the South China Sea which would be difficult in the sense that it is the territorial waters of many states. However, no matter how many vessels are sent by the U.S, it may not matter because according to the 2020 paper by the U.S Department of Defense, China has more naval vessels than the U.S and has "achieved parity with—or even exceeded—the United States in

several military modernization areas, including shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems.” (Defense, 2020, pp. 38-39) Besides that China has all its navy vessels in the East and South China Sea while the U.S will only have the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet to rely on in urgent cases which has at most 70 ships (The United States Seventh Fleet, n.d.) and can hardly take on the 350 vessels strong Chinese Navy.

According to research by RAND corporation on a Taiwan scenario, China has advantage over the U.S in two areas, approximate parity in four area and a disadvantage in three areas (An Interactive Look at the U.S.-China Military Scorecard, n.d.). The research showed that China has superiority over the U.S in neutralizing the threat of U.S Air Bases in the Indo-Pacific and also in anti-surface warfare in accordance to their military capabilities in 2017. Chinese submarines and air capabilities pose a significant risk to U.S navy vessels and China has continued to develop these capabilities even further into 2021. Other than that Chinese surveillance systems, ballistic and cruise missiles places hostile navy vessels at risk and not to mention China also has navy vessels which are equipped with anti-ship munitions. They have a higher range than many of the U.S Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) and can outcompete them in combat according to simulations (Axe, 2019). China also unveiled its 055 destroyer in 2017 which is equipped with long-range supersonic Over The Horizon (OTH) YJ-18 and YJ-12 anti-ship cruise missiles (Staff, 2017). According to an article in Forbes, the Chinese ship has outcompeted the U.S Arleigh Burke Guided Missile Destroyer as well as the bigger Ticonderoga class cruisers



(Corr, 2017). The U.S has brought this upon itself in a way, drunk on the victory of the cold war, basking in the concept of American exceptionalism, enamored with democracy and rights, its foreign policy of toppling dictators and engaging in the tedious task of nation building and finally, spending a walloping amount on defense budget but spending only a trickle of it on military modernization.

Another problem which the U.S will encounter if it goes ahead with the military option, is the distance. There is an ocean between Taiwan and the U.S in the literal sense which will make it difficult for the U.S to consider any military option which will have no immediate backup. Compared to the U.S, Taiwan is a stone throw away from mainland China. It is quite ironic that the very factor which prevented European powers from interfering in the American continent is precisely the very factor which will impede the U.S in formulating an effective response to an attack on Taiwan. It is understandable that geography as an element of national power was much diminished owing to the advancements in technology, communication and people-to-people contact. However, it does not mean that the distance has diminished, it will still take the U.S Navy more than a week to cross the ocean to come to the assistance of Taiwan and its 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet in Yokohama. The U.S cannot transport its military from one corner of the Pacific Ocean to the other in the blink of an eye. Although the fact that reinforcements will even come is quite suspect and highly doubtful. In the previous decade, there has been a change in the opinion of the U.S public, that change culminated in the election of Donald Trump in 2016. The U.S public is becoming increasingly averse to military interventions

in other countries or more specifically, the fact that their soldiers have to die in other countries and these interventions are paid for through their taxes. According to research conducted by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in three U.S states (Ahmed, et al., 2020), what the Americans whom were interviewed wanted more was a humbler foreign policy which is more restrained about using military force and more disciplined about employing diplomatic options first. The research also mentioned that many of respondents did not have competition with China at the forefront much less war. It is a fact that many of the U.S wars are unpopular and many Americans want the U.S troops to come back home. According to a Pew research poll, a majority of the Americans support the withdrawal from Afghanistan which corresponds with the aforementioned statements (Green & Doherty, 2021). After the end of the Cold War and especially after 9/11, the foreign policy of the U.S is mired with military interventions and hawkish policymakers like Donald Rumsfeld or John Bolton whom advocated the military option for anything and everything. So, it stands to reason as to whether the U.S will even consider the military option against the Chinese if they ever decide to use force to unite Taiwan with the mainland.

Now, let's analyze the non-military options which are available to the U.S. The major ones are economic and other sanctions, trade embargos, diplomatic pressure, bandwagoning of democracies and isolating China on the international level. None of these options have a significant probability of success. First, economic sanctions will hurt the U.S more than they will hurt China because no two states in world are as economically

interconnected as the U.S and China. Introducing economic sanctions on China would be no better than shooting oneself in the foot. Furthermore, this option can only work if others follow U.S lead which is not possible because almost every state in the world even democracies have significant economic relations with China which they would not jeopardize at any cost. The result would be an embarrassment to the U.S and would not assuage the problem in any way. Although, this is not hard proof for the matter to not be escalated into war keeping in mind that the highest trade between states was in 1913 and, “in the next few years nations slaughtered each other in unprecedented numbers.” (Huntington, 1996) However, chances of total war is diminished with the presence of nuclear weapons. Sanctions on different political persons are also a choice but not effective because they would only be barred from the U.S which occupies only 6.1% of the world’s landmass (n.d.) which leaves the other 93.9% accessible and one wonders what the point is to that option. Sanctioning entities is also an option but only the operations in U.S will be disturbed while the rest would go smoothly. Furthermore, U.S cannot sanction China because China will most likely respond with sanctions similar to what happened in the trade war which hurt U.S citizens, businesses and operations far more than they hurt China (Hass & Denmark, 2020). Second, the option of trade embargos are just as ludicrous as economic sanctions because China is the biggest trade partner of the U.S and vice versa. China could easily deal with these sanctions as for one China has a huge domestic market where it can send those goods unlike the U.S and secondly, the Chinese may make more sacrifices for Taiwan as compared to the U.S for whom Taiwan is just a small democratic island more than

5000 miles away. Third is the possibility of diplomatic pressure which are as likely to work as the first two. Diplomatic pressure works best when one state is weaker than the other and even if the U.S mounts diplomatic pressure, there is no reason to believe it will work better than it did with Hong Kong. The fourth option which is the bandwagoning of democracies may also not work as mentioned earlier. Every democratic ally of the U.S whether it is U.K, Australia, Japan or South Korea has significant economic relations with China which makes it difficult for them to go directly against China. It is hard to think they will compromise on their interests for an island with which they don't even have formal diplomatic relations with. The final option is Chinese isolations which is the most ridiculous out of all these options as China has the second biggest economy and has lucrative investments in many countries under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which provides little incentive for other states to consider taking part in the isolation of China.

#### **4. Strategies for China and their Possible Repercussions:**

Ever since the DPP won the elections in 2016, in the next year and afterwards, the possibility of the military option against Taiwan has slowly started to gain traction to the point that even moderate voice are talking about it (Mastro, 2021). Even state-sponsored news outlets such as the global times are not mincing any words when they say, “there is no doubt that the U.S is doomed to eventually abandon Taiwan” or that “the Taiwan authorities are lame ducks who are highly dependent on U.S protection.” (Why the US will abandon island of Taiwan eventually, 2021) The voices are steadily getting higher and the CCP is not in a mood to do anything

about these assertions which are being propounded by these elements. This is slowly leading to a change in opinion of Chinese public which is that it is not 1996 anymore and now, they can now take Taiwan by force. The 2019 White Defense Paper also did not deny the possible use of force on Taiwan and also the not-so-subtle threat on the occasion of the centenary of the CCP by President Xi and the assertions by the U.S Department of Defense in its 2020 paper also does not do much in tilting the argument another way.

If the Chinese government ever does decide to use force against Taiwan, there are a wide range of tactics some of which are already considered by military officials (Mastro, 2021). The 2020 paper on Chinese military by the U.S Department of Defense also concluded that China has a range of military options to occupy Taiwan from air to amphibious assault to maritime blockade (Defense, 2020). The option of blockade involves the least bloodshed and the U.S cannot do much except pass a trickle of aid through the blockade (Mastro, 2021) other than declaring war or attacking the ships of the blockade which is not a wise move in any aspect. The objectives in the blockade will be to completely isolate Taiwan by cutting the internet, striking its key infrastructure with cruise and ballistic missiles, cut off its oil imports and blockade it from the rest of the world which wear it down economically until it accepts surrender. Another option is to target its infrastructure and land ground forces on the shores to physically occupy Taiwan which is effective and can be supplemented by the Chinese Armed Police which are properly equipped to deal with suppressing dissenters (Mastro, 2021). Another strategy which is also in

the works is the regular incursions in Taiwan's coastal areas which makes it difficult for the U.S to figure out whether it is an invasion or an exercise. This strategy will impede the U.S response to any Chinese military action against Taiwan and consequently, buy the Chinese military time to subjugate Taiwan without U.S interference. The fact that the U.S has not actually guaranteed to come to Taiwan's defense will benefit it in case China attacks Taiwan because China may not attack any U.S base or vessel until it is certain it will come to Taiwan's assistance (Mastro, 2021). If U.S does decide to come to Taiwan's aid, it will probably lose quite badly as neither Taiwan's nor the U.S bases in the area can counter a Chinese missile attack. According to a commentary on RAND by David Ochmanek, the U.S is too spread out across the world while China is only focused on its immediate borders in addition to resolve over Taiwan of the U.S and China favoring the latter more (Ochmanek, 2019). To China, Taiwan has much significance which is why China can be prepared to take many risks as compared to the U.S for which Taiwan may not have much significance. A series of wargames conducted by RAND corporation and the Pentagon show that, "a military clash between the United States and China over Taiwan would likely result in a U.S. defeat, with China completing an all-out invasion in just days or weeks." (Mastro, 2021) Other than that, China may also use spoofing techniques to damage U.S bases in the Indo-Pacific and keep them in the dark during the early stages of the invasion, a threat which was highlighted in the U.S Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats testimony in 2019 (Coats, 2019). There are other strategies as well; missile and airstrikes to disable military targets and then target government buildings and finally civilian targets

until Taipei caves in. Another which will possibly escalate to war with the U.S is to target and neutralize U.S bases in the region to delay any effective response from the U.S for a while. Other than the strategies discussed above, there are a plethora of other strategies which China with its powerful military can utilize to force Taiwan to surrender.

However, what will be the repercussions for China if it uses force to unify Taiwan with the mainland? The first and last serious blowback will be to its amicable nature which China proudly expounds to other states. For decades, neither has China used military force nor has it involved itself in proxy wars. Using military force on Taiwan may well harm the image of China as a peaceful nation but it will in no way seriously affect China. The fact is that Taiwan is not a country nor a member of the United Nations (UN) and so China may construct the attack on Taiwan as doing what needed to be done to bring a renegade province under control. So practically, China will not break any of the international norms nor can it be held accountable for a military action against Taiwan. Many of China's close allies will not act or be part of any action against China and even democracies may not want to risk their economic opportunities much less a major power war for a small democratic island. The most and experts agree that, China can expect are some words of criticism, rhetoric or some symbolic sanctions if the crackdowns in Xinjian and Hong Kong are any lessons (Mastro, 2021). China's strategic partnerships with the European Union, ASEAN countries, Mexico, Brazil and dozens of other countries since the 1990s and the institutional frameworks, high-level meetings, long-term agreements, crisis management which can, "be leveraged to

help shape a more favorable political environment for China” (Zhongping & Jing, 2014). In more easier words, most of China’s top trading partners have already sent indications that the issue of Taiwan will not affect their relationship with China.

## **5. Conclusion:**

Thus, to conclude this paper, there is little doubt that China will use the military option against Taiwan to unify it with the mainland in deference to the arguments above and the fact that Xi wants to make it his legacy. There is wishful thinking in the western world that China would not want to use military force since it would put a damper on Xi’s future goals of Made in China 2025, the BRI and Xi’s rejuvenation plan. However, that thinking is erroneous; China is not bothered about the costs but of sovereignty which is evident by the lack of concern on the part of Chinese people of the cost of a military operation in Taiwan. The Chinese has always fought for what is theirs and Taiwan will be no exception. The present time would have been perfect for taking Taiwan when the U.S is war weary and the world is invested in the Taliban and Afghanistan. However, China will not take a military step until its leaders are absolutely sure of victory and with the pace of improvement in military equipment, sophistication and tactics, the next few years will see the military option being used on Taiwan while the rest of the world can do nothing but watch.



In the case of an attack on Taiwan, the state which will be most helpless will be the U.S. It will be hard to expect President Joe Biden or the next president after him to send a vessel in complete knowledge of the fact that the opponent has just as advanced a military. For the U.S, there will ever be two options as explained above; either to militarily intervene or to use non-military options. Both are doomed to fail and the oner is on the U.S. In 1996, the U.S military was advanced than Chinese, more sophisticated, more powerful and above all, had a numerical advantage over China. However, now the tables have turned, well not turned completely but in the sense the Chinese military has achieved more or less parity with the U.S military. The military option was always out of the question because of the specter of nuclear war but the same cannot have been said about the non-military options. The U.S could have built an alliance on Taiwan of fellow democracies much earlier to punish China if it ever attacked Taiwan which could have worked as an effective deterrence but that was not to be because of the defective and muscular U.S foreign policy after the 90s. Unlike the U.S, China has worked tirelessly the past two decades to precisely constrain the U.S from utilizing this option and the U.S is only now beginning to realize when it is too little too late.

However, that is not the only headache which will pervade the U.S besides failure to protect Taiwan because all efforts have little chances of success. Another problem for the U.S is that if nothing is done to protect Taiwan even though it will not succeed, trust in the U.S will nosedive even further than former U.S President Donald Trump's era especially among U.S allies in the Indo-Pacific. Possible embarrassment if its does come to

Taiwan's aid or guaranteed deterioration of U.S image if its does not. The U.S is in every sense of the phrase 'stuck between a rock and a hard place'. As for China, the extensive military modernization and the strategic partnerships it has developed across the years will prove much helpful in the case of Taiwan. The blowback from Taiwan should be manageable for China as long as it takes care not to slip up in its economic and diplomatic relations with its close allies as well as the influential democracies. All things considered, the environment is quite conducive for China to take action on Taiwan with the reaction at most being empty rhetoric from the democratic states, implicit applause from the partial democratic ones and outright support from autocracies. If China succeeds in Taiwan, it will be a turning point for the unilateral world after the end of the cold war and the result will not be a bilateral world but a quasi-multilateral one which will be all the more evident once other powers in the Indo-Pacific and across the world resist pressure from the U.S and look to their own interests.

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