



## **The Chinese Threat to Taiwan: Is it Clear & Present Danger?**

*Throughout history conflicts between nations have had significant consequences either in the immediate neighbourhood or have far-reaching consequences on the global stage. Empires were built on the decadent ruins of once glorious nations and maps were redrawn at unprecedented speeds. So the Huns challenging the Romans led to the redrawing of the maps, much in the same way as the Turks under Suleiman I carved out the Ottoman Empire from the Byzantine territory. Conflict curves have a way of peaking their way through disruptions before eventually settling down into straight lines of long periods of peace and tranquillity. Interestingly at the other end of the peak, the victors may even consider themselves the original inheritors of the glorious legacy of the people and culture they vanquished. The later Ottomans for example were keener on being identified as “Rumi” or Romans than being called out as Turks, reflecting their desire to be associated with the rich heritage of the Byzantine Empire.*

*Coming to contemporary times, referring again to the conflict curve, this time between China and Taiwan, it can be predicted to reach its peak in probably five to seven years before settling down into a peaceful straight line. The contours of this line will be defined by the events that will unfold in due course of time. For the moment both sides are keeping their powder dry waiting for the adversary’s next move. The situation no longer can be said to be a simple territorial dispute and has assumed deep complexities because of diverse issues that have got intertwined within the conflict. This is the main reason that is preventing the chief protagonists in this saga from making any unilateral move that can jeopardize their long-term interests.*

*This study is an attempt to first identify the multiple issues intertwined with the struggle for territorial rights and their possibility of assuming more importance than the ownership of Taiwan itself. Surmounting these issues may be more challenging for the main actors of this unfolding drama than the military aspect itself. Notwithstanding the discussion on the complexities of this conflict, this article will try to dissect the military options that China has and the chances of their success.*

## **An analysis of the non-military issues that may govern China – Taiwan conflict**

The current issues primarily revolve around geopolitics, economics, and ideology. Rather than mere territorial disputes, the evolving conflict is increasingly driven by ideological disparities. The Communist Party of China, representing China's interests, seeks a compliant Taiwanese government or, at the very least, one perceived as pro-China. Conversely, Taiwan's political landscape is characterized by diverse parties espousing a spectrum of ideologies, ranging from pro-China leanings to staunchly independent perspectives.

### *Fractured Polity*

The ideological rifts evident among the populace of Taiwan, akin to those found in all democracies, mirror the fragmented nature of the nation's political landscape. It is reasonable to infer that Taiwanese citizens, much like their political institutions, harbour divergent sentiments that vacillate between a strong inclination towards China and a staunch commitment to maintaining Taiwan's status as an independent democratic republic.

To gain insight into the perspectives of individuals in Taiwan on this complex matter, this study explores the ideological distinctions between the two principal political entities in Taiwan: the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

### *Kuomintang (KMT):*

Originating from China, the Kuomintang (KMT) was the dominant political force in the mainland from 1928 to 1949. Following its defeat in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the party's leadership sought refuge on the island of Taiwan to evade the advancing Maoist Red Army. From 1949 to 1987, the KMT governed Taiwan under martial law, maintaining single-party rule and suppressing opposition activities. After the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan gradually transitioned to a multi-party system, allowing other political entities to operate on the island. Despite its historical stance advocating for eventual reunification with mainland China, the KMT now pursues this goal within the framework of "one country, two systems," with the Communist Party of China controlling the mainland.

Although the KMT briefly lost power in the 2000 presidential elections to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), it regained the presidency in 2008. However, since 2016, the KMT has faced consecutive defeats in presidential elections, including the most recent one in January 2024. Nevertheless, in the same 2024 elections, the KMT secured control of the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's legislative body.

***Needless to say, the Chinese Communist Party is more comfortable with KMT at the helm of Taiwan than with the Democratic Progressive Party which advocates Taiwan's independent status.***

*Democratic Progressive Party (DPP):*

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), established in 1986 under the banner of Progressive Social Liberalism and Taiwan nationalism, has long been associated with staunch anti-China sentiments. Initially, it served as the primary opposition to the Kuomintang (KMT), engaging in vigorous debates within its factions: the fundamentalists advocating for complete independence from China and the moderates seeking a more tempered approach. Striking a balance between these extremes was important to garner support from Taiwanese citizens, who desired independence without provoking Chinese hostility.

In September 2007, the DPP adopted a resolution affirming Taiwan as a distinct entity separate from China and proposed the use of the name "Taiwan" to mitigate tensions with China, departing from the current designation of the Republic of China.

Like many fledgling political entities in democracies, the DPP underwent a period of adjustment within Taiwanese politics. It wasn't until 2016, twenty years after its inception, that the party secured a majority in the Legislative Yuan, capturing 68 out of 113 seats. Moreover, Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP leader, clinched the presidency with over 56% of the popular vote. (In 2000, Taiwan also witnessed its first DPP president, Chen Shui-bian, though due to opposition vote fragmentation, the DPP failed to gain control of the Legislative Yuan). The Tsai administration based its policies on four commitments – to establish a free and democratic constitution; Taiwan and mainland China should not be subordinate to each other; to resist annexation of Taiwanese territory or encroachment on the country's sovereignty; and finally to decide the future of Taiwan in accordance to the will of Taiwanese people.

***The final commitment of DPP may turn out to be a significant obstacle in resolving this complex issue.***

The DPP's influence endured in Taiwan, with Tsai's re-election victory in 2020, garnering 57% of the vote. Notably, in the January 2024 elections, the DPP candidate, Lai Ching-Te, saw a decline in his vote share to 40%. Despite this, he emerged victorious as the Kuomintang (KMT) candidate only securing 33.5% of the votes. It's worth noting that the Chinese view him as a separatist advocating for Taiwan's independence. To Western observers and those aligned with the anti-China bloc, the DPP's successive victories underscore Taiwan's reluctance to unify with mainland China.

2024	DPP 40%	KMT & Others 60%
2020	DPP 57%	KMT & Others 43%
2016	DPP 56%	KMT & Others 44%
<i>Combined Vote Share of KMT &amp; Other Parties vs DPP</i>		

***So a call for Taiwanese Independence may not enjoy total endorsement within Taiwan.***

The widespread belief that every Taiwanese citizen unequivocally desires complete independence from Chinese influence may not accurately reflect reality. Merely citing the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) consecutive victories in three elections as evidence of Taiwan's rejection of the "one nation, two systems" concept might oversimplify the situation. A closer examination, as illustrated by the accompanying figures, reveals a significant portion of the population voting against the DPP: 44% in 2016, 43% in 2020, and a notable 60% in 2024. These latest election outcomes serve as a poignant reminder of the nuanced perspectives within Taiwan regarding its relationship with China.

***From a Western standpoint, this study reveals a concerning pattern: The Taiwanese may not be unanimous in their hostility towards China. In such a situation if the conflict escalates into a war, strategically, any Western intervention supported by the USA might not be the most prudent choice.***

#### *Issue Complicated by Economics*

China and Taiwan share deep trade ties, making war between them unlikely. Since its separation from mainland China in 1949, Taiwan realized its lack of natural resources and focused on becoming an export-driven economy. With initial support from the U.S., Taiwan developed industries for the manufacturing of heavy goods and equipment. This industrial focus paired with universal education, allowed Taiwan to benefit from its progressive economic policies.

This export-driven approach fostered strong trade links with major partners like Japan, the USA, the EU, and China - specializing in the export of heavy industry and electronics. Today Taiwan leads in LCD TV production and microchip supply globally. In the last twenty years, China has evolved into its top trading partner, followed by Japan and the USA. Interestingly Taiwan has become one of the top investors in China, investing more than 203 billion USD from 1991 to 2022.

#### ***Can China eschew such close trade relations by launching a military action against Taiwan?***

##### *Is China eyeing the world's largest Chip manufacturing facility and other critical tech companies?*

In Taiwan's Hsinchu Science Park, lies the world's largest semiconductor foundry, TSMC, supplying chips for electronics like phones and computers. With nearly 70% market share in AI and quantum computing chips, it's pivotal in global supply chains, ranking 44th in Forbes Global 2000. TSMC output constitutes 25% of Taiwan's GDP and occupies 30% of its stock exchange index.

##### *How does this affect China?*

China, the world's manufacturing hub, heavily relies on Taiwanese chips. Acutely aware of its dependency on Taiwan for microchips, China tried its best to develop its indigenous microchip industry. However strict US restrictions and the ban on the transfer of sophisticated technology to China developed not only in the US but also in the West has left China at the mercy of Taiwanese chips.

***Annexing Taiwan, China will get access to critical chip manufacturing facilities and the relevant technologies.***

### *Complex Geopolitics*

The geopolitical dynamics surrounding the China-Taiwan dispute are heavily influenced by the escalating tensions between the United States and China, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. China, having experienced a significant surge in both economic and military prowess over the past three decades, seeks to assert its dominance in the area. This ambition is evidenced by its assertive claims over vast portions of the South China Sea, in direct violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982, to which China is a signatory.

Despite its commitment to UNCLOS, China persists in advancing its controversial 9-Dash Line concept, which effectively lays claim to nearly the entire South China Sea, curtailing the economic activities of neighbouring countries such as fishing and marine research. The countries most affected by this aggressive stance include Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Moreover, China not only asserts control over significant portions of the South China Sea but also claims sovereignty over islands that belong to these nations.

In 2016, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of the Philippines, which had sought legal recourse against China's expansive claims. However, China has adamantly refused to comply with the ICJ's decision. Additionally, Chinese Coast Guard vessels have escalated tensions by enforcing the 9-Dash Line, obstructing legitimate activities of Philippine government ships conducting marine research and resupply missions to remote locations like Sandy Cay or the Second Thomas Shoal.

Similar territorial disputes exist between China and other nations such as Vietnam and Japan, which can potentially escalate into conflicts. Due to its treaty obligations, any move by China against Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan can draw the US military into the conflict. The United States, keen to maintain its influence in the region, opposes any alteration to the status quo. Any attempt by China to annex Taiwan, whether through military action or other means, would be perceived by the West as a threat to its interests in the Indo-Pacific region, likely prompting a response from the US and its allies.

***The strategic thinkers in these countries fear that annexation of Taiwan may take China a step closer to legitimizing its claim of the 9 Dash Line.***

***Whatever the future course of events, Xi has given clear instructions to the leadership of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to prepare for the seizure of Taiwan by 2030.***

### **Staging a military operation to seize Taiwan is fraught with significant challenges**

At first glance, any military endeavour by China against Taiwan might appear straightforward, given China's status as the world's third most powerful military and Taiwan's comparatively lower ranking at 24th in the Global Power Index

2024. However, this assumption overlooks the significant support Taiwan receives from formidable allies like the United States, who have committed to aiding Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion attempt.

For China launching an invasion across the 180-kilometer-wide Taiwan Strait carries considerable risks, as the US Navy and its allies routinely assert Freedom of Navigation in the area. Attempting to send a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) flotilla through the Taiwan Strait could result in collisions and clashes with US ships and submarines traversing the same waters. It would not be prudent for the Chinese to get into a confrontation with the West at the initial stages of the conflict.

***In the given circumstances if PLA is ordered to invade Taiwan, it would rather prefer to engage with Taiwanese forces directly, instead of getting into a conflict with US naval assets on the Taiwan Strait.***

This study feels following tactics that do not challenge the US and allied forces directly, may be employed by PLA at the initial stages of the war and the Taiwanese military's steps to counter them.

1. *Pre-emptive attack on Taiwanese military bases and radar installations with missiles launched from the mainland from the west of Taiwan and/or with missiles and drones from the eastern side, launched from its aerial and naval assets (both ships and submarines) plying on the Philippine Sea.*

This is the standard conventional method of initiating an attack on the enemy assets and given the huge stockpile of missiles available with PLA's missile forces, in usual conditions can be devastating for Taiwanese defence. Usually, such attacks are a prelude to putting actual boots on the ground, either through airborne para-dropping land ships or both.

*Taiwanese counter:*

The Taiwanese military faces daunting odds in countering the onslaught of missiles and drones, relying primarily on their missile shield systems to intercept incoming projectiles. However, with China's overwhelming numerical advantage, inevitably, Taiwan will soon run out of its defensive missile stockpile. This is where the technological superiority of the US military becomes pivotal for Taiwan's defence.

A pertinent example is the recent Iranian attack on Israel, which unleashed over 300 missiles, including cruise and ballistic variants. Remarkably, ninety percent of these missiles were neutralized by US forces operating aboard naval assets in the Red Sea. The remainder were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system. In the event of pre-emptive strikes by PLA units, Taiwan can anticipate similar support from its allies. Crucially, like in the Iran- Israel conflict, such intervention would not escalate into a confrontation between US forces and the Chinese PLA.

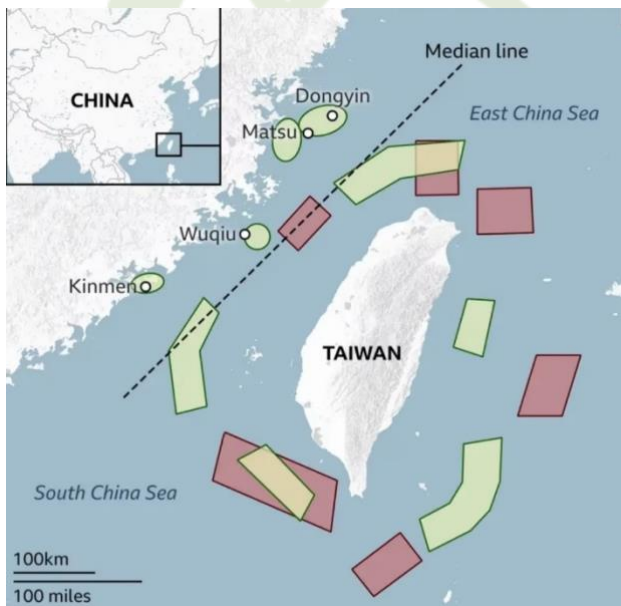
2. *Without challenging the US Navy, China may try to approach the Taiwanese islands with its landing ships carrying troops and armoured vehicles through the Taiwan Strait or the Philippines Sea in the east of Taiwan. All the while, the PLA tactically avoids a confrontation with the US military.*

Theoretically a sound move, since by not challenging US forces, China may not risk drawing their fire. For the US also this can be a very complex chessboard move by the Chinese, which can be thwarted only by directly hitting Chinese ships and planes leading to an escalation both sides would like to avoid.

*Taiwanese counter:*

Taiwan will undoubtedly strive to neutralize the landing ships and aircraft before they can reach the main island. Restricting and winning the war in the sea is crucial for Taiwan, as any prolonged land conflict could have devastating consequences for its inhabitants. Given the overwhelming numerical superiority of the PLA, which boasts the largest standing army in the world, Taiwan's chances in a land battle are slim.

In this scenario, Taiwan's greatest advantage lies with its Western allies. It is hoped that during a Chinese military operation, multiple US ships and aircraft will patrol the seas surrounding Taiwan. There is a significant possibility that US forces could become entangled in the crossfire between Chinese and Taiwanese forces. Any damage to



*Chinese Exercises around Taiwan in 2022 (Red) and in 2024 (Green).  
Credit CCTV*

allied assets could serve as a pretext for these nations to actively support Taiwan. This strategy by China is fraught with substantial risk of failure.

In a recent military exercise, the PLA surrounded Taiwan with its naval vessels, approaching from the west, east, north, and south. In response, the Taiwanese government activated its shore defences.

***A significant advantage for Taiwan and its allies in these recurrent Chinese exercises is their ability to observe and understand the PLA's tactics, allowing them to plan effectively for any future conflicts.***

3. *Initiating cyber warfare and disrupting communication satellites in orbit to cripple Taiwan's defence systems, followed by launching an invasion of the country.*

The likelihood of this strategy failing is significantly high. It is anticipated that not only Taiwan but also Western nations are technologically more advanced than China in this domain. For Taiwan and its allies, early detection and identification of the attack will be crucial to their defence capabilities. Should these measures not suffice, it is expected that a swift and devastating response from the allies would severely impact China.

Given the current geopolitical dynamics favouring Western intervention, it seems Taiwan could very well withstand any conventional Chinese military operation.

***China might need to devise alternative strategies in its attempt to subjugate Taiwan.***

### **Conclusion**

Though predicting how the China-Taiwan conflict curve will play out over the next decade can be challenging; it is quite clear that it will be very difficult for China to exert total control over Taiwan. Despite potentially aggressive moves, such as deploying numerous fighter jets across the median line of the Taiwan Strait, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will find it difficult to coerce Taiwan into submission, especially with the persistent presence of the US military in the region.

A potential concern is whether China would be willing to exercise the option of devastating Taiwan in a war just like the Russians are doing in Ukraine. Any action like that will risk the loss of critical technological assets like those of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company which the Chinese covet highly. In contrast, Russia's goals in Ukraine appear limited to territorial annexation, with no broader strategic objectives.

China also faces complications with its assertion of the "Nine Dash Line," which seeks to redefine territorial waters, antagonizing multiple nations simultaneously. The Chinese propensity to get immersed in border disputes has led to challenges on multiple fronts which includes India a military powerhouse in South Asia. Although India may not directly engage in South China Sea conflicts, it is always open to helping countries like Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines with military aid. Moreover, India, along with the US, Japan, and Australia, has formed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), aimed at counterbalancing Chinese influence in the region.

Another consideration is the firm stance of the US and its allies, who are determined to maintain their significant influence in the area. They are keen to avoid the creation of a Ukraine-like scenario in East Asia and might be more prepared to take decisive action if necessary. It is worth noting that while Russian and American forces have avoided confrontation throughout the Cold War, there have been historical instances of Chinese and American troops engaging in bloody clashes, during the Korean War.

Ultimately, the destiny of Taiwan must be determined by its own people. This study notes with interest that the modernization efforts within the Taiwanese military have notably accelerated under the Democratic Progressive Party, particularly during President Tsai's tenure, as opposed to during the Kuomintang regime. Evidently, for the KMT and its supporters, China might not represent the same level of threat as perceived by the DPP.

***That leads to the question, what is the majority Taiwanese view of China, especially considering that the current DPP President of Taiwan was elected with only forty percent of the votes?***