



KALINGA INSTITUTE OF
INDO-PACIFIC STUDIES

KIIPS Event Report



Picture Courtesy: ALAMY

Roundtable Discussion

on

War Clouds over Taiwan: Causes & Consequences

23 October 2021

On **23 October 2021**, the Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies organised a Roundtable Discussion on the theme **‘War Clouds over Taiwan: Causes & Consequences’**. The discussion brought different perspectives to the Taiwan flashpoint following China’s aggressive military posturing in the Taiwan Straits and its consequence not only for Cross Strait relations, but also regional peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The discussion brought to the forefront the diverse perspectives from the point of different stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific, and also the internal and external dimensions of policymaking in the two principle actors, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC), hereafter, referred to as China and Taiwan respectively.

The primary takeaways of the discussion were the following:

- While China and Taiwan both might share a certain degree of common cultural chords, Taiwan’s 70 plus years of independence has bestowed an individual identity to the country - one very different from that of China’s. China’s persistence for Taiwan to return to the “motherland” and its use of military posturing, as seen in recent times, cannot be delinked from its intention to pursue ultra-nationalism as a way to maintain the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in the face of looming domestic vulnerabilities in the country.
- Tsai Ing-wen and her government are steadfastly refuting and challenging the ‘One China Principle’- particularly, through deepening spheres of Taiwanese cooperation with countries, like the United States, in economic and military realms. This explicit divergence from the “motherland” is spurring an increased Chinese antagonism against Taiwan. In the past, specifically from 2000-2015, Taiwan strongly believed that it could deter Chinese attempts at re-unification by forging cultural and political exchanges between the two countries. However, heightened Chinese state propaganda and stagnating levels of economic growth in China invalidated any Taiwanese attempts at swaying China. Consequently, Taiwan would now need to strengthen its military capacities and develop additional military alliances.
- By staging more than 600 intrusions into the Taiwanese AIDZ, China is purposefully threatening Taiwan and stretching the country’s patience till the breaking-point. By training and supporting numerous rebel groups within Taiwan, China is aiming to cajole the Taiwanese citizens into believing that re-unification is in their best interests. By making the Taiwanese travel-permits almost identical to the Chinese Citizen’s identity card, China is forcing the Taiwanese to see no difference between themselves and their counterparts in the “motherland”.
- A series of Chinese White Papers have gradually escalated the nature of action against Taiwan while revealing that the island’s rebellious nature is China’s greatest national security threat. They also reveal Chinese willingness to take drastic actions against Taiwan should the country refuse the peaceful settlement of cross-strait unification through negotiations. Moreover, the aim to achieve this goal by the centennial celebrations of the CCP further fortifies the imminence of an armed invasion in Taiwan. Additionally, with

a military far more superior to that of Taiwan's and with several missiles in provinces bordering the island, China is well-equipped to launch a military strike.

- The Taiwanese strait is a passage for global commerce. Moreover, the island state harbours over 40% of global hardware production. Therefore, while China might staunchly attest otherwise, the international community has an integral stake in the country's crises. In the bid to both contain China and preserve Taiwan as a viable stream for commerce, they would be willing to militarily support the island in case of a Chinese invasion.
- In the current security environment of the Indo-Pacific region, unlike the earlier assessment that South China Sea was the geopolitical hotspot over which a war could take place, there is growing realisation that the war could instead erupt over the Taiwan flashpoint. In the latest 2021 Defence White Paper of Japan, the need for stability in the Taiwan Strait has been highlighted in a major way. It mentions that the stability in the Taiwan Strait is an imperative and also warned how the military balance has tilted heavily towards China.
- Despite having many friends in the international system, and the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act putting an obligation on the United States to come to Taiwan's rescue in case of an invasion from China, Beijing has been using force, financial aid, investment, and trying to persuade the small-small nations with whom Taiwan has diplomatic relations to switch alliances.
- In Japan, there is an ensuing argument that the one percent ceiling of the GDP towards defence expenditure, is not serving defence purpose and this should be increased. There is a rising demand that the defence budget must be at least 2.1% of the GDP. Moreover, when the Japanese Prime Minister visited the United States for meeting with Biden, for the first time in the joint statement, Taiwan was mentioned.
- The Taiwan flashpoint yet again brings to the forefront, the enduring question about U.S. intention and capability to intervene to the rescue of Taiwan. If there are red lines relating to the Taiwan case, it is complicated in real time to determine the red lines that China couldn't or won't cross, and the redlines that the US couldn't or won't tolerate. Since the Taiwan issue comes close on the heels of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the question looming over the future of US image as a security guarantor to its allies becomes all the more imperative.
- There is a changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, and cases like the Taiwan flashpoint are testing the old notions of post-World War II US military security framework and the limitations of US extended deterrence, and what all these mean for regional peace and stability.
- It was an interesting development when during the US-Australia summit; the joint statement specifically mentioned that Taiwan was a leading democracy and equitable partner of both the countries. There has been an increasing effort from Taiwan to forge

stronger security ties with Australia, including in the realm of intelligence information sharing. It is imperative to further question the future role that other prominent stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific like Australia, India and Japan could play with and without the United States, in terms of managing the ramifications of China's aggression over Taiwan.

- The geopolitical circumstances in which the US-China rivalry is evolving, and the complex China-Taiwan tension as a result of China's aggressive military posturing, is testing the meaning of Washington's policy of strategic ambiguity. America's stance on the one China policy, and at the same time its support to Taiwan's relative autonomy and security capabilities, might call for more clarity in the near future.
- America's policy strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan has been multidimensional as it takes into the factors of geography, history, domestic, regional and global politics, the politics of economy and security. Moreover, America's stated support for a liberal democracy in Taiwan will remain an important aspect of how Washington assesses its approach to Taipei in the midst of its growing competition with China. This raises the debate relating to the future relevance of strategic ambiguity vs strategic clarity. While strategic ambiguity might be seen relevant for Washington to preserve the status quo, strategic clarity might enhance the military and economic capability of the US-Japan and US-Australia relationships, and most importantly, it will enhance Taiwan's defence capability in face of Chinese aggression, and consequently, it will increase America's agenda shaping capabilities in the region.

invites all to a Roundtable Discussion on
**"War Clouds over Taiwan: Causes &
Consequences"**



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Vote of Thanks
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