



China-Taiwan Conflict

This editorial is based on [“Preventing a China-Taiwan conflict”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 28/03/2024. The article explores India's involvement in disputes over distant Asian borders, such as Taiwan, where India aims to prevent the escalation of conflict. China asserts its sovereignty over Taiwan and is actively preparing for a potential forcible takeover of the island, while the U.S. has shown a growing readiness to support and defend Taiwan.

For Prelims: [China-Taiwan Conflict](#), [South China Sea](#), [Taiwan Relations Act, 1979](#), [One China Policy](#), [Philippines](#), [India's Act East Foreign Policy](#).

For Mains: Significance of Taiwan for India, Stand of India on the Taiwan Issue.

China continues to assert its sovereignty over [Taiwan](#), viewing it as a part of its territory and insisting on eventual reunification, by force if necessary. China has significantly increased its military activities around Taiwan, including regular air and naval incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). The United States has reiterated its commitment to Taiwan's security and has increased its support, including arms sales and military cooperation, in response to China's growing assertiveness.

Taiwan, on the other hand, maintains its separate identity and democratic system, with a majority of its population supporting the status quo of de facto independence. Taiwan has bolstered its defences in response to China's military threats and has sought to strengthen its international presence and partnerships.

What is the Present Context of China-Taiwan Conflict?

▪ Historical Context:

- Taiwan came under Chinese control during the Qing dynasty but was given to Japan after China lost the first Sino-Japanese war in 1895.
- China regained control of Taiwan in 1945 after Japan lost [World War II](#), but the civil war between the nationalists and communists led to the nationalists fleeing to Taiwan in 1949.
- The roots of the Taiwan issue go back to the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950) between the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) and the Communist Party of China (CPC).
- After the Communist victory in 1949, the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan, establishing the Republic of China (ROC) there, while the CPC proclaimed the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland.

▪ One-China Policy:

- Both the PRC and the ROC claim to represent the legitimate government of all of China. The PRC asserts sovereignty over Taiwan and insists that there is only one China and Taiwan is part of it. This is encapsulated in the [One-China Policy](#).



▪ **International Recognition:**

- Most countries, including the United States, recognize the PRC as the legitimate government of China and acknowledge the One-China Policy.
- However, they maintain unofficial relations with Taiwan, often in the form of economic and cultural ties, without officially recognizing Taiwan's sovereignty.

▪ **Taiwan's Identity:**

- Taiwan has developed its own separate identity over the decades, with its own government, constitution, and democratic system. Many Taiwanese people identify as Taiwanese rather than Chinese.

▪ **Cross-Strait Relations:**

- Over the years, relations between Taiwan and mainland China have fluctuated. There have been periods of tension and hostility, as well as periods of detente and cooperation, especially in the economic sphere.

▪ **Military Threats:**

- China has not ruled out the use of force to reunify Taiwan with the mainland if peaceful means fail. It has modernised its military capabilities, including building up its naval and missile forces, which has raised concerns in Taiwan and among other countries in the region.

▪ **International Community:**

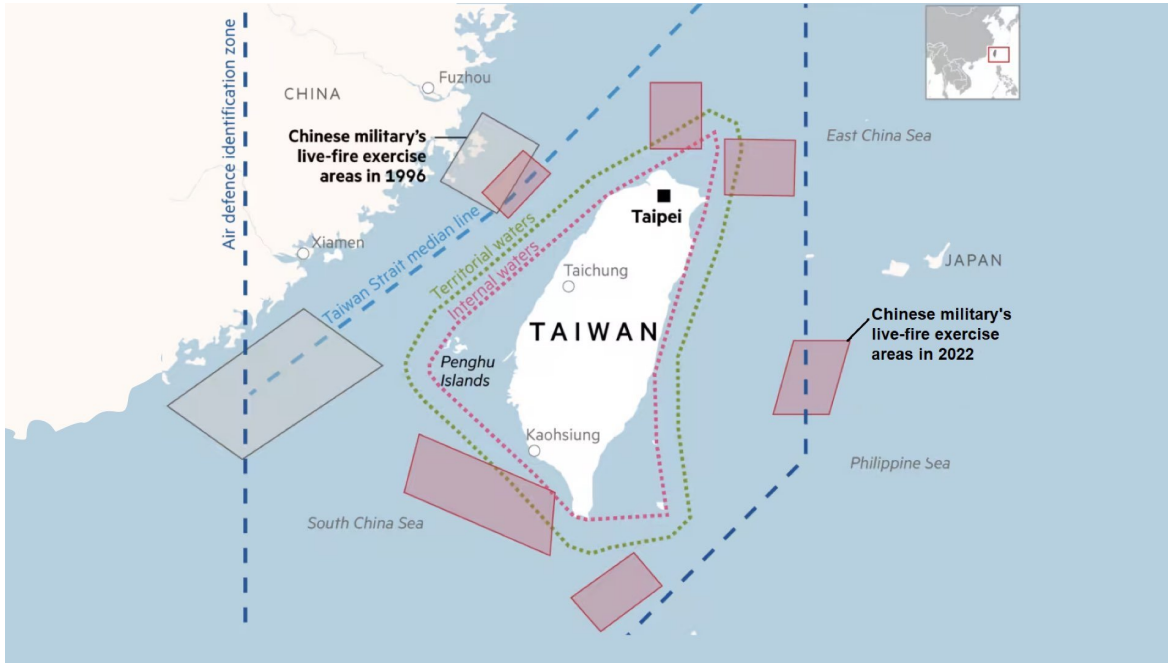
- The Taiwan issue remains a sensitive and contentious topic in international relations. Many countries seek to maintain a delicate balance between their relations with China and their support for Taiwan's security and democracy.

Note

Strategic Significance of Taiwan:

▪ **Geopolitical Location:**

- Taiwan is situated in a strategically important location in the western Pacific Ocean, adjacent to China, Japan, and the Philippines. Its location provides a natural gateway to Southeast Asia and the [South China Sea](#), which are critical for global trade and security.



▪ **Military Significance:**

- Taiwan's proximity to mainland China makes it a critical factor in military planning for both China and other regional powers.
- Control over Taiwan would enhance China's ability to project power into the western Pacific and potentially threaten key US allies such as Japan and South Korea.

▪ **Economic Importance:**

- Taiwan is a major economic player in the global market, particularly in the semiconductor and electronics industries.
- Its economy is closely integrated with regional and global supply chains, making it strategically important for regional stability and economic security. Taiwan produces over 60% of the world's semiconductors and over 90% of the most advanced ones.

What are the Different Aspects of China-Taiwan Conflict in Present Times?

▪ **China's Concerns:**

◦ **One China Policy Challenged:**

- This means that countries seeking diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC, Mainland China) must break official relations with the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) and vice versa.
- The existent diplomatic relationship of the Taiwan and its membership in intergovernmental organisations challenges this policy:
 - The ROC, Taiwan has diplomatic relations with 15 countries and substantive ties with many others such as Australia, Canada, [EU](#) nations, Japan and New Zealand.

◦ **Agreements/Exercises Countering China:**

- The US has announced a new trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific, between Australia, the UK and the US ([AUKUS](#)), which is also seen as an effort to counter China.
- [Malabar Exercise](#) (US, Japan, India and Australia) is also a major step towards building a sustainable Indo-Pacific coalition thereby addressing the massive strategic imbalance generated by an economically and militarily powerful China.

- **Strategic and Defense Support to Taiwan by US:**
 - Taiwan has sought to improve its defences with the purchase of US weapons, including upgraded F-16 fighter jets, armed drones, rocket systems and Harpoon missiles.
 - A US aircraft carrier group led by the warship Theodore Roosevelt has entered the South China Sea to ensure freedom of the seas, and build partnerships that foster maritime security.
- **India's Stand on the Issue:**
 - **Recognizes One-China Policy:**
 - Since 1949, India has accepted the "One China" policy that accepts Taiwan and Tibet as part of China.
 - However, India uses the policy to make a diplomatic point, i.e., if India believes in "One China" policy, China should also believe in a "One India" policy.
 - **Starting Diplomatic Relations:**
 - Even though India has stopped mentioning its adherence to One China policy in joint statements and official documents since 2010, its engagement with Taiwan is still restricted due to the framework of ties with China.
 - India and Taiwan do not have formal diplomatic relations but since 1995, both sides have maintained representative offices in each other's capitals that function as de facto embassies.
 - **Opening Third TECC Centre in India:**
 - Taiwan has announced plans to open its third representative Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre (TECC), in India, specifically in Mumbai.
 - The move, which involves establishing a TECC, is aimed at enhancing economic linkages and strengthening bilateral cooperation between Taiwan and India.
- **US vis-a-vis- China over Taiwan:**
 - The Chinese government passed an Anti-Secession Law in 2005 that provides conditions under which China might employ non-peaceful means to prevent the permanent separation of Taiwan from mainland China.
 - The US as part of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) 1979, is required to assist Taiwan if coerced or attacked by China.
 - **US' Stand:** The recent Chinese incursions and US' opposition to it are manifestations of this contradicting stand of the US and China on Taiwan.
 - It has urged China to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan's democratically elected representatives.
- **Recent Developments:**
 - The 2016 election of President Tsai marked the beginning of a sharp pro-independence phase in Taiwan, which was intensified by her re-election in 2020.
 - The island now has significant economic interests, including investments in China. Pro-independence groups worry that this economic dependence may hinder their goals.
 - Whereas pro-reunification groups in Taiwan, as well as China, hope that increasing people-to-people contacts will eventually wear down the pro-independence lobbies.

Why does India not Want the Conflict to Escalate?

- **Trade and Economic Concerns:**
 - India and Taiwan have expanded trade seven-fold since 2001 and are exploring a possible free trade agreement. The Taiwanese firm, Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation, has partnered with the Tata Group to build India's first semiconductor fabrication plant.
 - An agreement was signed recently to send Indian workers to Taiwan. India's industry, critical supply chains, and overseas population are all increasingly invested in an enduring peaceful status quo across the Taiwan Strait.
- **Disruptions Due to War:**
 - Any Chinese aggression against Taiwan would be catastrophically costly for India. Such a scenario would, in effect, cripple global trade with China and Taiwan, which would create disruptions throughout Asia and West Asia.
 - A recent Bloomberg study estimates that the costs of a conflict would amount to over 10%

of global GDP. India's economy would suffer a greater shock than the US economy and its most valuable sectors, from electronics to pharmaceuticals, would run dry of components and materials.

▪ **Spill-Over Effects Across the Borders:**

- A protracted or general war between China and the US, spreading beyond Taiwan, could spill over in multiple directions. It could ignite the already tense India-China land border.
- It could wipe out or take offline sizable portions of Chinese, American, and other regional countries' industrial capacity, on which the world depends; apart from the risk of unthinkable nuclear escalation, it poses.

▪ **Worsening India's Long-term International Position:**

- While a conflict itself would be calamitous, its outcomes could further worsen India's long-term international position, depending on which side prevails.
- A limited conflict, where China has relative advantages of concentrating force near Taiwan, is also the most likely scenario to end in a Chinese victory over Taiwan and a corresponding defeat of the US and its allies.
- If China, as a consequence of battle, thereby displaces the US as the region's pre-eminent military power, it would undermine the region's entire security architecture.

▪ **Promoting Arms Race in the Neighbourhood:**

- American security guarantees would be less credible, neighbours may seek to assure their security with more arms or offensive postures, and China's military would be free to further project unchecked influence, including into the Indian Ocean.
 - It may even feel emboldened to press its claims on Arunachal Pradesh. India is not an American ally, but it does depend on the US for its military modernisation and a broadly benign strategic environment.

What are the Options Available for India in Managing the Escalating Conflict?

▪ **Maintaining Military Balance in the Taiwan Strait:**

- Beijing employs various tools, such as international law, economic leverage, and political influence, in its strategy towards Taiwan, avoiding military coercion when possible. It aims to minimise costs and disruptions, reserving military action for when it believes victory is assured.
 - The military balance in the Taiwan Strait is key to deterring conflict, but nations like India can also contribute by convincing Beijing that its conditions for military action are not met.

▪ **Exploring Different Policy Options:**

- India has six types of policy options at its fingertips: international law arguments; building narratives opposed to aggression; coordinated diplomatic messaging; economic de-risking; active information operations to support the Taiwanese people; and military support to the US forces in the Indian Ocean.
 - Each option can be calibrated to variable levels of ambition and political appetite; and they can be adapted and applied by many other countries.
- These options can also advance India's grand strategic position, regardless of their impact on the China-Taiwan dispute:
 - Enacting these policies would, first and foremost, lend India more leverage in its intensifying strategic competition with China.
 - They also offer additional pathways for India to deepen its cooperation with the US., thereby accelerating its national rise.
 - And they offer a wider agenda for Indian international leadership, especially among countries of the Global South, which otherwise would be passive or at best uncoordinated in deterring Chinese aggression more broadly.

▪ **Reconsidering One-China Policy:**

- India can rethink the One China Policy and separate its relationship with mainland China from that with Taiwan just as China is expanding its involvement in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) through its ambitious project [China Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#).

▪ **Following a Collaborative Approach:**

- India and other powers must draw a redline for any Chinese effort to take Taiwan by force. After all, the Taiwan issue is not just a moral question of allowing the destruction of a successful democracy, or a question of international ethics where the principle of settling

disputes peacefully is adhered to.

- In fact, the reason for drawing that line is not about Taiwan at all, but because of what the consequences of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be for India and the rest of Asia.

Conclusion

India's expanding national interests present stronger reasons to maintain the status quo regarding Taiwan. Any involvement in a conflict over Taiwan is highly unlikely due to India's economic and security interests. The costs of such a conflict would be catastrophic, affecting global trade and potentially leading to broader regional conflicts. To prevent such a scenario, India can use various policy options, including international law arguments, diplomatic messaging, economic strategies, information operations, and military support to the US in the Indian Ocean.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss India's strategic considerations and policy options regarding the China-Taiwan conflict, considering its implications on regional stability and national interests.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

- Q.** Evaluate the economic and strategic dimensions of India's Look East Policy in the context of the post-Cold War international scenario. **(2016)**
- Q.** "China is using its economic relations and positive trade surplus as tools to develop potential military power status in Asia". In the light of this statement, discuss its impact on India as her neighbour. **(2017)**
- Q.** The US is facing an existential threat in the form of a China, that is much more challenging than the erstwhile Soviet Union. Explain **(2021)**