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China's Political Warfare against Taiwan



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Thucydides Trap* and Taiwan Tribulations

Within a span of five months of the unveiling of US' Indo-Pacific Strategy, Washington introduced two acts, 'Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act 2019' and 'Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act 2019' in quick succession which infringes on China's 'One China' policy. While its reaction to the TAIPEI Act 2019, introduced on October 31, 2019 was measured, but the signing of the 'Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act' on November 27, 2019 by President Trump has infuriated China. China's foreign Vice Minister Le Yucheng, warned US about the consequences, as he declared that China reserves right for "firm countermeasures". Beijing, embattled by the

Key Points

- The Communist People's Republic of China (PRC) or commonly referred to as China and democratic Taiwan (commonly known as the Republic of China or ROC) have a bitter legacy of the past 70 years.
- January 2020 presidential election in Taiwan and the current COVID-19 pandemic has enlarged the ideological and political gulf between them. Taiwan seems to be drifting away from the 'One China' policy, thus, straining the cross-strait relationship.
- For Beijing, Taiwan is its core issue and for US, its main ally. The worsening of the Sino-US relationship is impacting Taiwan.
- Beijing is aware of likely foreign intervention in case of a military contingency against Taiwan. Hence, it has devised a political warfare mechanism to influence Taiwan.
- China aims to minimise the strategic friction and look for strategic opportunities so that its millennium goal is not disrupted. It is, therefore, important for the security planners to watch the Chinese political warfare and strategic behaviour.

* In *Destined for War*, Graham Allison explains a deadly pattern of structural stress that results when a rising power challenges a ruling one. He draws the inspiration from Thucydides, the famous Greek historian who in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* wrote the following: 'What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power (rising power) and the fear which this caused in Sparta (the dominant power).'

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ongoing protest in Hong Kong, a crucial financial and technological hub of China, sees it as interference in its internal affairs. Beijing has warned the Hong Kong protesters of grave consequences if they collude with external forces to undermine China's 'one country, two systems' policy.¹ The Ministry of National Defense (MND) of China was quick to add that, the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Garrison forces in Hong Kong were well equipped to deal with the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong.

The "die has been cast" for the future rounds of conflict thereby, imperiling further negotiations of trade-technology warfare. These acts have ignited fear, anger and emotions in China—a basic ingredient for the "Thucydides' Trap" as alluded by Professor Graham Allison to explain the likelihood of a Sino-US conflict. After President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan assumed office in 2016, the 'One China' policy has rocked Taiwan-China relationship. Given China's sensitivities towards the internal stability in Hong Kong and assertions by Taiwan on its core issue of 'One China', two key questions that emerges are as follows:

1. Whether Sino-US conflict is gravitating towards a "Thucydides Trap" and in such an eventuality will Taiwan remain neutral?
2. Will China pre-empt Taiwan contingency earlier than expected to realise Xi Jinping's resolve to achieve the "Great Rejuvenation"? If so, how is it likely to pan out and does Beijing have a timetable for seizing control?

Exploitation of Strategic Opportunity by China

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) United Front Work Department (UFWD) is the agency responsible for coordinating influence operations both inside China and in foreign missions. Mao had claimed that *military activity, party building, and united front work* are China's three 'magic weapons'. Xi'an incident of December 12, 1936, celebrated by China, is a testimony to the use of this magic weapon. During this period, CCP was facing the existential threat from the relentless Kuomintang

(KMT) campaign launched by Chiang Kai-shek. He regarded CCP as a bigger threat than the Japanese invasion. To prevent CCPs decimation, Mao-Zhou combine subverted KMT Nationalist Marshal Chang Hsueh-liang, whose father was killed by the Japanese, along with General Yang Hucheng. At the behest of Mao, they detained their commander Chiang Kai-shek and forced him to sign a truce with the communists. So-called China's second reunification moment post-Xi'an incident gave time to the CCP to regroup itself while KMT faced the brunt of the Sino-Japanese war.²

At the end of World War II, Japanese which had captured Taiwan in 1895, returned the control of Taiwan to ROC led by Chiang Kai-shek. ROC began ruling China including Taiwan. However, the celebration was short-lived for ROC as the CCP recommenced the civil war immediately after World War II taking KMT and the Allies by surprise. This ultimately resulted in the creation of communist China in 1949. The government of ROC had to flee to Taiwan. However, ROC held China's seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and was recognised by many Western nations as the only Chinese government until 1971 when Mao sprung another surprise on ROC, keeping in league with his ability to exploit a strategic opportunity.

The Ussuri River conflict of March 1969 set the stage for the China-Soviet split and warming of the US-China relationship. Nixon-Kissinger's combined intention was to defang the Soviets and use China as a counterweight. But it was Mao who wanted the US' assurance badly to prevent further fallout from Russia. He also recognised that improved relationship with the US advances China's "quest for additional recognition and entry into [the] United Nations."³ In 1971, China was successful in extracting the diplomatic recognition for itself while unseating ROC from the UN. Despite flexible interpretation, in April 1979 China persuaded the US to sign the Taiwan Relations Act. This diluted the cause of Taiwan legally fulfilling China's national goals.^{4,5} It wanted to keep its external environment secure by "hiding capabilities and biding time" till such time it attains "favourable strategic configuration". However, China's 2019 White Paper on *National Defense in New*

Era has clearly articulated China's National Defense aim to "oppose and contain Taiwan's independence".

China and Taiwan Constitution: Contest of Political Will

China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law authorises China to pursue a "peaceful national reunification" agenda by employing non-peaceful means against secessionist forces. Over Taiwan's status, Xi in his 2019 speech reiterated that Beijing would consider the use of force to prevent "intervention by external forces". Since 2016, Taiwan's relationship with China, commonly known as the cross-strait relationship, is at its ebb. This relationship has been swinging between the "three No's" (no contact, no negotiations and no compromise) and "three links" initiative (transportation, communication and commerce) promoted over the past two decades.

Political will is at the heart of all serious forms of conflict. A constitution usually defines the terms on which war will be conducted.⁶ The constitution of both China and Taiwan seeks unification. China regards Taiwan as a breakaway province⁷ while Taiwan claims that it has all the trappings of a sovereign state from the constitution to armed forces. Its constitution proclaims Taiwan as a free area and the Chinese mainland as occupied territory.⁸ Thus, both China and Taiwan, while looking for unification, have their agenda. Paul Smith notes that the empire based on ideology tends to perform most effectively in political warfare when it "complements and transcends the rational-legalistic framework of the nation-states within them".⁹ Hence, it is important to contextualise 'Political Warfare'.

Contextualising Political Warfare

War, as the employer of military means to advance political ends, has been relegated and replaced by a more subtle method—'Political Warfare'. George Kennan, an American diplomat and proponent of the

containment policy against Soviet expansion during the Cold War, has been credited for defining "Political Warfare" in May 1948 as "the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives."¹⁰ The March 2015 White Paper by the US Army Special Operations Command recognised 'Political Warfare' as the "Fourth Fighting Arm" tasked to influence the will of the people in the enemy country. The primary aim being the destruction of the enemy's foundations of war machinery and ideas based on the identified higher strategy. It encompasses a spectrum of influence operations through unconventional means orchestrated through diplomatic and economic engagement, Security Sector Assistance (SSA), novel forms of Unconventional Warfare (UW) and Information and Influence Activities (IIA).¹¹ US, Russia and China have been employing political warfare tools to promote their influence by using unattributed forces and by exploiting the fault lines within the targeted countries.

Overview of China Political Warfare Strategy

People's Liberation Army (PLA) has metamorphosed its Political Warfare Strategy into the "Three Warfares". The 'psychological warfare' targets adversary's decision-making capability through propaganda, deception, threats and coercion. 'Public opinion warfare' is to guide and influence public opinion and gain support from domestic and international audiences. The legal warfare uses international and domestic laws to gain international support, manage political repercussions, and intimidate target audiences. China's leaders probably consider open democracies susceptible to influence operations with cyberspace as the preferred arena for such activities.

The RAND study on *Modern Political Warfare* reveals that China extensively uses private businesses and cultural entities as civilian proxies for the International Liaison Department of the Political Works Department (PWD).¹² It is publicly known as the "China Association for International Friendly Contacts"¹³ and includes the China Association for Promotion of Chinese

Culture, the Centre for Peace and Development Studies, External Propaganda Bureau and China Energy Fund Committee.¹⁴ Chinese influence operations are coordinated at a high level and executed by the UFWD, the Propaganda Ministry and the Ministry of State Security (MSS). China's foreign influence activities are predominantly focused on establishing and maintaining power brokers within a foreign government to promote Chinese policies. It's "Thousand Talents Programme" targets and employs ethnic Chinese citizens of other countries to support its foreign technology acquisition strategy. Furthermore, China harnesses academia and educational institutions, think tanks and state-run media to advance its soft power campaign in support of security interests.

China's Political Warfare Against Taiwan

Beijing is aware of foreign intervention (mainly the US) in case of a Taiwan contingency. Hence, it is using political warfare across political, intelligence, military, economic and diplomatic (PIMED) spheres to undermine an adversary's resolve in a contingency or conflict. The CCP sponsored UFWD has been tasked to advocate for China's preferred cross-strait outcome, i.e. unification of Taiwan with the Mainland. UFWD 3rd Bureau has been tasked to look at Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora.¹⁵ The defection testimony of China's William Wang Liqian on November 23, 2019 to Australia's counter-espionage agency revealed Beijing's modus operandi of influencing Taiwan's January 2020 elections.¹⁶

On November 24, 2019, Taiwan detained China Innovation Investment Ltd (CIIL) Executive Director Xiang Xin and his wife Kung Ching on charges of espionage. According to the CIIL website, it is an investment holding company listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange since August 2002. It has investments in several companies in Hong Kong and China that are involved in energy storage products, lighting products, and media terminals. However, according to Wang, CIIL was created under the PLA to infiltrate into Hong Kong's financial market and also collect intelligence.¹⁷

Corporate records and newspaper archives reveal CIIL's close connection to 'Norinco', the Chinese military's weapon company.¹⁸ Taiwan has been a prominent target of China espionage as more than 56 agents have been arrested in Taiwan from 2002 to 2016, who were primarily involved in extracting sensitive information on the US military technology shared with Taiwan.¹⁹

Michael Cole, a Taiwan expert and former Canadian intelligence official, believes that the goal of UFWD operations in Taiwan is to create instability and then justify its military intervention.²⁰ It intends to turn Taiwan's democracy against itself, as was evident when Chang An-lo, the head of Taiwan's Chinese Unity Promotion Party—which advocates for unification with the Mainland—mobilised about 200 pro-Beijing activists to protest the arrival in Taiwan of Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong and pro-self-determination Hong Kong legislators.²¹

China has also been practicing "lawfare" to promote the 'One China' policy even through business deals. Armed with the 2005 Anti-Secession Law, it wields the threat of employing non-peaceful means against Taiwan's declaration of independence. Any international brands not complying with Beijing's view on Taiwan over the 'One China' policy is marginalised. Italian sports car brand Maserati and French luxury house Dior's had to tender an apology for not showing Taiwan in the featured map of China.²² Labelling row has erupted between the two neighbours over Huawei smartphones that failed to represent each country differently.

Beijing has devised unique measures as part of its influence operations. In March 2018, just before the local elections, it had unveiled 31 measures for economic cooperation and in November 2019, barely two months prior to the election in Taiwan, it again proposed 26 measures which included tax incentives, preferential land-use policies²³ along with an offer to join its 5G efforts which have been rebuffed by the Taiwan Mainland Affairs Council. The accumulative amount of investment in China by Taiwanese businessmen totalled over US\$ 164.59 billion, which is over 60 per cent of

Taiwan's total investment outside Taiwan. Taiwan has been badly affected by the US-China trade war and it is looking at recalibrating its policy with China. It also realises the cyber threat posed by China. According to an estimate, the public sector weathers 20 to 40 million cyber attacks each month and according to the US estimates, it is likely to grow by almost 20 times in the coming years.²⁴

Beijing has used its diplomatic outreach to reduce Taiwan's diplomatic space. It has weaned away Taiwan-supporting nations. The diplomatic ties of Taiwan have shrunk from 22 to 15.²⁵ It was one of the major points raised by the opposition party in Taiwan against President Tsai in the January 2020 elections.

Taiwan's Options

The Sino-US conflict and Taiwan's current cross-strait estrangement have the potential to spiral out. In such a scenario, how China is likely to intervene is the question, Taiwan is encountered with.

China's lessons from the Taiwan missile crisis of 1995/96 made it evident about US' intervention in a Taiwan contingency. China perceives that the US military presence in Asia is to constrain its rise by interfering with China's sovereignty, particularly in a Taiwan scenario. Hu Jintao's New Historic Missions in 2004 was aimed at developing a range of systems to deter and deny foreign force projection. In a span of 15 years, China has closed many of the gaps in key warfare areas, such as air defence, long-range strike weapon systems, etc. It now has a blue-water navy with a wide array of advanced platforms, including submarines. It has also developed the world's first road-mobile, anti-ship ballistic missile, a system specifically designed to attack enemy aircraft carriers. The Anti-Access Anti-Denial (A2AD) strategy put in place by China, allows it multiple military options against intervention forces. A Rand publication in 2007 on China's likely pre-emptive strategies in a Taiwan contingency, points to its early targeting of the US surveillance and reconnaissance capacity.²⁶ For this to happen, the PLA would need to be seen as defending

some aspects of China's sovereignty. Hence, it is seeking to expand its jurisdiction over military activities in the Taiwan Strait. On March 31, 2019 it violated the long-established median line in Taiwan Strait by flying two PLAAF J-11 jets²⁷ to show its resentment over the US hosting of President Tsai in Hawaii and the US sale of defence articles to Taiwan. Beijing sees the sale of platforms like jet fighters and submarines as implicit red-lines as it disturbs the strategic stability in the cross-strait relationship. The waning influence of China over Taiwan may be another catalyst to trigger the Taiwan crisis.

The Taiwanese military knows that it cannot defeat the PLA on a conventional battlefield. It is equally aware that there will be a time lag between the PLA action and allied response. Hence, its best defence lies in building a credible force capable of increasing the costs of invasion by the PLA. Logically, this implies building up its capabilities to counter an amphibious assault through a combination of naval and aerial assets, as well as anti-armour rockets, missile batteries, artillery, mobile Special Forces units and a well-trained & equipped reserve, to saturate the beaches and create a kill zone for advancing PLA forces. In an eventuality of saturation bombing by the Rocket Force in the initial phase of major hostilities, the survival of its air force and navy assets would also be important. Cyberspace is another place where the conflict may happen. Taiwan has a credible defence industrial base for the production of missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and information and communications technology (ICT) components. For the first time in November 2019, Taiwan in concert with the US conducted a joint cyber exercise – the Cyber Offensive and Defensive Exercises (Code).²⁸ It is using this opportunity to build asymmetric cyber capabilities against China. It's "National Information and Communication Infrastructure Security Mechanism Plan", that looks into the military and public security, are in its final phase. Taiwan's strategic position in the Western Pacific makes its defensibility an important aspect of the US alliance system and strategy for the Region.²⁹ Taiwan is seeking to strengthen its security ties with its allies. With its new "South Bound Policy"³⁰

it is exploring strategic partnerships for better integration with the countries in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

In China, the publication of defence policy falls under the purview of the central leadership which is defined in the Party Congress Report. For years, China did not have a formal national security strategy nor had an organisation dedicated to formulating one.³¹ With the focus on making the ministries and bureaucracies accountable for successful implementation of the reforms, a National Security Commission was established at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013 and in 2015 China issued its National Defence White Paper (NDWP) on “China’s Military Strategy”. In April 2018, in the review meeting of the Commission, President Xi Jinping proclaimed that the Commission has solved many national security problems that “had long remained unsolved and achieved tasks that had long remained undone.”³² The government describes it as a comprehensive body to coordinate Xi’s broad vision for national security. While the details are more obscure, however, the Chinese analysts points that the wide-ranging national security laws passed since 2015 are part of deliberation by this body which was formed. The 2019 NDWP on “China’s National Defense in New Era” has clearly articulated one of the national defences aim as “to safeguard national political security, the people’s security and social stability and to oppose and contain Taiwan independence.”³³ The 2015 NDWP has defined the tasks for PLA “to strengthen efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism and terrorism so as to maintain China’s political security and social stability and resolutely safeguard the unification.”³⁴

Given China’s declared national defence aims and PLA tasks, the power play by China against Taiwan needs scrutiny as it provides an insight into China’s strategic behaviour. It shows how China has been able to promote its strategic interests across multiple domains. China engaged in a prolonged competitive contest with the

US, has used political warfare tools to defend its core interests while aiming to minimise the strategic friction. However, it has been aggressive about protecting its core interests. Given the unresolved border dispute of India with China and the sensitive Tibetan issues, China’s policy of containment and engagement needs careful evaluation. Indian security establishment must keep a close watch on the influence operations that China is capable of embedding and exploiting in the future in India’s neighbourhood.

According to former US National Security Adviser (NSA) HR McMaster, “Geopolitics is back and back with a vengeance after this holiday from history we took in the post-Cold War period.”³⁵ The political warfare will be played across traditional and non-traditional security domains. The 2016 PLA reform has enabled China to harmonise its “three warfare strategy” to deal with public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and lawfare. Critical technologies like cyber and space have played a pivotal role in Chinese influence operations. NSA Ajit Doval on October 15, 2019 while addressing the 41st conclave of the Defence Research and Development Organisation’s (DRDO) directors, outlined the necessity of developing niche technology for India’s security.³⁶ To contest in political warfare space, India will need to build strategic partnerships and invest in developing critical and disruptive technologies like cyber, computing, artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology. Lessons from China’s political warfare in Taiwan can help India to recalibrate its security strategy.

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