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## China's Assertiveness on Taiwan, South China Sea, Hong Kong and Bhutan: Its Implications for India



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### Introduction

According to reports in open media, the COVID-19 issue was discussed by Chinese doctors in December 2019. Authorities in Wuhan had taken legal measures against eight doctors, who had shared information about COVID in the chat groups, on 1 January 2020.<sup>1</sup> The authorities even widely publicised the punishment of the eight 'rumour-mongers'. Thereafter, on 29 January 2020, the Wuhan city Mayor admitted a failure to disclose timely information on the outbreak of pandemic to the people.<sup>2</sup> There were few days of openness, which allowed for an outpouring of criticism, especially of the Wuhan administration,

### Key Points

- China's primary interest is to maintain its fundamental system and security.
- This could be threatened by domestic forces in combination with foreign countries.
- The party leadership uses anxiety to shore up loyalty within the party and convince Chinese society of its need for protection.
- This has led to assertive behaviour against Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, and Bhutan.
- Implications against India are clear, as India remains the sole military challenge to China in Asia.
- Situation demands India to reset its stance towards China.
- India needs to modernise its Armed Forces and adopt a proactive policy vis-à-vis China.

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## China's Assertiveness on Taiwan, South China Sea, ...

reprimanding of Li Wenliang, an Ophthalmologist by profession, who was one of the eight doctors and who later succumbed to the disease. Thereafter, the authorities once again clamped down on the free flow of information within China.<sup>3</sup> The domestic situation was against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), for its opaque methods in treating the disease. Accordingly, there was a need to divert the attention and this led to China's assertiveness. Unlike democracies where policies transform with the change of leadership, in authoritarian setups, policies are long term and study of the past becomes important in deciding the intentions of an authoritarian leader.

### China's Assertiveness

China's assertiveness commenced ever since the country, in its present form, was established in 1949. Mao Zedong, the founder clearly stated that "Power grows out of the barrel of a Gun".<sup>4</sup> Ever since the CCP took over, it has fought the Korean War, which was followed by the war with India in 1962. Thereafter, it secured the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in 1974 and had also gone to wage another war with Vietnam in 1979. Hong Kong (in 1997) and Macau (in 1999) became a part of China as Special Administrative Regions, thereby leading to China becoming more assertive. Chinese leaders, for the last 12 years, are unwilling to adjust and are assertive in international dealings. Chinese core interests can be summarised as to what the State Councillor Dai Bingguo told Americans at the first China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue in July 2009. He stated that, China's primary interest is to maintain its fundamental system and security, which could be threatened by domestic forces in

combination with covert foreign elements.<sup>5</sup> The second applies to the issue of Taiwan, Tibet, Ussuri River and Spratly as also Paracel Islands. These are the issues which directly impacts external security. The third issue deals with economic stability, which is extremely important for the CCP to control the people of China.<sup>6</sup> It is also pertinent to add that, the CCP is fearful of mass organisations which can rebel against the authorities. The CCP considers the following as internal threats:

- Religious groups which comprise Muslims, Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, Tibetan Buddhist monks, and Falun Gong practitioners.
- Hong Kong democracy advocates.
- 'Me Too' activists, property owners opposing forced evictions, college students helping to organise labour unions.
- Economics professors, artists, and photo-journalists.

It is interesting to note that even when such groups don't seek to challenge the CCP, the mere potential of their action is seen as a threat. Even high ranking CCP members are not safe from the 'purge and prison' as internal political struggle comes to the forefront. The party leadership uses anxiety to shore up loyalty within the party and convince the Chinese society of its need for party protection. Anxiety is, therefore, but a tool. There must always be an enemy to create anxiety. This notion is embedded in an aspect of state security called cultural security.<sup>7</sup> This is the reason why there is a spurt of activity in the international arena post COVID-19. It would be pertinent to view China's areas of assertiveness.

## Taiwan

President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan has recently been sworn in for her second term, thereby, preceding strains in the tripartite relationship between the United States, China, and Taiwan. Tsai has placed confidence in her ability to defend Taiwan's democracy and sovereignty. The issue gets linked to China's handling of Hong Kong where there has been a steady erosion of 'One Country Two Systems' formula. The prospect of Taiwan returning to China is a subject that is usually avoided by Taiwanese politicians. It is pertinent to note that, the United States remains the sole protector of Taiwan. It is important to note that, despite the Taiwan Relations Act not yet recognised as an official security treaty, the Vice President of Taiwan was welcomed by US, which was enough to send a signal to China that the United States does not stand by the 'One China' policy. Taiwan has been upgraded as an ally in consonance with other allies of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, making it possibly the biggest flashpoint in United States-China relations. It is indeed creditable to see as to how President Tsai has well-managed the situation.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to cite a Reuters report of 12 April 2020 in which a Chinese naval Flotilla, led by China's first aircraft carrier Liaoning, passed by the eastern and southern coasts of Taiwan on the said date, to carry out drills. According to the Taiwanese government, there has been an increased presence near the Island in the past few weeks. The aircraft carrier Liaoning – China's first operational aircraft carrier – along with five warships passed through the Miyako Strait, located between Japan's islands of Miyako and Okinawa, which lies to the north-east

of the Island. Taiwan, sensing trouble, scrambled fighter jets in response to Chinese manoeuvres. However, Taiwan later asked China to concentrate on controlling the Coronavirus pandemic, rather than menacing the Island. China's two aircraft carriers occasionally skirt around Taiwanese waters. It is pertinent to note that in late December 2019, shortly before Presidential and parliamentary elections in Taiwan, China's latest aircraft carrier Shandong, sailed through the sensitive Taiwan Strait – a move condemned by Taiwan as attempted intimidation. Incidentally, the United States military has also been active in waters near Taiwan recently.<sup>9</sup>

## South China Sea

China has strained every sinew to establish defence works on the islands in the South China Sea. In early April 2020, China approved the establishment of two districts to administer the disputed Paracel and Spratly islands. In the SCS, the two districts will be governed by the Sansha city for the Paracel Islands and Fiery Cross Reef for the Spratly Islands. Prior to this, Beijing had issued new names for 25 islands/reefs and 55 undersea entities in a bid to 'reaffirm' its sovereignty in the disputed region. This has drawn a furious response from the United States, Australia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The Philippines have also filed a diplomatic protest at the Chinese Embassy in Manila.<sup>10</sup>

The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that a fishing boat was hindered, rammed, and sunk by a Chinese Coast Guard Ship.<sup>11</sup> This event occurred in the first week of May 2020. Both the countries claimed that the ships were in disputed waters but



the Chinese aggressiveness was condemned by the United States and other countries.<sup>12</sup> On 13 July 2020, the United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, formally rejected China's historical rights claims over the South China Sea. Terming the Chinese policy completely unlawful, he added that the international community will not allow Beijing to treat the South China Sea as their maritime empire.<sup>13</sup> However, the United States also displayed its maritime muscle in the South China Sea twice during July 2020, whereby, Carrier Strike Groups of USS Ronald Regan and USS Nimitz as well as their escorting cruisers and destroyers patrolled the South China Sea waters. This is the first time since 2014 that two United States aircraft carriers have operated together. According to the Commander of Nimitz Carrier Strike Group, both the strike groups were operating in the South China Sea, wherever the international law allows, to reinforce United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, the Chinese Embassy in Washington called these actions completely unjustified.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the maritime posturing continues, with numerous fishing boats of China, manned by naval ex-servicemen, dominating the area around Spratly and Paracel islands.<sup>15</sup> Their domination is sustained and sporadically disturbed by the United States.

## Hong Kong

The transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China took place 23 years ago on 1 July 1997. This led to the birth of 'One Country Two Systems' in Hong Kong, as it became a Special Administrative Region controlled by China. Till 30 June 2020 it enjoyed limited

autonomy which has been systematically curtailed by the National Security Law promulgated by the Chinese government. The National Security Law was preceded by protests against the fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill (2019). The aborted bill would have allowed the extradition of offenders to Mainland China, and this led to sporadic demonstrations and protests in Hong Kong. To gradually enhance its control over Hong Kong, the Chinese government passed the National Security Law containing 66 articles. The Law was kept as a secret till it unfolded on 30 June 2020. It criminalises the following acts and brings about major changes:

- Secession: breaking away from the country.
- Subversion: undermining power or authority of the central government.
- Terrorism: using violence or intimidation against people.
- Collusion with foreign or external forces.
- Damaging public transport facilities can be considered as terrorist acts.
- Beijing will establish a new security office in Hong Kong, with its law enforcement personnel.
- The office can send some cases to be tried in Mainland China.
- Hong Kong's chief executive will have the power to appoint judges to hear national security cases. Beijing will have power over how the law should be interpreted. Further, some trials will be heard behind closed doors.

The Law gives Beijing powers to shape life in Hong Kong. Critics say that it will effectively curtail

protests and freedom of speech. Critics have called it the end of Hong Kong and that China has successfully ended the 'two systems' concept by introducing the draconian law.<sup>16</sup>

## Bhutan

Recently in July 2020, China signalled to get the Global Environment Facility of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to stop funding activities in Sakteng sanctuary in Eastern Bhutan, on grounds that it was a disputed territory. Bhutan protested and this was followed by China's official statement that the boundary between China and Bhutan has never been delimited.<sup>17</sup> There has been disputes over Eastern, Central, and Western sectors for a long time.<sup>18</sup> This was another major incident, first being Doklam. They have built-up tremendous infrastructure in the area, thus enabling them to be poised for a possible future transgression.

The fact that the issue has come up in June 2020, when China and India were involved in a standoff in Eastern Ladakh, is a possible signal for India. In typical Chinese style, the basic issues have suddenly been altered. This is what China did to India in 1959, Vietnam with regard to Spratly and Paracel islands, and Japan in connection with the Senkaku islands. The eastern portion allows easier access to the Kameng division of Arunachal Pradesh (which China calls it Southern Tibet). Incidentally, 24 rounds of negotiations have already taken place between Bhutan and China on border negotiations – the last round was held in 2016. As of now, there are no formal diplomatic relations between China and Bhutan. The Chinese Embassy in New Delhi looks after all aspects and the current Ambassador

of China to India Sun Weidong visited Bhutan in November 2019.

## Implications for India

China remains an enigma to the entire world. Currently, it is pursuing its dream of 'Strength and Wealth'. Incidentally, 2021 is the centenary of the founding of the Communist Party of China and it would be pertinent to mention about the Six Wars which were visualised by China in 2013. The "Six Wars China is Sure to Fight in the Next 50 Years", as is mentioned in *Wen Wei Po* (a pro-China newspaper based in Hong Kong), is as under:

- Unification of Taiwan which is expected to be fought between 2020 and 2025.
- Recovery of islands in the South China Sea between 2025 and 2030.
- Reconquest of Southern Tibet (Arunachal Pradesh) would possibly be undertaken from 2035 to 2040.
- Recovery of Senkaku Islands between 2040 and 2045.
- Unification of Outer Mongolia around 2045 to 2050.
- Recovery of territories lost to Russia between 2055 and 2060.<sup>19</sup>

Viewing the issues referred earlier and the current assertive behaviour in Taiwan, South China Sea, Hong Kong and Bhutan, China is moving on a calibrated plan to asymmetrically dominate Asia. In this domination the principal rival is India. China has been following the art of "nibbling and salami-

slicing” India’s territory ever since its occupation of Tibet in 1950. India has been playing the role of a trustworthy country which has respected all agreements and confidence-building measures which mean very little to China. It is time for India to play an asymmetric game and like Nathu La, play cards with ‘guile and cunningness’. There is a reset needed with our relations with China. The following measures are suggested:

- **One China Policy.** India needs to modify its ‘One China’ Policy. There is no need to make any announcements on the subject, but we must gradually bring in issues like changing the Tibetan culture, ill-treatment of Muslims in Xingjian, problems of Inner Mongolia, and other aspects related to Taiwan and Hong Kong.
- **Taiwan.** India must gradually enhance its diplomatic activity, military exercises as well as trade and technical cooperation with Taiwan. We must also have an intelligence-sharing agreement with Taiwan. We should also exploit the technical brain of Taiwan as also exploit the ‘Manufacturing Hub’ concept of Taiwan.
- **South China Sea.** This is an area where we must continue our oil exploration in both exploration Blocks despite Chinese interference – we have two Blocks where drilling is on with cooperation from Russia and Vietnam. We must strengthen our relations with Vietnam and have berthing rights at Cam Ranh Bay where our naval ships and fighter aircrafts can regularly visit. Vietnam must be given the BrahMos missile which would be a game changer, if mounted on Vietnamese warships or located in the islands occupied by Vietnam in the South China Sea. The storage of the missiles could be at Cam Ranh Bay which is about 740 kilometre (km) from the Spratly Islands. The Subsonic Cruise Missile Nirbhaya which has a range of about 1,000 km could be considered for the same purpose.
- **Hong Kong.** About 38,000 Indians are living in the region. A special relationship existed by virtue of which Indians did not need a visa for 14 days visit to the country. From 2017 onwards, a pre-registration is needed for entry up to 14 days. Hence, India needs to diplomatically mention this aspect, in order to find a substitute for this, in the international fora.
- **Quad.** India must leave no stone unturned to make the Quad a functional alliance at a military level between the United States, Japan, and Australia. Our exchanges must be in the military domain and inter-operability exercises must be in the Indian Ocean, East China Sea, and the South China Sea.
- **Protests over Shaksgam Valley and building of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).** India must protest over the occupation of Chinese in the Shaksgam Valley and building of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan.
- **Dalai Lama.** The Dalai Lama needs to be given his due respect and the Tibetan population be gainfully used to gather human intelligence on Tibet.
- **Nibble at Chinese territory in the India-China Border.** The Chinese have been adept



at the art of cartographic aggression, making impromptu claims and transgressions. China is extremely sensitive to territory and respects strength. India must nibble, in the short-term, at a few points to keep the Chinese on their toes. We have a huge border area and it is best left to the Armed Forces to decide the areas which would be suitable for this purpose. We have the capability and China would respect us for our courage and fortitude. It would be prudent to get the Mountain Strike Corps fully organised for operations.

### Way Ahead

There are numerous write-ups, discussions, and speeches post events that occurred on the intervening night of 15/16 June 2020, which saw a clash at Galwan Valley between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), resulting in casualties to both sides. These casualties were after 45 years and all Indians, as well as other sensible strategic thinkers, feel that there is a need to reset relations with China. To do that, we need to build our Comprehensive National Power.

Our Armed Forces need to be urgently modernised to stand up to China on the land borders as also on the Maritime Front and Air Power. China wishes to dominate Asia and militarily India is possibly the sole challenger. We need to accept the challenge and build our Armed Forces to be strong, right from the Strait of Hormuz to the South China Sea. While we are strengthening our land borders and would take actions to put our adversaries on their toes, there is a need to strengthen Andaman islands, and have a base at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, where our

forces could be effective and look after our critical assets in the South China Sea. Lastly, we must know how to undertake operations as a dominant power in the Asian continent with humility and values. We have to do all this as soon as possible to ensure that our strategic capabilities are toned to beat our adversaries.

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## ... Hong Kong and Bhutan: Its Implications for India

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