

Decoding China's Contentious Territorial Claims in the Far East

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by [Dr Manoj Kumar Panigrahi](#) Contributors ⌚ 7 mins 4 August 2022



2 August 2022 was a special day for flight trackers enthusiasts worldwide. SPAR19 flight became the most tracked flight in the world. More than 24 lakh people have been tracking it since it took off from Kuala Lumpur at 1542h local time, heading to Taipei. It was not just another flight; it had Speaker of the US House of Representative Nancy Pelosi in it along with her delegation. After putting much suspense on the backbench and ignoring a constant warning by China to “pay the price”, Pelosi landed in Taipei, Taiwan, on 2 August 2022. Pelosi had put her thoughts in an opinion piece with the Washington Post on the reason for travelling to Taiwan. She reiterated the USA’s commitment to democracy and the freedom of all to be respected and called Taiwan “an island of resilience”.

In response to Pelosi’s visit, Beijing is furious, as always with earlier visits of foreign leaders and delegations to Taiwan. Economically it announced a ban of over 2066 products by over 100 Taiwanese exporters. Such economic response is not new to China’s behaviour toward those countries and organisations which do not follow its instructions. In March 2021, Australian wine exporters saw a tariff of 116-218% on their products to China, which effectively shut the doors to their most prominent market, scrambling to find other markets.

China's immediate actionable military response was to announce the launch of live fire drills around Taiwan from 1200h August 4 to 1200 on August 7 (Beijing Time). In addition, there was an incursion of 21 fighter planes by the People's Liberation Army Airforce (PLAAF), which crossed Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). Such flights have been based on making the Taiwanese defence "tired" and "test the response" of the ROC Airforce. As per the data collected from the Ministry of National Defense, Republic of China (ROC), and other reports, there has been a rising number of ADIZ incursions by the PLAAF; from August 2015 to December 2017, it was 26, the year 2018 it was 638, for 2019 it was 675, 380 for the year 2020, for 2021 it was 969, and it was 370 until May 6, 2022.

Another front which has been seeing a massive response from China towards Taiwan is the cyberattacks, and to a more significant extent is the "cognitive warfare". A Chinese theorist has described cognitive warfare as using public opinion, psychological, and legal means to achieve victory. The Chinese have used cognitive warfare over the years by meddling in the politics not only of Taiwan but also in major world economies. With Pelosi's visit, the southern city of Taiwan, Kaohsiung's Xinzuoing Railway Station, saw a hacked message on the display of the notice board. The message read as:

The sly visit of the old witch (Nancy Pelosi) to Taiwan is a serious provocation against the sovereignty of the motherland (China)".

It also affected the popular convenience store 7-11 in Taiwan with hacked messages. Such economic, military, and cognitive actions reflect the growing actionable measures that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its sympathisers are capable of.

Several analysts call the current crisis the "Fourth Cross-strait crisis," which challenges the region's status quo. It is where the PRC promised not to attack Taiwan militarily and Taiwan, in return, not to declare itself as a self-independent nation. The first crisis was in 1954-55, the second was in 1958, and the third crisis was in 1995-1996. The current military drill announced by the PRC overlaps the Taiwanese-controlled water and air territories. This move can be seen as a message by the PRC that it is capable of being able to conduct an air and water blockade around Taiwan at its own will. It also reflects that PRC will not be shying away from denying any movement by a third country to protect or assist Taiwan in case the military conflict flares.

Before Nancy Pelosi's visit, Newt Gingrich visited Taipei in 1997 as the USA House of Representatives speaker. His visit came right through the third missile crisis and when Lee Teng-hui, as President, led Taiwan.

China has claimed the whole of Taiwan to be its territory since the ancient ages, but in contrast, the only time it could control part of it was during the Qing Empire in the 17th century. It was mostly considered a "savage land", and mainlanders were banned from moving to Taiwan. Moreover, from 1895 it was under Japanese control until the Japanese

surrendered in 1945 after their defeat in World War II. The Chinese civil war led Chiang Kai-shek's party Kuomintang's ROC, to move to Taiwan in the hope of going back to the mainland one day and reclaiming its lost power though it never materialised and the

Living among multiple threats since the ROC government led by Chiang Kai-shek moved to Taiwan, the local Taiwanese are leading a typical day for them. Though being elated by Pelosi's visit, they have gotten used to such theatrics from China as life should "move on" motto. The domestic news cycled around much other news besides Pelosi's visit, such as plagiarism issues in a local mayoral election.

As per the survey, 25.6% of Taiwanese citizens hope to maintain the status quo and move towards independence, in contrast to 28.6% who believe in maintaining the status quo independently. The idea of maintaining the status quo is preferred mainly by the Taiwanese because it is considered defacto independence without declaring it.

What can India learn from this?

The current situation along the cross-strait is something one needs to be closely observed. First, China's capabilities to launch disinformation warfare against its advisory. This was seen during the Doklam, Galwan, and other brief skirmishes with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). By coming out with videos, reports, and leading local newspapers, the Chinese tried to explain how it was India's fault for such disturbance at the border. The way to address such disinformation is to come out with time-bound factual reports by the government and set up a special department to identify and correct such misleading reports in public.

Second, the "different perception" of the border (Line of Actual Control) between the two sides must be resolved. However, in the current situation, it does not look like it is moving towards any such issue-solving situation. India should be aware of the "salami slicing" tactic used by China to occupy a piece of land slowly one by one. Conducting small-scale moves and multiplying a more significant conflict into smaller ones, and keeping it active through protracted negotiations is what China has been doing with India. Such moves raise the stake for India in multiple ways. India being a democracy, the government needs to show the results to its public of being a capable negotiator without giving away its territory. Another it also raises the cost of deploying soldiers and other heavy military equipment at a higher altitude and keeping them war ready.

The third is that strengthening India's Critical Infrastructure (CI) has to be one of the goals of reducing dependency on any foreign power. Sectors such as power, railways, dams etc., need to be carefully vetted on who are its foreign investors and their Indian partners. The blackout in Mumbai after the Galwan clash with China is a striking example of India's CI's vulnerability.

There have also been multiple claims and comparisons between Russia's Ukraine invasion with the cross-strait issues between China and Taiwan. It is not fair to compare the two conflicts as both have different variables and history to what led and might lead to a large-

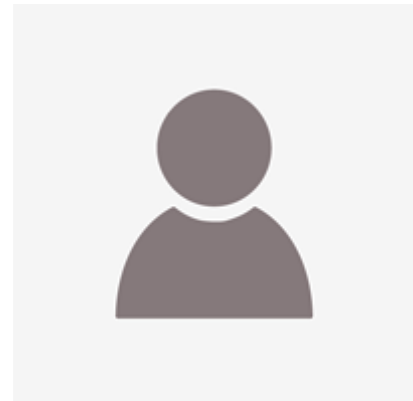
scale war. By being prepared militarily, economically, and informed correctly, one can up the ante on the challenges emerging from China on all fronts.

As a democratic nation, India might take a decision late. Still, it can learn from how other countries and regions respond to China's behaviour and indeed, it will give enough time to analyse and learn how things can look if it faces a full-scale war.

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