

Taiwan: Political Rivals' Trips to China & US Highlight Cross-Strait Conundrum

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Geopolitically, one of the most interesting things to observe earlier this month was the developments across the Taiwan Straits. The centrality of Beijing in Taiwanese domestic politics has been further cemented by the following developments: Opposition leader Ma Jing-yeou's visit to China (27 March to 7 April) and President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with the United States, House of Representative Speaker, Kevin McCarthy (5 April 2023). Both these developments are bold and controversial in their own regard. They also underscore the importance of the United States (US) in directing China-Taiwan relations.

During Ma's visit to China, the sentiments expressed were of working towards peace and asserting that people across the Strait are 'Chinese' and that it is the responsibility of both Taiwan and China to avoid war. On the other hand, during Tsai's meeting with McCarthy, both sides stated that the US is committed to supporting Taiwan as Tsai asserted that she was committed to maintaining the status quo.

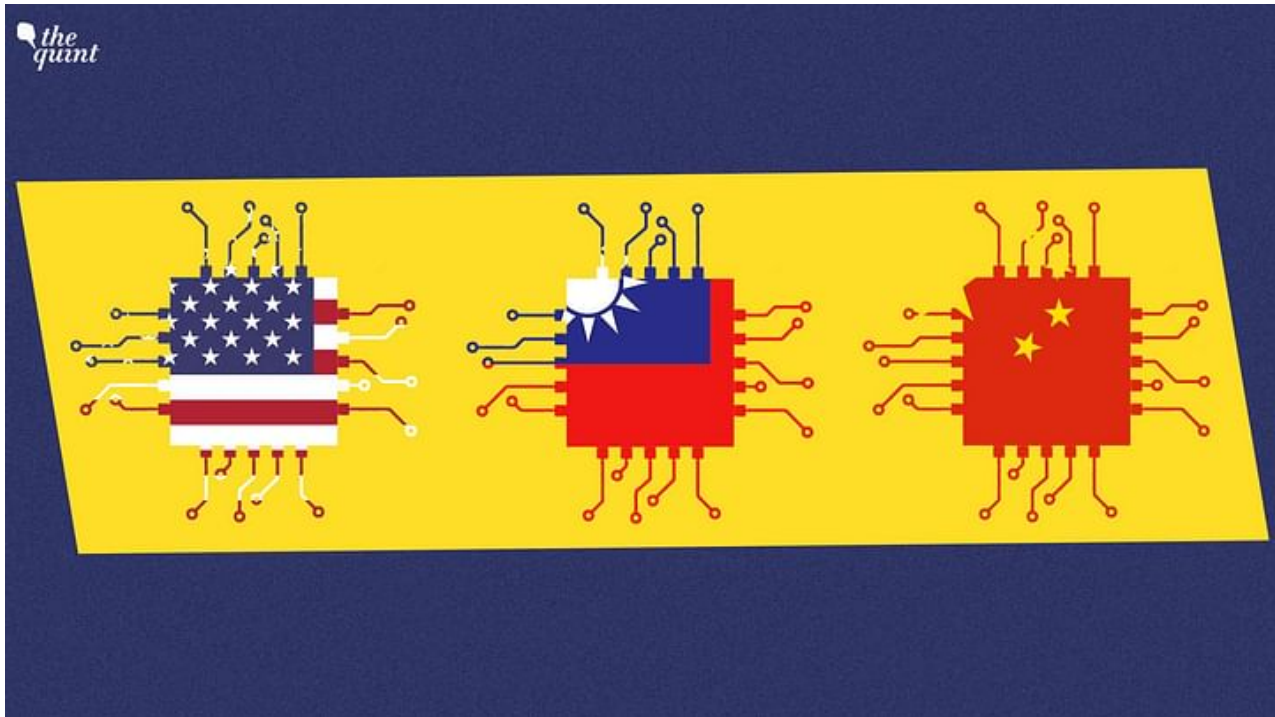
But the Chinese reactions have been on expected lines. Beijing has made statements that the meeting between Tsai and McCarthy violate the One China Principle. In response, the Chinese military has started drills across the Taiwan Straits.

The Chinese foreign ministry issued a statement saying, "providing a podium for Taiwan separatists to carry out official exchanges between US and Taiwan and enhance ties between the US and Taiwan". Similar statements were issued by Beijing after the visit of

McCarthy's predecessor, that is, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan in August 2022.

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China has been consistent in its threat of the use of force if Taiwan even tries to push for independence. What is interesting, however, is that under Tsai, Taiwan has consistently challenged the Chinese position and has not shied away from pushing the envelope. Tsai, who belongs to the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has been very successful in using every opportunity to assert the Taiwanese stand. The price of this assertion is that Taiwan today is highly insecure about its diplomatic future. In the last decade, the number of countries that diplomatically recognize it has been reduced to just 13. Beijing has used its financial clout and leverage to woo more countries away from Taiwan.

On the other hand, Ma, who belongs to the pro-reunification, the Kuomintang (KMT), has taken a more friendly and peaceful tone. The stand is that both the parties across the Straits need to work together to maintain peace which is the ultimate need for the people across the Straits. Thus, he claims that under the KMT, the overall situation will be more peaceful and conducive for the economy as well as the general well-being of the people. A less aggressive Beijing will be beneficial for Taiwan and peace will lead to faster growth.

There is no doubt that under Tsai, the situation has been constantly tense, and the Kuomintang is trying to ‘sell’ the alternative. The primary question, however, is what the 23 million people of Taiwan want and expect from their government.

Taiwan has moved towards a functioning and vibrant democracy. The media is free and so is civil society. It has in the process built a very different identity vis-à-vis China. On the contrary, the mainland has been governed by an authoritarian Leninist party, the Communist Party of China (CPC). The media and civil society must function within the limits dictated by the government. China, even after 70 years, still considers Taiwan to be its renegade province which needs to be reunited for the ultimate glory of the mainland.

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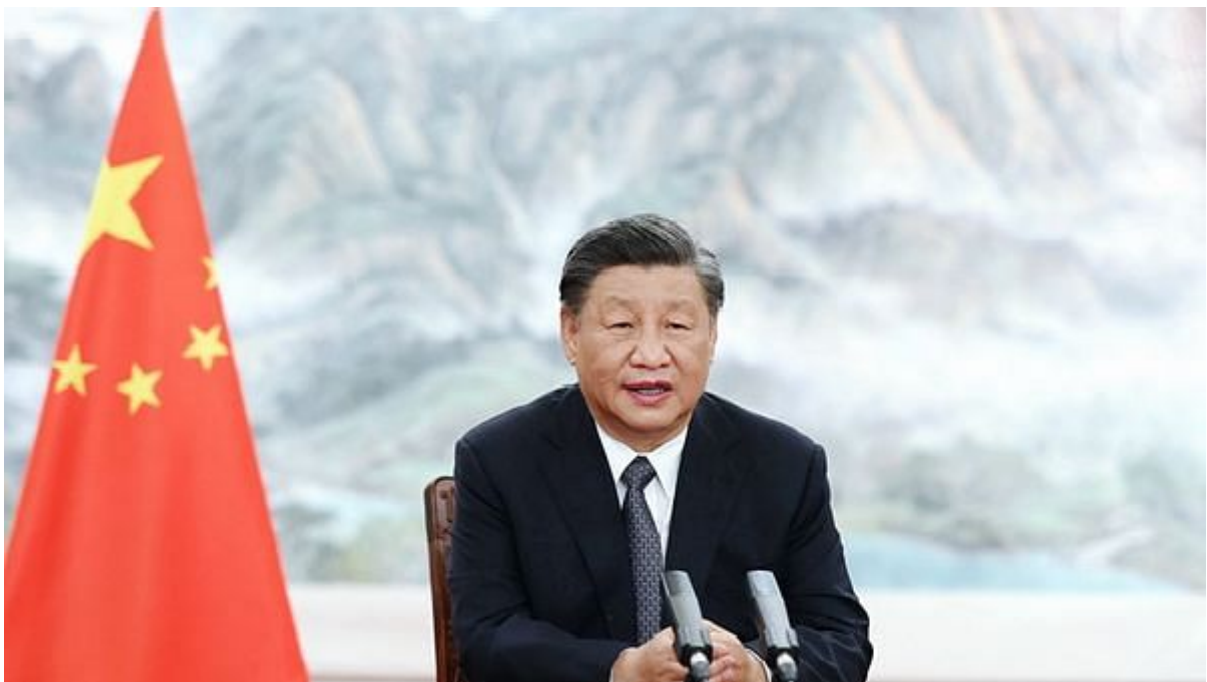
Taiwan under Tsai is becoming more assertive towards independence and is also keen to highlight the differences with respect to the mainland. On the other hand, China under Xi Jinping is becoming more authoritarian and the space for freedom and critical thinking is constantly shrinking. The increasing gap between the governance styles of Taiwan and China is stark.

The contrast is glaringly striking today. And the narratives being built by the DPP under Tsai and the KMT under Ma cannot be poles apart. It will be interesting to see how the people of Taiwan decide their future in the upcoming election scheduled for early 2024. The election results will be very critical to indicate whether the Taiwanese people are ready to assert their 'Taiwanisation' (those people in Taiwan do not associate themselves as Chinese but as Taiwanese). Or will they look for an alternative where they do not have to be constantly on high alert with the possibility of a Chinese attack turning into reality anytime? It will also be a test of how far the United States is ready to go to safeguard a vibrant democracy in Asia.

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