

Cross-Strait Status: Foreseeing Challenges for the U.S. Foreign Policy

isdpeu.org/cross-strait-status-foreseeing-the-challenges-for-u-s-foreign-policy

March 7, 2023



Image Credit: Ivan Marc Shutterstock.com

On February 2, 2023, the U.S. got access to the four additional bases requested in the Philippines by fully implementing the signed Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014. Though it took time, this agreement gives American forces more extensive access to the region. The agreement states that the U.S. forces will be able to store defense equipment and supplies on those bases. The four bases are in addition to the five previously agreed on, which allows the U.S. military to rotate its forces on and around the island. Interestingly, the current Philippines acting defense secretary Carlito Galvez termed the requested bases as “EDCA sites” instead of “bases” during the joint press briefing with U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III.

The location of these four new “EDCA sites” is not public yet. There is speculation that one will be located in the northern part of Luzon island, 402.3km from Taiwan in the north. Finding itself in northern Luzon will give the U.S. forces an additional location to get easier access to the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea (SCS). By using the “Freedom of Navigation (FON)” understanding, the U.S. will be able to conduct more such passage of its warships and military flights as the logistical aspects or the turnaround of its military assets in the region will be much more straightforward given the proximity of its bases in the Philippines.

Parallel to its enhanced agreement with the Philippines, the U.S. military has also conducted changes in its deployment at its long-standing base on Okinawa islands of Japan. At the 2-plus-2 defense talks between the Japanese and the U.S. governments in

January 2023, it was agreed by the two sides for the deployment of a US Marine littoral regiment consisting of 1,800-2,000 personnel. This came soon after Japan decided to increase its defense expenditure from 1 percent to 2 percent of its Gross National Product (GNP) in December 2022. Japan has also started to boost its military bases on Okinawa and Kyushu.

The rationale behind the recent changes and new bases gained by the U.S. in and around the Taiwan Strait are crucial to maintaining the necessary status quo in cross-strait relations. Taiwan has been a major bone of contention in U.S.-China relations and having a greater presence in the region is pertinent for U.S. foreign policy. Vital allies, in this case Japan, can assist and be prepared to face a growing assertive China.

Such arrangements by the U.S. and its regional allies are being made to face an increasingly aggressive China in military terms. Cross-strait tensions between China and Taiwan have been determined as a possible “flashpoint” in the region by several international relations analysts. In its May 2021 issue, *The Economist* even termed Taiwan “The most dangerous place on Earth” on its cover page.

U.S. in the Cross-Straits Conundrum

In August 2022, the visit by Nancy Pelosi, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, to Taiwan amplified the existing tensions between the U.S. and China. Pelosi’s visit was followed by a Chinese barrage of missiles and other military maneuvers around Taiwan. The missile tests were much closer than the earlier ones conducted in the 1995-1996. Some of the missiles fired by China passed over Taiwan’s air space and also landed in Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as claimed by Japanese officials. Such military action around Taiwan almost “blocked” Taiwan’s seaports which is crucial to its export-oriented economy and trade. It was even called the “Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis” by a few analysts.

Currently, talks are underway regarding a possible Taiwan visit by Kevin McCarthy, Pelosi’s successor. This will further strain bilateral relations between the two world powers. Taipei will surely welcome this move as it suits its interests in being more visible to the world and gaining supporters against the Chinese threats. Such continuous threats from China towards Taiwan only have increased with Xi Jinping in power. Contrary to bringing any change on the ground, they have only helped Taiwan in building its narrative against China.

Though the U.S. shifted its stance towards China, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) led Taiwan in 1979, it created some enabling factors to continue its relationship with Taiwan. Acts like the Taiwan Relations Act form the basis of the U.S.’ current position of opposing any unilateral change to the status quo between Taiwan and China. This is necessary as both the U.S. and Taiwan need each other in order to check an assertive China.

U.S. forces have continuously supported Taiwan, providing military hardware and training to their Taiwanese counterparts irrespective of the diplomatic non-recognition. And have also helped Taiwan to train their troops under its International Military Education & Training (IMET) program. Such support is crucial to the Taiwanese military as it must maintain a joint working combat experience in case of a military conflict.

Challenges Ahead

The U.S. faces multiple challenges in the cross-straits. First, as stated by few retired U.S. marine officers, the change in deployment by the U.S. is doomed to fail in defending Taiwan. Three retired colonels have described it as “a flawed operational concept” causing “serious concerns”. This is because as per the proposed plans, the heavy-armor units of Marines are being rotated out from the base.

Second is the rise in the usage of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) by China’s military near Japan’s territorial claims. Such UAVs have also been used against the Taiwanese Air Force. The UAV used by the Chinese in this incident is the WZ-7, one of the most advanced drones in China’s military. UAVs have started to play a more prominent role as it helps China to reduce its “human cost” in case of an accident or a military conflict. Such UAVs are used to collect Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), which can stay in the air longer than fighter jets.

Third is the people’s perception. As per a Pew Research Centre Survey, about 82 percent of Americans surveyed had an unfavorable view of China in 2022. The Pew Survey conducted post-COVID-19 pandemic found that China lost favor in most countries worldwide. Add to this the “spy balloon” incident, which is worthy of mention in the context of the current challenges that U.S. foreign policy faces. The incident ballooned the already strained trust deficit between the U.S. and China.

Fourth is the domestic challenge within Taiwan. The U.S. needs to be watchful of the upcoming presidential election in Taiwan, where the question of Taiwan’s status will be a hot issue in campaign discussions. Though briefly, William Lai from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), upon assuming chairmanship of the party, mentioned that “Taiwan is already a sovereign and independent nation and therefore has no need to declare its independence”. Lai is a potential presidential candidate for the 2024 election. Such a statement by a presidential candidate caught the U.S. by surprise. And it puts the U.S. on a thin ice with regard to its foreign policy outlook.

Military bases around Taiwan will definitely help the U.S. in showing its strength and checking China, but the U.S. also needs to watch out for multiple new and unfolding challenges. The rise of disinformation will be another cause of worry for the U.S. and its allies. A case in point was when a Twitter Japan Yahoo account claimed that Pelosi’s airplane had been shot down in the Taiwan Strait. The account was later closed and thankfully it was disinformation that was being spread around. Time-bound fact-checking on such news will be crucial in avoiding any miscalculation.

A strategy encompassing military means such as setting up bases in the proximity of Taiwan along with a pin-pointed approach to the above unfolding challenges is the need of the hour for the U.S.

ISDP Voices

ISDP Voices is a blog for *informed* commentary and opinion.

With a particular focus on Asia, it joins the debate on topical issues of politics, security, and development in the region.

The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of ISDP or its sponsors.

If you'd like to contribute to the blog, please contact Jagannath Panda, Editor, at jpanda@isdp.eu.

Archive

2023

- [March](#)
- [February](#)
- [January](#)

2022

2021

2020

2019

2018

2017

2016

Sign up for updates

Keep up to date with the latest research and posts from the blog with our newsletter.

[Sign up](#)

Most Popular
