

China's aggression and Taiwan's 2024 elections – Why they matter for India

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Elections are seen as the hallmark of democracy. However, the advent of technology has ensured the possibilities of elections being rigged not just in favour of domestic parties, but also in favour of international players that may want a particular regime in place which is friendly to the actor. Amidst the current tussle for supremacy in the international political system, there are at least two important Asian countries that go to elections next year, both of which have at least two similarities. The two countries — India and Taiwan — are important Asian democracies and have found themselves often at the receiving end of aggression from China.

In its latest acts of aggression, the Chinese navy staged “actual combat training” around Taiwan. China began the exercises after Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen returned to Taipei following a meeting in Los Angeles with US House of Representatives Speaker Kevin McCarthy. This is not the first time that China has tried to intimidate Taiwan with its military drills. Even last year, after US speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit, China engaged in similar hostile tactics, because of which there were fears of the fourth Taiwan Straits crisis actually taking place. What is interesting is that there are eerie similarities between situations around the Third Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1995-96 and between 2022-23, and much that India should closely watch.

The Third Taiwan Straits crisis of 1996 was a series of missile tests conducted by China around the self-ruled island. The first set of missiles that China fired in mid-to late 1995 were to send a message to then-Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui who was seen by China as moving his foreign policy away from the one-China policy. China fired the second set of missiles in early 1996 in order to intimidate the Taiwanese electorate in the run-up to the presidential elections in 1996. Since Tsai Ing-wen has taken over leadership in 2016, she has been very vocal about an independent Taiwan. Last year's visit by Pelosi sent China into frenzy as it saw Taiwan vying for even more independence, carrying out foreign policy decisions on its own.

China got angered back in 1996 when President Lee Teng Hui accepted an invitation from Cornell University, his alma mater, to speak on Taiwan's democratisation experience. The US granted him a visa. Seeking to diplomatically isolate Taiwan, China opposes such visits by Taiwanese leaders. Any inclination that Taiwan is capable as a country to take independent decisions, be it President Lee's visit to Cornell or Taiwan under President Tsai agreeing to Pelosi's visit angers China.

At the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Xi Jinping talked about “local wars”. The term ‘local’ definitely means Asian, which could have implications for India, or for Taiwan or for both. China’s warfare strategies include much more than military warfare. If elections could be tweaked in target countries to ensure governments which have friendly policies towards China, then it augurs well for Beijing.

Of late, some diplomatic allies have severed off ties with Taiwan. Next year’s presidential elections in Taiwan will be a tough one given that China has amplified aggression around the island to showcase the weakness of the current government. Beijing has started massive disinformation campaigns against President Tsai trying to wean away the electorate from supporting her. China also uses massive disinformation campaigns against India and its model of democracy and uses narratives of the current government being divisionary for the Indian society and detrimental in general for the country’s future. China has also unleashed military aggression against India, not just in Galwan in 2020 but also in Tawang in December last year, to not just gain Indian territory but also to show weakness of the existing government to an electorate that goes to elections in 2024.

Given that China’s chequebook diplomacy has weaned away Honduras recently from Taiwan, it is clear that Beijing wants to influence next year’s elections in Taiwan, showing the current government to be weak, and that Taiwan’s calls for independence, which have been amplified by President Tsai are all for naught. Honduras is the ninth diplomatic ally that Taipei has lost to Beijing since pro-independence president Tsai took office in May 2016. This will surely cause a credibility issue for the current Taiwanese government. As far as India is concerned, the probe into the cyberattacks on servers of AIIMS last year got tracked to China. Delays in access to public health facilities surely create credibility issues for any government. More such tactics to create doubts in the credibility of the government can be expected as elections near.

Given the fact that Xi mentioned ‘local wars’ in his 20th Party Congress speech and that it sees itself as a ‘democracy that works’, leverage over Taiwan and over India for different sets of political reasons mean well for China. As such, India needs to watch the Taiwan Straits carefully since there is much to understand in the ways in which China will try to tweak democratic elections in target countries in its favour.

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