

# Synopsis

## **Choppy Seas Around Taiwan: China's Belligerent Behaviour & its Implications on the World**

Webinar Summary Report

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Acknowledgements:

The webinar CASA WEBINAR SERIES: ***Choppy Seas Around Taiwan: China's Belligerent Behaviour & its Implications on the World*** was held on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2022 at 5pm IST. It was organized by the Current and Strategic Affairs Forum (CASA). We would like to thank our moderator and panellists for their comprehensive analysis and for their candidly expressed views:

Panellists:

Dr Yujen Kuo, Professor, Institute of China and Asia-Pacific Studies, National Sun Yat-Sen University, Taiwan.

Lt Gen (Dr) Prakash Menon, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd),  
Director Strategic Studies, Takshashila Institution.

Vice Admiral Anil Chopra, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), Former C-in-C Western and Eastern Naval Commands.

Moderator: Lt Gen P R Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)  
Former DG Artillery and Professor of Practice, IIT Madras.

We would like to thank the many other distinguished attendees including many senior veterans, business leaders, professors, think-tank researchers, contributors, analysts and others who took out time to participate as well as to share their inputs, relevant Q&A and comments during the course of the webinar. We would like to thank Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC (Retd), former DG Ordnance Services and the Founder of CASA and Mr Mahadevan Shankar, Member of the CASA Core Committee and the IT Team for coordinating logistics, back end coordination and for live streaming the webinar on the CASA YouTube channel.

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### **Introduction**

Lt Gen General Gautam Moorthy welcomed everyone to the 32nd CASA webinar on behalf of CASA and stated that in recent days the world had watched with bated breath as the US and China faced off with each other over the US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei on 02 Aug 2022. Both Biden and Xi Jinping were projecting themselves as strong

leaders to their domestic audiences and neither was willing to climb down. Even as the waters around remained unsettled due to the aggressive moves by the PLA Navy and Air Force, we need to understand the implications on the world of China's belligerent actions. General Moorthy then went on to give a brief introduction of each of the panellists and then handed over to General Shankar to conduct the webinar.

General Shankar then made a few opening remarks to set the backdrop for the panellists and included the following points:

- Firstly, we are currently living through very interesting times. We have survived nearly three years of the pandemic and the still ongoing Russia-Ukraine war in Europe that is into its sixth month.
- Climate change is searing through the world with most parts of the globe experiencing record high temperatures, the drying of once mighty rivers, massive forest fires, rapid melt down of glaciers, etc.
- Amidst all of the above we also now have a crisis involving the US, China and Taiwan because the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, chose to visit Taiwan along with her delegation.
- Though it may seem that only the US, China and Taiwan are engaged in this tense stand-off, all the countries in the region and some further away, run the risk of being sucked into the maelstrom.
- For India, tensions around Taiwan also meant heightened activity along the LAC with Tibet by the Chinese PLA forces deployed in the TAR, breaching of the 10 km no-fly zone along the LAC by the PLA-AF warplanes, firing of

long range missiles and rocket artillery in rear areas not far from the LAC and near zero achievement at the 16<sup>th</sup> Corps Cdrs Conference between the PLA and the Indian Army in Eastern Ladakh. A Chinese missile tracking ship Yuan Wang-5, docked at the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota on 16<sup>th</sup> Aug despite India's expressed security concerns.

- Of late, in all diplomatic statements India has quietly dropped any mention of the 'One China' expression.

The General concluded his opening remarks by stating that in his opinion he felt that whatever happens in the Taiwan Straits or the South China Seas, it has always had a ripple effect on India along the unsettled LAC with Tibet from Ladakh in the West to Arunachal Pradesh in the East. He then set the parameters for the panellists to make their presentations before inviting the first speaker, Professor Yujen Kuo to take the floor.

## **Prof (Dr) Yujen Kuo**

Prof Kuo used a detailed Power Point presentation containing about 30 well-made slides to explain what Taiwan is experiencing. Each slide contained a lot of information that would not normally be available to the average Indian who could be following the developments from Taiwan. His talk covered the following six broad areas:

- A backdrop on US-China relations leading to Pelosi's visit.
- China's simulated invasion.
- The tale behind the two missing missiles.

- Likelihood of a US-China understanding involving the visit.
- China's naval expansion.
- Taiwan's strategy.

He made the point that the American president came under a lot of pressure from his European allies for an early end to the war in Ukraine preferably before the onset of winter and sought US help in mitigating the loss of Russian energy supplies, food items and to control galloping inflation that has plagued all the nations of Western Europe. The Prof also cited the following:

- From early June this year to mid-July China's Vice President, Wang Qishan was in touch with the ex-US President Barak Obama since both knew each other since 2011-2012. He suspected that it was an attempt to get the US to defer the visit of Nancy Pelosi.
- Though Nancy Pelosi was announced to be visiting Asia, the focus was on Taiwan alone. Apart from official meetings with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-Wen and other Taiwanese officials, Pelosi also held meetings with representatives from Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, an important point that was missed by the media.

The Chinese demonstrated a three- stage plan for invading Taiwan: firing of missiles, air and sea manoeuvres followed by amphibious operations. The scale, impact and the frequency of China's military activities around Taiwan was explained by the Prof in detail using detailed slides showing maps and charts. The tracks of Chinese ship and drone movements around Taiwan was explained.

The Prof made a very interesting observation regarding the 16 missiles that China had claimed to have fired starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> of August into the waters off the Taiwan and Japan including over the Island. The Taiwanese radars detected 11 and the Japanese radars detected 9 of these missiles. He sought to explain the discrepancy by saying that the Chinese had for the first time fired their DF-17 hypersonic missile with the hypersonic glide vehicle that has unpredictable trajectory and the ability to escape detection by conventional radars due to their high velocities.

Prof Kuo listed the possible purposes of the Chinese actions as:

- Simulation of their three-stage invasion plans.
- Invalidate the till now followed 'Median-Line' of the Taiwan Straits and the declared Taiwanese ADIZ of 37 nautical miles.
- Simulate the blockade of food and energy supplies from Taiwan.
- Test the efficiency of Taiwan's land, sea and air forces.
- Test the quantum and timing of the responses from the US & Japan, specially from Okinawa.
- Gauge the reaction of the international community to China's attempts to invade Taiwan.

The Prof further opined that the actions so far indicated to him that there existed a tacit understanding between the US and China over recent developments. He inferred this while displaying the track of the USS Ronald Regan Carrier Strike Group that stayed well away from Taiwan in the Philippine Sea between 30 July and 09 Aug 2022. This allowed the Chinese

warships to come within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan's coast as also to breach the declared 37 nautical mile ADIZ.

The Prof concluded his talk by briefly discussing Taiwan's counter strategy to meet China's threats of invasion. He alluded to further strengthening of Taiwan's semi-conductor fabrication industry with its largest chip making company TSMC planning to add 18 more factories in the next 4 years and achieving the ability to manufacture even smaller chips from 4 nano to 2 nano sizes. Taiwan hopes to convert itself to a 'missile Island' by deploying five different types of missiles in significant numbers.

Referring to the time plans often announced by China, the Prof felt that the period from 2024 to 2027 would be the most challenging one for Taiwan. This is the window of opportunity he felt that Xi Jinping had, to justify the grant of an unprecedented likely third term to him as President/ General Secretary/ Chairman CMC, at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CCP scheduled for end Oct-early Nov 2022. He could even resort to the use of force to reunite Taiwan with the PRC. Though China could become the world's largest economy by 2028-30, it would be constrained by an aging and declining population with nearly 20% being over the age of 60, thereby leading to a shortage of labour. Both Taiwan and the US would have new presidents in 2024.

The moderator thanked Prof Kuo and invited the next speaker, General Prakash Menon to take the floor.

### **Lt Gen Prakash Menon**

The General began by thanking the CASA Forum for giving him the opportunity to once again participate in a webinar

involving China and alongside such eminent panellists. He dwelt on the following points:

- The recent Chinese actions involving Taiwan ought to be seen in the context of China's own realisation of its increased power and its perception of opposition from the US and its allies to prevent it from reaching its deserved global status.
- China had to react to Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as it had left itself no elbow room by its belligerent rhetoric in the days preceding the widely announced visit.
- China sees its actions both before and after the visit as its fundamental right in its pursuit of unifying China.
- China had moved from its earlier position of peaceful reunification with Taiwan to stating that, if necessary, it would use force against the renegade province.
- The flip side to the above is that learning from the Russian experience in Ukraine, China realises that the big guy cannot always walk over the small guy, especially if the small guy has wide support from the international community.
- Taking physical control over territory is one thing; taking control over the people there is an entirely different matter.
- The defiance displayed by Taiwan to the recent Chinese actions as well the reactions from the US and others has made it realise that it must proceed towards reunification in smaller steps, steps that would not immediately invite retaliation from either Taiwan or the US.
- China's actions with regard to Taiwan must also be seen in the light of its internal domestic political situation and not from the geopolitical aspect alone.



- Drawing new lines, pushing the envelope, splitting the opposition, etc would be the way China would pursue its dream of reunifying Taiwan while also keeping the issue alive as long as it is unable to do so.
- China keeps its threat of invasion as a threat in being, though the Gen agreed with Prof Kuo that China is running out of time.
- China would only risk a complete take over of Taiwan when it is sure that the US and its allies are sufficiently distracted away from Taiwan- the opportunity could be man- made or by provenance.

The Gen concluded his presentation by stating that unless China was assured that the rest of the world was distracted elsewhere, it would continue with its present policy of intimidation, threats and bluster without actually invading Taiwan.

Thanking Gen Menon for an insightful talk, Gen Shankar next invited Vice Admiral Anil Chopra to give his presentation.

### **Vice Admiral Anil Chopra**

During his presentation the Vice Admiral touched upon the following:

- Firstly, he agreed with the previous speakers that though the seas around Taiwan were indeed choppy at this time, there was no chance of the PRC invading Taiwan.
- In his view, China had thrown down the gauntlet to the US led Western powers much earlier when Xi and Putin had held a summit in Beijing on 04 Feb 2022 and de-facto created an Eurasian alliance under the garb of taking part

in the opening ceremony of the 24<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympic Games.

- The Admiral saw the visit of Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan as a stratagem that has played out well for the US and its allies and was surprised how the Chinese fell into the trap venting violent rhetoric and aggressive behaviour by their navy and air force in the seas and skies around Taiwan, knowing fully well that they are not in any position to invade Taiwan just yet.
- The Admiral further believed that the Chinese have given out a series of dates by which to attain certain goals without first assessing their own strengths and capabilities to meet those targets. Those targets have since been adversely impacted by events such as the pandemic induced lock-downs, economic slow-downs, tensions in the Indo-Pacific and the South Pacific that they could not foresee coming.
- It must be understood by all that the primary concern of the ruling elites in China is to stay in power. To that end, the soon to be held Party Congress, the G-20 summit in Indonesia are also the reasons for China's belligerence around the seas off Taiwan.
- The Admiral alluded to the difficulties and complexities of the famous WW2 Normandy landings in France across a sea barrier of just about 25-30 miles from the allied bases in the UK. How were the Chinese going to get across a sea barrier that stretches from 120 to 130 miles from its coast line in today's scenario when nothing much can be hidden from the enemy due to the availability of advanced technology in abundance?

- Even though militarily unlikely, the Admiral enumerated four plausible reasons why an invasion by China could still occur:
  - Political desperation in China's internal politics.
  - For reasons of legacy ie ending the unfinished revolution started by Mao.
  - Before the re-unification gets even more difficult due to changes in power equations.
  - Taiwan declares independence (worst case scenario).
- Response to the Chinese drills and manoeuvres with live fires around Taiwan have included the following:
  - Another bi-partisan US Congressional delegation visited Taiwan soon after Pelosi had left.
  - The US re-started trade talks.
  - Announcement by the US to restart Freedom of Navigation operations through the Taiwan Straits.
  - Japan, with late Shinzo Abe's NDP in power, has restarted the debate over Japan's self-imposed restrictions on its military forces as stated vide Article 9 of its Constitution.
  - Indonesia, the lynch-pin of ASEAN, conducts its largest exercise Super Garuda 2022 with the US and 7 other countries where India also participated as an observer. This is a sure sign that equations within the ASEAN are changing with China being the ultimate loser.
  - Australia is conducting one of its largest air exercises named Pitch Black with participation of 17 countries including from the Indian Air Force.

- Xi Jinping is powerful but he is not the CCP. In such totalitarian regimes, survival of the party in power overrides any individual egos and aspirations. Hence leaders are often replaced abruptly if the party feels his continuance will do more harm than good to the party's hold on power.
- The Admiral averred that the outcome of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in Oct/Nov this year is still open and even if Xi gets an unprecedented third term in office, he would have to alter his behaviour considerably.
- South Korean planes have landed in Taiwan and German air force planes have flown past the Island; NATO seems to be involving itself more in the region; UK is already an announced partner of the AUKUS; France has also teamed up with regional players because of its island territories in the South Pacific and SE Indian Ocean.
- These developments have not escaped the eyes of the CCP who see a dangerous confrontation developing in the seas around China or where China has an interest to secure its SLOCs for its imports and exports.

Summing up his talk, the Admiral referred to India and observed that we have always been hedging and building bridges in every direction. When does it become a bridge too far? On the LAC we have to remain alert to any adventurous actions by irrational leaders from the CCP who when thwarted over unifying Taiwan under the One China Policy could easily settle for the less glamorous prize of teaching India a lesson and grab additional territories from us along the undefined LAC with Tibet along the Himalayas.

## Summing Up by General PR Shankar

Following the very enthralling presentations by all the three panellists, General Shankar made the following points during his summing up of the talks by the three speakers:

- The invasion of Taiwan is going to involve a very complicated amphibious military operation for which the PLA seems ill-prepared at present.
- A landing is only the first stage of the invasion. The PLA will still need to fight across the grain of the country against a tenacious enemy who will get all the support it needs from the US and its allies. Missiles are good demonstrators but do not win their users control over captured territory.
- Time horizons were referred to both by Prof Kuo and Admiral Chopra. The issue of an aging population is important here. China's population has declined to 1.28 billion as per some reports with rapid aging. Aged societies do not win wars.
- Aging coupled with other factors like a slowing economy, climate challenges, lack of energy supplies, drying rivers and lakes, all put together could delay an economic recovery by China by at least 3 to 4 years.
- Past history tells us that China has never gone to war if it has not been assured of victory beforehand.
- The irrationality factor brought out by all three speakers is very important. The example of Mao attacking in India in 1962 while China was suffering one of its worst famines was cited in this context.

- The answer to many questions lies in the perception one holds of the Chinese economy. Is it a status quo power, an ascending power, or a declining power?
- All current indicators point to China being a declining economic power or at best a status quo economic power. To move towards becoming an ascending economic power from here on for China is a very difficult proposition. Just three months ago a well-known Chinese economist had said that the day when China would overtake the US economy has gone further away.
- With its aggressive behaviour, China has kept itself in the game by rendering the self-declared Median Line in the Taiwan Straits and the ADIZs around Taiwan's air space irrelevant. It has established a new norm.
- The situation would remain hazy for the next few years. India will face increased hostile activity along the LAC as well as irritants in our neighbourhood.
- The next best option for China if it fails against Taiwan will be against India. If it cannot be a super power, it will at least like to be known as an undisputed regional power by putting down India militarily.

The General concluded his summary of the three speakers by wondering out aloud if China has been drawn out by the US and has its limitations been exposed for the world to see? Till date China was an aided economy with the West largely helping its economy to grow. Now after the pandemic China's economic growth is being opposed and it will face strong head-winds from the world for any future growth.

## Questions & Answers

The first question was to Prof Kuo who was asked at to when China would have felt over-stretched or over-extended during its recent aggressive military actions against Taiwan?

In his reply, Prof Kuo alluded to the 13/14 June 2022 promulgation by the CMC of a set of trial outlines on military operations other than war (OOTW). It had 59 articles in 6 chapters and serves as the legal basis for the PLA's for OOTW and took effect from 15 June 2022. Since Jan 2022, China has been carrying out such OOTW not only against Taiwan but also against Japan. China sought to control the SCS by seizing and militarising small islands and atolls and is now doing the same in the South Pacific with the agreements it has signed with the Solomon Islands. China cannot easily swallow Taiwan by military means as also brought out by the other speakers. However, the Prof also stated that the morale of the Taiwanese armed forces could be easily broken if the US persisted in what he saw as a US-China understanding by which the US allowed the PLAN and PLAAF to come so close to Taiwan.

The Prof further mentioned that the secretive meeting of the top leaders of the CCP at Beidaihe (beach resort town in Hebei province) this year had ended on 12<sup>th</sup> Aug- much earlier than the expected date of 20<sup>th</sup> Aug. The question arises as to how could Xi Jinping get through the meeting so fast when China is reportedly in such a dire state and his own position at the top of the CCP is supposedly being challenged?

In this context, the Prof was further asked by General Shankar if he saw anything significant in President Xi doing North to

Liaoning and the PM Li Keqiang going South to Shenzhen after the Beidaihe meeting practically on the same day of 15-16 Aug 2022?

In his reply, Prof Kuo said that there is a lot of speculation but no concrete information. One thing was clear that Xi Jinping has turned the CCP from a collective leadership party to a one-man party. If he gets his way at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Standing Committee of the Politburo would become irrelevant.

The next question was directed to General Prakash Menon who was asked his views on whether the loose blockade that the PRC had established around Taiwan could presage an actual takeover of the Island?

General Prakash was of the opinion that in the present context even the use of the word 'blockade' was a bit of a stretch—there were enough gaps between the announced 'stay away' sites for ships and planes to enter and exit from the Island—only the time taken to avoid the banned areas was more than the normal leading to additional costs of transportation, insurance premiums, etc. In today's world the idea of establishing a total blockade and then carrying out an amphibious landing and invasion seem outdated because of the reactions such an act would evoke from the world community. The talk of China imposing a blockade around the island before launching an invasion exists only in the realm of military imagination. China only wanted to send a message of physiological intimidation to Taiwan.

Admiral Chopra was then asked if we were to go by the recent statements attributed to our EAM, where does India really stand on the question of Taiwan?



The Admiral replied that in a democracy like ours there are bound to be various points of view. As a developing nation our policies too are evolving and the present appearance of hedging indicates that India is still unsure of the way forward on Taiwan. One school of thought favours a policy of strategic ambiguity whereas the other favours closer ties with the PRC. A third point of view sees authoritarian regimes such as the PRC being a security threat to India. To his way of thinking, China remains both a military threat and a competitor to India.

General Shankar, turning to Prof Kuo once again, wanted to know what would China do with the people of Taiwan if it succeeded in invading and taking control of Taiwan?

In his reply, Prof Kuo, said that the PRC Ambassador to France had recently made the unacceptable statement that post its takeover of Taiwan, China would set up 're-education' schools, etc. This is pure rhetoric aimed at scare mongering. China will not be able to swallow Taiwan so easily by military means alone. Even economically, Taiwan is not dependent on the PRC- more than 65% of Taiwan's exports to China are of intermediary goods whereas 80% of China's exports to Taiwan are finished goods. It is easier to find alternate markets for intermediate goods than for finished goods. In the social field too, more than a million Taiwanese are in China running their factories and teaching the Chinese the way to conduct business. In every way China is more dependent on Taiwan than the other way around.

Lastly, Admiral Chopra was asked that as China seemed to be heading to isolation from the rest of the world what did he think would be the game plan of China?

In his reply, Admiral Chopra made the point that Xi Jinping today seemed like the story book character of an emperor without clothes because all his advisors avoid telling him the truth. China is totally dependent on the exports it churns out and most such export /import trade takes place through the seas. China still lacks the capability to fully secure its maritime trade routes or to fight a naval campaign in seas beyond the First Island Chain. In far of waters like the Mediterranean or the Atlantic it has practically zero capability. Apart from a limited capability in the Western Pacific China cannot sustain a naval campaign in other patch of the oceans of the world. It cannot consider itself to being a world power unless it develops such capabilities. Today the Chinese seem to have realised this.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion General Shankar wanted everyone to ponder the question whether Chinese leaders have actually demonstrated the long-term vision they are supposedly credited with? Was Mao thinking long-term when he launched the disastrous Great Leap Forward that had killed over 3 million Chinese? Was Deng thinking long-term when he enforced the One-Child policy? A World Bank- leading Chinese think tank had together put out a report in 2012 on how the Chinese economy could be developed further in a friendlier manner. Xi Jinping came to power in 2013 and promptly junked that report and chose to do the exact opposite to what had been recommended.

Following the very fascinating discussions, General Shankar opined that a very different China has emerged before our eyes. He exhorted every one not to blindly accept the Chinese

narrative as it comes but to rationally draw conclusions based on one's observations. He then handed over the floor to General Moorthy for final comments.

General Moorthy once again thanked everyone in the panel and the moderator for the fascinating webinar that had enriched the knowledge of all the participants. The webinar had been a reality check on China.