

## Taiwan's Centrality in Asian Geopolitics

Madhav Nalapat

The "Emerging Asia" has resulted from the relative stability in the continent over the last few decades. India believes in peace in order to ensure continued progress towards the elimination of poverty.

A military-centred policy could make China's rise a destabilising factor. A few years of Chinese posturing have led to the elimination of much of the goodwill created by Beijing because of the "Peace in our time" policy of Deng Xiaoping. Armed conflict may in fact be very probable if General Secretary Xi Jinping cannot rein back the generals of the People's Liberation Army from their interventions in the field of foreign policy.

Countries in Asia need to ensure the balance of power in the region. The history of Europe shows what takes place when a military overconfident of its abilities witnesses territorial gains sans sacrifice, a history that Asia needs to avoid by the simple expedient of ensuring status quo of current boundaries and authorities. With each absorption of territory, the aggressor would only get ever more strident in seeking to expand its territory and its interests, eventually leading to a generalised conflict. It would be a risk too far for countries in Asia to welcome any further expansion in the territory controlled by China.

Any integration of Taiwan into the People's Republic of China would act as a force multiplier which would immensely boost the technological - and therefore military - capabilities of China, besides its economy. Should this happen, a limit

would be crossed that would make future conflict inevitable rather than absent. With the exception of China itself and possibly a few countries such as North Korea or Venezuela, no other country in the world – certainly not India - would regard such a development as anything other than a direct threat to its vital interests.

Contrary to the claim that the current situation in the Taiwan Strait is a "magnet for war," it is in fact its major deterrent. The status quo relating to Taiwan needs to be maintained to ensure stability in Asia and the avoidance of future conflict.

Delhi has ritually spoken of its adherence to "One China," but has yet to affirm in a way as conclusive as it has in the case of Tibet that Taiwan is, or was, or will ever be, part of "One China". Indeed, given the continued approach of the PLA and the apparent backers of its line within the Chinese Communist Party to India and its core interests, a time may come in Delhi when Tibet too gets de-bracketed from "One China".

In addition to the strategic imperative of ensuring its current autonomy, Taiwan is at the heart of the Calculus of Capability in Asia. Reasons include:

(a) **Location.** Taiwan's position ensures immense significance for any attempt at domination of the China seas, especially the eastern section. Successive governments in the region have adhered to a "No War" line, focusing on the defensive and building up offensive capability only to the extent needed to ensure deterrence against

attacks. Any change in the mode of governance of Taiwan resulting in a shift in such a beneficial policy would be to the detriment of India, Japan, the U.S. and several other powers.

(b) **Knowledge.** From the 1980s, Taiwan has been the leader in Asia in the mastering of technologies and processes across a slew of economic activity, yielding only to Japan in its proficiency. If China is emerging as an advanced technological power, much of the credit rests with Taiwanese entities active in that country, which have given access to such technologies. Given the importance of technology and the knowledge economy in both the military as well as the commercial sphere, the continued "neutrality" of Taiwan is essential to maintain a level playing field between the powers of Asia. Such neutrality is also in the best interests of Taipei.

In such a context, while China has been helpful to Taiwan in the creation of manufacturing platforms, a similar level of engagement with India in the field of software would help to ensure it develops to the same level as hardware and peripherals have. This is why there has been some (though not adequate) focus on creating partnerships between Indian and Taiwanese universities. A policy whereby only students from a particular country are encouraged to come and study in Taiwan and others from countries with as significant a population get ignored is not optimal.

Another corollary which needs attention is the relative neglect of the English language in Taiwan. A 21st Century Anglo-sphere would include not only the Churchillian model of "white" countries but also India, Singapore and hopefully in the future, Taiwan, should Taipei abandon its obsessive focus with a single regional language and embrace

the international link language as enthusiastically as its interests mandate.

(c) **Democracy.** It has been a mystery why the CCP has been as obsessed as it has been about integrating Taiwan into the PRC, for the reason that such a move, even if successful, would bring into a communist state twenty million and more high-capability individuals committed to political democracy. The maturing of democratic politics in Taiwan has shown to be untrue views such as that the Sinic peoples are "unsuited" to political democracy, and the obvious question is that if the people of Taiwan can so safely and so speedily embrace political democracy, why is it made an article of faith that larger Sinic populations cannot do the same without danger to economic progress and social stability? The pervasive acceptance of political democracy within Taiwan has made the island a "poison pill" which, if swallowed by China, would seep into the general population in a way toxic to the present structure of authority in Beijing, on a scale several degrees of magnitude higher than the effect of the sharply diluted democracy in Hong Kong.

The Taiwan Example is significant in the mind space of East Asia in particular, in a context where not everywhere is there the same respect for alternative views and lifestyles. The people of Taiwan have shown that modernism and moderate values move in a synchronous manner rather than get into conflict with each other. The demonstration effect of the emergence of Taiwanese society as a model of democratic temperance is substantial, and can only grow.

(d) **Importance in a boundary less world.** The reality of the 21st Century is that physical boundaries have become an impediment to

progress. It is time that Taipei called for not only a "No War Pact" in Asia but a call to maintain the status quo in matters of territory. Its own commitment to peace and liberal values and practices has been exemplary. However, Taipei needs to proceed beyond its two-country obsession (i.e., the U.S. and China, lately only a single country, China) and accept the reality of a multipolar world, where countries other than the U.S. and China should be a policy priority, especially India, a country determined to maintain the status quo in Asia. **BT**

**Madhav Nalapat** is Director of Department of Geopolitics & International Relations, Manipal University, India.