



EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

The Strategic Uncertainties of Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific and its Implications to Philippine National Security

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INTRODUCTION

Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China (ROC) is one of the many different actors of the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific between the United States and China. However, Taiwan is the key factor that determines the future of the Indo-Pacific. Taiwan is the key to achieving the United States' interest in containing China, and it is also the key to achieving the Chinese Dream or the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" according to Xi Jinping¹. Aside from these, Taiwan plays various roles in different aspects of the Indo-Pacific such as its strategic location and its relations with regional trade and shipping routes, economic ties and relatedly to this is Taiwan's technological advancement, and finally, Taiwan's role in regional stability.

As the Indo-Pacific region is currently shaped by the ongoing great power competition between the United States and China, Taiwan's role was further expanded than just a distant land of China. Taiwan is currently known under the 1979 concept of "one country, two systems" by Deng Xiaoping along with Hong Kong and Macau. The concept was formed with the intention to eventually reunify with China.² Though the concept was rejected by Taiwan, China maintained good faith with the hope that Taiwan will eventually reunify as long as it maintains the one country, two systems policy.

In relation to regional stability there are also the factors of democratic values and security and defense. Taiwan became a major player in terms of managing the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region. For the United States, ensuring the democratic status of Taiwan is the only way to preserve the US-led rules-based order and contain the hegemonic rise of China. For China, it seeks to advance its core interest to return as a great power equal to the United States and recover from the injustices of China's Century of Humiliation. Taiwan's status under the "one country, two systems" is a reminder of China's Century of Humiliation and remains as a source of frustration for Chinese leadership therefore seeking to amend the "one country, two systems" and take Taiwan back is crucial for the advancement of China's core interest.³ In the

emergence of the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region, Taiwan is considered as the key to winning it.

However, determining the strategic implications of the role of Taiwan still remain under a vast majority of scenarios based on the defense capabilities and diplomatic course of actions of the great powers. Therefore, this paper seeks to discuss and highlight the strategic uncertainties of Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific region to contribute to the assessment of the future of the region. This Executive Policy Brief aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the role of Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific region?; (2) What are the strategic uncertainties of Taiwan in the region?; (3) What are the implications of the strategic uncertainties of Taiwan for the Philippine national security?

MAJOR CASE ISSUES

STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTIES OF TAIWAN

Taiwan has long battled with its existence in relation to China. Its role was put in the spotlight as the great power competition between the United States and China intensified due to its strategic role in the Indo-Pacific. However, Taiwan's strategic role is highly objective based on its current national interest and strategic alignment. Therefore, this paper discusses some of the strategic uncertainties related to this security issue.

TAIWAN'S EXISTENCE

In 2013, Xi Jinping publicly expressed the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation with Taiwan's reunification with the motherland as an essential factor.⁴ Though China continues to present a non-violent approach to settling the reunification with Taiwan, China has made it clear that according to Article 8 of China's Anti-Secession Law of 2005, it has the right to do so by non-diplomatic means.⁵ China intends to liberate Taiwan even through military force as necessary. However, to maintain China's position in the international society, it continued to pursue isolation diplomacy towards Taiwan. Nonetheless, China continues to release statements about resorting to the military

approach in terms of the reunification of Taiwan during certain circumstances.⁶

As a result of China's civil war, Taiwan currently exists as the land of the Kuomintang (KMT) who fought against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) taking advantage of the support from the United States.⁷ Since then, dating back to the Truman Administration, Taiwan had been receiving generous support from the United States. Initially, the ruling party of Taiwan were the mainlanders or the KMT however, the growing local Taiwanese population grew to oppose the ruling party and expressed the interest to pursue an independence movement which later became known as the Democratic Progress Party (DPP). With the growing presence of the United States and establishing military, political, and economic links with Taiwan, the United States became a principal obstacle for China in liberating Taiwan.

Aside from the presence of the United States, Taiwan's domestic politics have also evolved throughout the years between the ruling of the KMT or the DPP parties. Since the KMT fled to Taiwan, they have established democratic elections and held the political powers. Initially, the KMT made significant policy adaptations that were geared towards modernization of the island to create a self-sufficient Taiwan with the intention to leverage such a position in an attempt to reunify with China.⁸ Unfortunately for the KMT, there is still a large percentage of Taiwanese people that want to identify as Taiwanese rather than Chinese and prefer independence rather than unification with China.⁹

The domestic politics in Taiwan and their interest in independence or unification with China presents a strategic uncertainty. China has laid out its cards with regards to pursuing reunification with Taiwan either through diplomatic or military means. For the United States, according to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, it will bolster the indo-pacific security through integrated deterrence. This would involve the continued modernization of treaty alliances and working with partners within the region to "maintain the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."¹⁰ Therefore, Taiwan's management of its domestic politics and

interest is a vital factor in the strategic uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific region.

STRATEGIC LOCATION AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

Mindful of the complications that the Cross-Strait relations bring, Taiwan's strategic location becomes both an advantage and a disadvantage for their national security. On one hand, the many disadvantages that occur in Taipei on a frequent basis are the constant assertions of the PRC's One China Principle. This prevents Taiwan from formally engaging with like-minded states without diplomatic retaliation from China.¹¹ Thus, with the lack of diplomatic tools, Taipei is compelled to utilize different instruments of power to secure itself within the international community.

On the other hand, the advantages to Taiwan's strategic location can be observed through how Taipei makes use of its economy and trade for guaranteed national security. Being an important player in the semiconductor industry significantly protects the country, and can even be argued that its semiconductor manufacturing facilities have served as a "silicon shield," primarily because China is dependent on Taiwan's facilities.¹² In this case, there is a huge strategic and economic disadvantage for China if it decides to sabotage or attack Taipei's semiconductor manufacturers. Likewise, the same dilemma applies to those relying on the chip industry, as Taiwan's facilities possess the most important step within the semiconductor supply chain.¹³ For example, the United States is aware of Taiwan's critical position within the global supply chain of semiconductors. Any form of disruption or coercion from China may pose security threats and economic issues not only to the Indo-Pacific region, but also the semiconductor-dependent world.

Tensions are escalating between the United States and China, mostly because both countries understand Taiwan's role for the global economy. Of course, it is now evident that there is much to gain for the United States by assuring Taiwan's defense from China, as Taiwan's strategic location now becomes equally critical for its own defense. Allies of the United States in the Indo-Pacific have

positioned themselves to be a thorn for China's reunification plans.¹⁴¹⁵ Utilizing the Philippines' Bashi Channel (Luzon Strait) and Japan's Yonaguni Channel, Taiwan becomes assured by the United States and its allies' timely response in the event of China's invasion.

DEFENSE AND SECURITY

Given the uncertainties of Taiwan's existence and strategic location amid the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region, Taiwan currently lives under a constant threat to its defense and security. Aside from the great power competition, China's long-term interest in Taiwan reunification is slowly shifting to an aggressive approach. The situation highlights the intention of China to use military force in pursuing the reunification of Taiwan. Therefore, currently the principal threat to Taiwan is the potential attack from China to pursue reunification.¹⁶ Compared to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Taiwan armed forces are far less advanced and given the close proximity of the island to the closest point of China across the Taiwan strait, it will be at the mercy of China.

Another factor that contributes to the strategic uncertainty on defense and security of Taiwan is its relations with the United States. As stated in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States encourages its own allies and partners to strengthen each other's ties.¹⁷ However, the Three Communiqués, Six Assurances, and the Taiwan Relations Act of the United States signals ambiguous plans to Taiwan. With this in mind, Taiwan's plausible strategy is to deter China.

Given the limited military capability of Taiwan, its defense and security posture depend on international or regional support. Its inability to gain recognition and international support in terms of possible Chinese hostility is a significant strategic uncertainty. Taiwan's existence in the international society is still a loose recognition and this is further threatened by China's increasing warnings to attack Taiwan. Chinese threats are also directed at any country for political representatives that interact with Taiwan¹⁸ – this is following the visit of the US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in 2022. With this in mind, China's

possible line of sight in terms of targeted attack would be Taiwan, followed by the United States with regards to their military deployment in the Philippines and Japan.

Relatedly, in the event of a targeted attack by China on Taiwan, it would target Taiwan's core capabilities, though there is not much – it would focus on Taiwan's air force bases that hosts its fighter jets. However, it would only take 62 to 81 PLA ballistic missiles to paralyze all the runways of the seven major air force bases of Taiwan.¹⁹ Taiwan will not be able to hold out for more than 30 days without any assistance in the instance of a targeted attack or if Taiwan utilizes its capabilities to impede the PLA.²⁰

REGIONAL STABILITY AND RULE OF LAW

Despite the constant harassment and intimidation from China, Taiwan remains to represent a thriving democracy to an undemocratic China. If Taiwan falls to China, then the rest of the Indo-Pacific will follow, and will lead to a decline of the current democratic world order. The aforementioned threat to regional peace and security incentivizes the United States in keeping the Cross-Strait relations in check by adhering to the One China Policy, yet providing defensive capabilities to Taiwan.²¹ However, as China pursues a more aggressive stance towards Taiwan, the United States is pushed to act in accordance with solidifying its power in the region while operating within the means of international norms and the rules-based international order.

The United States understands how Taiwan plays an important role in maintaining the current international norm in the Indo-Pacific. Reiterating its significance to the current global economy, Taiwan's semiconductor industry is too valuable that it may affect how China will continue with their attempt in revising and undermining the free and open international system. Further, losing Taiwan to China signals to the world how democracy and its international norms are fragile along with the United States' decline.²² Taking the said factors into account, China's annexation of Taiwan will increase its leverage, possibly making other democratic economies become vulnerable to China's vision of a global system, which will eventually usurp the regional

hegemony of the United States in the Indo-Pacific.

TAIWAN'S ROLE AND IMPLICATIONS TO THE PHILIPPINE NATIONAL SECURITY

The Philippines recognizes the “one country, two systems” by China enforced upon Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Despite cordial arrangements with China, the Philippines understands the significance of Taiwan in maintaining regional peace and security. Nonetheless, the national interest of Taiwan along with its strategic uncertainties have significant impact on the Philippine national security. With this, analyzing Taiwan’s role in the Indo-Pacific and its effects towards the Philippines is worth dissecting.

REGIONAL STABILITY AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

As previously mentioned, China remains to be the constant threat to the Indo-Pacific region. With Taiwan out of the picture, it can only be a matter of time before China follows through in solidifying its claim in the South China Sea. Thus, Taiwan heavily relies on the United States’ strategy for deterrence. This strategy essentially augments fellow US allies and strategic partners against China by engaging and collaborating with US allies.²³ One of which is the Philippines, where the country has vested interest in ensuring regional stability in peace in the Indo-Pacific region.

Like most other countries in the region, the Philippines is implicated with Taiwan’s strategic uncertainties as this may lead to regional tensions. Currently, the looming threat of military threat from China on Taiwan puts the region, specifically the Southeast Asian countries and East Asian countries in a tense situation. The decisions of these countries are also vital to the outcome however, per the recent trends, most Southeast Asian countries have remained neutral. Thus, Taiwan’s strategic uncertainty in the event of independence or unification with China and China’s military threats can implicate and expose the Philippines to conflict situations, consequences of humanitarian disaster, and even refugee outflows.²⁴

Further, the strategic uncertainties of Taiwan threaten the rules-based order in the region. It also puts into questions the existence of some regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) in managing the situation to ensure regional stability and peace. ASEAN’s consensus-based approach and hesitation in discussing this security issue prevents it from managing the situation. In this regard, the Philippines have engaged in minilateral engagements with neighboring countries that share the same interest in the South China Sea such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

Aside from that, China is one of the major trade partners of most countries in the Indo-Pacific. Recently, as China employed its gray zone strategies and economic warfare in relation to pursuing unification with Taiwan, countries that express formal or informal support to Taiwan will suffer economic trade consequences from China, including the Philippines.²⁵

MARITIME AND TERRITORIAL DISPUTE

The Philippines have been burdened with maritime disputes with China due to the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea even without factoring in Taiwan. Taiwan’s strategic uncertainty in terms of its existence as well as its claim in the South China Sea also presents a complication for the rest of the claimants to settle or manage the dispute peacefully. Taiwan’s claim in the South China Sea when Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan, it claimed a U-shape or eleven-dash line of the South China Sea area which was changed by the CCP to the nine-dash line claim.²⁶

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled in favor of the Philippines ruled the Taiping Island, which Taiwan currently occupies is not an island but merely a “rock” that does not hold an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).²⁷ This was aggressively rejected by Taiwan.²⁸ Taiwan is now faced with a challenge to balance its act to assert its sovereignty claims to certain areas and features in the South China Sea and to differentiate its claims with those of China.

Taiwan’s interest and its claims in the South China Sea implicates the resolution of the

dispute and hinders the decrease of tension in the region. In this regard, the Philippines needs to closely monitor Taiwan's actions and its strategic uncertainties as it has a significant impact on maritime and territorial disputes.

DEFENSE DIPLOMACY AND MILITARY COOPERATION

Sharing the same ambiguous sentiments with the United States, the Philippines also exercises a One China Policy while maintaining de facto diplomatic relations through Taiwan's economic offices. However, the Philippines is met with a dilemma. China remains to be the largest trading partner of the Philippines,²⁹ which leaves the country more vulnerable to possible economic coercion just as they have experienced in 2012.³⁰ If the Philippines becomes more cordial with its stance to Taiwan, especially since the United States encourages its allies and partners to strengthen their ties with one another, then the country must carefully and strategically ensure no escalations will occur.

On another note, while the Philippines has to diplomatically affirm its stance to the concerned parties, there are indicators from the Philippines that assures its cordial stance to Taiwan. One indicator that Taiwan can be assured of is the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) of the Philippines and the United States. The Philippines announced four (4) more EDCA sites with the three sites strategically positioned towards the north facing Taiwan resulting in an angry China who threatened the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) residing in Taiwan.³¹ The Philippines continues to reiterate that the EDCA sites will be used for contingencies and natural disasters. There are no explicit statements regarding aiding Taiwan from the Philippine side, however, it was mentioned by the Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. that the announced EDCA sites can be useful for evacuating Filipinos from Taiwan.³²

Aside from humanitarian aid, the EDCA sites may enable the United States to increase joint drills and training in the region. In a press briefing with US Indo-Pacific Command Chief Admiral John Aquilino, the Armed Forces of the

Philippines Chief-of-Staff General Romeo Brawner said that they recommend more EDCA sites, even stating that some sites can be designed specifically for joint training.³³ Indeed, the two countries understand the significance of joint exercises. As a matter of fact, there were joint drills that already occurred in the region which were attended by the United States, the Philippines, Australia,³⁴ and even Japan.³⁵ For Taiwan, this level of interoperability between US allies can serve as a deterrence, since the drills conducted can enable other US allies to join the drills as well, signaling their readiness should a Cross-Strait crisis occur.

NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

As China's presence has become more aggressive in the region, some of due to its interest to pursue Taiwan unification, have implicated several non-traditional security challenges. As the South China Sea dispute also intensified, China adopted a gray zone strategy through a variety of coercive tactics just short of an act that would initiate an armed conflict.³⁶ These actions include increasing the frequency and scale of PLA bombers, fighter jets, and surveillance patrols across Taiwan. Further, several cyberattacks have been launched from China towards Taiwan.

Reports of China sabotaging critical infrastructures such as submarine cables that cut Taiwan's interest and communication have also recently surfaced. As the cables were cut by Chinese vessels, these were interpreted largely by Taiwan and the international community as China's deliberate acts of aggression.³⁷ Overall, the increasing coercive tactics of China towards Taiwan can also be employed to other countries within the region that is in the line of sight of China.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the strategic uncertainties of Taiwan and its role in the Indo-Pacific region, certain defense and security implications were highlighted for the Philippines. Given these uncertainties, the Philippines through the Defense Department, as well as other government agencies must continuously monitor and prepare in response to possible

outcome scenarios. In this regard, this policy briefs put forward some policy considerations:

Establish Contingency and Risk Mitigation Protocols on Taiwan's Strategic Uncertainties. On the issue of independence or unification of Taiwan, China's looming aggressive response is foreseeable whether it is on Taiwan, or towards other countries within its line of sight in pursuing hegemony in the region. On the one hand, in the event of Taiwan pushing for independence, there is the threat of China to prevent it by force and invade Taiwan. In this scenario, the Philippines as an ally of the United States and being geographically close to Taiwan will also be implicated. On the other hand, in the event Taiwan decides to peacefully reunify with China, it increases China's might and hold of the region, also breaking down the rules-based international order. The latter scenario might also trigger a more aggressive action by China towards its claim in the South China Sea.

In either scenario, the Philippines is at the forefront and will be significantly affected. In this regard, it is recommended for the Defense Department to continuously monitor and prepare for every scenario considering the outlined strategic uncertainties. This would include the placement of military capabilities in the right positions as well as the drafting of the policies specifically reinforcing the northern flank of the Philippines. In addition, an outlined rules of engagement under the international laws should also be established in order to counter the possibility of China's direct military threats and even its gray zone operations.

Enhance Multilateral and Diplomatic Approaches. Indeed, the strategic uncertainties of Taiwan and the looming threats of Chinese invasion is a defense and security concern not only for the Philippines but for the entire Indo-Pacific Region. The Philippines have utilized Multilateral diplomatic approaches due to certain hindrances and the inability of some regional approaches in managing the security situation. However, China's aggressiveness cannot be handled by one or even two countries on their own.

Increase Joint Exercises/Drills/Trainings in the Region. In connection with contingencies, there is a significant incentive in strengthening the combat-readiness of the Philippines. Being a US ally in this evolving security environment allows new opportunities for the country to expand its network for larger joint exercises. The joint drills generate not only combat readiness with its participants but also closer ties that may open up to more opportunities whether economic, diplomatic, or even military.

Strengthening Defense Capability and Capacity Development. The Philippines have been contending with Chinese maritime forces over the South China Sea despite its victory in the arbitral tribunal award in 2016. China has also engaged in aggressive gray zone operations that harass the Philippine maritime patrol in the area. Given China's maritime prowess, there is an immediate need for the country to secure its maritime areas by investing, improving and modernizing its naval and maritime capabilities. First, the Philippines should develop and maintain a credible naval presence in the West Philippine Sea to enforce maritime laws within its EEZ by acquiring new vessels for the Philippine navy which could include frigates, patrol boats, and maritime surveillance assets. Second, it cannot be denied that the domain awareness capabilities of the country are subpar than those of its neighbors thus, there is a need to strengthen coastal surveillance and maritime domain awareness capabilities. This is to ensure effective monitoring of activities within the Philippine waters. Third, the Philippine Coast Guard should be enhanced with improved capabilities and an expanded fleet that includes modern patrol vessels and assets.

The PLA's missile arsenal is a critical factor to consider in modernizing and developing the Philippines defense capability. Initially, missiles provide China the straightforward path in achieving their goals³⁸ thus, this is one of the main factors that the Philippines should consider. This is also the factor that was considered by most Southeast Asian countries in their military procurement.³⁹ This paper also reinforces the recommendations in the paper of Javier (2023) on Missile Proliferation in the Indo-Pacific, that given the military capability of China and the strategic uncertainties of

Taiwan, the best option for the Philippines to ensure military capability readiness for a possible threat from China which can be done through investment in air and missile defense.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Though the Philippines is not directly involved in the security issue between Taiwan and China on the cross-strait tensions, it is not exempt from the repercussions of Taiwan's strategic uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific region. Understanding the role of Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific region comes as a challenge given its highly dependent security situation. Nonetheless, factoring Taiwan in the security computation of the Indo-Pacific region should not come as a reactive response as these have critical consequences.

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Taiwan's strategic uncertainties provide an input to multiple scenarios in the Indo-Pacific region involving several actors. Based on initial assessment, a crucial finding in all possible scenarios is that conflict is a high possibility which the Philippines and other countries in the region should be prepared for. Nonetheless, effective diplomacy and international or regional risk management and mitigation must be the first line of defense. The Philippines can ensure national defense and security by continuously prioritizing diplomacy, maintaining readiness, and engaging in regional cooperation. With these considerations, the Defense Department can contribute to the peace and stability in the region and ensure to protect the Philippine interest amid the complex geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific region.

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