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**DETECTING AN ATTACK ON TAIWAN:
POLICY OPTIONS FOR INDIA
AND OTHER NON-BELLIGERENT
STATES
BY ARZAN TARAPORE**

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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The threat of Chinese aggression against Taiwan is growing. According to the US Defence Department's latest public assessment, Beijing's top strategic priority beyond the regime's domestic power is Taiwan; and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is accumulating a formidable mass of modern weapons and accelerating the field-testing and training required for an attack.

The problem

No country is obligated to fight to defend Taiwan. China has signalled a singular strategic priority to gain control of the island, by force if necessary, and is building a formidable military arsenal for that purpose. In response, the US has increasingly signalled its willingness to defend Taiwan - but the timing and scale of an American response remain uncertain political decisions, and its capacity to effectively thwart an attack remains doubtful. Japan has a powerful military and vital geography that would be indispensable, but it remains uncommitted. Australia provides the US with ever-greater levels of access, basing and military cooperation, although its political leaders remain coy. Some others, especially the Philippines, may find themselves drawn into a spreading conflict. Most other regional states fear Chinese retaliation and won't willingly join in direct combat for Taiwan.

Non-belligerent Deterrence

Beijing has a comprehensive campaign for Taiwan but it, too, would prefer non-military unification. However, if that were not to happen, China is ready to use force, which it has repeatedly re-emphasised. However, it can be deterred from taking a military action. The goal, however, should be to deter the conflict and not to oppose the unification. States that have no intention of becoming belligerents in a Taiwan conflict including India, can still play a role in deterring the conflict by helping to convince Beijing it that has not yet reached the conditions to achieve success in such an endeavour.

How India Could Act

India has a wide range of policy tools that can be calibrated in accordance with its own interests, capacity and risk appetite. Additionally, India has influence to mobilize the international community and it has shown political will to act, especially since 2020. Suggested below are six broad policy options that India and others could adapt and apply to deter China from using force against Taiwan:-

- **International Law Advocacy.** Deploy legal arguments against China's territorial revisionism and get other states to coalesce around these legal arguments to pre-emptively contest the legitimacy of China's actions in the South China Sea. Frame a legal argument explicitly referring to potential military action against Taiwan as a matter not of national interests, but international law, regardless of Taiwan's legal status. Thirdly, India and others could remind China that major wars bring with them the risk of unforeseen political discontinuities, that its aggression could precipitate exactly the countervailing coalitions and isolation of China that would set back Xi's grander strategic goal of national rejuvenation.
- **Narratives Opposed to Conflict.** Create a narrative to shape regional and popular discourse to counter China's claim that the Taiwan dispute is an internal Chinese political matter needlessly inflamed by the US. Firstly, India and others could assert that the use of force in the Indo-Pacific is illegal and unacceptable. Secondly, India and others could repeat the message that the destabilisation and costs of any conflict would be catastrophic, especially for the countries of the global South, which couldn't escape the economic costs even if they are far from the zone of conflict.
- **Coordinated Diplomatic Messaging.** Non-belligerent states, including India, could seek to use existing diplomatic networks and groupings to issue coordinated public and private diplomatic messages about the non-permissibility of military action against Taiwan. India and its partners could more pointedly stress how escalating military provocations and coercion create a real risk of regional instability.

- **Economic De-risking.** In anticipation of punitive economic retaliation by China against non-belligerent states adopting the measures suggested here, take actions to reduce their dependence on China and coordinate with US authorities to understand the likely targets and effects of US sanctions on China and to de-risk in those particular sectors as a priority.
- **Offensive Information Operations.** Use offensive cyber operations to disrupt the networks that carry and disseminate Chinese disinformation campaigns undermining Taiwan's political leadership and popular will to resist.
- **Out-of-area Military Support.** Provide out-of-area military support to US forces on the southern flank of China's campaign against Taiwan. It could, for example, offer to backfill some of the US Navy's peacetime presence in the Persian Gulf or provide its facilities for maintenance, repair and overhaul, in accordance with recently signed agreements.

Why India Should Act?

As a developing state with its own persistent security challenges, India has an abiding interest in a stable status quo - both in the Indo-Pacific region generally, where great-power conflict would derail its national growth, and in Taiwan specifically, where it is cultivating a burgeoning trade and technology relationship. Therefore, a war against Taiwan would be an economic catastrophe and Chinese victory would be a strategic catastrophe.