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What Should India Do Before the Next Taiwan Strait Crisis?

Vijay Gokhale

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Summary

In the next two decades, the Taiwan question is likely to assume increasing importance for the Indo-Pacific region. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is becoming more assertive about unifying Taiwan with the mainland, and it is also making progress toward establishing the military capability toward this end. For a rising PRC seeking to establish itself as the dominant global power, it is untenable that a part of its territory remains outside its control. Possible endeavors toward establishing this control could lead to a response by the United States, which would have broader ramifications for the region and the world.

For the United States, any endeavors by the PRC to this end would undermine the very core of the idea that the United States is the defender of freedom and democracy across the world, thus undermining its credibility. It might also deal a devastating blow to the United States' global power. In this context, and given the significance of Taiwan to both countries, it is an issue that can rapidly escalate, making it a matter of concern in the Indo-Pacific. Further, a conflict over Taiwan would dwarf the global economic fallout that began when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Short of conflict, Chinese coercion of Taiwan could disrupt the freedom of navigation and sea lanes of communication through the Taiwan Strait and will have severe consequences for Asian geopolitics and geoeconomics.

Given India's substantial geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in the region and its long history of exchanges with East and Southeast Asia, India should pay constant and careful attention to this issue. Further, a policy to respond to various contingencies must be thought through and put into place. This paper tries to look at the possible policy that India might adopt ahead of a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first part analyzes the geopolitical and geoeconomic consequences of another Taiwan Strait crisis for India. While it is difficult to estimate the actual damage that would be dealt to the Indian economy, it is clear that all segments of the economy would be affected, with the impact possibly substantial enough to set India back several years. A crisis would also impact India's geopolitical interests and national security, given that China is increasing its assertiveness both along the Line of Actual Control as well as in the Indian Ocean.

The second part argues against a commonplace view that India played no role in crisis management during earlier periods of high tension in the Taiwan Strait—the 1954–55 and 1958 Taiwan Strait Crises, also known as the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, respectively. By using archival material in the United States, the United Kingdom, and India, it seeks to dispel the above notion and that Taiwan ceased to be a matter of interest for India after it had recognized PRC's claim over Taiwan in 1950. Further, it looks at the lessons for policymaking from India's handling of the crises.

The third part of the paper briefly traces the history of India-Taiwan relations following India's transfer of its diplomatic recognition to the PRC till the present day. It provides an overview of India's Taiwan policy. Given that a war in the Taiwan Strait is not beyond reasonable doubt, it then discusses the scenarios India might find itself in and the possible policies to respond to these scenarios. It recommends a close following of the U.S.-China-Taiwan strategic triangle, a whole-of-government assessment around impacts of a Taiwan Strait contingency, and an assessment of policy options. It also recommends mapping the expectations that China and the United States would have of India, along with undertaking consultations with key partners on the Taiwan question.

Introduction

Over the course of the next two decades, the Taiwan question is likely to become increasingly important for the Indo-Pacific region. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is becoming more assertive about unifying Taiwan with the mainland. Possible Chinese action could lead to a response by the United States with significant international ramifications. A recent American study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) wargaming a Sino-U.S. conflict over Taiwan has opined that what was once unthinkable—a direct conflict between the United States and China—has now become a commonplace discussion in the national security community.¹

The deep enmeshing and interdependence of the world's two largest economies is sometimes cited as a reason to conclude that a war over Taiwan is neither inevitable nor likely. However, the world has gone to war despite interdependence and familial bonds, as demonstrated by the First World War. And the Taiwan question is no ordinary unresolved geopolitical problem. It is dangerous because it plays out in an area where the prestige and interests of the two most consequential global powers—China and the United States—are directly at stake. For the PRC, which is striving to establish itself as the dominant world power, it is intolerable and a matter of national humiliation that a part of what it considers its territory still remains “independent” of its control.² For the United States, the PRC's forcible seizure of Taiwan will strike at the very root of the idea that it is the defender of freedom and democracy across the world.³ This might deal a devastating blow to the United States' global power. Given the significance of Taiwan to both countries, it is a dangerous flashpoint in India's part of the world, the Indo-Pacific.

A report released at the 2023 Munich Security Conference says, “While there are different views as to whether Beijing has a timeline for possible action against Taiwan, whether that timeline has changed, and how much progress the PLA has made in working toward its capability goals, there is mostly consensus that Beijing hopes to have the ability to successfully invade Taiwan [even in the face of U.S. resistance] by 2027.”⁴ And, in 2021, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission’s annual report to the U.S. Congress concluded that the PRC either had or was close to achieving an initial capability to invade Taiwan.⁵ Therefore, the future of Taiwan will be key for the region, and the prevention of conflict between the PRC and Taiwan will be the singular challenge since, as the report released at the Munich Security Conference 2023 states, the consequences would dwarf the global economic fallout of the Ukraine war.

Even if an actual conflict between the United States and the PRC does not take place, Chinese coercion of Taiwan—which might disrupt the freedom of navigation in the Taiwan Strait—will have severe, possibly devastating repercussions for Asian geopolitics and geoeconomics. In a piece for *Foreign Affairs* in February 2023, Evan Feigenbaum and Adam Szubin wrote that Beijing cannot simply assume that the West will never risk economic shocks over a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or that it will impose only marginal sanctions on major countries.⁶ It would be equally naïve for the West to assume that China will eschew the use of force against Taiwan merely because it fears that the West will levy economic penalties. Therefore, what is likely to play out in the Taiwan Strait over the coming decade has justly become a focus of national security for the entire Indo-Pacific region.

India is a large and populous Asian country with a long history of contact and exchanges with East and Southeast Asia. In the past decades, India has built strong political ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), East Asian states, Australia, and the Pacific Island states. It is an active participant in ASEAN-centric mechanisms and is also an important security provider in the sea lanes of communication that straddle the northern Indian and western Pacific oceans. More recently, it has concluded free trade arrangements with several countries and has substantial trade, investment, and cultural interests in the region that have a bearing on India’s economy and national security. India’s substantial geopolitical and geoeconomic interests require that careful and continuous attention is paid to this question and that a proper policy to deal with various contingencies is thought through and put in place. The objective of this working paper is to look at the possible policy that India might adopt ahead of a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

The first part of this paper explores the likely geopolitical and geoeconomic implications of another Taiwan Strait crisis for India. It is difficult to estimate the actual damage that the Indian economy might suffer, but what is clear is that it will affect all segments of the economy and that the impact of a crisis might be substantial enough to set it back several

years. Geopolitically, there will be significant implications for India's national security, both directly as well as in the broader regional context, if Taiwan is reunified with the PRC. Conflict or tensions in the Taiwan Strait are, therefore, not in India's interests. As an important regional player with growing interests across the Indo-Pacific, India cannot avoid playing its part in trying to defuse tension and prevent war. Policymakers need to think whether and what kind of role India could play in averting a crisis, as well as possible action that it might need to take in preparation for high tension or a full-blown crisis in the Taiwan Strait, singularly or in conjunction with like-minded countries.

Then, there is a popular view that India played no role in crisis management during earlier periods of high tension in the Taiwan Strait. To better appreciate India's historical positions in earlier crises, the second part of this paper looks at India's diplomatic experience and actions during the Taiwan Strait crises in 1954–55 and 1958. By using Indian, British, and American archival materials, the paper seeks to dispel the popular perception that India played no role and that this issue ceased to be a matter of interest after it had recognized the PRC's claim over Taiwan in 1950. To the contrary, Taiwan was an important aspect in India's foreign policymaking throughout the 1950s, and India engaged diplomatically with the principal players (barring the Kuomintang) to resolve the crises in pursuance of its national interests.

India's previous handling of the Taiwan Strait crises might provide lessons for crafting future Indian policy. A comprehensive analysis of available historical records suggests that India was deeply concerned about the possibility of conflict between the PRC and the United States in the Taiwan Strait, and that such concerns led the Indian government to take diplomatic initiatives with both sides. India's intentions were to avoid another Asian flashpoint (besides Korea and Vietnam) that might vitiate peace and stability and have foreign policy implications for India's relations with both countries, which it deemed essential for its own security and development.

The final part of this paper is premised on the assumption that while a war in the Taiwan Strait is not inevitable, it is not beyond reasonable doubt either. Therefore, India must develop a range of policies to deal with any contingency that might arise in the Taiwan Strait in the coming decade. The crux of the recommendations is that a whole-of-government assessment or modelling the impact another Taiwan Strait crisis would have on India, especially its economy, should not be delayed any longer. Based on the results, India should prepare contingency plans for risk mitigation. Simultaneously, the institutions that make national security policy need to have greater awareness about the situation in the Taiwan Strait. This would rely on regular monitoring and continuous assessment as well as policy direction for public messaging that India might make or diplomatic actions that it might take in pursuit of its national interest in this context.

The Implications of a Potential Conflict in the Taiwan Strait for India

The Taiwan question has been a potential flashpoint in East Asia for decades, but the risk of war seems to have sharply increased. In August 2022, a visit from Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, was an inflection point. China reacted with aggressive military behavior. The 2023 U.S. National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) includes new initiatives to bolster Taiwan's defense capabilities and diplomatic support for Taiwan. It symptomizes the structural problem in U.S.-China relations today. The current state of the Sino-U.S. relationship shares certain characteristics with their relationship in the 1950s. According to a recent study, China thinks that the United States has, once again, begun to use Taiwan as a tool to weaken and divide China. Internal political trends in Taiwan (the assertion of Taiwanese identity) have amplified these anxieties. On the American side, Chinese willingness to tackle the United States in the Taiwan Strait, once again under a more risk-tolerant leader (then Mao Zedong and now Xi Jinping), may be leading Washington to think that taking Taiwan is a way for China to weaken the United States in the western Pacific and create division among its allies.⁷ For both, therefore, the Taiwan Strait is an existential problem.

To each, Taiwan is a symbol of what it means to be a "great power." The PRC considers Taiwan's re-merger with the mainland as marking the symbolic end to the humiliation of China by foreign powers and the true beginning of the Chinese century in the Indo-Pacific. The United States considers the continued existence of Taiwan as a symbol of democratic resilience against authoritarianism and the preservation of United States' global influence as leader of the free world.

There are, no doubt, fundamental differences between the situations in the 1950s and today as well. For one, the overall differential in their respective comprehensive national strengths has greatly narrowed.⁸ Second, their economic interdependency is deep-rooted. Third, Taiwan has abandoned Chiang Kai-shek's dream of retaking the mainland. These are reasons for another group of strategic experts to posit that the United States must develop a more nuanced understanding of Beijing's intentions and not automatically assume that Xi Jinping is accelerating plans to invade Taiwan.⁹ But, there is no clarity on what China's real intentions regarding Taiwan are, because strategic ambiguity has been maintained and the use of force in achieving reunification has never been abandoned as a principle.

It is possible that China might conclude from the Russo-Ukrainian War that since Taiwan is not an existential problem for the United States (in the same manner as it is for the PRC), Washington may not be willing to engage its military directly, and the PRC may feel that there is a window for it to make a move on Taiwan. In such circumstances, there is a high probability of a miscalculation because Taiwan has a different significance for the United

States compared to Ukraine. The PRC's seizure of Taiwan could change the balance in the western Pacific, shatter the first island chain encirclement, and end American primacy in the Indo-Pacific. For these reasons, it would be wrong for China to assume that its legitimate claim to Taiwan and the fact that most countries recognize this claim would be sufficient to deter direct American intervention.

If the recent direction of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization is any indication of Chinese concern that the United States will block reunification, then it is possible that the PRC may contemplate actions that accelerate the long-held goal of unifying Taiwan with China. Statements by U.S. President Joe Biden¹⁰ and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,¹¹ indicating that U.S. forces would provide military support if an invasion of Taiwan is attempted, have angered China but not caused it to reduce the rhetoric. In a telephone conversation with Biden on July 28, 2022, Xi asked the United States to be "clear-eyed" and said that "those who played with fire will perish by it,"¹² and on March 7, 2023, at a press conference during the first session of the fourteenth National People's Congress in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang described Taiwan as "the first red line that must not be crossed in China-U.S. relations."¹³ If the recent American efforts to strengthen its alliances and build new partnerships in the Indo-Pacific are any indication of American concerns that China intends to force the issue, then it is possible that the United States may adopt measures to bolster Taiwan's capacity to resist China's ability to take the island. The fact that the American strategic community and policy circles are debating this question is a fair indicator that the possibility of another (fourth) Taiwan Strait crisis is part of the mainstream debate.

Predicting the actual shape and scope of a potential fourth Taiwan Strait crisis is difficult. A number of publications have outlined various scenarios, ranging from outright invasion to internal subversion of Taiwanese domestic politics.¹⁴ Experts are in agreement that a U.S.-China conflict will have devastating global consequences. But, so far as India is concerned, even action short of actual conflict (gray-zone warfare) will have serious implications and, thus, calls for advance planning and preparation. Within the spectrum of the PRC's gray-zone coercive options are massive cyber attacks that paralyze the Taiwanese economy as well as efforts to isolate Taiwan to prevent it from sending exports or receiving imports. Its goal would not be to completely cut off all food and supplies to Taiwan but rather to demonstrate de facto sovereignty by controlling the air and the maritime spaces around the island as well as ship and aircraft access.¹⁵ Even though this might not lead to a hot war, the West might take countermeasures (including sanctions) to warn China off of a forcible takeover. The direct and second-order effects of these countermeasures would have major consequences on supply chains and shipping that India would not be able to avoid. Regardless of whether an actual war takes place, the risk makes it necessary for India to follow the situation in the Taiwan Strait carefully to build out ways in which it could play a diplomatic role in preventing tension from spilling over into conflict as well as to prepare for the risks of conflict by drawing up contingency plans.

What are some of the geopolitical and geoeconomic imperatives that might shape India's approach to the situation in the Taiwan Strait?

Geopolitically, India's salience has grown as its economy and trade have expanded and continue to expand into the Indo-Pacific region. Its Act East Policy has led to fresh interest in regional geopolitics east of the Malacca Strait all the way up to Japan. India has built strong political ties with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and the oceanic states, with many of whom it shares the desire for long-term peace and stability in the region. It has joined plurilateral mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the Quad, among others, with the objective of building peace. The Indo-Pacific vision articulated by India's prime minister at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018 has also meant that India's strategic direction has turned toward the high seas,¹⁶ where India is becoming an engine of regional growth, a security provider for international trade and shipping in the maritime routes, and a first responder to disasters in the northern Indian Ocean. India's future lies in a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific as well as in the prevalence of stability, peace, and security in this region for an extended period of time.

China's rise has advantages for this region as well as for India's economic development. However, its recent behavior and action in peripheral and proximate regions have been such that concerns have emerged, albeit of different degrees, in all sub-geographies of the Indo-Pacific. It wants to become the dominant power through the pursuit of an assertive foreign and national security policy, and this pursuit involves the reduction, and possibly the expulsion, of American influence. The resulting rise in geopolitical tension has impacted the positive trends and made the regional situation less predictable and more prone to tension and conflict.

Besides the regional tensions and heightened concerns in various parts of the Indo-Pacific, India is also dealing with legacy issues so far as the PRC is concerned. India has a 3,500-kilometer-long boundary with China that the latter disputes and the two countries fought a border conflict over in 1962. Until now, the two sides have been unable to resolve the issue to their mutual satisfaction despite several negotiations. The Line of Actual Control (LAC)—the actual ground positions where the respective forces are located—is also disputed, and of late, the Chinese military has attempted to militarily change the status quo in violation of the agreements signed by both sides pledging that neither side will do so by force. China's rapid military rearmament and new security-related activities and infrastructure along its southwestern boundary poses a formidable military challenge in the light of its reluctance to clarify the LAC or to fully abide by agreed measures for border peace and tranquility. China's new security outlook also redefines its security perimeter to include regions proximate to China (beyond its territorial periphery), which means that for the first time in several centuries, China is seeking a significant presence in the Indian Ocean. India is simultaneously facing both a direct challenge on its northern frontier as well as heightened competition with China to its south. This strategic "squeeze" will likely increase geopolitical costs for India. China's reunification plans are closely correlated with India's national security.

It should not be forgotten that in the latter half of the 1950s, India crucially missed the changing dynamics in East Asia because it stopped paying close attention to developments in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁷ By 1959, after the Soviet threat to Cuba had begun to overtake the threat from the PRC in the Taiwan Strait, the United States became less tolerant of Chiang Kai-shek's plans for an invasion of mainland China and relaxed its hostility toward China. As a result of United States' shifting priorities, in mid-1962, when the U.S.-Soviet tensions over Cuba were reaching a fever pitch, the United States informed the PRC that "the U.S. government had no intention of supporting any GRC [Government of the Republic of China] attack on the mainland,"¹⁸ thus allaying China's deep concern of a two-front conflict (with the United States in the Taiwan Strait and with India along the southwestern border). It is an accepted view that this assurance from the United States to the PRC substantially abated that threat and was one of the important reasons for China to subsequently launch the border war with India.¹⁹

One possible lesson to draw from the 1950s is that if developments in the Taiwan Strait are not closely followed, China and the United States might again temporarily accommodate each other, and China might feel less constrained to militarily turn its attention toward India while being more willing to risk military adventurism. Therefore, from a geopolitical perspective, the preservation of both peace and the status quo in the Taiwan Strait for at least the next two decades suits India's national security interests.

Beyond geopolitical imperatives, there are new and strong geoeconomic exigencies that require India to pay very close attention to the Taiwan question. In the 1950s, India's commercial dependence on countries east of Kolkata was relatively unimportant in terms of the impact that disruptions in global trade, caused by war in the Taiwan Strait, might have upon the Indian economy. The world itself was not as interconnected in the mid-twentieth century as it is today. In 2023, India's situation is qualitatively different. According to a CSIS study, India's total trade through the South China Sea was \$123 billion in 2008, which grew to \$208 billion by 2016 (an increase of 80 percent in just eight years) and accounted for more than 30 percent of all trade in goods.²⁰ In view of the further growth in exports and imports since 2016, it is likely that both the volume and percentage of Indian trade passing through the South China Sea has increased yet further. A China-Taiwan conflict would make it difficult to trade through the South China Sea since the maritime passage to its north would be severely impeded. The stoppage of such trade as a result of the closure of these critical waterways will severely impact key sectors of the Indian economy.

Aside from this direct economic damage, the second-order disruptions are likely to be more devastating. According to a study by the Rhodium Group in 2022, Taiwan produces 92 percent of the world's most advanced logic chips (node sizes below 10 nanometers) and between 33 and 50 percent of global output in less sophisticated but still critical chips.²¹ Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC) also produces 35 percent of the world's automotive microcontrollers, 70 percent of smartphone chipsets, and critical components for telecom and medical equipment. A blockade of Taiwan by China would severely disrupt semiconductor exports to India with major impact on key economic sectors.

If the West challenges China's blockade of Taiwan by imposing economic costs like sanctions, the consequences for India might be worse. First, it would affect all economic activity between India and Northeast Asia (Japan and South Korea) because the Taiwan Strait would become impassable for commercial shipping. According to one estimate, nearly 50 percent of global container shipping passes through the Taiwan Strait.²² Second, trade between China and the rest of the world would be severely affected because banks would likely reduce exposure to China in anticipation of western sanctions, in turn disrupting global trade finance. China accounts for 12 percent of global trade, and about half of China's exports represent important parts of the global supply chains.²³ Third, the consequent supply chain disruptions would impact India's key economic partners (from both the East and the West). Fourth, the chips shortage would disrupt the global electronic, automotive, and computing worlds.²⁴ Fifth, Taiwan is an important hub for submarine cables (fifteen major cables that undergird the virtual world have a Taiwan node).²⁵ If cable security is affected, there would be significant resultant disruption to global digital flows.²⁶ The ensuing global trade shock would deeply impact not only the manufacturing sector in India but also e-commerce, IT-enabled services, logistics, entertainment, and other service industries that are key elements of India's economy, collectively leading to the potential unemployment of millions of Indian citizens. The Rhodium Group study estimated that annual disruption from a blockade of Taiwan would mean a global annual economic loss of \$2 trillion (about 3 percent of the world's GDP).²⁷ Other estimates suggest that 7.6 percent of China's nominal GDP, 3.7 percent of Japan's nominal GDP, and 2.1 percent of Europe's GDP will disappear.²⁸ Therefore, the socioeconomic impact of any conflict in the Taiwan Strait, even a blockade or a quarantine, might have catastrophic consequences for India.

Therefore, from the perspective of both geopolitics and geoeconomics, what happens in the Taiwan Strait must become India's business. What is needed is clear policy direction so that, if and when the next crisis happens, India has a toolkit to protect its interests. In order to develop this toolkit, it is instructive to study how India approached the Taiwan problem in the 1950s when two major crises (1954–55 and 1958) brought the region to the brink of military conflict. Valuable lessons, both positive and negative, that might be gleaned, would be helpful to shape (and justify) India's contemporary advance.

India's Taiwan Policy During the 1954–55 and 1958 Crises

To begin with, it is important to briefly understand the logic behind India's policy decision in late 1949 to transfer diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the newly established People's Republic of China. After independence, India established ties with Nationalist China and stationed an ambassador in the capital, Nanking (now known

as Nanjing). By November 1948, Indian Ambassador K. M. Panikkar was reporting to New Delhi that Chiang Kai-shek's position as China's president had become "untenable" after military defeats in Manchuria and the battle for Hsuehchow,²⁹ which in turn led India's then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru to ask the Ministry of External Affairs not to get too involved with the "expiring government in China."³⁰ By mid-1949, after the Communists had overrun most of the mainland and captured Nanking, Nehru concluded that "there is not a ghost of a chance of their [Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang regime] succeeding now."³¹

The question of recognizing the new Communist government was examined in detail by India. Four options were explored—refusal to recognize, de facto recognition, conditional de jure recognition if China agreed to abide by all treaties concluded by the previous regime, and full and complete de jure recognition.³² The decision to accord full and complete recognition was recorded at a high-level meeting on November 17, 1949, wherein the Government of India concluded that "this regime [the People's Republic of China] is well established, stable and likely to endure. . . . It follows therefore that the fact should be recognized so that normal dealings can take place with this new government."³³

Prior to recognizing the PRC, India consulted with several important partners including the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth nations. The British government also favored early recognition, both because "there does not seem to be any further ground for hope that the communists will fail in their bid for complete power in China," and because withholding recognition "leads to grave practical difficulties regarding the protection of Western interests in China" (these "interests" were defined in both political and commercial terms).³⁴ The United Kingdom was keen that India should be able to support the line that the British government proposed to take in forthcoming discussions with the United States. India was aware that the United States was opposed to the recognition of the PRC. The Americans handed an aide-memoire to India in October 1949, urging it not to make "haste" and also cautioning India that "the announcement of the central communist regime contains no assurances that the regime is prepared to assume the international obligations which devolve on a government in China."³⁵ Further consultations were held during Nehru's visit to Washington in October.³⁶ New Delhi was being advised from various quarters that America would eventually come around. The Indian Embassy in Washington conveyed that the "State Department was NOT unwilling to recognize [the] New Chinese regime" (emphasis in the original telegram).³⁷ Ernest Bevin, then UK foreign secretary, reportedly told the Indian high commissioner in mid-November 1949 that it was his personal impression that the U.S. opinion showed signs of becoming less averse to the UK position. This message was seen and initialed by Nehru.³⁸ Nehru concluded that "the United States may not, for special reasons, accord recognition at this stage, but we are sure that they will."³⁹

As the PRC had insisted that "if India is sincere, first they must break all ties completely with Jiang Jieshi [Chiang Kai-shek], unconditionally refuse any kind of support and assistance to this regime and make it into an official declaration,"⁴⁰ India de-recognized the Republic of China (ROC, or the Kuomintang regime) and transferred its recognition to the new regime on December 30, 1949.⁴¹ India's decision to do so was based on the assessment

of the facts as well as the larger geopolitical scenario in Asia after World War II. After the policy decision was taken, India broke off all contacts with the rump government of Chiang Kai-shek and focused on building relations with the Communist regime.

Three important conclusions may be derived from the above narrative. First, India's decision to recognize the PRC followed a clear logic based on a considered assessment of the prevailing situation on the ground and a cost-benefit analysis of what the switch entailed (this included possible repercussions for the issue of Jammu and Kashmir in the United Nations Security Council in view of the fact that Taiwan held the China seat as a permanent member).⁴² Second, India had also concluded that the PRC could sustain its continuance in power and, therefore, it would be beneficial in the long run if India were to take the initiative to recognize the new government of a neighboring state.⁴³ Third, in transferring recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the PRC, India was also looking at the issue in the larger context of the Asian geopolitical situation. It felt constrained by the emergence of two camps in the Cold War and was keen for major Asian countries to stay together in order to create a new geopolitical balance in Asia that would serve India's national interests. China was deemed essential to this effort. India concluded that there was nothing to be gained from preserving ties with Taiwan or from withholding recognition to the PRC.

It is a popular misconception among Indians that after India recognized the PRC, it took no further interest in the Taiwan issue. Archival sources unveil a different picture. The world, according to Nehru, was faced with two choices—co-existence or co-destruction. And for the former to prevail, he felt that India must be neutral and form an area of peace. In practical terms, it meant that India would not join either camp in the Cold War. Thus, India's foreign policy was so conceived as to “follow a line which may not completely fit in with the two prevailing tendencies of the age.”⁴⁴ Within this overall framework of foreign policy, India anxiously watched the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam and worried that the world was “marching, sometimes in a leisurely fashion, and at other times more rapidly, to major crisis.”⁴⁵ Nehru's view was that India, “an independent nation of great potential power . . . [which] cannot disclaim the responsibilities that come with independence,”⁴⁶ had an obligation to try and stabilize the Asian geopolitical situation and prevent the escalation of regional crises into the wider instability of a hot war that would be to India's disadvantage.⁴⁷ Nehru declared that while Asian problems are of the deepest interest to the West, “we must have a say in our destiny and in Asia's destiny.”⁴⁸ India saw the PRC as a key player that could help India shape a new balance in Asia, one that was not decided by the “Western powers . . . without consulting Asian countries.”⁴⁹

Confrontation between the United States and the PRC in Far East Asia complicated this objective of Indian foreign policy, as it had during the Korean War. The experience of that war served as a lesson for future issues that would require mediation. Rudra Chaudhuri writes that back then, Nehru

“openly declared that ‘India can offer her good offices for mediation,’ but ‘only if requested to do so.’ By this token, India would also serve as a messenger between Communist China and the US. To maintain measure and play its part as an interlocutor, it was imperative not to ‘fall in line’ with the US. Further, it was essential that India did not get ‘hustled’ into what could very easily turn into a US-led war in the Far East. The aim was to judge events ‘as objectively as possible’, and not be ‘swept away by passion’. This would be hard. It was, as Nehru well understood, ‘a frightfully difficult matter to try to balance oneself on the edge of a sword.’”⁵⁰

Accordingly, India opposed the use of force in the Korean War and attempted to remain friendly with all countries, so that it could still serve as a channel and also maintain strategic autonomy.⁵¹ India was also aware that “siding with the United States would ultimately mean opposition to the PRC, India’s immediate neighbour.”⁵² Finally, an important conclusion from the experience of the Korean War was that nonalignment was about safeguarding India’s regional interests, which meant encouraging reconciliation with the PRC and its entry into the United Nations.⁵³ These lessons would be revisited in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Nehru identified the Taiwan question as the “danger point” because neither party was prepared to yield.⁵⁴ Nehru concluded that this impasse would make “the situation in the Far East . . . progressively grow worse.”⁵⁵ This made the Taiwan question one of India’s most important foreign policy concerns.

On the question of sovereignty, India was clear that “both the legal basis and the historical basis [of China’s claim over Taiwan] are favorable to the Chinese government.”⁵⁶ Nehru also felt that deliberate obstructions were being placed by the Americans in the way of Formosa (as Taiwan was known then) going to China. The Americans were aiding Chiang Kai-shek in the “occupation, not only of Formosa, but many islands very near the Chinese mainland.”⁵⁷ India counseled moderation. Nehru wrote, “We have suggested to the U.S. that a clear declaration about Formosa would ease the situation. We have suggested to the Chinese Government that any injudicious or provocative step would be dangerous and should therefore be avoided. . . . But our influence is limited and the part of the peacemaker is always difficult.”⁵⁸

The First Taiwan Strait Crisis

The First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–55) centered around islands (notably Jinmen/Quemoy and Mazu/Matsu islands, hereafter referred to as the offshore islands) located within ten nautical miles of the Chinese mainland but under Taiwan’s control. Chiang’s military reinforcement of these offshore islands and their subsequent bombardment by the PRC

sparked high tension between China and the United States from August 1954 onward. Although India was neither directly involved nor immediately affected, it was concerned that a “vicious cycle of fear” was being created because the Americans were building an anti-communist military bloc against China (the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, or SEATO), and China was building an Asian group⁵⁹ in order to “strike a blow at the US conspiracy to organize a south east Asian invasive bloc.”⁶⁰ Nehru publicly weighed in early on this crisis, telling Parliament in August 1954 that “when a problem or a decision may lead to war or peace, a war that may extend all over the world, then it ceases to be a local or even a continental problem—it is a world problem.”⁶¹ He regarded it as India’s responsibility to “throw our weight on the side of peace” when the world was “sitting on the edge of some kind of a precipice.”⁶²

Nehru’s conversations in Beijing in October 1954 with Mao—who told him that the offshore islands were being used by the United States and Chiang Kai-shek’s forces to harm China,⁶³ and described Taiwan as “a standing threat to the Chinese mainland”⁶⁴—led Nehru to conclude that the PRC’s immediate concerns centered around the offshore islands.⁶⁵ Mao also hoped that India might convey to the United States that China was not interested in fighting them over Taiwan.⁶⁶ In a subsequent conversation with Zhou Enlai, although Nehru said that he did not want to “mediate” on the Taiwan question,⁶⁷ it was from this point on that India took an active part in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Encouragement came from other quarters, notably the British government. India had noticed the “distinct—and somewhat disturbing—divergence of opinion” between the United States and the UK (India’s principal partners in the western world) over the PRC even in 1949.⁶⁸ When the crisis erupted, the British became concerned that the Sino-American confrontation could complicate their still substantial interests in the region, especially after learning that the United States intended to sign a Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan that would upset Beijing. Nehru’s conclusions, after his conversations in Beijing, that China prioritized the repossession of the offshore islands over the repossession of Taiwan, resonated with the British government. The British ambassador in Washington, who shared Nehru’s inputs with then U.S. secretary of state John Foster Dulles, also told him that “our own information is that the situation in the area of the coastal islands is perhaps not so immediately menacing as they suggest. . . . It would be dangerous if the Americans should as a result of Nationalist pressure, go ahead with a treaty which does not, either in its provisions or in the accompanying statement of its purpose, make clear that Formosa is not [to] be used as a ‘privileged sanctuary.’”⁶⁹ Both India and the UK converged on the point that a larger conflict might be avoided if a solution to the problem of the offshore islands could be found.

The Americans saw China in a different light after 1949, and the gap between India and the United States had steadily grown during the Korean and Indo-China conflicts, and over Chinese behavior in Asia in general.⁷⁰ India’s tendency to give the benefit of the doubt to China created unhappiness in Washington.⁷¹ India’s refusal to join the American-led collective security arrangements in Southeast Asia in September 1954 only served to deepen Washington’s concerns about India’s “friendship” with communist China. The Americans

watched Nehru's trip to China closely. His subsequent positive messaging about China, including a specific mention about China's claim to the offshore islands,⁷² further did not help India's image in the eyes of the U.S. administration under then president Dwight Eisenhower. When, therefore, the British urged the Americans to talk to Nehru about Taiwan,⁷³ the Americans demurred.⁷⁴ From almost the beginning, the United States was reluctant to look at India as a possible intermediary, or to even consult with India.⁷⁵

The First Taiwan Strait Crisis continued to further deepen in early 1955 after the United States signed the Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan on December 2, 1954, and the U.S. Congress passed the Formosa Resolution of 1955 that permitted the American president to deploy the armed forces for the specific purpose of securing and protecting Taiwan against a communist attack. Nehru called it "a somewhat explosive situation in the Far East."⁷⁶ Anglo-American differences also sharpened because the British were concerned that Dulles's characterization of the crisis as "a battle for Taiwan"⁷⁷ might have the effect of "frightening the Asians into China's arms"⁷⁸ and complicate the UK's interests in Asia, in addition to its relations with the Commonwealth. The United Kingdom told the United States that if the latter became involved in hostilities over the coastal islands, it might have grave implications for Anglo-American relations. The Americans, in turn, made it clear that making concessions to the PRC would be dangerous, and Dulles drew an analogy with the Munich Agreement of 1938.⁷⁹

The British were nudging India to exercise influence in this deadlocked situation between the PRC and the United States and to press Beijing with the idea of agreeing to a mutual cease-fire in the Taiwan Strait in return for the Americans persuading Chiang Kai-shek to vacate the offshore islands. This idea appealed to Nehru because it aligned with his analysis that the PRC's immediate concern or interest was in the offshore islands. In December 1954, Sir Roger Makins, the British ambassador in Washington, told G. L. Mehta, the Indian ambassador, that "the U.S. would probably not mind some of the small offshore islands near the Chinese coast such as Quemoy being taken over by the Peking Government provided they did not threaten Formosa."⁸⁰ A month later, at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London (January 31 to February 9, 1955), Nehru got the same impression from his British counterpart that the Americans might be amenable to such a mutual arrangement.⁸¹ A similar message was conveyed by the Canadians after their foreign minister, Lester Pearson, had spoken with Dulles.⁸² Nehru possibly presumed that there was support for India to exercise influence on both parties based on the idea that if the evacuation of the offshore islands by Taiwan "was done without conflict, the chances of untoward incidents would lessen very greatly."⁸³ As a result, in the spring of 1955, India began fresh efforts to engage with the United States and the PRC on the withdrawal of Taiwan from the offshore islands in return for mutual cease-fire in the Taiwan Strait.

In March, V. K. Krishna Menon, at the time a parliamentarian and India's chief delegate to the UN, suggested to the Americans that "in order to make any progress direct but informal contact would have to be established between Americans and the Chinese Reds," adding that a third party "might be useful" in this connection.⁸⁴ There was no American

response. The United States knew of public statements by Nehru and Krishna Menon in the Indian Parliament in February 1955, categorically reiterating China's claims over Taiwan, and implicitly criticizing U.S. military support to Taiwan.⁸⁵ At Menon's meeting with Eisenhower on March 15, 1955, both he and Indian Ambassador G. L. Mehta got the impression that the "President and Dulles had decided not to raise any issue of controversy nor to refer to the situation in the Far East."⁸⁶ But Menon was not willing to take the cue that the Americans were not interested in an Indian intervention. Therefore, when Menon told Dulles at a meeting in March that the PRC had no "expansionist ambitions," he would have likely confirmed Dulles' view that India was partisan. India's friendship with China, but also its growing relationship with the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin and its reluctance to support the American line on the PRC, had created growing distrust between the United States and India. And the fact was that in the 1950s, there were few interlocutors that weighed in favor of this relationship under these circumstances. The Americans knew that Menon was going to the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in April (where Zhou Enlai would also be present) but did not engage with him on this.⁸⁷ In early April 1955, prior to the Bandung conference, Dulles conveyed to his British counterpart that the United States would use other countries, but not India, to sound out the Chinese negotiators.⁸⁸ The United States subsequently approached Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Thailand, and Japan for this purpose.⁸⁹

One noteworthy lesson from India's experience of the 1950s is that around the time that the UK was encouraging India to work on the offshore-islands-for-cessation-of-fire idea with China, China was separately telling the British that this idea was a "dirty deal."⁹⁰ But, this information, and the fact that then British foreign secretary Anthony Eden was corresponding with Zhou Enlai in February 1955, was only shared with India later. It is, therefore, reasonable to infer that Nehru pursued (and was being encouraged by others to pursue) a proposal that China had already rejected.

In April 1955, at Bandung, the Chinese side stated its willingness "to sit down and talk with the United States regarding the relaxation of tensions in the Far East, and especially in the Taiwan area."⁹¹ Nehru again thought that this was the opportunity for India to play an informal role through private talks with the parties concerned.⁹² He, therefore, agreed to Zhou's idea for Krishna Menon to visit China for talks in May 1955 and sought American endorsement for his trip.⁹³ But the response from the Department of State in Washington was not encouraging. "We should avoid allowing any of them [India and other countries] believe they have mandate [to] speak for us when and if they visit Peiping."⁹⁴ This message was reiterated in late May. "We are . . . interested [to the] fullest possible [in the] reports regarding [the] Menon visit but not prepared [to] accept any specific intermediary at present."⁹⁵

Despite American reluctance, Nehru continued to press the matter, telling Eisenhower that Krishna Menon's "recent talks have led me to the belief that steps both to reduce tension and to pave the way for negotiation can be established and the desire to bring about this exists."⁹⁶ At his urging, Eisenhower and Dulles met with Menon in mid-June 1955, but Menon's

conversations in Washington were again not helpful from the American perspective. He reportedly told Dulles that China could, if it wished, take the offshore islands by force,⁹⁷ hoping to persuade the Americans to abandon them without deciding who they belonged to. When Menon told Dulles that “everybody agreed to these islands being part of China including the British, Dulles referred to Hongkong and asked whether the British would also agree to relinquish Hongkong.”⁹⁸ The records of the two meetings that Menon had with Dulles on July 1 and July 6, 1955, show that neither was a meeting of the minds. Although Menon reiterated time and again that India was not judging either party (the United States or China) and had “no other interest but to see that peaceful conditions prevailed in the Far East and the equilibrium was not upset,”⁹⁹ the Americans, by this time, were biased about India’s neutrality as well as sincerity. They used the British channel to respond to Zhou’s offer for bilateral talks.¹⁰⁰ Thus, it was finally with British help that the PRC and the United States began ambassadorial talks in Warsaw, which led to the gradual reduction of tension in the Taiwan Strait and greatly reduced the possibility of conflict. India had no role to play in this final act of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. Krishna Menon bitterly commented (addressing U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs George Allen) that “your secretary [Dulles] has said to me in so many words: ‘Go away, you are not serving any useful purpose.’”¹⁰¹ In the end, the Americans preferred to utilize their ally (the United Kingdom) over their partner (India), who they saw as partisan and biased. The British took India’s help to serve their own purposes until they succeeded in establishing their own channel (Zhou and Eden) so that India’s intervention with China was no longer needed. Beijing, which thought India might help it in establishing contacts with the United States (Zhou said as much to Trevelyan after Krishna Menon had visited Beijing in May 1955),¹⁰² eventually also realized that the British channel was more effective in delivering the Americans.

Despite a rather disappointing end to Indian efforts in resolving tensions, what clearly emerges is that India was actively involved in diplomatic efforts since it served its geopolitical interests. The abatement of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in August 1955 was, in overall terms, a good development from India’s perspective. Nehru would deny that India was officially mediating,¹⁰³ but he also admitted that “it is in this direction that India’s efforts have been directed in our informal talks in Peking, London, Ottawa and Washington.”¹⁰⁴

The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis

In August 1958, a second, more potent crisis erupted, which threatened to descend into a superpower contest after China resumed bombarding the offshore islands, and the United States publicly announced that, if attacked, it would defend them. The deployment of U.S. naval escorts to protect Taiwanese convoys and the subsequent Chinese decision in the first week of September 1958 to declare that the offshore islands lay within Chinese territorial waters (12 nautical mile limit), exacerbated the crisis to such a degree that, on September 8, then general secretary of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev wrote to Eisenhower stating that an attack on China would be regarded as an attack on the Soviet Union.

India concluded that these developments had major implications for regional peace and stability, and Nehru again “strongly [felt] that all of us should exercise such influence as we have to prevent this catastrophe from happening.”¹⁰⁵ India once again pursued the idea of finding a solution to the Taiwanese occupation of the offshore islands, which was seen as a “constant menace” posed to the Chinese mainland.¹⁰⁶ On September 30, 1958, G. Parthasarathi, the Indian ambassador in Beijing, tested the idea (Taiwanese withdrawal from the offshore islands in return for a PRC cease-fire) on Zhou Enlai, who rejected it outright, saying, “Please tell Mr. [Krishna] Menon that we are very grateful for his kindness, but there is no hurry,” and explicitly said that “if America does not cancel the ceasefire proposal, we can only continue to fight; there is no room for compromise.”¹⁰⁷ Zhou told the Soviet ambassador in Beijing, S.F. Antonov, that India (Menon) was doing this at the behest of the Americans so that it could maneuver the UN into accepting a two-Chinas situation.¹⁰⁸ Thus, whereas during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, China had generally considered Indian efforts helpful, by the time of the second crisis, it no longer felt that India was unbiased or neutral.¹⁰⁹

American concerns about India’s unreliability as an interlocutor had also solidified further. By the beginning of the second crisis, the Americans had generally discussed and rejected the use of a private channel.¹¹⁰ When, therefore, on October 1, 1958, Arthur Lall, India’s permanent representative in New York, told the Americans that India could help by providing informal interpretations to each side of the other’s position and also reportedly conveyed that China was willing to renounce the use of force provided the Taiwanese people vacated the offshore islands,¹¹¹ the Americans were already aware that the Chinese side was working to forestall this possibility. John Foster Dulles expressed concerns about the activities of Menon and Lall.¹¹² On October 2, 1958, at a meeting of the National Security Council, he referred to the conversation between Zhou Enlai and an unnamed individual (presumed to be Indian ambassador Parthasarathi) as “planted.”¹¹³ The CIA director, Allen Dulles, was also convinced that China had used India for propaganda purposes.¹¹⁴ Clear instructions were sent to the U.S. Mission to the UN, stating that “Menon should not be encouraged re any possible role for him or India as mediator in [the] present Taiwan straits crisis.”¹¹⁵ This message was reemphasized by the U.S. State Department to the U.S. ambassador in New Delhi, asking him to make it clear to the Government of India that the United States did not want a mediator in the crisis at the time.¹¹⁶

The British government initially probed the Americans about involving India in finding a solution at a meeting between Eisenhower and the British foreign secretary Selwyn Lloyd (on September 21, 1958) and shared information about Zhou’s meeting with Parthasarathi.¹¹⁷ The British soon figured that the Americans were not receptive to this idea.¹¹⁸ Subsequently, their objective became to use India to influence Asian public opinion in favor of Taiwan and against the PRC. Selwyn Lloyd told his ambassador in Washington that a more favorable Indian view of Taiwan “would be helpful not only in dealing with the question of Formosa itself, which is now likely to come to the fore, but also as ‘pressure’ against the communists.”¹¹⁹ With the United States, China, and the United Kingdom being of the same view that Indian mediation was not desirable, albeit for different reasons, India’s attempts to play

a role in the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis were thus of a limited nature. Nonetheless, India made efforts to influence developments during the second crisis as well as per the requirements of its foreign and national security policies.

Some important conclusions may be drawn from India's role during the two Taiwan Strait crises in the 1950s.

First, India's unequivocal recognition of China's sovereignty over Taiwan did not mean that the Taiwan Strait question became irrelevant to Indian foreign policy. To the contrary, developments there were an important factor in the shaping of foreign policy in the 1950s. India took keen and active interest and acted diplomatically per its objectives.

Second, the primary objective was the preservation of regional peace and security. To the extent that heightened tensions between the PRC and the United States impinged on the larger prospects for peace and security in the region, India felt that it had legitimate interests and concerns in the Taiwan Strait question. In short, India established the principle that happenings in the Taiwan Strait became India's business when the actions of involved parties led to tension and, potentially, to wider conflict.

Third, India felt that its good relations with both the PRC and the United States put it in the position of being able to offer its "good offices" to foster direct dialogue and reduce tensions, and that this approach would also serve India's strategic interests in the region. It was unable to discern that the United States did not see India's offer in the same light (nor, for that matter, did the PRC, who used India for their own purposes). Their contrasting approaches were described in the following way in Alfred D. Wilhelm Jr.'s case study of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis: "For the Indians, who like the Chinese were also seeking to refurbish their national identity after a hundred years of western influence, the talks provided another opportunity to enhance their role in Asian politics. From the perspective of Dulles the efforts of the Indians, especially those of Krishna Menon, were abetted by the Chinese and tended to produce results largely at the expense of the United States."¹²⁰ Instead, America (and China in the 1958 crisis) saw India as partisan and biased.

Fourth, India's proximity to and affinity with a third major international player, the United Kingdom, which was not a directly involved party in the Taiwan Strait but nonetheless had very substantial stakes (including Hong Kong and other colonies) in the region, did influence the way in which India acted. India consulted with the British government throughout both crises. While such consultation was understandable (the UK had ruled India until 1947 and there were cordial relations between them), the Indian leadership was unable to discern that the UK was pursuing its own objectives in the Far East. The British government, sometimes willfully, used India's policy as a means of persuading the Americans to their point of view, and at other times, pushed their own ideas through India to China. It is possible to postulate that Indian policy and the pursuit of its own geopolitical objectives, as a result, became distorted by the interests and objectives of a third party.

Finally, the personality most closely associated with Indian diplomacy during the two Taiwan Strait crises, namely Krishna Menon, may have affected India's diplomatic efforts. There are repeated references in American archival sources about Krishna Menon's apparent egotism and penchant for preaching.¹²¹ At times, the Americans also felt that he was misleading Nehru about his discussions with China.¹²² At one point, Dulles described Menon's efforts as "dangerous,"¹²³ and the British foreign secretary Harold Macmillan agreed that Menon was "messing things up" and that the Indian side was not "very reliable."¹²⁴

These possible lessons about how India handled the Taiwan question in the 1950s and acted diplomatically when it threatened to become a larger Asian conflict might be useful for policymakers when they look at how India might deal with a similar crisis in the Taiwan Strait in the future.

Choices for India in Case of a Future Crisis in the Taiwan Strait

After India transferred its diplomatic recognition to the PRC in 1950, there were no official or overt contacts with Taiwan until the end of the Cold War.¹²⁵ When India faced a balance-of-payments crisis in 1990, it confidentially explored the prospects of securing bridging finance from Taiwan (which had one of the largest foreign exchange reserves globally), but in return, Taiwan wanted to formally establish a presence in India, which was not acceptable.¹²⁶ However, new possibilities opened after the normalization of relations with China, and India seriously explored the idea of opening contacts with Taipei. A political delegation to Taiwan, led by I. K. Gujral (who went on to become the foreign minister and then the prime minister of India), had apparently reported to the Indian prime minister P. V. Narasimha Rao that if India were to set up an office there, it could expect a large amount of Taiwanese investment. In 1994, Rao told senior Indian diplomat V. C. Khanna that it would be in India's interest to establish economic ties with Taipei, "but we cannot risk our relations with PRC."¹²⁷ He tasked Khanna on attracting Taiwanese investment and trade and to steer clear of political issues. A nonofficial presence under the nomenclature of the India-Taipei Association was established in 1995. Khanna became its first director general.¹²⁸

From the outset, there was a clear view within Indian policymaking circles that India would adhere to the policy that was set in motion in 1950 through the act of transferring diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. Despite attempts by Taiwan from time to time, the question of formal recognition of the ROC never arose. The PRC also took these developments in stride. India avoided any words or actions during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–96 and gave China no reason to distrust it.¹²⁹ Driven by economic motivations, over the succeeding years, both sides worked on double taxation, bilateral investment, and civil

aviation agreements to build the framework for more trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges. Agreements were carefully crafted with creative approaches and appropriate language within the strict confines of policy. In 2003, after his successful visit to China in June, then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee cleared the appointment of a serving officer as the director general.¹³⁰ Economic and commercial activity rapidly developed, but India remained cautious in order to avoid activities that might be seen as politically colored. This policy has been broadly adhered to across the political spectrum by all the Indian governments since 1995.

In 2018, the Lok Sabha's Standing Committee on External Affairs expressed concern that “even when India is overtly cautious about China’s sensitivities while dealing with Taiwan and Tibet, China does not exhibit the same deference while dealing with India’s sovereignty concerns, be it in the case of Arunachal Pradesh or that of the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK).”¹³¹ The report also stated,

Given the fact that China’s muscular approach of late while dealing with some of the issues pertaining to India, it is difficult for the committee to be content with India’s continuing with its conventionally deferential foreign policy toward China. Dealing with a country like China essentially requires a flexible approach. The Committee strongly feel that the Government should contemplate using all options including its relations with Taiwan, as part of such an approach.¹³²

Some in the strategic community have called for the revision of India’s Taiwan policy because they feel that China’s insensitive actions on India’s core concerns should be sufficient to rethink strategy.¹³³

Any reassessment or revision of policy ought to bear in mind the circumstances under which India transferred diplomatic recognition to the PRC. It was, broadly speaking, underpinned by a cost-benefit analysis where India felt that in any situation the withholding of recognition to a government that, de facto, was in full control of a neighboring territory with virtually no possibility of being ousted, could be detrimental to India’s interests and national security. Good relations with China were seen as serving India’s interests in the broader regional and international context.¹³⁴ It was a strategic policy decision. Policy decisions are, of course, subject to change. A shift from the existing policy will likely invite significant retaliation because this is a hard redline for China. Does a policy change on the question of recognition serve India’s geopolitical situation, and do the benefits outweigh the risks?

The other question that needs answering is whether India specifically articulated or affirmed a “One China” policy when it transferred diplomatic recognition to the PRC in 1949? During the negotiations with the PRC for opening diplomatic relations, India agreed not to have official relations with the ROC or support Taiwan’s membership in the UN as the representative of China.¹³⁵ There was no mention, however, of a One China policy by either

party in the formal communications exchanged between Nehru¹³⁶ and Zhou Enlai¹³⁷ at the time of India's recognition of the PRC. It is also a matter of fact that when relations were normalized following then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit in December 1988 (or the return visit of then premier Li Peng in December 1991), the joint press communique made no reference to One China. The first reference to "One China" is contained in the China-India Joint Declaration of November 30, 1996, during Chinese president Jiang Zemin's state visit to India.¹³⁸ The intention may have been to reassure the PRC that India's decision to open a nonofficial office in Taipei in 1995 did not mean a change in policy. Yet after a decade (during which similar references were made at least four more times in bilateral joint statements), the practice of referring to One China was discontinued by India in 2009 on the grounds that China was not willing to show concern for Indian sensitivities on issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹³⁹ The current government has explicitly stated in 2014 (through then external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj) that "for India to agree to a one-China policy, China should reaffirm a one-India policy."¹⁴⁰ This policy of making no official reference to One China is consistent with the original position and intent of the Government of India, namely that India's transfer of recognition to the PRC in 1949 does not require any further explanation. Therefore, in the future, India should not make any reference to a One China policy in statements and communiqués, whether joint or solo.

The official position recognizing the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan does not prevent India from having more people-to-people, trade, business, educational, or cultural ties with Taiwan. During the first Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government of president Chen Shui-bian (2000–08), Taiwan announced the Go South Policy that included India within its ambit and scope. Several enabling agreements dealing with taxation, investment, and civil aviation were negotiated in preparation for investment flows from Taiwan. Efforts were made to attract companies in the electronics, computing, and semiconductor sectors. The investments did not materialize partly because the Taiwanese side was only interested in leveraging them for political recognition, but equally because the Indian side could not provide sufficiently attractive conditions and policies. Taiwan benchmarked the investment environment in India with those prevailing in the PRC, Malaysia, and Thailand. India fell short in Taiwan's expectations. In 2016, the current administration of President Tsai Ing-wen brought the New Southbound Policy with four focal areas—trade collaboration, talent exchanges, resource sharing, and regional connectivity—which covered South Asia as well.¹⁴¹ This time, there has been greater focus in India on greater economic engagement and corresponding receptivity in Taiwan due to Chinese behavior, but success will not come automatically and will depend on last-mile delivery and hand-holding by the Indian side.

India's recognition of the PRC in 1950 also did not, in policy terms, mean that the Government of India ceased to take any further interest in developments relating to cross-strait relations. To the contrary, in the 1950s, the Taiwan question remained central to the crafting of India's foreign policy as outlined in the second part of this working paper, and India closely followed the developments and diplomatically intervened when required. A recent study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace throws light on how

China increasingly uses the One China principle to frame the policies of other countries toward the Taiwan question.¹⁴² By asserting that this principle is globally accepted, China tries to establish a sense of legitimacy and a seemingly moral high ground from where it can pressurize others to bend to its view that whatever happens with Taiwan is a purely bilateral matter that should not be the concern of other parties. The PRC's objective is to eliminate the possibility of any external involvement in how China chooses to reunify with Taiwan, by making others, including India, feel that such action is inconsistent with their own policy.¹⁴³ However, in the 1950s, India had separated the sovereignty question from that of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. So far as the latter was concerned, Nehru made it quite clear, by word and deed, that “when a problem or a decision [in the Taiwan Strait] may lead to war or peace, a war that may extend all over the world, then it ceases to be a local or even a continental problem—it is a world problem.”¹⁴⁴ The policy of “what happens in the Taiwan Strait is India's business” was thus clearly established. This policy remains relevant in today's context because the implications of tension or conflict in the Taiwan Strait are likely to be significantly more detrimental to Indian national security.

China can be expected to exert considerable pressure to dissuade Indian activism during periods of tension in the Taiwan Strait. It will possibly argue that, aside from the One China principle, India is not even part of the “region” in which the Taiwan Strait is located and that it is therefore not a matter for India to be concerned with. However, the PRC has regularly weighed in on tense situations in South Asia and the northern Indian Ocean regions, by claiming that tension between India and other neighbors affects regional stability and therefore is a matter of legitimate concern for other countries, including China.¹⁴⁵ By the same token, India has good reason to express concern and take diplomatic action when cross-strait tensions threaten to disturb regional peace and security. For several decades, India had imposed self-censorship as part of its overall China policy. This seems to have changed when, on August 12, 2022, India expressed concern about developments in the Taiwan Strait after China began military maneuvers following the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's decision to visit Taiwan. This statement was balanced and urged all parties toward “exercise of restraint, avoidance of unilateral actions to change the status quo, de-escalation of tensions and efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region.”¹⁴⁶ India should henceforth continue to articulate concerns about destabilizing behavior by the involved parties in the Taiwan Strait in a consistent and credible way.

Given the salience of the Taiwan question from both the domestic socioeconomic as well as national security perspectives, it is not enough that the Taiwan Strait should be resituated as an important factor in India's foreign policymaking. A detailed study of internal developments (including the possibility of a change in government in Taiwan in 2024), cross-strait exchanges between the PRC and Taiwan, and the triangular dynamics between the PRC, the United States, and Taiwan is required without delay. The National Security Council Secretariat could be tasked to develop a whole-of-government assessment of both the risks and the mitigative policies that will minimize the direct and indirect impact of a Taiwan crisis on the Indian economy. On the basis of such an assessment, the Indian government

could develop contingency planning as well as identify “red flags” that might trigger the implementation of such plans. The potential consequences for India, in case its domestic economy is unprepared for the blow, will be far more widespread than the impact of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War.

If a crisis begins to develop, India may have to decide what sort of diplomatic action to take in the interests of preserving regional peace and security. In the 1950s, the government’s strategic vision of the importance of maintaining regional peace, because it was in India’s fundamental interest to do so, was correct. However, the conflicting objectives between acting in self-interest and, on the other hand, doing what was right or ethical, led India to adopt a confused policy. This error was compounded by the mixing of the national agenda with the personal agenda of V. K. Krishna Menon, who was the face of Indian diplomacy during both the Taiwan Strait crises in the 1950s. If, in the 1950s, there were good reasons to believe that China would become a partner in the Asia-Pacific, and that India’s good relations with both the PRC and the United States placed it favorably to act as a diplomatic go-between, this is no longer the situation in the 2020s. India has a multifaceted and strategic partnership with the United States. On the other hand, the PRC does not see India as “neutral” but as having tilted toward the Americans.¹⁴⁷ Since Beijing talks of judging others by their deeds—China’s actions since 2017, including its activities along the entire LAC and its recent significant augmentation of military force levels close to the border areas¹⁴⁸ as well as other indicators including the prolonged absence of a replacement for the previous Chinese ambassador in New Delhi (who left in October 2022), suggest that China considers India to be biased and problematic. In such circumstances, the possibility of adopting diplomatic action to help the two main parties in resolving a future crisis is neither practical nor feasible. India’s national interest is to avert tension and prevent disruption of peace in the Taiwan Strait. It might craft a set of diplomatic actions that, singly or in combination, help India to pursue that objective.

To what extent Indian actions are coordinated with its partners will be decided by policymakers depending on the shape and circumstances of an actual crisis in the Taiwan Strait. A recent assessment by a prominent American think tank has opined that India, along with Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand, “would be concerned about Chinese encroachment but also fear Chinese power. They would be sympathetic to the United States and Taiwan but reluctant to expose themselves to a Chinese attack. Thus, they would take a passive approach, allowing U.S. overflight and transit but not participating themselves or allowing operations from their territory.”¹⁴⁹ A recent European assessment released at the Munich Security Conference 2023 has similarly omitted any reference to India in the context of regional deterrence building against PRC’s aggressive behavior toward Taiwan.¹⁵⁰ Such assessments suggest that the rest of the world is not clear about India’s course of action if a crisis breaks out in the strait. It is important that India’s partners have clarity on this matter so that there is no misreading of its position.

This, first and foremost, requires a mapping of the expectations of the two principal players and the actions they would anticipate from India.

So far as the PRC is concerned, it would prefer that India remains “neutral,” but it would presume that the latter is likely to “tilt” toward the United States. Its actions might, thus, be with the intention to deter this tilt or to minimize the possible threat of a second front. This could take the form of posturing (massive force build-up or nuclear weapons targeting), aggressive behavior along the LAC (either singly or with Pakistan), or, in a more extreme case, a limited punitive strike. On the basis of scenario-building, Indian strategists need to develop a set of responses on an escalatory ladder in case China follows such a course of action. This will have to be done bearing in mind that the asymmetry between India and China will not change in the near future either in terms of comprehensive national strength or in terms of border infrastructure, and hence India has to prepare for increased border tensions if China feels that gray-zone warfare is the appropriate form of deterrence to stop India from helping the United States in the next Taiwan Strait crisis. An important lesson of the 1950s that is worth recalling is that China is equally anxious about a multifront conflict.¹⁵¹ India should remind China that the latter is vulnerable too. China cannot be allowed to absolve itself of responsibility by placing the burden of conflict along China’s southwestern border only on India simply in order to deter the Indian tilt toward the United States.¹⁵² If India’s national interests are directly threatened, all options should be available. However, this is a case in extremis. The overarching objective should be to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and every effort must be made by India to prevent the possibility of conflict in any form without closing any options.

The United States assumes that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would put India in a dilemma. On the one hand, India would be wary of the strengthening of China’s position, which might result from a conquest of Taiwan, and would have reasons to be friendly with the United States. On the other hand, India would also be alert to the dangers that would result from participation. It is unlikely that India would take active part (except if directly threatened) if a conflict were to arise, but the United States would still expect some Indian support during the same. A CSIS paper makes the key point that, unlike in the case of Ukraine, the United States will neither be able to preposition significant forces in Taiwan, nor will they be able to land troops or significantly augment supplies and war materiel once the conflict begins. This means that the United States will have to put all their logistical and basing arrangements in place before the conflict. The report postulates that initial Chinese missile strikes may destroy much of the United States’ forward-deployed aircraft and naval strength.¹⁵³ This makes prewar deployments that are geographically less vulnerable to Chinese strike capabilities critical to the U.S. war effort. It is not unreasonable to assume that the United States will ask for logistical assistance from India, possibly including the use of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These could be seen as red flags by the PRC. India needs to have a clear view of what to do in a pre-conflict situation where the United States might be climbing the escalatory ladder as well as during a conflict when Washington makes demands of New Delhi. This requires a proper understanding of the United States’ objectives, strategy, and strategic expectations.

For these reasons, the Taiwan Strait issue should be put on the agenda in all consultations with key partners. India will inevitably have differences with its partners on the risks and

benefits of confronting China, but a clear idea, during peacetime and not as the crisis unfolds, of the points of convergence and divergence and of its partners' expectations will provide the vital inputs that will facilitate advance preparations for contingencies in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Closer coordination and liaison arrangements ought to be built into the partnerships. Building a framework for structured dialogues with bilateral partners, including European countries who share similar objectives on Taiwan—namely of how the status quo can be preserved without Taiwan making any moves toward independence¹⁵⁴—as well as with ASEAN, which also broadly identifies with India's goal, should also be a priority. Constant monitoring of the situation and regular exchanges with foreign stakeholders are necessary so that India is not left in a vulnerable position.

India might consider taking the following steps in building a common approach with the European Union. First, both could align their statements to send the message that India's concerns are also shared by other countries. Second, both could raise greater awareness among other countries in the Indo-Pacific and, more generally, in the Global South, about the potential consequences of a war in the Taiwan Strait for their economies. Most countries, including Indian Ocean and African states, have no clear idea what consequences might mean for them and, when apprised of them, they might be prone to adding their voices to those of India and others who wish to see peace and stability prevailing in the Taiwan Strait. Third, with the EU, India should have focused discussion on “de-risking” (not de-coupling) measures that can be mutually beneficial to both parties. In pursuit of de-risking from over-dependency on China, European businesses are exploring alternative investment destinations. India should offer itself as a viable partner. For this to happen, a dialogue between policymakers on both sides about the potential risks in the Taiwan Strait is also necessary. ASEAN and other middle powers in the Indo-Pacific may be less willing to do this out of concern for what China might think. Yet, balanced discussion with them could yield benefits because the starting point for all is that peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is a necessary precondition for the economic security and prosperity of the whole region. The larger the number of countries that talk in concert against an escalation in the Taiwan Strait, the greater the possibility that global public opinion might act as a deterrent on those who seek to perpetuate a crisis.

Finally, scenario-building also needs to take place accounting for the possibility that the two principal powers reach a compromise. The CSIS study avers that escalation, prolongation, or a stalemate might cause strategic disillusionment in the United States. The human, financial, and military costs may lead Americans to question whether a defense of Taiwan is worth the sacrifice, especially if the outcome of a Sino-U.S. conflict is not conclusive.¹⁵⁵ One should recall that equations between great powers (the PRC and the United States) shifted quickly on Taiwan between 1959 and 1962, leaving India in a vulnerable position. Another lesson of the 1950s, when a great power (the United Kingdom) sought to shape India's perceptions and influence its actions in the service of its own interests, should also not be forgotten.

Conclusion

The growing rivalry between the PRC and the United States in the western Pacific is likely to be for the long term. Taiwan is the most probable flashpoint for possible conflict. Any sort of conflict, or even high tension, in the Taiwan Strait could have a devastating impact on Indian economic and national security interests. Aside from the obvious and immediate impact that it will have on India's external trade and supply chains on which key Indian export sectors are dependent (pharmaceuticals, electronics, and semiconductors), there will also be massive disruption in global shipping, rising costs of transportation insurance, and disruption of data flows, causing joblessness at a very substantial cost to the Indian treasury. Further, this is notwithstanding the possibility that secondary military action might be launched along the LAC if China thinks that India is an adjunct threat.

Therefore, what happens in the Taiwan Strait must become an integral part of Indian foreign and national security policy. There is an urgent need to assess the likely impact of a potential crisis across the Indian economy and to identify ways to mitigate the impact. Delaying such assessment might prove very costly since significant preparations to harden critical sections of the domestic economy and to reduce dependencies on China and East Asia will take time. This will require a whole-of-government effort.

On the external front, India's strategic interest is to ensure that peace and stability prevails in the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, India must exert diplomatic efforts toward this end, both in terms of signaling its concerns to the two principal players as well as through structured consultation with a wide group of partners, in order to obtain clarity about their intentions in the event of a crisis and to inform them about India's likely posture in various situations. Finally, in preparation for a potential crisis, India needs to map the possible expectations of China and the United States and prepare a menu of responses (in ascending order) to the pressures that both parties might build upon India.

About the Author

Vijay Gokhale is a nonresident senior fellow at Carnegie India. Gokhale retired from the Indian Foreign Service in January 2020 after a diplomatic career that spanned thirty-nine years. From January 2018 to January 2020, he served as the foreign secretary of India.

Prior to his term as foreign secretary, Gokhale had served as India's high commissioner to Malaysia from January 2010 to October 2013, as ambassador of India to the Federal Republic of Germany from October 2013 to January 2016, and as ambassador of India to the People's Republic of China from January 2016 to October 2017. He has served as head of the India-Taipei Association, in Taiwan, from July 2003 to January 2007. During his time in the headquarters of the Ministry of External Affairs, he has also worked in key positions in the East Asia Division, including as the joint secretary (Director General) for East Asia from March 2007 to December 2009.

He has worked extensively on matters relating to the Indo-Pacific region with a special emphasis on Chinese politics and diplomacy. Since his retirement from the Foreign Service, Gokhale has contributed opinion pieces to the *New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Hindu*, the *Times of India*, and the *Indian Express*. He is also the author of three recent books: *Tiananmen Square: The Making of a Protest* (HarperCollins India, May 2021), *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India* (Penguin Random House India, July 2021), and *After Tiananmen: The Rise of China* (HarperCollins India, September 2022).

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