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'RISING TENSION IN TAIWAN STRAIT IS CAUSE FOR CONCERN'

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Tension across the Taiwan Strait has risen in past weeks after the leader of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Lai Ching-te took over as Taiwan's new President. Since then the Chinese authorities have mounted psychological and military pressure on Taiwan. Beijing has issued sternly worded warnings, accompanied by personal threats, to Lai Ching-te against making statements that Beijing perceives as provocative. Tensions were raised further when Chinese President Xi Jinping told the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to be ready to invade Taiwan by its hundredth founding anniversary in 2027. On May 7, 2024, the US Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns repeated that "President Xi has instructed the PLA [People's Liberation Army], the Chinese military leadership to be ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan".

A few significant developments have contributed to the increase in tension. These include Chinese President Xi Jinping's three nation tour to Europe in early May, which came after an interval of five years, and Russian President Putin's summit with Xi Jinping in Beijing within a week thereafter. China and Russia, who claim a "no limits friendship", have endorsed each other's "core interests", "indivisible security" and territorial claims, and jointly articulated that the existing world order needs to be made more "fair" and "equitable". While Putin considers Ukraine as historically a part of Russia, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made Taiwan's reunification with Mainland China an emotionally charged domestic issue and identified it as one of the country's three "core interests". Chinese President Xi Jinping has stoked this aspiration and made it an integral part of the "rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation". The goal is linked with Xi Jinping's personal ambition to go down in China's history as the leader who achieved the reunification.

The electoral victory of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for an unprecedented third time and the election of pro-independence DPP candidate Lai Ching-te as President was a setback for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Xi Jinping. The DPP victory came despite Xi Jinping having strengthened the CCP Central Committee (CC)'s United Front Work Department (UFWD) in late 2016, by doubling its budget and personnel strength. He also brought retired veteran CCP cadre Song Tao out of retirement to head the crucial Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the CCP CC's Taiwan Office.

Song Tao, currently Director of the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) of the State Council, (宋涛) worked in Fujian Province when Xi Jinping served as Governor there (1999-2002) and was even then considered a close confidant of Xi Jinping. Song Tao was

also Xi Jinping's special envoy to North Korea in November 2017 and played similar roles on visits to Vietnam and Cuba. Song Tao is also close to Wang Huning, the fourth-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP, Party ideologue and Deputy to Xi Jinping at the Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs. According to reports, of all the Directors of the Taiwan Affairs Office since the agency's inception, Song Tao is the one who has "the deepest knowledge of the DPP" and has had "many contacts and communications with" Chiu Tai-san (邱太三), the current minister of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC, 大陸委員會), TAO's counterpart in Taiwan. Of his three Deputy Directors: Pan Xianzhang (潘賢掌), Qiu Kaiming (仇开明) and Wu Xi (吴玺) ---- Qiu Kaiming, holds a Ph.D. in International Politics from Fudan University in Shanghai, earned under the guidance of Wang Huning, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and known as the "national mentor". Qiu Kaiming served as Director of the Cross-Strait Relations Research Centre at the Taiwan Affairs Office think-tank until 2019, when he assumed the role of Director of the Research Bureau at the Taiwan Affairs Office. With over 25 years of research experience on Taiwan-related issues, he now oversees cross-strait exchanges and formulates policies towards Taiwan.

The UFWD has been operating inside Taiwan and can now certainly be expected to intensify efforts. Already, interactions with the Kuomintang (KMT) have been stepped up with a KMT delegation visiting China almost every week. KMT leader and former Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou has visited China at least twice and met Chinese President Xi Jinping. China's official Huaxia Ribao (Overseas Chinese Daily) publishes reports on Taiwan and the officials or politicians visiting China from Taiwan each day. Reports suggest that Taiwan's armed forces personnel are also being targeted and attempts made to win them over or get them to defect.

Ever since former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, China has maintained military and psychological pressure on Taiwan and kept alive the possibility of China using the military to effect the reunification. The PLA Eastern Theater Command has conducted numerous exercises in the Taiwan Strait and, departing from past practice, has now made crossing the median line almost routine. They have also, for the first time, begun carrying out exercises around Taiwan and on its eastern coast, prompting observers to assess that the Chinese Navy is rehearsing for a blockade. The number of warships and aircraft participating in these exercises has also increased. Most recently on July 10, Taiwan's defence ministry reported it had detected more than 66 aircraft and 7 PLAN warships in the Taiwan Strait and that 56 of them had crossed the median line. Separately, PLA Ground Forces and Marines have carried out amphibious landing and para-drop exercises on the Chinese Mainland ostensibly in preparation for an invasion of Taiwan.

There are other indications of the Chinese Communist leadership working to a timetable for Taiwan's reunification, if necessary, by force. In fact, China's leadership has wanted to reunify Taiwan with the Mainland since 1947. The PLA has been preparing for this and with China having grown much more powerful the threat too has correspondingly grown. While Chinese Communist leaders have occasionally said that Taiwanese are their compatriots and they would not like to shed Chinese blood, their statements imply that the Taiwanese should agree to peacefully reunify with the Mainland.

In March 2024, for the first time the Work Report of the Government presented by Chinese Premier Li Qiang to the National People's Congress (NPC) plenum omitted the word "peaceful" while referring to the reunification of Taiwan. It was notable that the final version of his speech too did not include it, thereby confirming that the omission was deliberate. The frequency of assertions by senior Chinese leaders that China will not tolerate moves towards independence by Taiwan's leaders have also increased. At the 16th Straits Forum in Xiamen in June this year, Wang Huning, Politburo Standing Committee member and Chairman of the CPPCC, which is responsible for Taiwan's reunification with Mainland China, reiterated this. Separately confirming that the situation had changed, a senior CCP cadre recently revealed that the reunification process had entered the "fast track". Zhang Weiwei, a close associate and supporter of Chinese President Xi Jinping and former English Interpreter to Deng Xiaoping and late Chinese Premier Li Peng, is also a Professor of International Relations at Fudan University and Director of its China Institute. Zhang Weiwei is known to have briefed the Politburo. Speaking at a seminar in Malaysia on May 8, he said that reunification had entered the "fast track" and is targeted to be completed by 2027. Interestingly, Zhang Weiwei was in France around the time of Xi Jinping's visit and in lectures there underscored that the Taiwan issue was high on the CCP's agenda and that reunification would be effected soon. If Xi Jinping has returned from his European tour with the feeling that the US is distracted and Europe is preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, it would strengthen his view that they will possibly be reluctant to open a second front. In that case China has a window of opportunity to move against Taiwan with minimal possibility of intervention by the West.

The increased overt military pressure on Taiwan needs to be viewed in this backdrop. Reports have further revealed that China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal and has been constructing hundreds of new silos in Xinjiang. A few years earlier, PLA officers had suggested that China is redeploying its nuclear warheads to reduce the time taken to marry warheads with the missiles. These measures build deterrence against any potential attack on China by the US and West. Reports yet to be confirmed claim that the fishing boat incident off Kinmen Island in March 2024 in which two fishermen were killed was actually an operation of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). If true, it would signal a significant escalation of pressure on Taiwan. Beijing also chose to interpret Lai Ching-te's inaugural speech as provocation and warned that such acts would not be tolerated. The following day the PLA conducted a major exercise around Taiwan when Taiwan's defence ministry claimed dozens of aircraft and vessels had crossed the median line. The spokesman of the PLA Eastern Theatre Command warned Taiwan that with each provocation China's armed forces would take one step further towards reunification. By saying so Beijing has effectively put Taiwan and its supporters on notice.

Whether China can successfully launch a military invasion of Taiwan is debatable. There is a reliable report that late last year a PLA General conveyed to Xi Jinping that the PLA is not ready for an invasion of Taiwan. Amphibious operations are difficult and crossing the Taiwan Strait will be a difficult operation as would be going over Taiwan's mountainous hinterland to get to its urban centres. A major uncertainty is whether the US will intervene and whether other countries in the region will react when their commercial shipping and lanes of communications are threatened. The Japanese Foreign Minister has already declared that "an attack on Taiwan means an attack on

Japan"! If countries start preparing to support Taiwan, then Beijing will probably re-evaluate, or pause, its plans for Taiwan.

Nevertheless, Beijing retains the option of a sudden, swift operation to seize the three small islands of Penghu, Matsu and Kinmen sited only 129 kms, 19 kms and 12 kms respectively off the coast of Mainland China. They are dependent on China for water and some daily essential supplies. Such a limited Chinese action will also end before the US or other nations can react and enable Xi Jinping to declare he has begun the process of reunification --- becoming the first Chinese leader to achieve this! The US will then face the difficult choice of either responding militarily to ensure it remains the preeminent global power or imposing punitive economic sanctions on China. Enforcing the latter will be difficult as American business is already unhappy with the sanctions and restrictions on trade with China as the US Administration emphasises competition rather than confrontation. Europe, which is reluctant to dilute ties with China, will also drag its feet. Countries in the region like Japan, Vietnam and India can be expected to take serious note of China's actions and prepare options to counter its aggressive policy of forcibly grabbing territories it claims. It would, nevertheless, be imprudent to disregard the possibility of Xi Jinping embarking on such an adventure.

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