



EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

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Taiwan, a Malacca blockade and India's options

Syllabus: GS2/ India & Foreign Relations, International Organisations & Groupings

In Context

- China has been frequently intimidating Taiwan over the past year through the deployment of its air force and navy in the surrounding areas.
 - There is the often-posed question, of whether India would take action in the Strait of Malacca or the Andaman Sea.

China and Taiwan Conflict

- **One China Policy:** The “One China” policy refers to the idea that China is one country, consisting of mainland China and Taiwan.
 - Both sides claimed to be the legitimate government of China, and for many years Taiwan was recognized as such by much of the international community.
 - China asserts that Taiwan is a province of China and therefore part of “One China,” while Taiwan maintains its own government and claims to be an independent country.
- **Recent issue:** China's President Xi Jinping has said "reunification" with Taiwan "must be fulfilled" - and has not ruled out the possible use of force to achieve this.
 - China launched a series of military exercises, including the firing of ballistic missiles, focused on six danger zones around Taiwan, three of which overlapped the island's territorial waters.
 - In 2021, China appeared to ramp up pressure by sending military aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defence Zone, a self-declared area where foreign aircraft are identified, monitored, and controlled in the interests of national security.

Role of Malacca Strait & Andaman Island in Relation with the Taiwan issue

- **Relation of Malacca Strait:**

- **Need of China:** The Strait of Malacca is a crucial route from the standpoint of China's energy security policy.
- **Security of Taiwan:** There are several concerns which suggest that Taiwan needs to give attention to the Malacca Strait which is vital to its security.
- **Location of big power rivalry:** The strait has recently become a nexus of big power rivalry involving China, India, Japan and the United States.
 - Although the strait's littoral states--Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore--have struggled to maintain security in the strait and their sovereign right to do so, Australia, India, Japan and the United States have all offered military "assistance."
- **China-US rivalry:** China believes that the US strategy in the event of a clash over Taiwan is to disrupt its energy imports.
 - Indeed it believes the US Navy now tacitly controls the strait.
- **Role of Andaman Island:**
 - The U.S. increasingly regards India as a regional ballast for stability in the region.
 - According to experts, India could provide the US with diplomatic support and access to the Andaman and Nicobar islands in the event of a Taiwan-China crisis.
- **What is being Speculated?**
 - Any speculative action in the Strait of Malacca or the Andaman Sea would involve **EITHER**
 - A naval blockade against commercial shipping
 - **OR**
 - China's key trade and energy sea lines of communication or military action against Chinese naval vessels.

Constraints/Limitations

- There are multiple constraints in regard to India's options in the Strait of Malacca.
- **Not in line with international law:**
 - "Distant blockades" away from a belligerent nation's geography can be challenged under international law.
- **Trade dependence:**
 - The trade that passes through the Strait of Malacca is not just China's economic and energy lifeline.
 - An overwhelming volume of the trade of Japan, South Korea and even India itself passes through the same Strait.
- **Insufficient Support:**
 - The channel of the Strait of Malacca is long, nearly 500 miles, and involves the sovereignty of other states such as Indonesia, Malaysia,

Thailand and Singapore which would all be affected adversely by a naval blockade.

- The affected countries are unlikely to support a naval blockade.
- **Restrictions of Commercial shipping:**
 - Commercial shipping is extremely complex to identify in terms of the sovereignty of the vessel, flag, registration, insurance and ownership of cargo.
 - And these are often multinational in nature and can also be changed as convenient through transshipment at any port in Southeast Asia.
- **Detouring options:**
 - Apart from the fact that it is difficult to interdict China's trade and energy supplies, the additional reality is that even if the Strait of Malacca were "choked", shipping can take a detour either through the Sunda or the Lombok Straits to reach China.
- **May lead to a war:**
 - A naval blockade or unilateral action against an adversary's naval vessels would be tantamount to a declaration of war; at the very minimum, it could **lead to a conflict**, not necessarily limited to the maritime sphere.
 - Regional countries which are adversely affected by disruption in the Strait of Malacca, including friendly countries, are **unlikely to endorse any unilateral action**.

Suggestions & Way ahead

- **Dependency on US & other stakeholders in Conflict scenario:**
 - The larger question in the context of the Strait of Malacca that remains to be answered is whether any of India's strategic partners, especially the U.S., would support any interdiction of Chinese vessels in a bilateral conflict between India and China unless the U.S. itself were involved in a kinetic conflict with China.
 - Even in such a scenario, there is perhaps no guarantee of support by other stakeholders in the region, especially the Southeast Asian nations.
- **Safety and the security of the region:**
 - One possibility for Taiwan would be to establish itself as a genuine stakeholder in the safety and security of the Malacca Strait.
 - Technology and training would help the littoral states to improve security and safety.
- **India's primary role:**
 - India has traditionally faced China's military threats on its borders essentially on its own.
 - To the extent that a full-blown U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan sends ripples across the Indian Ocean, India's primary role may be limited to

- A **proactive defence of its territorial interests** and
- The security of its sea lines of communication and those of its strategic partners in the eastern and western India Ocean.
- In any such eventuality, India's primary focus would remain on its continental borders with China.
- **Advocacy of multi-polarity:**
 - A robust India with a strong economy, nuclear deterrence capability and a credible military can contribute to multi-polarity in the Indo-Pacific.

Daily Mains Question

[Q] What is the role of Malacca Strait & Andaman Island in Relation to the Taiwan issue? What should be India's role in the case of a conflict scenario in the Indo-Pacific?