



## **China's Three Gorges Dam a military target in war with Taiwan and India?**

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### **Abstract**

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In the face of a recent uptick in Chinese sabre rattling against Taiwan and India, the topic of the Three Gorges Dam as a military target has come to the fore. Taiwan defence planners have long discussed bombing the dam in the case of a Chinese invasion of the island, and with concurrent deterioration in Sino-Indian relations over border skirmishes, there is increased risk the dam could be in the crosshair that would devastate China's population as well as its reserve military forces downstream.

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## Analysis

This past week there has been an uptick of Chinese fighter jets [violating](#) Taiwan airspace.<sup>1</sup> Multiple Chinese [Su-30 and J-10](#) fighters had entered Taiwan's "response zone" to its southwest, prompting the island's defence ministry to condemn this "destabilizing action which threatened regional peace."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, these provocative actions elevate the risks of miscalculation and escalation of military conflict. On September 4 when a Chinese Su-35 crashed in Guangxi in southern China, [Indian press](#) and social media began reporting that Taiwan's patriot missile defence system had [shot it down](#).<sup>3</sup>



Rohit k Rai  
@The\_RKR

The people Of Taiwan are with India .

Taiwan just shot down Chinese SU KAI 35 Fighter jet!

The pilot was seriously injured in the crash of the Chinese PLA's Su Kai 35 fighter jet flying over the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

Congratulations, [@globaltimesnews](#)

Relations between India and China are currently tense and at a nadir not seen since the 1970s, following the violent border clash in Galwan Valley back in June that [killed 20 Indian soldiers](#) and left an unknown number of Chinese dead.<sup>4</sup> The primitive weapons of [nail-studded rods](#) used to bludgeon Indian soldiers to death especially sparked outrage and fortified Indian hardliners against China.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the incident's viral spread in India and China, Taiwan Ministry of Defence was quick to issue a statement [denying](#) they had shot down the Chinese fighter jet, as U.S. gave a [sigh of relief](#). The last thing U.S. wants right now is a cross-strait conflagration in midst of a pandemic and civil unrest during an election year.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee, "Chinese fighter jets enter Taiwan airspace in 'threat to regional peace'", *The Independent*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-taiwan-jet-fighters-regional-space-dispute-tsai-ing-wen-b420945.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Taiwan reports multiple Chinese fighters to its southwest", *Times of India*, September 9, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/taiwan-reports-multiple-chinese-fighters-to-its-southwest/articleshow/78013028.cms>

<sup>3</sup> James Palmer, "Indian Social Media Goes Nuts Over Fake Claim of Su-35 Shootdown", *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/04/india-taiwan-china-su35-shootdown/>; "Fact Check: Did Taiwan Really Shoot Down Chinese Fighter Jet For Violating Its Airspace? Here's The Truth", *India*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.india.com/viral/fact-check-did-taiwan-really-shoot-down-chinese-fighter-jet-for-violating-its-airspace-heres-the-truth-4131634/>; [https://twitter.com/The\\_RKR/status/1301791150332768257](https://twitter.com/The_RKR/status/1301791150332768257)

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Slater, Gerry Shih, Niha Masih, "20 Indian soldiers killed in first deadly clashes with Chinese troops in 45 years", *Washington Post*, June 16, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/three-indian-soldiers-killed-in-rare-clash-on-china-india-border/2020/06/16/13c11c46-afa5-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/three-indian-soldiers-killed-in-rare-clash-on-china-india-border/2020/06/16/13c11c46-afa5-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> "Galwan Valley: Image appears to show nail-studded rods used in India-China brawl", *BBC*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53089037>

<sup>6</sup> Aishwarya Rakesh, "Taiwan Denies Shooting Down Chinese Warplane", *Defense World*, September 4, 2020, [https://www.defenseworld.net/news/27796/Taiwan\\_Shoots\\_Down\\_Chinese\\_Su\\_35\\_Violating\\_Airspace\\_Reports#.X1o5ry2z1N0](https://www.defenseworld.net/news/27796/Taiwan_Shoots_Down_Chinese_Su_35_Violating_Airspace_Reports#.X1o5ry2z1N0); Michael Peck, "Be Glad That Taiwan Didn't Shoot Down A Chinese Fighter", *Forbes*, September 4, 2020,



### Asia's alliance of democracies

Realising U.S. may or may not come to Taiwan's defence under Washington's current policy of "[strategic ambiguity](#)", Taipei is taking steps to join India and Japan in forging an Asian "[arc of freedom](#)" to counter China.<sup>7</sup> The "arc of freedom" was championed by New Delhi and Tokyo in [2014](#) to align democratic countries in Asia to withstand China's regional expansion.<sup>8</sup>

This week, at the Ketagalan Forum's Asia Pacific Security Dialogue in Taipei, Taiwan's President Tsai called for an [alliance of democracies](#) to oppose China.<sup>9</sup> With an international audience that included keynote speaker and former U.S. National Security Advisor General H.R. McMaster, Tsai exhorted that "It is time for like-minded countries, and democratic friends in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, to discuss a framework to generate sustained and concerted efforts to maintain a strategic order that deters unilateral aggressive actions."

In the absence of treaty allies, Taiwan understands the imperative of coalition-building. Often dubbed as "[the Israel of the Far East](#)", Taiwan shares similarities with Israel as a democratic country and staunch U.S. ally facing autocratic adversaries, yet lacks a mutual defence treaty by virtue of their diplomatic isolation/boycott and questions over legitimacy of their national sovereignty.<sup>10</sup>

As such it is no wonder Taiwan is now stepping up efforts to engage democratic countries outside of Asia such as Israel in the Middle East, and next year Taipei will be sending a [military delegation](#) to study reserve forces in Israel.<sup>11</sup> With [NATO](#) now turning its eyes towards [China](#) and the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan as a [Major Non-NATO Ally \(MNNA\)](#) will likely increase its cooperation with fellow MNNA Israel, Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Thailand.<sup>12</sup>

### Three Gorges Dam a military target

In the meantime, miscalculation and accidental military conflict remains a concern. There is a real risk of China overreaching with its cross-Straits military provocations and a fearful Taiwan overreacting. In this case, the Three Gorges Dam may become a military target.

In a recent interview with well-known [German-Chinese](#) hydraulic engineer Wang Weiluo, he mentioned how the Chinese have long been cognizant of the dam as a military target for terrorists and adversaries, and has thus

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelpeck/2020/09/04/be-glad-that-taiwan-didnt-shoot-down-a-chinese-fighter--and-start-a-war/#4cfe8da18a7>

<sup>7</sup> Brad Glosserman, "Straight talk about Taiwan's 'strategic ambiguity'", *The Japan Times*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/09/08/commentary/world-commentary/taiwan-us-strategic-ambiguity-china/>; "Japan, India and Asia's 'Arc of Freedom'", *The American Interest*, March 5, 2014, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/03/05/japan-india-and-asias-arc-of-freedom/>

<sup>8</sup> Jaswant Singh, "Asia's New Security Trifecta", *Project Syndicate*, February 23, 2014, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/jaswant-singh-considers-india-s-deepening-strategic-relationships-with-south-korea-and-japan?barrier=accesspaylog>

<sup>9</sup> "Taiwan's Tsai calls for alliance of democracies to oppose China", *The Mainichi*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/taiwan-to-send-military-delegation-to-israel-to-study-reserve-forces-641477>

<sup>10</sup> Uriel Sturm, "Taiwan—the Israel of the Far East", *Jerusalem Post*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/magazine/taiwan-the-israel-of-the-far-east-614365>

<sup>11</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Taiwan to send military delegation to Israel to study reserve forces", *Jerusalem Post*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/taiwan-to-send-military-delegation-to-israel-to-study-reserve-forces-641477>

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Speranza, "China is NATO's new problem", *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/08/china-nato-hybrid-threats-europe-cyber/>; Emil Avdaliani, "China's Effect: A Global NATO", *BESA Centre Perspectives Paper No. 1,684*, August 10, 2020, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-nato-pacific/>; U.S. Department of State, "Major Non-NATO Ally Status", January 30, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>



set up a thick layer of ground and air defences to protect the dam.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, in a scenario of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, Taiwanese defence planners have since the 1990s discussed using [long-range missiles to hit the dam](#).<sup>14</sup> Given the concurrent tense relations between [India and China](#), with Indian generals warning of military escalation, this may also be a likely target should further conflict break out.<sup>15</sup>



But if this happens, it would be devastating to China as 400 million people live downstream, as well as the majority of the PLA's reserve forces that are located midstream and downstream of the Yangtze River. According to Wang, if the dam is bombed and the water rushes down, 90% of the PLA airborne division would be wiped out.

As such it is precarious that China, India and Taiwan are all engaged in a game of chicken at this juncture. Hopefully there is a hotline among the militaries for de-escalation, because the well-being of millions of their people hang in the balance.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *The Times of Israel* on September 11, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Zooming in with Simone Gao, "The Ongoing Danger of the Three Gorges Dam, Pt. 1: Will it become a military target?", August 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4aBLMwC5Us>

<sup>14</sup> "Two missiles could blow up Three Gorges: strategist", *Asia Times*, January 18, 2018, <https://asiatimes.com/2018/01/two-missiles-can-blow-up-chinas-three-gorges-dam-taiwan-strategist-claims/>

<sup>15</sup> "Ladakh faceoff: India, China on the brink of war?", *India Today*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/programme/newstrack-with-rahul-kanwal/video/ladakh-faceoff-india-china-on-the-brink-of-war-1719897-2020-09-08>; <https://twitter.com/sagarikaghose/status/1304087250829848577>



### About the Author of this Issue

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Dr. Christina Lin is a California-based foreign policy analyst. She has extensive US government experience working on national security policy planning, including at DoD, State, and NSC, and was a research consultant at Jane's Information Group's Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear Assessments Intelligence Centre.



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