

Chinese politics & policy

China's great power play puts Asia on edge

Domestic insecurity, ambition and the pandemic blamed for Beijing's belligerence



China's defence budget has increased by double digits every year for the past two decades © Kyodo News/Getty

James Kyng in Hong Kong, **Kathrin Hille** in Taipei, **Christian Shepherd** in Beijing and **Amy Kazmin** in New Delhi 3 HOURS AGO

China's southern and eastern reaches are ringed with anxiety, raising fears of conflict sparked by miscalculation or even by design.

The potential flashpoints are familiar: Taiwan; disputed islands in the South China and East China Seas; and India's Himalayan border. What is unusual is that tensions have risen in unison and some commentators have warned that there are risks of military flare-ups potentially involving the US.

"Since China and the United States are nuclear powers, the risk of a direct war between the two countries is still very small, but small-scale military conflicts do happen," said Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University, one of China's most influential academics.

"There is a qualitative difference in scale between a direct war and military conflicts," Mr Yan said via email. "The core conflict between China and the United States is power competition and the smaller the power gap between the two, the more intense the competition will be."



But why is Beijing's assertiveness intensifying on its periphery even as its relationship with the US shifts from strategic competition towards outright hostility?

Analysts ascribe the tougher edge to a confluence of domestic insecurity after crackdowns in regions such as [Hong Kong](#) and [Xinjiang](#), great power ambitions fuelled by the leadership of Xi Jinping, and a touch of opportunism afforded by the coronavirus pandemic.

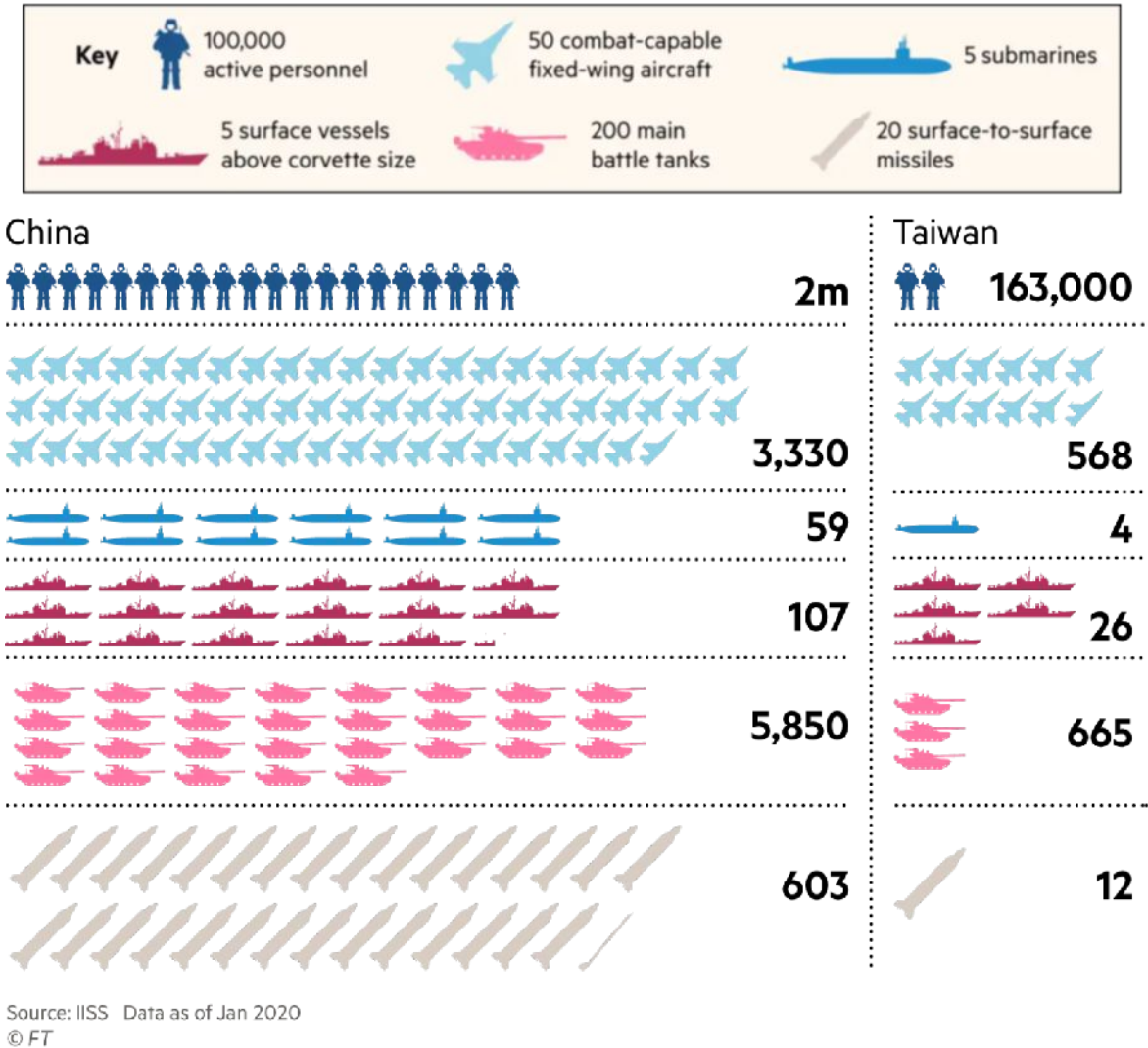
‘Sacred’ Taiwan is a magnet for tensions

China conducted military exercises near Taiwan “to safeguard national sovereignty” in August as Alex Azar, US health secretary, became the most senior Washington official to visit [the country](#) since 1979.

Beijing was furious. “Recently, certain large countries are incessantly making negative moves regarding the Taiwan issue and sending wrong signals to the ‘Taiwan independence’ forces, seriously threatening peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” said Colonel Zhang Chunhui of the People’s Liberation Army.

A person who advises Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan’s president, said Mr Xi’s great power ambitions, coupled with purges within the Communist party, had shaken Beijing’s established decision-making processes.

Chinese military superiority



“This has created a very messy situation, and we worry that Xi Jinping might not be stable,” the person said. “When that happens, the risk of conflict rises rapidly.”

Alexander Huang, a professor at the Institute of Strategic Studies at Tamkang University, said internal power struggles had played a role in other Chinese military conflicts.

He cited concerns by Mao Zedong that he might not be able to control a regional party leader in north-east China as one factor in the former leader’s decision to enter the Korean war in 1950.



China, which has the world's largest navy, has made numerous territorial claims in the South China Sea © Mark Schiefelbein/AFP/Getty



Indian soldiers were involved in a fatal brawl on the Himalayan border with Chinese troops in June © REUTERS

“Nowadays, we are again seeing a linkage between internal and international factors, but with a reversed dynamic: China feels risks and pressure on many fronts externally, and Xi might come under pressure internally if he is seen as not handling one of those issues well,” Prof Huang said.

The assertiveness is sharpened by the PLA’s capabilities and reach. Following more than two decades of annual double-digit increases in defence spending, the Chinese military has acquired the world’s [largest navy](#), rapidly growing numbers of military aircraft and an arsenal of Intermediate-Range missiles capable of hitting US targets throughout the region.

Xi's insecurities

China's aim to boost its global power has been telegraphed repeatedly by Mr Xi. In 2017, he summarised the country's progress since the 1949 revolution with the phrase: "China has stood up, grown rich, become strong and . . . is moving towards centre stage."

This built on the 2013 decision to ditch the mantra of "keeping a low profile" that had served as Beijing's guiding philosophy in international affairs since the late 1970s. In its stead, Mr Xi unveiled a strategy of "*fenfa youwei*", or "striving for achievement".

The strongman leader, who has abolished presidential [term limits](#), has also articulated what Matthew Johnson, a political consultant, has called a "total security paradigm".

Disputed territory



In a 2014 speech to inaugurate China's National Security Commission, a government body, Mr Xi defined security policy as encompassing almost all areas of life. The NSC would integrate "territorial security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, technology security, information security, ecological security, resource security and nuclear security", he said.

Beijing is also combating perceived instability at home. Re-education [camps in Xinjiang](#) that are believed to house about 1m people from China's Muslim ethnic groups are a case in point.

“China's foreign policy is increasingly a reflection of the attempt to seek regime security . . . at home,” said Sheena Greitens from the University of Texas, Austin. “The CCP treats things as serious threats that might have been tolerated before.”

Show of strength in the Himalayas

Gautam Bambawale, a former Indian ambassador to China, said that a brawl on the country's [Himalayan border](#) with China in June that killed 21 Indian soldiers, followed the PLA's deployment of tens of thousands of troops and heavy equipment to the area.

“It was not an accidental meeting,” he said. “It is a well thought out, premeditated plan by the PLA.”

“What they are also signalling at a strategic level is that China is risen and you have to accept that China is the pre-eminent power in Asia, and you better understand your place in this hierarchy,” Mr Bambawale added. “They are saying the 21st century isn't an Asian century. It is merely and solely a Chinese century.”

Yun Sun, at the Stimson Center, a Washington-based think-tank, said Beijing viewed India's infrastructure building in the Galwan Valley as a “serious offence” that required a firm response.

“In the Chinese perspective, if they do not punish severely enough, it's going to leave a mentality of possibility,” she said. “Punishment must be seriously comprehended and lessons absorbed.”

Raising assertiveness is also visible around the [Senkaku or Diaoyu islands](#) in the East China Sea, which are disputed by Japan and China. A defence white paper released by Japan in July said Beijing was “relentlessly” pressing its claim to the islands by increasing maritime activities that sought to change the “status quo”.

Sabre-rattling in the South China Sea

The South China Sea, in which China's territorial claims overlap with several south-east Asian nations, is also a focus of tension pitting the US against China. The foreign ministers of Asean, the grouping of 10 south-east Asian nations, issued a communique this month urging self-restraint and non-militarisation in the sea.

Mike Pompeo, US secretary of state, said last week that Washington stood with “our Asean partners as we insist on the rule of law and respect for sovereignty in the South China Sea, where Beijing has pursued aggressive campaigns of coercion and environmental devastation”.

Additional reporting by Sherry Fei Ju in Beijing

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