



Counterpoint Southeast Asia

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Image Credit: Unsplash/Thomas Tucker

What should Southeast Asian states do in a Taiwan conflict?

By Drew Thompson

United States (US) Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in early August 2022 and China's military displays immediately afterwards brought **global attention** to cross-Strait tensions. Ballistic missiles launches, successive waves of aircraft sorties flown around Taiwan and across the Taiwan Strait centreline, and the declaration of six military exclusion zones encircling Taiwan, all underscored the volatility of the situation.

For many in Southeast Asia, the **invasion of Ukraine** in February demonstrated that a military invasion could potentially be used to settle political disputes, and China's

 Lee Kuan Yew
School of Public Policy

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Centre on Asia and Globalisation

+65 6516 7113

cag@nus.edu.sg

469A Bukit Timah Road, Tower Block 10,

Singapore 259770

<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag>

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August military exercises revealed for many the reality that a conflict over Taiwan would not be geographically constrained to the island and the strait that separates it from the mainland.

China's military exercises further demonstrated that a conflict over Taiwan would inevitably encompass neighbouring states both to the north and south of Taiwan. In addition to ballistic missiles launched from China, flying over Taiwan before landing in Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), one of the military exclusion zones declared by China was in the Bashi Channel separating Taiwan from the Philippines, only 10 nautical miles from the latter's territorial waters.

There is little remaining doubt that a cross-Strait conflict would not only affect the economic and political interests of Southeast Asian states, but would also pose significant security challenges as well. The question then, what should Southeast Asian states do in a future Taiwan conflict? The Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) invited three Southeast Asian analysts to debate and examine this question.

Chong Ja Ian, an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, explains that Singaporean views about Taiwan's security are mixed. He notes that while they are generally focused on Singapore's narrow economic interests, there seems to be little appreciation for the risks and potential implications from a cross-Strait conflict. While Singapore's preference might be to

“not take sides,” it may be impossible to avoid entanglement in the face of increased pressure from both the US and China in the event of a conflict.

The risks to Singapore extend beyond the binary question of whether to continue to enable US forces to utilise military infrastructure on the island, or to accommodate China by curtailing US military operations and access. He further observes that China's close cultural ties to Singapore's majority ethnic-Chinese population could tempt China to mobilise ethno-nationalism which would undermine racial harmony and social stability in the island state.

Ratih Kabinawa, a PhD student at the University of Western Australia, meanwhile observes that Indonesia's interests in Taiwan and at home would be severely impacted in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. She argues that the personal safety of almost 250,000 Indonesian citizens currently residing in Taiwan would be the primary concern of the government. Jakarta might even have to look to or work with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to support evacuation efforts.

In addition, Ms. Kabinawa argues that Indonesia's military needs to develop the capability to control its own territorial waters and airspace, enabling it to deny access to a belligerent. Notably, even though Indonesia and China do not have formal competing claims in the South China Sea (SCS), Indonesia is concerned about China's

encroachment into its EEZ in the North Natuna Sea. Lastly, she assesses that Indonesia's preference for neutrality could limit its ability to protect its interests, including impacting the ability to evacuate its citizens and ensure the Straits of Malacca remains an open waterway.

Ivy Kwek, Fellow for China at the International Crisis Group, asserts that Malaysia's core interest in the event of a cross-Straits conflict is maintaining open sea lanes in the SCS and ensuring the free-flow of commerce. This underscores the tremendous regional economic impact that a cross-Straits conflict would entail. She also observes the political ramifications for SCS claimant states should China use force against Taiwan; it would indicate Beijing's willingness to aggressively assert its claims against SCS claimants.

Ms. Kwek proposes that Malaysia both works with ASEAN and takes proactive steps to prevent a conflict from breaking out over Taiwan. ASEAN could also attempt to reclaim its centrality by acting as a go-between for the US and China. She makes concrete recommendations that Malaysia begins planning for a Taiwan contingency, engage in multilateral military exercises, and begin talks with Taiwan to plan for contingencies including non-combatant evacuations.

The authors shared their perspective during a

public webinar on 30 September 2022 (video link [here](#)). The discussion highlights Southeast Asian dilemmas when faced with the prospect of a cross-Straits conflict that they neither want, nor can avoid. Southeast Asian analysts have a clear sense of the considerable impact of a conflict, and clear interests in preventing a cross-Straits conflict. But Southeast Asian states have little appreciation for the tools they might employ for preventive diplomacy, leaving them focused on managing the fallout from a conflict they feel powerless to prevent.

Drew Thompson is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He tweets at [@TangAnZhu](#).