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# Strategic Digest

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**Military exercises as geopolitical messaging**

**China recalls its Ambassador to Lithuania over Taiwan Representative Office in Vilnius**

**Regional calls for maritime security in the Gulf and Sea of Oman**

## Military Exercises as Geopolitical Messaging

In August 2021, both the US and China have conducted large scale military exercises. The US and its allies kicked off a month-long military exercise of their navies and marines titled Large Scale Exercise 2021 (LSE 2021) commenced on Aug 02, 2021, which is slated to run till August 27, 2021. Coinciding with LSE 2021, China conducted a major military exercise in the South China Sea from August 06 to August 10 which had included a very large exclusion zone of over 100,000 square kilometres for weapon firing. During the same period, Russia and China conducted a theatre level exercise ‘The Sibiu/Cooperation-2021’ in the Ningxia region.

### *The US Navy’s Large Scale Exercise 2021 (LSE 2021)*

LSE 2021 is a Chief of Naval Operations-directed live, virtual, and constructive, globally integrated exercise that spans multiple fleets. Termed as one of the biggest mobilisations of navy and marine assets in decades, LSE 2021 aims to evaluate the current and future readiness of the US and allied naval forces and improve the Navy and U.S. Marine Corps’ ability to integrate all domains in a high-end global conflict. The exercise is being executed by U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, which incorporates U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps forces, alongside UK Armed Forces, Australian Defence Force, and Japan Self-Defence Force. The exercise covers areas of responsibilities of Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command, U.S. Pacific Fleet, and U.S. Naval Forces Europe. The exercise will test the US Navy’s Distributed Maritime Operations, the Marines’ Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment at a scale that spans 17 time zones, three global combatant commands and more than a dozen command staffs. Included in the exercise will be evaluations of experimental technology from a variety of warfare areas including unmanned technologies.



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### ***Russia-China Theatre Level Exercise ‘The Sibiu/Cooperation-2021’***



The joint theatre level exercise ‘The Sibiu/Cooperation-2021’ saw the participation of The 10,000 troops, from the PLA's Western Theatre Command and the Eastern Military District of Russia. “The two sides’ participating troops will be mixed into teams to make plans jointly and conduct training together in a bid to verify and improve both troops’

capabilities of joint reconnaissance, search and early warning, electronic information attack, and joint attack and elimination,” a joint statement said. In a show of the high-level political commitment to the exercises, Russian defence minister Sergey Shoigu flew to China to preside over the closing ceremony on 13 August 2021 with his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe.

#### ***Assessment***

While Official statement of exercises military exercises typically stress their specified purpose of improving training, readiness, and interoperability among services and multinational forces. But military exercises also convey powerful geopolitical messages intended to demonstrate how the capabilities on display enhance regional stability, deter aggression, and reinforce foreign policy goals.

The US Navy has highlighted that LSE 2021 will signal to competitors that the American military “remains ready at the high end of warfare expressly because of its global operational commitments”. Latent geopolitical message in the LSE 2021 has not been missed in Beijing. Chinese media has termed the US approach of flexing its muscles through massive naval mobilisation as miscalculated move. Similarly, Russia-China Theatre Level Exercise has drawn attention over its implications for the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. However, the US observers say the two militaries have an ultimate target in mind - the United States. Geopolitical messaging seems to be a key aspect of both sets of military exercises and should be seen as part and parcel of the larger geopolitical discourse.

#### **China Recalls its Ambassador to Lithuania over Taiwan Representative Office in Vilnius**

On August 10, 2021, China recalled its ambassador to Lithuania and over the country’s decision to allow Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius under its own name. Beijing has asked Lithuania to recall its top envoy, Diana Mickeviciene who had just arrived in Beijing and will return to Vilnius after completing the mandatory COVID quarantine for 21 days.

The recall is part of a diplomatic spat that has been playing out since last month when Taiwan announced it would be setting up a representative office in the Baltic country's capital under the name "Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania." The announcement drew a warning from China's Taiwan Affairs Office that Lithuania "not send the wrong signals to forces behind Taiwan independence". Lithuania's permission for the office to open under the name of Taiwan was done "in disregard of China's repeated representations and articulation of potential consequences", and severely undermines China's sovereignty, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said. China urged Lithuania "to immediately rectify its wrong decision, take concrete measures to undo the damage, and not to move further down the wrong path." The statement from Beijing also suggested that much of its reaction was based on plans to use "Taiwan" in the name of representative office rather than the Chinese preferred moniker "Taipei".

Lithuania's foreign ministry and the EU have expressed regret over Beijing's decision. This is the first time China has recalled an ambassador from an EU member state over an issue related to a Taiwan representative office. Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told that "Lithuania will continue with its policy because it is not only Lithuania's policy we are pursuing, it is also the policy of many European countries." EU foreign affairs spokeswoman Nabila Massrali warned about the impact of this event on overall EU-China relations. She said: "We regret the Chinese action, and are following developments closely ... We do not regard the opening of a representative office in or from Taiwan (as opposed to an embassy or consulate) as a breach of the EU's One China policy." Washington also weighed in to support Lithuania. "We stand with our ally Lithuania and condemn the People's Republic of China's recent retaliatory actions," said U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price. "The U.S. supports our European partners as they develop ties with Taiwan."

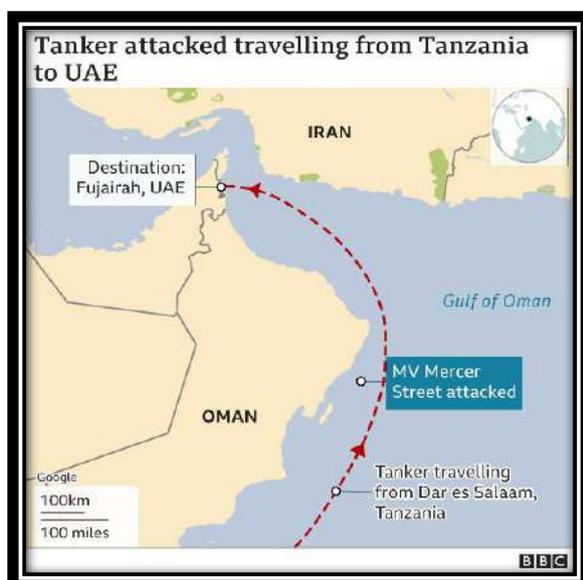
The current diplomatic escalation over Taiwan's representative office comes hot on the heels of another diplomatic tussle between Vilnius and Beijing. In May 2021, Lithuania quit China's "17+1" platform for dealing with Central and Eastern European countries and criticized Beijing for causing disunity among EU countries. The Lithuanian foreign minister had called upon other EU countries to also abandon the initiative. "From our perspective, it is high time for the EU to move from a dividing 16+1 format to a more uniting and therefore much more efficient 27+1," Landsbergis said. "The EU is strongest when all 27 member states act together along with EU institutions."

### **Regional calls for maritime security in the Gulf and Sea of Oman**

Highlighting growing threats to maritime security in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea, a statement issued by the Arab Parliament on 12 Aug 2021 stressed the importance of intensifying Arab and international efforts to enhance the safety

and security of maritime navigation. The statement highlighted that threats to maritime security in the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Sea affect not only regional stability and security, but also the global economy.

This regional call for enhancing maritime security in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea follows similar concerns expressed by Kuwait and UAE a few days earlier. On 11 August, Kuwait expressed its “deep concern” over the serious consequences of threatening the safety of maritime navigation in the Arabian Gulf, Sea of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Meanwhile, at the high-level open debate on maritime security held by the UNSC, the UAE submitted a statement affirming its commitment to regional and international efforts to confront threats to navigation. The UAE stressed the pivotal role that maritime transport plays in the global economy, highlighting that maritime security and environmental sustainability are interrelated.



The above statements come after a flurry of reports about attacks on tankers around the Straits of Hormuz in recent weeks. The deadly attack on merchant ship *Mercer Street*, off the coast of Oman on Jul 29, 2021, had caused the death of two crew members. The U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) said that it had collected and analysed substantial evidence. As per the CENTCOM statement, the ship had been targeted by three drones but that the first two were unsuccessful. “The investigative team determined that the extensive damage to the Mercer Street ... was the result of a third UAV attack.” It said an analysis of the explosive concluded that the drone had been rigged “to cause injury and destruction.” Iran denied any involvement in the attack.

A few days later, The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO), in a warning notice based on a third-party source, had earlier reported a "potential hijack" and advised ships to exercise extreme caution due to the incident around 60 nautical miles east of the UAE's Fujairah emirate. As per reports, Iranian-backed forces are believed to have seized an oil tanker in the Gulf off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. In addition, at least five ships in the sea between the UAE and Iran had updated their AIS tracking status to "Not Under Command" indicating exceptional difficulty in navigation. Iran's foreign ministry said the reports of maritime incidents were "suspicious" and warned against any effort to create a "false atmosphere" against Tehran.