

Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei: Implications for the US-China-Taiwan Equation

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This article attempts to explore the repercussions of Nancy Pelosi's 'unofficial visit' to the self-ruled island of Taiwan, on the US-China-Taiwan triangular equation. The article also addresses the potential causes and consequences of American and Chinese provocations in the Taiwan Strait (by contextualizing it within their foreign policies), and critically examines the discourse which seeks to draw parallels between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Chinese dream of National Rejuvenation by means of reunification with Taiwan. Finally, the article discusses a way forward for the US, China and Taiwan to resolve contentions and negotiate peace without the use of overmilitarized foreign policies.

Keywords: Taiwan, China, Cross-Strait Reunification, Pelosi Visit, Strategic Ambiguity

Introduction

On the second of August this year, an opinion pieceⁱ in The Washington Post asserted that America has made a vow to protect Taiwanese democracy by supporting the defense of the self-ruled islandⁱⁱ against a unilateral effort to change the status quo across the Taiwan Straits through the use of force, likely to be perpetrated by the People's Republic of China. The invocation of this vow, quoting Section (2)(a)(4) of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979,ⁱⁱⁱ acted as the founding rationale for a Congressional delegation's departure to Taipei (along with other stops in Asia) which commenced that same day. The opinion was authored by none other than Nancy Pelosi, US House Speaker and the representative heading the delegation.

Speculations arose worldwide on whether the Pelosi-led delegation would visit Taiwan even before their flight, SPAR-19, landed anywhere in East Asia. Due to such speculations, it became one of the most tracked flights in the world as per websites like Flightradar24.^{iv} The five-stop visit undertaken by the delegation began with a halt in Singapore, followed by one in Malaysia, moving next to Taipei, and ending with South Korea and Japan (in that order).^v The broader purpose of the trip, as Pelosi's delegation highlighted,^{vi} was reiterating America's commitment to 'democratic governance' and 'security' in the Asia-Pacific.

In her comments at both meetings, Pelosi regarded Taiwan as America's key partner in the Indo-Pacific, and lauded its efforts in security, economy and governance – three of America's most important policy pillars.

Upon arrival in Taipei, Tsai bestowed upon Pelosi the Order of Propitious Clouds with Special Grand Cordon, the highest civilian honour conferred by the government of the ROC on both Taiwanese citizens and foreigners since 1941. Post the ceremony, Tsai's welcoming remarks served as assurances made to the US regarding Taiwan's reliability as a partner, and its determination in the face of Chinese retaliation.^{vii} Pelosi then made elaborate remarks expressing her gratitude and that of her delegation, while commending Taiwan as an "island of resilience".^{viii} Her further

engagements included a bilateral meeting with Tsai, followed by a joint Press Conference, and a Bilateral Meeting with the Vice President of the Legislative Yuan of Taiwan Tsai Chi-chang. In her comments at both meetings, Pelosi regarded Taiwan as America's key partner in the Indo-Pacific,^{ix} and lauded its efforts in security, economy and governance – three of America's most important policy pillars.^x A statement of significance she made at the Press Conference following her meeting with Tsai, was that "It's really important for the message to be clear that in the Congress, House and Senate, Democrats and Republicans are committed to the security of Taiwan, in order to have Taiwan be able to most effectively defend themselves." Even though she visited Taipei in her capacity as Speaker and not on behalf of the US government as a whole, her statements claimed to represent the collective and bipartisan consensus of the American political class on providing Taiwan with active defense against China.

Pelosi's Visit in Historical and Political Contexts

"Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (hereafter, China) with the victory of the Communist Party of China (CPC) over the nationalist Guomindang Party in 1949, and the subsequent reestablishment of the latter's rule on the island of Taiwan (known also as the Republic of China/ROC), China has considered Taiwan a "province,"^{xi} which must eventually be reunified with the mainland. For Xi Jinping, reunification forms a core tenet of

his project on the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”^{xii} (*Zhōnghuámínzú Wěidà Fùxīng*, 中华民族伟大复兴; 中華民族偉大復興). The tumultuous PRC-ROC history is complicated by the economic and military presence of the United States in the Taiwan Straits, as well as its “robust unofficial relations”^{xiii} with Taiwan, as prominent factors influencing the dynamics of cross-strait relations.

In the backdrop of the Cold War, when China opened up to the world in the late 1970s, the US realized the significance of maintaining strong relations with the communist nation in enabling it to firmly rival the USSR-led camp. Subsequently, with the passing of UN Resolution 2758 in the General Assembly in 1971, the PRC was acknowledged as the only legitimate representative of China. This further consolidated the idea that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and compelled the US to acknowledge it as such, through its three joint communiqués^{xiv} (1972, 1979, 1982) with China. For China, the assurances and provisions of the three communiqués form the basis of cordial US-China relations, because they guarantee that the US accepts the fundamental principles such as “the Government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government of China,” “the liberation of Taiwan is China’s internal affair in which no other country has the right to interfere,” and “that it [the US] intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution”.

American foreign policy is governed by a slew of stakeholders. From academicians of the Congressional Research Service (CRS) to the hotheads of the Pentagon, many have a say in how America decides to act in a particular situation. But it is the President of the US who commands the gun and the butter. Joseph Nye, a prominent scholar of international relations theory, argues^{xv} that the moral character of American presidents significantly shapes the decisions they make. In this light, the current US President Joe Biden’s liberal and democratically inclined morals justify his emphasis on acting against the reported atrocities being committed by the People’s Liberation Army and the People’s Armed Police in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and Hong Kong (Macau), which forms a significant component of his China policy. At another level, the moral dimension is also seen in his taking a strong stand on Chinese actions in the Taiwan Strait.

Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan thus can be seen in the continuum of a long line of actions the US has undertaken, pursuant to its right to defend its people, and to defend democracy worldwide. In the backdrop of the Ukraine war, where the West’s attempts at providing defense and security have arguably faltered, it seems that Pelosi saw the need to visit Taiwan, and to reiterate the US’s firm commitment to protecting its democracy and sovereignty. Pelosi reportedly did not even inform Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen of her visit until the last minute. As per reports,^{xvi} Biden

also made it clear that it was Pelosi's prerogative to make this trip as House Speaker, and that he could not do anything about it. This visit eventually turned out to be quite controversial for the Biden administration itself, and its China policy.

China's Response

China is ruled by the Communist Party. Both intra-party and party-people relations are governed by the ideals of nationalism and revolution, which are at the core of the CPC's ideological doctrine. Both the party cadres and the people are regularly reminded of the "century of national humiliation," because of which, as described in the 2021 'Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century'^{xvii}, "the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness." Since Xi Jinping's ascendance to power in 2012, the emphasis on ideological cohesiveness has gained ground much more strongly than it did under leaders who came after Mao Zedong.

Xi came to power amidst an insecure internal and hostile external environment, with the mandate to conduct an antigraft campaign. He also adopted swiftly a confrontational foreign policy approach with the party's ideological commitments at its center. As per an English translation of the speech made by Xi at the Shanghai World Expo Centre in May 2014, he argued that "the security of Asia... depends on

the Asian people to maintain." Analysts^{xviii} argue that this outlook, which implicitly condemns the US for interfering in a region it has no business in, has emerged from China's need to create an international order more conducive to its inevitable rise, if not one that is China-centric in nature. China's foreign policy motives under Xi, in this regard, can be best seen as articulated in its strategy "To Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind the Right Way to Solve the Problems of Today's World".^{xix} Two of its key tenets are that countries "should all live in harmony and treat each other as equals," and that they "should respect and learn from each other, and abandon all arrogance and prejudice."

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This is not to say that China turned hostile toward the international order. As evident from the Chinese readout^{xx} of a video call that took place between Xi and Biden as recently as March 2022 (the US published no such readout), Xi was willing to accommodate the fact that while the US and China will continue to have differences, the two parties still needed to look beyond the mistrust and misperceptions created by the "previous US administration" (that of Donald Trump's) to coexist peacefully. The video call apparently also featured a discussion

on Taiwan, and Biden reiterated US's commitment to the One-China Principle.

However, Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, and the overall changes in the US policy toward Taiwan in recent years, have been viewed as highly provocative by Xi's China, and as reneging of America's commitment to enhancing US-China relations. These changes are evident in the release of 'New Guidelines for U.S. Government Interactions with Taiwan Counterparts'^{xxi} by the US State Department in 2021, the approval of a US \$ 108 billion weapons sale to Taiwan by the American Congress in July 2022^{xxii} as well as that of a US \$ 1.1 billion weapons sale by the US Department of Defense in September 2022^{xxiii}, and of course, the fact that Pelosi's visit to Taipei garnered bipartisan support among America's political elites. The decisions of US Senator Marco Rubio and House Representative John Curtis to introduce bills^{xxiv} on the renaming of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in the US to the 'Taiwan Representative Office' (TRO) have also invited China's ire. Furthermore, to demonstrate its unwavering support for robust ties with Taiwan (official or not), another five-member Congressional delegation, led by US Democrat Senator Ed Markey visited Taipei,^{xxv} to meet President Tsai-Ing Wen in August 2022.

Consequently, these have invoked a slew of responses from China, starting from the eight countermeasures^{xxvi} China deployed against the

US. These countermeasures included the canceling of the China-US Theatre Commander Talks, the China-US Defense Policy Coordination Talks, and the China-US Military Maritime Consultative Agreement Meetings, as well as the suspension of China-US Cooperation on the Repatriation of Illegal Immigrants, China-US Cooperation on Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, China-US Cooperation against Transnational Crimes, China-US Narcotics Cooperation, and China-US Talks on Climate Change. In extension, China has been conducting live-fire sea and air drill exercises in six zones around Taiwan. China also released its third White Paper on Taiwan, the first two having been released in 1993 and 2000 respectively by the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office of the PRC. Entitled 'The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era',^{xxvii} the paper attempted to give fresh insights into why reunification with Taiwan remains the long-held dream of the "sons and daughters of China," and argued^{xxviii} that "the differences in social system [between China and Taiwan] are neither an obstacle to reunification nor a justification for secessionism." In retaliation to Pelosi's opinion column, the Chinese Ambassador to the US also wrote a piece in The Washington Post,^{xxix} making a case for why China – and its 1.4 billion people – are right to be indignant with the US for sending Pelosi to Taiwan.

“Today’s Ukraine is Tomorrow’s Taiwan”^{xxx}

It was indeed inevitable for parallels to be drawn between the situations in Ukraine and Taiwan, and both the Chinese and the Taiwanese have been looking at the war in Ukraine very closely. As a result, Taiwanese locals and political elites have been divided along two different ways of approaching this matter: one has taken social media by storm,^{xxxi} propagating the slogan “Today’s Ukraine is Tomorrow’s Taiwan,” while the other has responded by making clear the prominent differences between the two situations. The majority of local opinion, however, is unified on strengthening the island’s defenses and expanding the “willingness to fight” in the face of aggression (close to 70%^{xxxii} of the respondents of a 2022 survey by a Taipei-based think tank agree to fight in the event of an armed attack against the island, as opposed to 40%^{xxxiii} of the respondents in a 2021 iteration of the same survey). Both strands of thought are reflected in the Chinese social media,^{xxxiv} i.e., that the situations in Ukraine and Taiwan are similar, and thus incite a nationalistic desire for reunification through force (treading the Russian path, so to say), or that they are dissimilar, to clarify that reunification with Taiwan, unlike the war in Ukraine, is an “internal matter” (thereby signaling that Taiwan

already belongs to China). On both sides of the strait, intense criticism of the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has emerged, and fear of helplessness has inevitably gripped those living in Taiwan. China’s official position on such parallels is also clear – as articulated by Liu Pengyu,^{xxxv} Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the US during a virtual press briefing in March 2022, that China expects the US to respect the ‘One China Principle’ regardless of whether there exists a conflict in Ukraine or not.

America’s ineffective action during the Ukraine crisis is testimony to its seemingly inefficient foreign policy assessments in the past few months. Associated developments, arguably, could be seen as specifying what the US should not do in Taiwan.

In this context, two debates are important for scholars and geopolitical actors to address - first, is it that the US is increasingly attempting to unilaterally alter the status quo across the Taiwan strait? America’s ineffective action during the Ukraine crisis is testimony to its seemingly inefficient foreign policy assessments in the past few months¹.

¹ The author draws this inference because it is debatable whether the sanctions on Russia have impacted its ability to export oil and gas – many of its European partners are suffering because of Russia having turned off the gas supply from its Nord Stream 1 pipeline, and the global hike in oil prices has compensated for the losses resulting from sanctions on Russia’s exports and foreign assets. At the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been

bolstered to declare 15% of Ukraine formally annexed to Russia – despite US military assistance to Ukraine (which has fallen very short of providing troops on the ground for Ukraine’s defense). For a detailed analysis on the impact of sanctions on oil and gas prices and exports, please see : “What’s Next For Oil And Gas Prices As Sanctions On Russia Intensify,” J.P Morgan, 10 March 2022, <https://www.jpmorgan.com/insights/research/oil-gas-energy-prices>.

Associated developments, arguably, could be seen as specifying what the US should not do in Taiwan. Despite the obvious differences between the situations in the Taiwan Strait and the Russia-Ukraine region, the ‘US factor’ plays similar disruptive roles. Similarities exist also in Putin’s and Xi’s warnings to the US. Then why has the US political class chosen to ignore the signs and continue to disrupt the status quo in the Taiwan Straits? This could be because the interpretation of recent foreign policy setbacks within American political circles has been that the US must save face by demonstrating that it hasn’t forgotten Taiwan. As a result, we witness the US adopting a tough stance by continuing to pay “official visits” to Taiwan simply because it can.^{xxxvi} This outlook is powered by both, its desire to prove its commitment to Taiwan, as well as to set its image straight and to project its global deterrence capabilities.

Another point of view emerges from the examination of America’s policy of ‘Strategic Ambiguity’ towards Taiwan,^{xxxvii} which effectively concludes that the US considers it incumbent upon itself to come to Taiwan’s defense even if its actions provoke China to become increasingly aggressive. Hence, the US appears to be effectively letting itself off the hook for the consequences of adding fuel to fire. A third, more interesting lens is for those who believe that the US chose to ignore the signs in Ukraine because of its need to bring about a “regime change”^{xxxviii} in Russia. It is potentially attempting to do so by keeping its troops out of

the war, while continuing to extend the war through the supply of weapons to Ukraine, with the ultimate goal of causing overstretch for the Russian military and the collapse of the Russian economy. While it does appear improbable and highly unlikely, if the US has a similar goal for Xi’s China, then in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress, the enhanced degree of provocations could be intentional. What does seem apparent is that in any eventuality, Taiwan must keep its expectations from the US to a conservative minimum.

Second in the order of debates, is that while the abovementioned White Paper reiterates that “peaceful reunification” is the most significant way forward for China, can it be depended upon?

Given China’s military might and in tandem with the predictions^{xxxix} made by Taiwan’s own defense minister Chiu Kuo-cheng regarding China’s ability to launch a “full-scale invasion” against it by 2025, reunification with Taiwan (which is also a territory with only about half of Ukraine’s population size) would seemingly be easy for China. However, as some scholars have argued,^{xl} a major consideration for China would then be counteracting global sanctions. In the face of sanctions, China could also have a lot more to lose than Russia given that it accounts for 12% of the global trade^{xli} and is massively interlinked with major global supply chains, unlike the latter.

Moreover, in attempting to invoke fervour and excitement toward reunification among the

masses, the CPC has domestically inflated narratives surrounding its military achievements, the failures of the West, and the obvious reality that the ‘Taiwanese compatriots’ are as willing to reunify as their counterparts in China are. This is evident from the third White Paper on Taiwan, wherein the CPC argues, that “Moves to separate Taiwan from China represent the serious crime of secession, and undermine the common interests of compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Straits,” indicating that achievement of reunification is a common interest of people on both sides.^{xiii} Even the provisions of the PRC Constitution, adopted during the fifth National People’s Congress in 1982, dictate that “it is the inviolable duty of all Chinese people, including our compatriots in Taiwan, to accomplish the great task of reunifying the motherland.” Additionally, if one is to believe that the PRC’s Anti-Secession Law of 2005^{xliii} continues to dictate a significant part of mainland policy toward Taiwan, there is some hope since the Law specifies that the use of force is an option for China if Taiwan openly declares independence and “secession” from China, or if it outrightly refuses to negotiate with China over the prospect of reunification - thereby exhausting the option of using “peaceful means”. One cannot argue that Tsai Ing-Wen has not been an advocate of independence for Taiwan - in one of her election rallies for the

2020 Presidential elections, she stated^{xliv} that “as president, standing up to protect national sovereignty is not a provocation — it is my fundamental responsibility.” But to keep her moderate allies in the Pan-Green coalition² satisfied, and to protect her citizens from unwanted provocation, neither ‘secession’ nor a halt in negotiations seem to be on the table.

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Conclusion

The existence of perceived imperium^{xlv} has led to an overmilitarization of US Foreign Policy, and as a result, some scholars deem it fit to argue^{xlvi} in favour of the US launching a two-front war against Russia and China. This could have further disastrous consequences for American global leadership, and cause a repeat of over a century of unwon wars. Instead, the US must act on Henry Kissinger’s advice at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting at Davos in May 2022, where the former American

coalition, comprising parties like the Kuomintang (KMT), People First Party (PFP) and the New Party. Currently, the Pan-Green parties occupy 63 out of 118 seats in the Taiwanese Parliament, the Legislative Yuan. Please see: Po Jen Yap and Chien-Chih Lin, “*Constitutional Convergence in East Asia*,” Cambridge University Press, 2021.

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Secretary of State argued that “Taiwan cannot be the core of the negotiations between China and the United States,” and that “a direct confrontation should be avoided”.^{xlvii}

In this light, the US must actively engage with China on how to jointly achieve the purposes enlisted in the three joint communiqués going forward, to be able to do away with Taiwan as a bone of contention in an otherwise highly testy bilateral relationship. Secondly, China and Taiwan must agree to halt further militarization of the Taiwan Strait, lest the fears of a “fourth Strait crisis”^{xlviii} be realized. A significant step in this regard would be to negotiate the gradual suspension of US arms sales to Taiwan. China and Taiwan must also pay heed to their economic interdependence, as evident in the rise of bilateral trade by a factor of 7000 between 1978 and 2021,^{xlix} as well as people-to-people exchanges through events such as the Straits Forum, which add great value to the cross-strait dynamics. Finally, especially through unofficial, sub-governmental initiatives like a Taiwan Fellowship (currently introduced as a Bill in the US Senate by Senator Ed Markey),³ the US and Taiwan must continue to infuse energy into economic and diasporic ties to keep strengthening unofficial relations.

³ The Taiwan Fellowship, as the sponsor of this Bill envisions, would be a Programme conducted by the US government to bestow upon eligible US citizens a fellowship to study in Taiwan. The three pillars of this study programme would entail learning about the Mandarin Chinese language; the people, history, and political climate on Taiwan; and the issues affecting the

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