

US/CHINA: Assessing the long-term impact of Pelosi's Taiwan visit

- The Chinese government's immediate response to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan did not trigger a crisis as feared, but the medium- and long-term impacts could be more significant.
- Pelosi's visit may have ushered in a new normal of increased Chinese military presence around Taiwan, more frequent provocations from US politicians, and a deepening security dilemma.
- Though a Taiwan invasion remains highly unlikely, the most plausible invasion scenario is 2024 elections in the US and Taiwan that produce both a hawkish US president and a strongly pro-sovereignty Taiwanese leader, who then coordinate moves to consolidate independence.

Washington keeps its cool

Washington responded to Beijing's unprecedented series of [military exercises](#) near Taiwan largely by not responding at all, thereby refusing to play its part in a bilateral crisis. Notably, the US military declined to send an aircraft carrier to the area as observers had expected. Though media reports indicate that the Biden administration strongly opposed Pelosi's visit in private, the administration's public stance is that her trip was a non-event. A Pentagon official said the US would not "take the bait" and that the recent uproar was "manufactured" by Beijing.

In the short term, this approach appears diplomatically shrewd because it enabled Washington to cast Beijing's response as an overreaction, while encouraging statements of condemnation from allies and partners, including the G7, , and the European Union. In the medium term, however, Pelosi's visit may have ushered in a new normal of increased Chinese military presence around Taiwan and more frequent provocations from US politicians.

Security dilemma deepens

As , China's military exercises set a new precedent in terms of size and proximity to Taiwan. Missiles flew directly over Taipei (though in space, beyond the atmosphere) and landed in Taiwan's territorial waters near the island's main commercial ports. Chinese officials openly described the exercises as "blockade drills." Dozens of fighter jets also crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, which had not occurred for 20 years before 2019 and has remained only sporadic since then.

Last week's military exercises set a new baseline against which Beijing's future demonstrations of force must be calibrated. Actions that until recently were viewed as highly escalatory may now become commonplace. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) announced on 10 August that its exercises had "successfully completed various tasks" but also that it would "organize regular combat readiness patrols in the direction of the Taiwan Strait" going forward. The next Western provocation may therefore require and an even more forceful response from Beijing.

This new, higher baseline increases the risk of an accidental incident leading to escalation, but we think both sides are willing and able to defuse any crisis with potential to trigger armed conflict. The more significant long-term impact from the Pelosi visit may be to intensify the security dilemma that was already plaguing US-China relations.

A security dilemma occurs when one side takes actions that it views as defensive, but the other side perceives those same actions as offensive. We believe Beijing's primary objective is to deter moves by Taipei and Washington towards *de facto* independence, rather than to accelerate progress towards unification. However, China's increased military presence around Taiwan will reinforce a growing perception in Washington that Beijing is impatient with the status quo and preparing to achieve unification by force. This perception may prompt Washington to increase arms sales and continue its from the traditional version of the One China Policy. This drift would then trigger even more forceful efforts at deterrence from Beijing, and the cycle repeats.

Worrying precedents

Beijing's responses to various regional security incidents over the last decade offer precedents for the long-term impact of the Pelosi visit. The pattern that emerges from these incidents is that China uses discrete incidents as an opportunity to create new facts on the ground that permanently alter the security landscape.

For example, in 2013, the Philippines filed a case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration alleging that China's "nine dash line" claims on the violate the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This legal action apparently triggered the Chinese government to launch construction of artificial islands and military installations in the disputed Spratly Islands. These facilities are now effectively permanent.

Similarly, Beijing responded to the Japanese government's purchase of four islands in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 by sending large coast guard flotillas to patrol this area of the East China Sea. The goal was to show that Chinese authorities could exercise administrative control in an area previously patrolled only by the Japanese Coast Guard. Chinese coast guard operations in the area continue to this day on roughly a monthly basis.

The China-India border dispute offers another rough precedent. When the Indian military began improving roads in the disputed border region around 2019, China responded with its own major expansion of military personnel and facilities in the area, including more aggressive patrol operations, culminating in a in June 2020.

These precedents suggest that the Pelosi visit may usher in a new normal of a more robust, regular PLA presence around Taiwan. Some US defense planners worry that this new normal could undermine Washington's ability to distinguish routine PLA operations from preparations for an invasion or blockade.

Pelosi's visit also has implications for future US foreign policy. Republicans who normally oppose Pelosi's across the board praised her Taiwan trip. House Republican Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said on 26 July that he would visit Taiwan if he assumes the role of House speaker following this year's midterm elections. Beyond McCarthy, strong anti-China sentiment in Washington and around the country creates a political incentive for US politicians to engage in further provocations on Taiwan.

Worst-case scenario

We continue to believe that mainland military action against Taiwan is over the next five years if not longer. However, the most plausible – though still unlikely – scenario for armed conflict is one in which a hawkish Republican candidate and a strongly pro-sovereignty Taiwanese candidate both win presidential elections in 2024. If these two presidents coordinate decisive moves towards consolidating *de facto* Taiwanese independence – such as an explicit US security guarantee – China's leadership may conclude that such moves are equivalent to formal independence and require a military response.

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