

## US/CHINA: Pelosi's Taiwan visit could spark months-long response cycle

- US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's potential visit to Taiwan in August is developing into a perfect storm for aggravating US-China bilateral tension.
- The Biden administration privately opposes Pelosi's visit but must avoid the appearance of pressuring her to cancel, which would create the appearance of bowing to Beijing's intimidation.
- If Pelosi's visit proceeds, Beijing's will likely seek to calibrate a response that appears strong but does not provoke a cycle of escalation, but even a non-escalatory response cycle could potentially last for months.

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Pelosi has not officially confirmed her trip, which could still be abandoned, but media reports indicate she is planning to visit Taiwan in August as leader of a delegation that will also visit Japan, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia.

### A perfect storm

A confluence of factors makes Pelosi's potential trip especially provocative from Beijing's perspective. First is the political context. China's leadership already perceives a clear [slippage in Washington's commitment](#) to the One China Policy. Fueling this perception are the increased size and frequency of US arms sales and recent visits by increasingly [high-ranking US officials](#), both former and current. Beijing's warnings to Washington over the Taiwan issue have grown more forceful in recent months, including at the most [recent high-level meeting](#).

Second is timing. A Pelosi visit in August would coincide with the 95th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army on 1 August. The visit would also come within a few months of the 20th Communist Party Congress – likely to convene in October or November – where Chinese President Xi Jinping aims to secure a precedent-breaking third term as party general secretary. A perceived US provocation ahead of the congress would generate political pressure on Xi to respond forcefully.

Pelosi canceled a previously planned visit to Taiwan in April, after contracting Covid-19, but the timing of that visit would have been less provocative, since it could have been viewed as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Similarly, after the party congress, Xi might feel more secure in responding moderately to a perceived US provocation.

A third irritating factor is that while Pelosi does not officially represent the Biden administration, she is second in the order of presidential succession, behind only the vice president. As such, Beijing views her as closer to a head of state than a backbencher or even a low-ranking cabinet official. In February, US President Joe Biden dispatched a delegation of former defense officials to Taiwan, which provoked relatively modest criticism from Beijing. The fact that Pelosi, a Democrat, belongs to Biden's own party, further implies that she would be acting with Biden's implicit blessing. Then-House speaker Newt Gingrich visited Taiwan in 1997, but he belonged to the opposite party of then-president Bill Clinton.

A fourth factor is Pelosi's own history as arguably Congress' most longstanding and outspoken critic of the Chinese government. In 1991, she famously unveiled a protest banner while visiting Tiananmen Square, enraging Chinese leaders.

Pelosi also repeatedly sponsored unsuccessful legislation to revoke the China's "most-favored nation" trading status under US law.

### Biden's calculation

Biden faces a difficult balancing act in handling Pelosi's potential visit. Senior administration officials, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, reportedly oppose this visit, and military officials reportedly view it as risky, but Biden lacks formal legal authority to block it. Even informal pressure could be viewed as a violation of constitutional norms governing the separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches.

Beyond the constitutional issue, Biden's critics will criticize any move to dissuade Pelosi as an act of appeasement and a demonstration of weakness. Republican legislators and former Trump officials who typically oppose Pelosi have expressed public support for her visit in recent days. Meanwhile, Biden said that "the military thinks it's not a good idea right now." His phrasing appears designed to discourage Pelosi while ostensibly leaving the final decision to her.

### Beijing's response

Xi faces similar domestic political challenges in formulating Beijing's response to any Pelosi visit. Beijing's goal will likely be to calibrate a response that appears strong relative to previous shows of force, but not so strong that it provokes a cycle of escalation. The foreign ministry said on 19 July that the Chinese government would take "resolute and forceful measures" if Pelosi's trip proceeds.

Beijing's response could be modeled broadly on the PLA's [actions in October](#), when it set three consecutive daily records for aircraft incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone. To increase the intensity compared to that episode, flyovers could be coupled with naval activity in the Taiwan Strait, including possible breaches of the median line that divides the strait in half.

Some reports have suggested that Beijing could intercept Pelosi's flight, which would likely be on military aircraft, and prevent her from landing. While this possibility cannot be ruled out, we believe it is unlikely because it would mark a dramatic escalation. A less escalatory option would be to send aircraft beyond Taiwan's air defense identification zone – which Beijing has [already breached](#) many times – and into Taiwanese sovereign airspace. Such action would set a new precedent but stop short of a hostile act against US military aircraft.

### Precedent from an earlier Taiwan crisis

The Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-96 offers a rough template for how a new crisis might unfold. Among the lessons is that Beijing's response to a Pelosi visit could continue for many months.

Under pressure from Congress, Clinton granted permission for Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to attend a reunion at Cornell University in July 1995. Washington regarded Lee's trip as an unofficial visit, but the trip followed a year of intense Taiwanese lobbying in Washington, and Lee delivered a speech at the reunion about Taiwan's democratization. The visit infuriated Beijing, which recalled its ambassador from Washington and conducted regional military exercises intermittently for nine months. These included short-range ballistic missile tests and amphibious landing exercises. The US sent an aircraft carrier to the area in July 1995 and two carrier groups in March 1996.

Following months of military posturing, both sides were able to frame the incident as a win, as neither overtly backed down. But following the incident, the Clinton administration appeared to shift course. Clinton met personally with then-president

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