BUCKLE UP: PELOSI'S VISIT AND THE FOURTH TAIWAN STRAIT CRISIS

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AMID TAIWANESE aspiration, Chinese rage, and regional concern about whether the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, would visit Taiwan, she arrived on 2 August 2022. The most senior US official to travel to Taiwan in a decade and the first sitting House Speaker to do so in twenty-five years, her itinerary was busy and full. She spoke with Mark Liu 劉德音, the chairman of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC); had breakfast at the American Institute in Taiwan (an unofficial agency that functions as a de facto embassy); addressed the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan's parliament) and met President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 there; toured the Jing-Mei White Terror Memorial Park;[1] hosted an exchange with Taiwan-based dissidents from Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China (PRC); and held a press conference. Her visit was high profile and widely covered by global media.

It infuriated Beijing. Before her flight even took off for Taipei, on 30 July, China announced a live-fire zone in Fujian province across the Taiwan Strait,[2] along with temporary import bans on certain Taiwan-manufactured foods on the grounds that they had not

been registered in the PRC.[3] More retaliatory measures were adopted after Pelosi's flight landed in Taipei. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying 华春莹 expressed her government's position: the United States and Taiwan were the first to act provocatively, whereas China was compelled to act in self-defence. Any countermeasure taken by the PRC would be a justified and necessary response to the United States' obliviousness to Beijing's repeated démarches and to the United States' unscrupulous behaviour.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) carried out military exercises in six zones on all sides of Taiwan for a week, continuing after Speaker Pelosi left Taiwan for Seoul.[4] The government placed more bans on Taiwanese agricultural and fishing products,[5] halted exports of sand (needed for infrastructure construction), and sanctioned individuals[6] and organisations for 'secession'.[7]

The Communist Party of China (CPC) also released a White Paper titled 'The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era',[8] which expresses Beijing's long-term policy towards Taiwan. It describes 'resolving the Taiwan question' as 'indispensable for the realisation of China's rejuvenation' and a 'historic mission' of the CPC. It describes Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as having an agenda of 'independence' and warns that while 'peaceful reunification' is the CPC's goal, yet: 'We will always be ready to respond with the use of force or other necessary means to interference by external forces or radical action by separatist elements.'

The PLA's Retaliation

The military retaliation measures demonstrated certain things about the PLA's enhanced military capabilities. First, the PLA imposed six zones in this exercise, signalling that it could mobilise sufficient force to encircle the island. In comparison, during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the PLA imposed six zones in the Taiwan Strait but did not carry out activities in all six at the same time.

Second, the size of some of the August 2022 military exercise zones was double or triple those imposed between 1995 and 1996, implying a prioritised area of operations. Third, some of the zones overlapped the waters of Taiwan's 24-nautical-

Then US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and President Tsai Ing-wen wave to the camera
Source: Chien Chih-Hung, Wikipedia

mile or territorial sea baselines; in the 1995–96 crisis, all were outside these areas. As a result, the PLA's activities affected Taiwan's shipping and civil aviation routes, signalling that the PLA could launch a blockade to choke off Taiwan's external communications.

This shows that after four decades of military modernisation since the 1980s, the PLA can launch a variety of military operations against Taiwan, ranging from coercive quarantine and total blockade to all-out invasion. The number of zones and their size speak to the PLA's capability.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this exercise served to test the PLA's future operation plans. That the large-scale exercise was announced only several hours after Speaker Pelosi had departed Taiwan indicates it had been long in the planning and the PLA had simply been waiting for the right time to carry it out.

It also shows that the PLA's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) operations — a military tactic that holds that 'the best way of prevailing over a distant adversary, especially if it is superior in overall military power, is to prevent it from deploying its forces into the

theatre of conflict in the first place' — are being factored into China's military plans.[9] What's more, they can execute this operation against possible US forces simultaneously with a military operation against Taiwan, because one zone is located to the east of Taiwan, where any US force is expected to pass.

The exercises also sent a warning to Japan to not cooperate with US forces in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait; some of China's ballistic missiles fell into Japan's claimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ). It has been reported that Chinese president Xi Jinping deliberately chose the EEZ as the target.[10]

There is no doubt that Australia is probably also factored into mainland military calculations, because one zone is located south–south-east of Taiwan. In the framework of the strategic defensive alliance agreed to in September 2021 by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, known as AUKUS, it is expected that Australia will play a role in a Taiwan Strait contingency.

In addition to its military function, the August 2022 military exercise carried a strong political message—namely, that the Taiwan Strait had been 'internalised' by the PRC and the PLA could cross it whenever it saw fit.

Since 1949, there has been a median line in the Taiwan Strait to separate the PRC and Taiwan. This line was set unilaterally by the United States during the Cold War, when the historical feud between Taiwan's then ruling Kuomintang (KMT) and the CPC precluded the two parties from communication. Both Taiwan and the PRC had observed this median line as a de facto border between them, though Beijing did not explicitly endorse it.

Starting in 2022, Beijing began to argue more frequently that, based on its long-held claim that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China, the PRC has sovereignty, sovereign rights, and management rights over the whole Taiwan Strait.

Analysis

The military exercise created serious repercussions for US–China relations. First, it worsened the already fragile relationship and heightened strategic competition:

China, considering Taiwan as its core interest, must push further to bring reunification with Taiwan within reach, while the United States must do its utmost to help defend Taiwan to safeguard its credibility. Any concession by either side would come with a political price tag.

Second, the exercises created a new normal in the Taiwan Strait. PLA military jets crossed the median line and its missiles landed within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan, nearly penetrating its sovereign waters. In other words, it is possible for the PRC to enforce its maritime claim over the Taiwan Strait. That could involve denying US warships future freedom of navigation operations there.[11]

In such circumstances, further militarisation of US–China competition in the Taiwan Strait is conceivable. To reach its goal of reunification with Taiwan, China will likely stage its military exercises even closer to Taiwan in the future. This would serve two purposes: to damage Taiwan's morale and confidence, and simultaneously discredit the United States.

Political leadership must be factored into any assessment of the risk of military escalation in the strait. In seeking a third term, breaking long-established norms in China since the 1980s, Xi Jinping staked his legitimacy in part on progress on Taiwan's reunification. His performance over the past two terms shows he is an ambitious leader eager to establish his legacy. Backed by China's growing military capability, he will likely push toward this goal.

Xi's assessment of the external environment may embolden him. The United States is spread thin with conflicts on many fronts globally while internal rifts over some political issues could weaken its national power. Russia, stuck in its long war with Ukraine, meanwhile, needs China more than ever and, for these reasons, is unlikely to attempt to constrain China from the north.

The likelihood of a large-scale invasion of Taiwan at this stage is low. Organising such an action, including coordinating naval, air force, and infantry combat troops, as well as the logistical support they would require across the Taiwan Strait, remains too difficult a task for the near future. Its cost, both

in material terms and in potential casualties under Taiwanese retaliation, would damage China's global standing and jeopardise Xi's dream of great national rejuvenation.

In contrast, the 'salami-slicing' grey-zone operations in which, according to the Lowy Institute's definition, 'no individual provocation is large enough to force the other side to respond militarily', along with enhanced disinformation, better serve Xi's purposes.[12] The PRC can incrementally exhaust Taiwan's resources, reduce Taiwan's self-confidence, and drive a wedge between the government and the Taiwanese people. Doing it this way will not give the United States an excuse to intervene militarily, and there will be little else it can do to directly support Taiwan.

Taiwan will not sit idle. Aware of the consequences of inaction, Taiwan is very likely to push back so that the PRC is unable to sustain the new normal established in this military exercise.[13] This also involves Taiwan changing the rules of engagement for its military forces. Of course, any pushback runs the risk of conflict breaking out between the Taiwanese and Chinese militaries.

US involvement of some sort in the Taiwan Strait would then be inevitable. The *Taiwan Relations Act* requires the US government to act (it is, however, up to the US president to make the ultimate decision), stipulating that 'any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, [is] a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States'.

China's military exercises and grey-zone operations are a threat to 'the peace and security of the Western Pacific area'.[14] I would argue that the United States must react to help safeguard its own credibility. In the wake of growing Chinese military capability and the subsequent asymmetric situation between the Taiwanese and Chinese militaries, US involvement will inevitably be extensive, and at least include providing more arms and combat training. Even short of a commitment to defend Taiwan militarily, its involvement will

infuriate China, which will take further action as a result, creating a vicious cycle.

The United States must also take a stance on China's legal claim over the Taiwan Strait. Here, as in the South China Sea, the United States must continue to execute freedom of navigation operations to push back against China's claim of exclusive sovereignty. Helping Taiwan maintain its de facto independence will indirectly help the United States maintain its image as the only power in the world capable of upholding the 'rules-based order' on which so much of global economic, political, and other cooperation depends.

Taiwan has become the focal point of US–China geopolitical competition and has ensured that this competition will be militarised. With relations spiralling, we must all buckle up.

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