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Chinese politics & policy

'Take down Pelosi's plane': Chinese social media users react to Taiwan visit

Hawkish sentiments diverge from official line over US House Speaker's trip to Taipei



Newspapers in Beijing report on US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan © Wu Hao/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Sun Yu in Beijing, Gloria Li in Hong Kong and Tom Mitchell in Singapore 9 HOURS AGO

Chinese rhetoric was running so hot ahead of Nancy Pelosi's arrival in Taiwan this week that many people watching livestreams of the historic moment on state-controlled websites were surprised when her plane touched down at Taipei's Songshan Airport.

Why, some wondered, had the People's Liberation Army Air Force not forced the US House of Representatives Speaker's plane away from the self-ruled island, which the Chinese government claims as its sovereign territory?

"[The government] only chants slogans loudly while greatly disappointing the public with its actual actions," one person wrote on Sina Weibo, China's equivalent of Twitter.

On Tuesday, as [Pelosi landed in Taiwan](#), Chinese censors were racing to catch up and delete such nationalist reactions — as well as posts expressing a desire for cooler heads to prevail.

Several employees of state media outlets told the Financial Times that they had been told to rein in jingoistic sentiments on social media platforms.

They are now hewing closely to the tone of coverage on mainstream media outlets, such as the People's Daily, the Chinese Communist party's flagship newspaper, and

China Central Television. These reports largely parrot expressions of umbrage from senior Chinese officials and the official Xinhua news agency.

“We have to follow the official line on how to express our patriotism,” said a Beijing-based media executive, who asked not to be named because they were not allowed to speak to foreign media.

One Beijing academic who advises government officials on [Taiwan](#) policymaking said the initial divergence between hot-headed social media commentators and traditional media outlets had been “too extreme”.

“There was a lack of top-down co-ordination on how to convey China’s initial messaging on Pelosi’s Taiwan visit. As a result, people feel we were bluffing,” the person said.

“The Chinese government will be a lot more cautious in dealing with Taiwan-related messaging,” they added. “There will be less tolerance of hawkish expressions that are not in line with the official tone.”

At the weekend, Hu Xijin, former editor of nationalist tabloid Global Times, wrote on Twitter and Weibo that the PLA Air Force would be [entitled to shoot down Pelosi’s plane](#) if it approached Taiwan with US fighter escorts.

“I waited until 1am last night to see our air force take down Pelosi’s plane,” a Weibo user wrote on Wednesday. “All I could see is a repetition of harsh words from the Chinese government and random cannon fire financed by taxpayers’ money. So disappointing.”

China’s military began conducting [live-fire exercises](#) in earnest on Saturday, relatively far from Taiwan. On Thursday, with Pelosi’s delegation in South Korea, it began exercises in six zones arrayed around the island. Three of the zones are less than 12km from Taiwan’s coast at their closest points.

Ren Yi, an influential blogger who writes under the moniker Chairman Rabbit, wrote that the extreme sentiments expressed by Hu and others were “completely unreliable”.

“People will feel confused and disappointed when they don’t see follow-up actions,” Ren added in the post, which received more than 24,000 likes before it too was deleted.

Chinese social media was also flooded with pictures of tanks and other military

vehicles making their way slowly along the streets and beaches of Xiamen, a coastal city from which the Taiwan-controlled Kinmen Islands are easily visible.

[Pelosi](#) arrived just a day after the August 1 founding anniversary of the PLA, which is traditionally accompanied by a blitz of nationalistic propaganda. In one such celebratory post on Weibo, sent before Pelosi's trip was confirmed on Monday night, the PLA's Eastern Theater Command boasted that it was prepared to "bury any invading enemy".

In addition to targeting expressions of patriotism deemed too hawkish, censors have also cracked down on dovish comments.

"In war, there are no winners," one such post read before it was deleted. "It will only make normal people suffer."

"Everyone I talk to about it is certainly not enthusiastic about anything war-related," said one Shanghai-based technology executive. "They seem scared and don't want anything to happen, but they also seem resigned to the possibility of conflict.

"I think everybody is just trying to keep their jobs, provide for their families and figure out how [to navigate Covid controls] to get from Shanghai to Beijing and other places on business and other trips," they added.

Additional reporting by Xueqiao Wang in Shanghai

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