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US-China relations

Pelosi's Taiwan visit will inflame US-China crisis, analysts warn

US House Speaker's planned trip could provoke military response from modernised People's Liberation Army



A Taiwanese frigate participates in military exercises near the island's eastern coast this week © Huizhong Wu/AP

Kathrin Hille in Taipei 10 HOURS AGO

China has escalated a campaign of threats and war-games to try to dissuade Nancy Pelosi from visiting Taiwan in the coming days.

Beijing has publicly warned of “forceful countermeasures” to any [visit](#), which would be the first by a US House of Representatives Speaker in 25 years, and has stepped up naval and air force manoeuvres around Taiwan. Chinese officials have even suggested to US counterparts the possibility of a military response.

So intense has [the reaction](#) been to the visit, which is expected to be part of a trip to Asia in the coming week, that many analysts believe Beijing and Washington are heading into a new crisis over Taiwan.

In a conflict that has been frozen since China's Nationalist government fled to Taiwan in 1949, the US is trying to gauge whether this time the friction could bring it to the brink of war with Beijing.

“If she goes, there will definitely be a Taiwan Strait crisis, and it will definitely exceed the last one in 1995-1996,” said Wu Xinbo, director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. “That is because China's military capabilities by far exceed those of 26 years ago.”

But Chinese scholars as well as former US officials with first-hand knowledge of the

last crisis believe China still wants to avoid open [military conflict](#) with the US.

“We have to take seriously the possibility that [Chinese president] Xi Jinping might order the People’s Liberation Army to engage at least in some limited use of military force and not just its display,” said Richard Bush, who was national intelligence officer for East Asia when tensions in the Taiwan Strait peaked in 1995.

“But there are reasons it’s too risky for China to engage even in limited war. It is clear that the US would respond and they can’t be certain about winning,” he said. “Also, they still have confidence that the psychological warfare they’ve been engaging in over the past six years will work.”

Matters have come to a head in the Taiwan Strait three times. In 1955, Chinese and Taiwanese forces exchanged fire after the PRC shelled offshore islands controlled by Taipei. In 1958, Taiwan won a naval battle triggered by another round of PRC shelling of offshore islands.

The so-called third Taiwan Strait Crisis occurred almost 40 years later. Beijing fired missiles into waters off the northern and southern tips of the island after Washington allowed then Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui to visit in 1995.

China also wanted to warn Taiwan against electing a pro-independence president in 1996. The US responded by sending warships into the vicinity in its largest display of military force in Asia since the Vietnam war.

Former US officials agree that the Chinese military’s massive modernisation since then is likely to change Xi’s calculations.

“It was a different PLA then and a very different China overall,” said Randy Schriver, a former US assistant secretary of defence under the Trump administration. He also served in the office of the secretary of defence responsible for managing relations with the PLA and the bilateral security relationship with Taiwan between 1994 and 1998.

“In 1995, we knew they had limited capabilities and they knew. But the military reforms they have undertaken since were informed by that very crisis,” Schriver said.

“Within a year, they purchased [Russian] destroyers with surface-to-surface missiles, and from 1996 they began thinking about how to hold US forces in the region at risk with cruise missiles.”

Taylor Fravel, an expert on the PLA at MIT, said China’s expanded military capabilities would allow a more diverse reaction to a Pelosi visit.

Officials in Taipei said that Chinese warplanes could cross the median line in the Taiwan Strait, a theoretical line dividing both sides that the PLA has crossed repeatedly in the past two years, and fly right up to Taiwanese sovereign airspace.

Under another potential scenario discussed by Taiwanese officials, the PLA could impose a blockade on the Taipei-controlled South China Sea island of Pratas and prevent Taiwan from sending vital supplies, or even land and detain Taiwanese soldiers based there.

“The problem for China is that once whatever it is they have undertaken is done, they’re still in the same difficult position,” Bush said. “They don’t have a way to convince Taiwan to come to terms.”

Analysts also argue that a limited use of force by China now might boost a more radical pro-independence candidate in Taiwan’s next presidential election in 2024.

Ni Lexiong, a military analyst in Shanghai, suggested Chinese retaliation could range from sending warplanes and harassing Pelosi’s plane to supplying weapons to Russia. But any Chinese response would probably be measured.

“The move has to be big enough and must at the very least cause fear in the adversary,” Ni said. “But this action needs to be controlled in a way that it will not trigger armed conflict.”

Western analysts point to PLA scholars’ writings about the importance of controlling a crisis and argue that Beijing has not escalated its rhetoric to peak level.

Xi warned Joe Biden in a call on Thursday that “those who play with fire will perish by it”. That is a notch up from his government’s previous language but short of the phrase China used in the Korean war and other tense moments in cross-Strait relations, when it demanded that the US “[rein in its horse at the edge of the precipice](#)”.

Still, stoking the tension is Beijing’s belief that the US is using Taiwan as a lever in an intensifying struggle over global dominance.

“Since Trump, the US has been steadily raising its support for Taiwan, and they are using the Taiwan card all the time,” Wu said.

US analysts add that US-China competition and mutual distrust are destabilising the situation over Taiwan.

“It is all about US-China relations,” said Shelley Rigger, an expert on cross-Strait affairs at Davidson College in North Carolina.

She added that Taiwan’s president Tsai Ing-wen has few options because she is facing both the threat from China and the need to retain the support of the US, Taiwan’s only protector. Rigger said: “She has guns to her head from both sides.”

Additional reporting by Emma Zhou in Beijing

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