

TAIWAN TENSIONS

Taiwan act puts Washington's 'One China' policy at risk

'Beijing and Washington are in a security dilemma, a vicious cycle': analyst



Tensions between China and the U.S. over Taiwan show no signs of abating. (Source photos by AP)

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September 20, 2022 14:00 JST

NEW YORK -- U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan at the beginning of August prompted China to encircle the island with unprecedentedly large military drills. This did not deter further groups of American lawmakers from traveling there -- highlighting a new nadir in Washington-U.S. ties.

A U.S. Senate committee on Wednesday approved the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 -- legislation to boost military support for Taiwan, including a proposal the first major restructuring of Washington's approach toward Taiwan since 1979.

"What you hear from [diplomats], generally speaking, [is] frustration that the 'One China' policy is no longer understood," Robert Daly, director of the Kissinger Institute on China and the U.S. and a former diplomat at the U.S. embassy in Beijing, told Nikkei Asia.

Washington's "One China" policy, adopted in 1979, acknowledges Beijing's position but does not explicitly recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. Beijing has its own "One China" principle that regards Taiwan as an inalienable part of China that is to be reunified one day, despite Communist China never having held control of the island.

While the U.S. has a policy of strategic ambiguity over whether it would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, President **Joe Biden has in recent months repeatedly said that Washington would send forces**. Asked about this issue in a CBS 60 Minutes interview on Sunday, he said: "Yes, if in fact, there was an unprecedented attack."

The new act currently includes the phrase that "Taiwan is designated as a major non-NATO ally." If passed, "that's the end of the 'One China' policy," Daly said.

"We're heading pretty fast toward uncharted waters ... and all the policy has is a rowboat. These forces are bearing us toward conflict in a way that we're not sure we can control," Daly went on. "It's not clear that China and the U.S. can find a new foundation under which to have normal diplomatic relations."

Taiwan's foreign ministry said in a Sept. 15 statement that it will continue to pay attention to the progress of the Taiwan Policy Act.

Beijing and Washington have been adding heat to their diplomatic feud since Pelosi's Taiwan trip in August. Daly said that as China heads into its highly anticipated 20th People's Congress next, Beijing "has used the visit very successfully" and "feels the wind behind its back" to drum up domestic support for Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"All of the parties believe they're reacting to escalatory steps from the other side, tensions likely will remain elevated," said Ryan Hass, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute and a former diplomat in the American embassy in Beijing. "At the same time, there's no enthusiasm for conflict in the U.S., China or Taiwan. There will be no winners if war ever breaks out."

With both the U.S. and China having economic and other problems, "neither leader wants conflict, but at the same time, neither feels they can afford to look weak," said Daniel Russel, vice president for International Security and Diplomacy at the Asia Society Policy Institute.

"None of the mechanisms for crisis prevention or for crisis management are operational, the dialogues and the mechanisms that have in the past restrained escalation and fostered some sort of resolution of an incident, aren't working right now," Russel told Nikkei Asia, citing the large military presence in the Taiwan Strait.

"There's a lot of tension, and accidents have happened in the past and certainly can happen," he added. "The problem is that right now, an accident quickly becomes a crisis and a crisis could lead to conflict."



A projectile is launched from an unspecified location in China during long-range live-fire drills by the People's Liberation Army on Aug. 4. © Xinhua/AP

With no sign of an olive branch from either side, de-escalation could be difficult.

"Beijing and Washington are in a security dilemma," Russel said. "It's a vicious cycle. Each side thinks that it is the victim, that the action by the other is provocative, and therefore it needs to take defensive steps in response. But those defensive steps themselves are seen by the other side as being provocations and requiring more action by them."

Many experts say both sides should take a deep breath.

Daly said Washington and Beijing first need to be honest about "how dire the state of U.S.-China relations has become" and recognize the need to put mechanisms in place that are "conducive to peace and allow the two sides to converse.

"If you acknowledge how dangerous things have become, then it's clear the goal of U.S.-China relations should be to prevent conflict right now. Both sides act as though the goal of the relationship is to get the other side to wake up and admit that it's been wrong. That's not going to work."

Daly added that fixing U.S.-China relations will take decades of work, but the real discussion cannot begin in the current state of escalation, and America's allies would likely not follow suit with the direction in which Washington and Beijing are heading.

There is "a lot of anger and a lot of fear" in Washington, he said. The U.S. embassy in Beijing also faces many challenges, such as understaffing because of China's zero-COVID policy and very limited contact and access on the ground.

Many lawmakers in the U.S. have insufficient knowledge of the Asia-Pacific region, especially on Taiwan, some experts say.

"You need a lot of historical memory to understand its complexity and the current group of, mostly people in Congress, do not have that memory," said Minxin Pei, director of the Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies at Claremont McKenna College. "Every congressman and senator in D.C. should take a two-day course on Taiwan, so they know the history, the density and the complexity of the issue."

He added that officials in the military and the executive branch tend to understand the dangers better because they constantly deal with security issues, but lawmakers in Congress are too preoccupied with getting reelected to consider such problems very thoroughly.

Pei said policymakers nowadays tend to see the matter "in black and white terms," but much of the stability in the past has been achieved because of the gray area, where people wanted to maintain "a much more pragmatic approach."

The scholar added that the China-Taiwan issue has become a larger China-U.S. issue.

"The last thing we need to do is finger-pointing," Pei said. "I think the first step involves back-channel diplomatic conversations between the U.S. and China saying that we can either land the situation in the current direction and head for a military conflict, or we can do X, Y, Z, so we don't go there."

-- Additional reporting by Thompson Chau