

Taiwan

How Taiwan and the US managed risks in Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with Kevin McCarthy

Beijing's muted military response shows political pragmatism but tensions remain, analysts warn



Tsai Ing-wen, seen making a toast during an event in Los Angeles on Thursday, held the highest-profile meeting for a Taiwanese president with a US official on American soil © Taiwan Presidential Office/Reuters

Kathrin Hille in Los Angeles and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington 8 HOURS AGO

As Tsai Ing-wen flew home from Los Angeles, the Taiwanese president could boast success on her first overseas trip in several years.

Tsai this week held the highest-profile meeting with a US official on American soil, with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. But the talks, in which a bipartisan group of lawmakers offered robust support for [Taiwan](#), did not immediately provoke a strong military reaction from China.

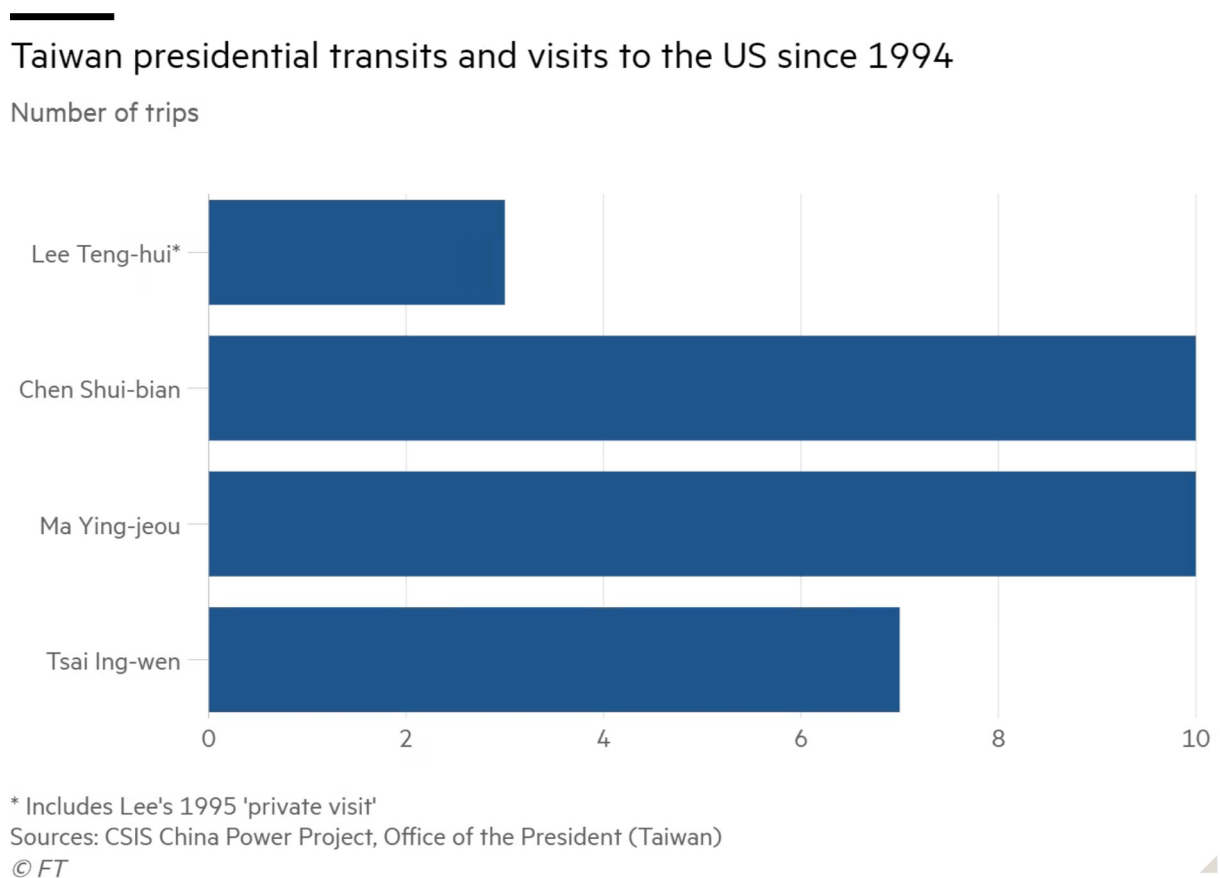
“This was my first overseas trip after the pandemic, and the international situation we are facing is even more complex,” [Tsai](#) told journalists on Thursday, hinting at a desire to avoid the kind of response China unleashed in August when then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei.

At the time, the Chinese military launched unprecedented week-long manoeuvres that included firing missiles over Taiwan for the first time. But Beijing’s answer to [her meeting with McCarthy](#) has, for now at least, been far more muted, despite tensions between Washington and Beijing.

China, which claims sovereignty over Taiwan, [protested the trip](#) but resorted to familiar language, accusing the US of “seriously infring[ing]” on its sovereignty and

threatening to take “resolute steps” in response.

Yet a vigorous show of force has not materialised. China's second aircraft carrier this week led a group of warships through the Strait south of Taiwan for exercises in the western Pacific for the first time, but military experts said such a move, while clearly timed to send a political signal, would have occurred sooner or later.



At a press conference before leaving the US, Tsai evaded questions about China's reaction, a reflection of her characteristic caution and what analysts said could be apprehension that Beijing might yet retaliate.

“I also hope that China can exercise self-restraint,” she said.

China experts in the US said a trip that had the potential to spark a crisis had been managed through close co-ordination between Tsai, the Biden administration and McCarthy's office. McCarthy stressed that the US was not changing its policy on relations with Beijing, while indicating the deterrent impact of bipartisan support for Taiwan.

“There was . . . a shared recognition that risk management is of high importance,” said Evan Medeiros, a former top White House Asia adviser who is now at Georgetown University. “It was handled quite well — there was a convergence of interests of Taipei

and Washington.”

According to several people familiar with the situation, the White House was in continuous communication with Tsai's team, which was in turn [co-ordinating with McCarthy's office](#) over the appropriate tone and level of public prominence. Kurt Campbell, the top White House Indo-Pacific official, also held meetings with McCarthy's team about the visit.

But Bonnie Glaser, a China expert at the German Marshall Fund, cautioned that it was too early to conclude that China had responded mildly, particularly with French president Emmanuel Macron and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen currently in China.

For Beijing, lashing out with dramatic military manoeuvres immediately would also be ill-timed. While Tsai was in the US, China was [hosting her predecessor](#), Ma Ying-jeou in a gesture of outreach towards the Kuomintang, Taiwan's main opposition party, ahead of presidential elections in the country next January.

“If the Chinese Communists begin a serious military coercion campaign while former president Ma is still there, any positive effect of what they hope will be a charm offensive to win over Taiwan voters will be undone,” said a Taiwanese government official.

Zack Cooper, an Asia security expert at the American Enterprise Institute, noted that Tsai's decision not to give a public speech, which Beijing might have used to justify a more hostile response, “didn't give China a lot of room to inflame tensions”.

Further belligerence was possible, Cooper added, “but it will be clear that if Beijing responds militarily to this action, China will have been the one who instigated this unnecessarily”.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office on Friday announced further sanctions on Taipei's top representative in the US, Hsiao Bi-khim, who was also targeted in August, as well as two Asia-based entities.

Beijing also imposed unspecified measures against the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, where Tsai spoke on Thursday, and the Hudson Institute think-tank in New York, where she received an award on a stopover before visiting two diplomatic allies in Central America.

Taipei is also watching the Chinese coast guard after China's maritime safety

administration said it would conduct a three-day patrol and inspection campaign, which would involve checking commercial vessels in the Taiwan Strait.

“It will be very important to see if this is just some psychological warfare move, or whether it’s the start of a practice they will try to step up over time,” said a Taiwanese official. “In the worst case, it could help undermine our sovereignty and create a new status quo of Chinese control over parts of our waters.”

Analysts cautioned against interpreting the lack of escalation as a sign that cross-Strait tensions were more broadly easing.

“The intense antagonism between China and the US remains, and may be getting worse,” said one Chinese academic. “Therefore I would not hold too high expectations that the Taiwan issue will be managed successfully.”

Medeiros pointed to one critical juncture ahead: “The inflection point to watch is going to be the Taiwan election.”

Chinese activities related to select Taiwan presidential transits

Transit/Visit	Diplomatic response	Military response
Lee Teng-hui (June 1995 ‘private visit’)	China cancelled military and high-level exchanges with the US, recalled its ambassador and postponed discussions on nuclear energy co-operation.	In late July, China began a series of military exercises and live-fire drills, marking the start of the third Taiwan Strait crisis. Exercises continued in March 1996 in the lead-up to Taiwan’s presidential elections.
Chen Shui-bian (May 2001)	China’s assistant foreign minister summoned the then-US charge d’affaires to condemn the stopover, saying Washington had ‘grossly interfered’ in Chinese politics.	After the visit, China engaged in one of the largest military exercises opposite Taiwan since 1996, involving the PLA navy, air force, army and artillery units in June and July 2001. The exercises simulated information warfare, invasion of the island and counter-interference.
Chen Shui-bian (January 2007)	China pressured Mexico to prohibit Chen’s aeroplane from entering its airspace, delaying his transit in Los Angeles from	On January 11 2007, China carried out its first test of an anti-satellite weapon, which occurred before Chen landed in

	Nicaragua. China criticised the transit, asserting 'the real aim' of the stopover was 'to carry out activities whose purpose is to split China and damage Sino-US relations'.	Los Angeles. China did not publicly link the test to Taiwan or Chen's intended activities, but the timing was likely to have had an impact on US calculus.
Tsai Ing-wen (July 2019)	Chinese ambassador Cui Tiankai wrote on Twitter that 'those who play with fire will only get themselves burnt'. During the transit, China announced the suspension of a pilot programme that allowed tourists from 47 Chinese cities to visit Taiwan.	China conducted one week of military exercises on both ends of the Taiwan Strait. This was the first time there were simultaneous exercises around the island since the third Taiwan Strait crisis.
Tsai Ing-wen (2023)	China's foreign ministry accused the US of 'act[ing] with Taiwan to connive at "Taiwan independence" separatists' political activities'. China's Taiwan Affairs Office also imposed further sanctions on Taipei's de facto US ambassador Hsiao Bi-khim and four entities.	China's second aircraft carrier led a group of warships through the Taiwan Strait for exercises in the western Pacific for the first time, and flew sorties over the median line. The Chinese coast guard said it would conduct three days of 'inspection patrols' of commercial vessels in the Strait.

Sources: FT research; CSIS China Power Project

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