

Post-Pelosi: Chinese Coercion and the Future of Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific Region

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The recent visit to Taiwan by US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi has garnered significant media attention, the tenor of which has varied widely between strong praise to the Speaker for supporting a fellow democracy with shared values, and disapprobation for upsetting Taiwan’s powerful neighbor, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). To register their displeasure with the Speaker’s visit, as well as a show of strength for domestic audiences within China, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ordered a series of live-fire missile drills around the island nation and placed a number of economic sanctions on Taiwan.

It is worth noting that Pelosi’s visit is not unprecedented (then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich went there in 1997); nor is the Chinese reaction comparable to the 1996. Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, in which the PRC launched missiles into the waters surrounding the island in an attempt to sway voters in Taiwan’s first free presidential elections—an attempt, it should be recalled, that backfired. After 25 years of military and economic development, China has become stronger and more ardent in achieving its goals, having abandoned its “good neighbor” policy and “peaceful rise” rhetoric in favor of cashing in on the economic, political, and military leverage it has painstakingly spent a quarter century building.

The Chinese reaction shows that the CCP under current leader Xi Jinping is significantly different from that under his predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, and Western policy analysts, political leaders, and trade negotiators can no longer rely on the many paradigms built under the era of those previous leaders. Today's PRC is more likely to use its military as a means to achieve its political agenda in the international sphere. This is especially true since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-China trade war have spurred a re-evaluation of Beijing's ambitions and trustworthiness by Beijing's erstwhile. Western partners, who are now learning that the CCP has set forth its long-term goals to maintain domestic dominance and build up a favorable international environment for the Party to sustain its power.

The post-pandemic international environment is proving to be disadvantageous for China's continued growth, especially regarding the execution of the Belt-and-Road Initiative, which is now being recognized as an economic tool in aid of the PRC's geopolitical agenda. Domestically, the CCP has been facing economic problems that have triggered many internal headaches that party leaders have to deal with. Draconian COVID-19 lockdowns in Shanghai and elsewhere; armed crackdowns on civilians attempting to withdraw their money from failing banks; and the government's use of its invasive social credit system to identify and isolate those account holders; all have served as a stark reminder to the population at large that theirs is an *authoritarian state rapidly transitioning to a totalitarian one*. Thus, the domestic pressure on the CCP to maintain stability is getting higher.

More importantly, Xi is pushing forward his plan to stay on for a third term as General Secretary of the CCP in the coming months: something not seen since the days of Mao Zedong. The need for domestic legitimacy is essential for Xi at this sensitive time, and Pelosi's visit has challenged Xi's "strong leader" narrative within the CCP, the country, and the world. It is therefore not surprising that Xi declared eight countermeasures against the United States before the Beidaihe Meeting, a crucial summit at which CCP elites set major policies for the next five years. For CCP hardliners, this is a great chance to showcase what they have planned for the next few decades – a to-do list that will surely include the annexation of Taiwan, by force if necessary.

China's hardline leaders and Wolf-Warrior diplomats may believe the live-fire exercises in the waters around Taiwan are a chance to demonstrate determination and strength. In the long run, however, Chinese leaders must be careful that their behavior does not unilaterally challenge the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait, which is an outcome that Washington would oppose according to a strict reading of the US Once-China policy and may serve to harm Beijing's confidence-building efforts throughout the region. This scenario highlights how the people of Taiwan are standing on a fault line between an authoritarian regime and an increasingly democratic world. ***Taiwan is facing immediate military coercion from China, directly threatening its free and democratic society.***

While China's reasons for conducting live-fire exercises are questionable, another key mistake—at least in terms of optics—has been the behavior of Beijing's more hawkish diplomats. One such *faux pas* occurred on August 3, 2022, when the PRC Ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, stated in an interview that “Beijing would impose re-education after it annexes Taiwan,” suggesting not only that CCP officials would handle Taiwanese people the way they are currently handling the Uyghurs, but that they know—contrary to official proclamations—that these camps are not for re-education, but to aid in cultural genocide. Compounding the egregiousness of this comment is the fact that it was made to Europeans, who are all too historically aware of the inherent evil of putting minority populations into concentration camps, and consigning prisoners of conscience to gulags; the horrors of which are still within living memory.

If the people of Taiwan fall under CCP rule, it will be a disastrous outcome not just for Taiwan, but for the democratic world. Clearly, Taiwan is standing precariously on democracy's first line of defense: the PRC's abrogation of its responsibilities under the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong that transferred that colony from Great Britain to China has illustrated the CCP's lack of trustworthiness and convinced the people of Taiwan that the proposed “one country, two systems” formula, as well as the “92 Consensus,” are unacceptable as power-sharing compromises.

Last October, in her Republic of China (ROC) National Day address, President Tsai Ing-wen made “four commitments” to the people of Taiwan and to the world: these included “a free and democratic constitutional

system; ROC and PRC should not be subordinate to each other; to resist annexation or encroachment upon our sovereignty, and the future of the ROC (Taiwan) must be decided following the will of the Taiwanese people.”¹ The baseline, once again, is not to change the Taiwan Strait *status quo*—which is still the “Greatest Common Denominator” (*zuida gongyue shu*) for both sides—but in fact to preserve it.

As a democracy and a strong US partner in the Indo-Pacific region, Taiwan often finds itself at center stage in the US-China competition, and its democracy has come under immediate military threat by the political pressure to accept Beijing’s rule. To the CCP, Taiwan represents not just a solid repudiation of its claims that democracy is incompatible with Chinese culture; it represents the last piece of unfinished historical business since the ostensible end of hostilities in the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Xi has vowed to complete this “historical mission of reunification of the motherland” (*zuguo wanquan tongyi de lishi renwu*). In the lead-up to Xi’s successful transition to a third term as paramount leader, Beijing is expected to become even more assertive and to rabble-rouse nationalist sentiment domestically by highlighting the competition with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.

As Ukraine’s defense against Russia’s aggression has illustrated, Taiwan must increase its international visibility in the post-pandemic era. The imminent threat from China’s fast-changing strategy and its response to the Pelosi visit—raising the stakes from merely reiterating the use of force to taking actual military action across the median line of the Taiwan Strait—demonstrates this in no uncertain terms. The international community must speak with a single voice and urge China to stop using military and economic coercion to change the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait, and like-minded countries must help Taiwan build up its self-defense capabilities to protect the Taiwanese people. Like Ukraine, Taiwan needs effective instruments to counterbalance an authoritarian military power bent on its domination, and to protect its hard-won freedom and democracy.

¹ Tsai Ing-Wen, “President Tsai delivers 2021 National Day Address,” *Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, 10 October, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6175#banner>.