

Pelosi fiasco pushes prospect of war to the brink

by John McCarthy

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The problem now is that the Taiwan turmoil will be the backdrop to the next crisis that comes along.

Years ago, one of Nancy Pelosi's most noteworthy predecessors as speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, uttered the phrase: "All politics is local". These words may have been on Pelosi's mind when she decided to go to Taiwan.

O'Neill cut his political teeth in the Irish wards of Boston. Pelosi was the Italian-American daughter of the mayor of Baltimore. People who succeed in those political environments prosper because they remember what got them to where they are.

True, Pelosi has form on China. In 1991, she unfurled in Tiananmen Square a banner "to those who died for democracy in China" and – as some suggest – she may well have been looking to her legacy as a promoter of democracy if the Democrats were to lose the House in the November 8 midterm elections. But politicians, particularly those of Pelosi's stature, do not like to lose.

Polling suggests Democrat's chances of retaining the House are as low as 17 per cent-25 per cent. The favourable US publicity overall that has accrued to Pelosi on the Taiwan issue would have entered into her political calculus.

But in terms of Washington's international interests, the visit was a [silly thing to do](#).

For President Xi Jinping also domestic factors have been in play. No Chinese leader would misunderstand how merciless failure can be in the Chinese system

– especially a politician like Xi who was exiled to the provinces following the purge of his father in the Cultural Revolution.

Mutual distrust will be greater and public opinion in each country more inflamed.

Beset by problems related to COVID-19 and a spluttering economy, Xi faces in November the Communist Party Congress which will *among other things* decide if he gets another five-year term. He cannot afford to look weak on Taiwan. This had to be an important aspect of a Chinese reaction to the Pelosi visit described by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken as “disproportionate”.

But whoever is most to blame for the crisis, the US and its allies are in the process of weighing up just how critical this recent set of incidents is for our national security.

Although the US relationship with China began to worsen following China’s activities in the [South China Sea](#) and Obama’s subsequent “pivot to Asia” in 2012, the major changes began early in the Trump administration, particularly with the 2018 trade war.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine preceded by the summit between Xi and President Putin added further challenges to US and other western strategic policy – the foremost being the complexities of dealing with threats in two theatres at once when our antagonists in each theatre had achieved a proximity of interests not seen in decades.

Now the Taiwan crisis, focusing sharply as it does on the nub of Sino-American security dealings since Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, could just herald a third major change in the strategic circumstances in which the US and its allies find themselves.

Mutual distrust and public opinion

The fact that both major powers have put some discipline into their actions and reactions over Taiwan suggest the current crisis will not get out of control. The problem is that it will be the backdrop to the next crisis that comes. Mutual distrust will be greater and public opinion in each country more inflamed.

The current escalation in tension will also give rise to pressures in the US to abandon the doctrine of “strategic ambiguity” – essentially the avoidance of a firm guarantee that the US would intervene militarily on Taiwan’s behalf should the latter be threatened with invasion.

As noted by scholar Richard McGregor, former secretary of state Mike Pompeo and former secretary of defence Mark Esper both said in Taiwan earlier this year the One China Policy and doctrine of strategic ambiguity should be abandoned.

Given that US President Joe Biden has also been less than precise in public statements relating to these doctrines, Chinese suspicions about the direction of US policy are likely to grow. The abandonment of these doctrines would significantly increase the prospect of war.

Meanwhile, China’s suspension of bilateral dealings with the US, including on [climate change](#), will diminish what slim possibilities existed for gradual confidence building in the overall relationship. Equally, any prospect of China influencing Russia on Ukraine must be drastically reduced.

Time to de-escalate

Another drawback of the Pelosi fiasco has been the degree to which it has made US policy on China appear a shambles to others in the region. Even those knowledgeable about the separation of powers in the US cannot quite grasp how the visit went ahead.

The language of Foreign Minister [Penny Wong about the visit](#) was studiously neutral – urging both sides to de-escalate tension.

However, close American allies such as Japan and Australia have done the right thing by the team in criticising Chinese actions rather than American ones (the Japanese having the added reason that the Chinese fired missiles into their EEZ), other regional countries such as South Korea have made known their view – although mostly indirectly – that the visit was irresponsible.

Regrettably the countries most perturbed by the visit – including some of those on the Pelosi itinerary – are those whom the US and its allies are seeking to persuade of the correctness of their policies on China.

If there is a hope, albeit remote, arising from the recent week of turmoil, it is that China and the US might now pull back from the brink.

If this can be achieved, the next stage would be to move policy away from a series of episodes in crisis management to the more structured approach to the relationship initially envisaged by the Biden administration involving areas of cooperation as well as competition and contestation.

Such an approach would require not only American political will but Chinese reciprocity. With the US congressional midterms and the all-important Communist Party Congress in November, we might need to be patient.

Until the vagaries of domestic politics play out in both countries, emotions over Taiwan will remain high. But eventually it will be in the interests of both Beijing and Washington to ensure all politics is not local.

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