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China's Countermeasures to Pelosi's Taiwan Visit Unveil a New Normal: Claiming Sovereignty over Taiwan by Military Means

By QI Dongtao

Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is arguably an inevitable result of an intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China. Even without Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the strategic rivalry is expected to lead to incidents on the Taiwan issue someday. In light of China's countermeasures and their effects, the three parties, namely China, Taiwan and the United States, have been relatively cautious when handling the aftermath of Pelosi's visit. For example, the Chinese government announced its military exercise plan right after Pelosi's arrival in Taipei on the night of 2 August; the exercises started two days thereafter on 4 August after she had left Taiwan. This two-day restraint disappointed many Chinese. The main flight path of Chinese missiles over Taiwan is in space and not in Taiwan's airspace, and Taiwan did not issue air raid warnings, another sign of restraint by both China and Taiwan. For the United States, its navy has been careful not to provoke China and escalate the situation before and after the Pelosi visit, especially during Chinese military drills.¹ The dialogue between the Chinese and US presidents, Xi Jinping and Joe Biden, before Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, may have played a role in their respective restraint. While the situation is still evolving, all three parties have losses and gains, with no clear winners and losers. Pelosi's visit to Taiwan has raised tensions between China and the United States on Taiwan to a new level, though they are still manageable, as shown by the restraint exercised by each party. Taiwan will face its biggest challenge, as it is uncertain if the various benefits and support it receives from the

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-tensions-reveal-challenges-us-navy-chinese-threat-grows-2022-08-05/>, accessed 12 August 2022.

United States can offset the significantly rising pressure exerted by China against the backdrop of a more intense US-China rivalry.

In addition to the unprecedentedly threatening military exercises around Taiwan, China's sanctions also include suspending the import of products from more than 100 Taiwanese food factories and certain Taiwanese fruits and fishes, putting on hold the export of natural sands to Taiwan, and prohibiting Chinese companies, organisations and individuals from cooperating with two Taiwanese government-affiliated non-profit foundations. Taiwan, which bears the brunt of China's military and economic countermeasures, has been unusually calm. The Tsai Ing-wen administration has maintained its usual style of low-key resistance, while Taiwanese society seems unperturbed, taking a casual view of China's sharply elevated military threat.² The economic countermeasures taken by China have little impact on Taiwan's economy, as the targets of the countermeasures are non-significant traditional sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and food, and the number of affected workers is not large. Conversely, it may strengthen people's support for the government. An unpublished study found that after China stopped individual tourism to Taiwan in 2019, Taiwanese support for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the affected tourism, hospitality and transportation sectors has increased. Plausible reasons were the subsidies provided by the DPP government to affected sectors and the successful diversion of people's grievances to China. The Taiwanese in these traditional sectors, many of whom belong to the pan-green camp, have a strong sense of Taiwanese nationalism and are therefore more receptive to the DPP government's anti-China narrative, especially when the government provides substantial subsidies and assistance. China's suspension of the export of natural sands to Taiwan will only affect Taiwan's construction industry and not the chip industry, as it is the former, not the latter, that needs China's natural sands as raw materials.³ The dependence is however very small.⁴

Although Taiwan's government has responded to China's countermeasures in a low-key manner, the unprecedented close-range military exercises around the island have impressed upon the Taiwanese the need for military preparedness. This gives the Taiwanese government solid ground to buy advanced weapons from the United States and to appeal for more substantial international support. A bigger military budget and deeper military reform are also more likely to gain support from the Taiwanese people. Some of Taiwan's civic organisations that are promoting an all-out national defence mobilisation will also receive more support. However, this rising atmosphere of active mobilisation for war may have a negative impact on Taiwan's democracy because of its greater emphasis on confrontation, internal unification, removal of dissent and simplistic thinking.

In a 2019 cell phone poll conducted in nine Chinese cities, the more nationalistic respondents, such as those who support armed unification, are more likely to be dissatisfied with the Chinese government's policy towards Taiwan. The Chinese government's high-profile warnings against the United States became a major source of the Chinese public's disappointment with the government, as these warnings were not accompanied by popularly expected military manoeuvres to deter Pelosi from visiting Taiwan. Therefore, consistent with the finding of the 2019 survey, the double-edged sword effect of nationalism has been clearly manifested in China right after Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. With the simultaneous rise of anti-China sentiment in Taiwan and anti-Taiwan sentiment in China, the Chinese government faces a new challenge: if it goes hard on Taiwan, the Chinese will be satisfied, but Taiwanese voters may be angered

² <https://theinitium.com/article/20220806-taiwan-whats-new-pla-exercises/>, accessed 9 August 2022.

³ <https://www.eet-china.com/mp/a151238.html>, accessed 9 August 2022.

⁴ <https://m.jrj.com.cn/madapter/finance/2022/08/04173136870700.shtml>, accessed 9 August 2022.

to the point of voting for the DPP in elections; if it is too soft on Taiwan, the Taiwanese society's favourable view of the Chinese government may increase, but it is likely to lead to the Chinese public's dissatisfaction with their own government.

Pelosi's visit to Taiwan gave the Chinese government an opportunity to assert its sovereignty through prolonged and more frequent military exercises, an approach that is similar to China's approach to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands when Chinese warships for the first time patrolled the waters around the islands as a response to the Japanese government's nationalisation of the islands in 2012. Chinese warships' patrol around the islands has become a frequent routine since. It is aimed at claiming sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands despite constant protests from Japan and the United States. The same scenario could be playing out in the case of Taiwan. China has shown strategic determination and patience on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands; it has the potential of replicating this determination and patience for the Taiwan issue. While Chinese military exercises driven by its strategic determination could be conducted more frequently, an attack on Taiwan is still unlikely, given its strategic patience. Even in the event of a military incident, the three parties of the United States, Taiwan and China are likely to prevent the situation from escalating into a war.

Although the United States appears to have gained from the Pelosi visit, it has lost several important channels of cooperation after overstimulating China. This threatens to turn its original "cooperation, competition and confrontation" balancing strategy on China into a "competition and confrontation" strategy. Pelosi's visit to Taiwan added fuel to China's already fierce anti-American sentiment. In the past, China had mostly avoided a spillover of the conflict over Taiwan to other fields. This time round, it has dropped moderation by halting even the climate change cooperation that the Biden administration has always valued. Future cooperation that the United States seeks with China may require the United States to express greater goodwill to China through concrete actions, which will be a big political challenge. It is more likely that the United States will continue to increase support for Taiwan on many fronts, reinforcing Taiwan as a flashpoint in future US-China rivalry.

QI Dongtao is Senior Research Fellow of the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

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