



NANCY PELOSI'S TAIWAN VISIT: WILL THE US CHALLENGE DETER CHINA'S OBJECTIVES IN TAIWAN?

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While the world has been focused on the Russia-Ukraine crisis, a US-China showdown took place in the western Pacific over Taiwan in which China was able to project a modus operandi to settle the Taiwan problem in its favour through economic-military tactics. Amidst the debate and counter debate of a Russian model of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, US House of Representative Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan on August 2. This led to a joint live-fire exercise in the waters and airspace around Taiwan by China from August 4 until 10.¹ The military drill was the largest exercise around Taiwan in decades that sealed off Taiwan for three consecutive days, and prompted more than 200 commercial vessels to leave Taiwan's surrounding waters, including the Taiwan Strait, a major shipping route in the region. Beijing took advantage of the visit to project its military capability and seized the geopolitical upper hand in order to push back the US in a Taiwan fiasco.

The visit was aimed at reassuring Taiwan and other regional allies about the US' security commitments in the region and sending a strong message to China that the US is here to stay to counter China's claim of regional superiority in the western Pacific. The visit has heightened the tension between mainland China and Taiwan, with intimidation tactics applied by Beijing against the island.

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mainland China and Taiwan, with intimidation tactics applied by Beijing against the island. Cross-strait relations had already been soured in the aftermath of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party's coming to power in 2016, which sought to reduce Taiwan's dependence on China and promoted the New Southbound Policy.³ China and Hong Kong account for 40 per cent of Taiwan's trade, which reached US\$ 328 billion last year.

Figure 1: China's Live-Fire Drills Surrounding Taiwan on August 4-10

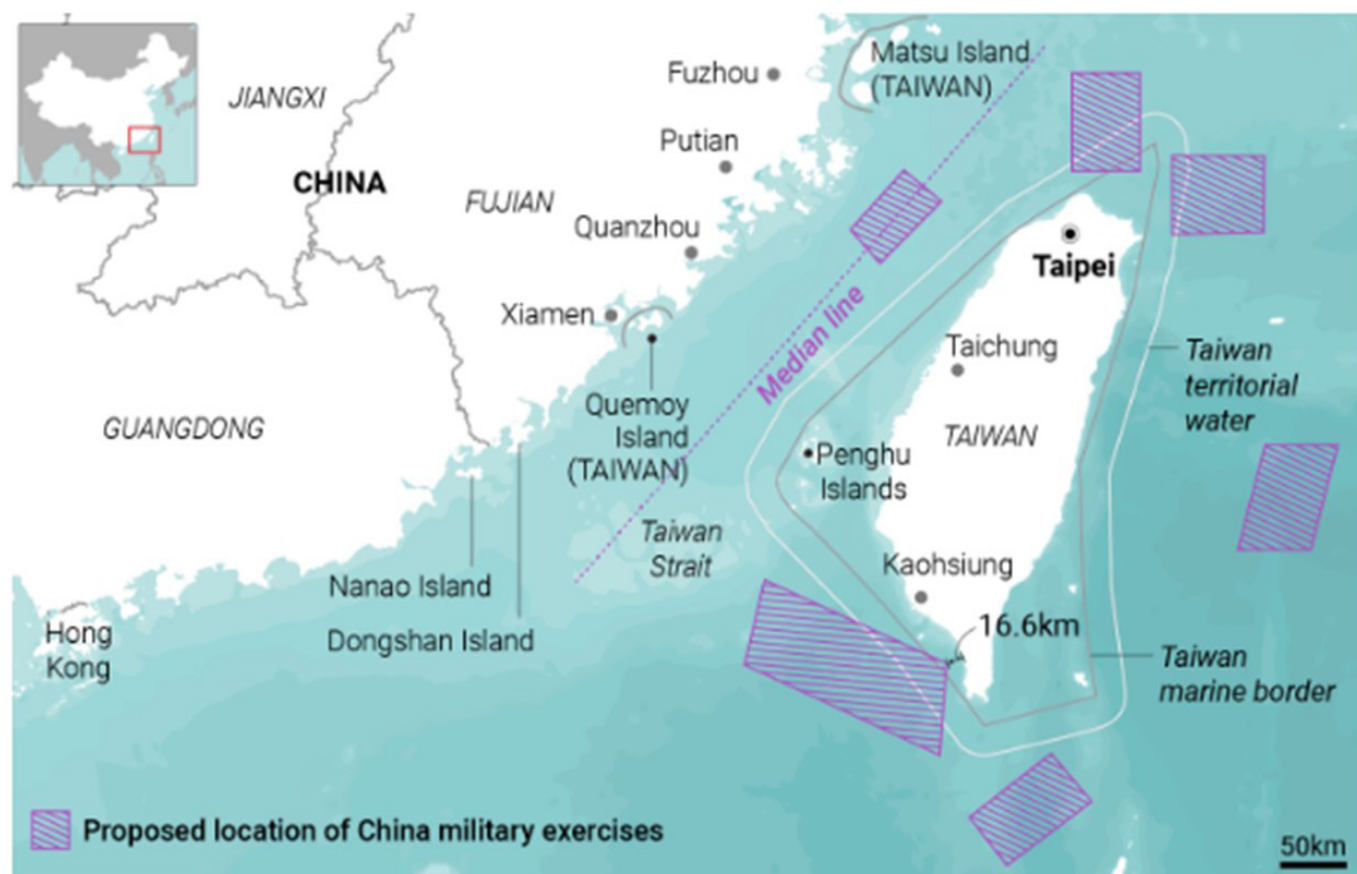


Source: Wenxin Fan et.al, "China Launches Live-Fire Drills, Missiles Around Taiwan After Pelosi Visit", *The Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-military-launches-live-fire-exercises-around-taiwan-11659600560?mod=article_inline. Accessed on August 12, 2022

The military drill was a carefully calculated one, without provoking Taiwan or world condemnation, including America's response, but conducted inside Taiwan's "territorial waters". It took place in six areas surrounding Taiwan (Figure 1) and was conducted by the People's Liberation Army's Eastern Theatre Command. The drill started with a simulated attack and blockade of Taiwan on August 4 with dozens of fighter planes and warships, followed by 11 DF series of ballistic missiles fired from various locations on the mainland. This was the first time that mainland missiles flew over the island. During the 7-day drill, fighter jets were flown across the median line in the Taiwan Strait. The median line was drawn by the US in 1995 and has pressured both sides to abide by an unspoken agreement not to cross it (Figure 2). China has also conducted joint anti-submarine and sea assault operations exercises around the island, as well as a cyber-attack on two Taiwanese government institutions.⁴ Besides, Chinese drones flew over

Quemoy, a Taiwan-controlled island close to the mainland and also known as Kinmen. Since China declared the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea (ECS) in 2013, Taiwan jets have scrambled Chinese fighter jets many times, but the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) never crossed the median line.

Figure 2: Median Line and Locations of PLA's Live-Fire Drill



Source: Lawrence Chung, “Could China’s massive war games be a new normal for Taiwan?” *South China Morning Post*, August 6, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3187905/could-chinas-massive-war-games-be-new-normal-taiwan?module=storypackage&pgtype=sport>. Accessed on August 12, 2022

Compared with the 1996 crisis, this time Beijing has not only broken the tacit understanding between the mainland and the island but has used various types of weapons aiming to pressurise Taiwan and send feelers to the US’ regional allies about China’s military prowess. The 1995-1996 crisis marked only missile tests covering the north and south of Taiwan to block its air and sea routes, while this time it included the southwest Bashi Channel and was comprehensive. A Taiwan blockade has long been part of China’s unification strategy. However, Pelosi’s visit has provided an opportunity to conduct a rehearsal of it. Importantly, the manner in which China conducted the drill indicates that Beijing can seal off Taiwan’s airspace and the surrounding waters at will.

China’s state leadership has fomented nationalist fervour about the visit and contributed with a heavy-handed response to please the domestic audience as the Taiwan issue is more sentimental and helps garner public support for the Communist Party, as well as its leader

Xi Jinping. The 20th Party Congress will take place this autumn, and Xi is vying for a third term, the first Communist leader after Deng Xiaoping to occupy the presidency for a third term, and for that, Xi amended the constitution at the last Party Congress in 2017. A show of strength on Taiwan would help Xi to project that he is a strong leader and is capable of securing Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity and can annul any criticism against him for a third term.

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In a Taiwan-specific white paper released by Beijing on August 10, the first white paper on Taiwan in over two decades, titled “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era”, China argues that it is seeking a ‘peaceful’ reunification. However, the white paper has proclaimed that “use of force would not be renounced,” and it “reserve the option of taking all necessary measures”.⁵ And, if adopted, it “would target external and separatist activities rather than the people on the island.”⁶ This suggests that Beijing’s strategy would be an economic blockade targeting Taiwan and a military confrontation with those countries that come to the rescue of Taiwan.

China’s Search for Regional Superiority in Asia

The latter half of the first decade of the 21st century has been a watershed moment for China’s great power ambitions as well as US-China relations. China successfully organized the 2008 Olympics and became the second largest economy in the world in 2010, surpassing Japan. Similarly, the Chinese leadership came to the conclusion that following the 2008 financial crisis, the United States would not get back its glory as it had enjoyed during the unipolar moment. Thereby, Washington’s will and capability to challenge China has been waning. Conversely, China’s military-industrial complexes started producing technologically advanced defence systems, and the long-cherished dream of the first-generation Chinese leaders of having an aircraft carrier came to fruition. China has gradually started shedding its hiding nature of power and launched assertiveness in various territorial disputes that began in the maritime domain and extended to the land border in the Himalayas.

Chinese economic dominance in the Asia-Pacific region is unassailable. Its military is the largest in the region and capable of withstanding the US’ intervention in a forceful unification of Taiwan. With a total of 355 ships and submarines and having been pursuing to make a two-ocean navy-the Pacific and the Indian- with 4-6 aircraft carriers, the Chinese navy is the largest in the world in terms of the number of ships, while the US navy is second with 297 ships.⁷ However, the US has never accepted the Chinese claim of its regional superiority in the western Pacific theatre and has challenged, though notionally, Chinese claims in various territorial disputes. For instance, when Beijing declared ADIZ over the ECS, two US B-52 bombers flew over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands without informing Beijing ahead of time, though not armed or accompanied by any escort planes.⁸ Many times, US naval ships sailed close to the disputed Paracel islands in the South China Sea (SCS) and received warnings

from Chinese naval ships and diplomatic protests.⁹ Both want to avoid a direct military confrontation and carefully manage regional tensions.

Nancy Pelosi's visit has attracted criticism in the US as it was argued that the visit was at an inappropriate time and was a bad idea because it would derail various ongoing security consultations between Washington and Beijing, and Xi might use the visit as an opportunity to bolster his power with a strong response, as China had 'threatened' against the visit when the news was leaked a month before. Even though US President Biden was initially against the visit, if a high-ranking official like the US House of Representative Speaker cancels the visit by heeding to China, then it would be construed as a weakness of the US to challenge China.¹⁰ Showing US' resolve to not heed to China's threatening, a second Congressional delegation visited Taiwan on August 14 for a two-day trip, to "reaffirm the United States' support for Taiwan" and to reassure its allies that the US is very much involved in the security affairs of East Asia.¹¹ For the US, the Taiwan issue is not just a security crisis in East Asia but is integral to the Biden administration's semiconductor resilience against China and is part of the 'Chip 4' alliance, along with South Korea and Japan.¹² US-China spar is now dominating the semiconductor sector and the US Congress passed last month a \$ 280 billion 'Chips and Science Act 2022', targeting the Chinese semiconductor industry.¹³ Indian analysts have also criticised China's coercive tactics during the visit and its use of the military to settle territorial disputes.¹⁴ Moving forward, Taiwan will become an important partner in India's semiconductor revolution and a technology giant.

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Conclusion

In many ways, the Taiwan dispute is a template for settling various territorial disputes and China's great power ambitions. Other regional countries are watching whether China will prevail over Taiwan or if the US would confront China. Despite being the largest navy in the world, the Chinese Navy is still inferior to the US Navy and a prolonged fight would cripple its sustainability. China is also carefully watching the Russian quagmire in the Ukraine war and will seek to avoid a US-China clash in its periphery. Instead, China might apply a combination of selective blockades to cripple Taiwan's economy and force it to bow down and accept Chinese conditions. China would conduct the same level of military exercise frequently, forcing Taiwan to temporarily halt its exports. Taiwan is an isolated island economy that relies on foreign trade and external linkages, hence any blockade would pose a big challenge. Importantly, once the Taiwan issue is settled, Beijing would divert its military forces to settle the remaining disputes in the SCS and the Himalayas and might seek a controlling position in the Indian Ocean waters.

Notes:

- ¹ Ananth Krishnan, “China concludes Taiwan drills, reaffirms ‘reunification’ pledge”, *The Hindu*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-concludes-taiwan-drills-reaffirms-reunification-pledge/article65754791.ece>. Accessed on August 12, 2022.
- ² Agence France-Presse, ““Those Who Offend China Will Be Punished”: Beijing Warns US In Taiwan Row”, NDTV, August 3, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/those-who-offend-china-vows-punishment-as-nancy-pelosi-visits-taiwan-3220009>. Accessed on August 13, 2022.
- ³ Scott Kennedy, et al, “The New Southbound Policy: Deepening Taiwan’s Regional Integration”, CSIS, January 19, 2018, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180613_Glaser_NewSouthboundPolicy_Web.pdf. Accessed on August 12, 2022.
- ⁴ Joyu Wang and Newley Purnell, “China Extends Military Exercises as Taiwan Battles Cyberattacks”, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-extends-military-exercises-as-taiwan-battles-cyberattacks-11659969484?mod=hp_listb_pos2. Accessed on August 12, 2022.
- ⁵ Mimi Lau, “Beijing removes pledge not to station military personnel in Taiwan and offer of ‘high degree of autonomy’ in new reunification paper”, *South China Morning Post*, August 11, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3188454/beijing-removes-pledge-not-station-military-personnel-taiwan?module=lead_hero_story&pgtype=homepage. Accessed on August 11, 2022..
- ⁶ Cyril Ip, “Beijing’s Taiwan white paper: the messages for home and abroad”, *South China Morning Post*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3188367/mainland-china-releases-white-paper-declaring-beijings-greatest?module=inline&pgtype=article>. Accessed on August 11, 2022.
- ⁷ The Editorial Board, “The Chinese Navy’s Great Leap Forward”, *The Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-great-naval-leap-forward-cambodia-military-base-navy-beijing-xi-jinping-11654637895>. Accessed on August 16, 2022..
- ⁸ Zachary Keck, “US Bombers Challenge China’s Air Defense Identification Zone”, *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/11/us-bombers-challenge-chinas-air-defense-identification-zone/>. Accessed on August 16, 2022.
- ⁹ Helen Davidson, “China warns the US after tracking warship in South China Sea”, *The Guardian*, Jan 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/20/china-warns-of-serious-consequences-after-tracking-us-warship#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20military%20has%20said,warning%20of%20%E2%80%9Cserious%20consequences%E2%80%9D>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.
- ¹⁰ The Editorial Board, “After Pelosi’s Taiwan Visit”, *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-nancy-pelosis-taiwan-visit-china-xi-jinping-11659476190>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.
- ¹¹ Ben Blanchard and David Shepardson, “U.S. lawmakers arrive in Taiwan as China tensions simmer”, *Reuters*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-congressional-delegation-visit-taiwan-sunday-2022-08-14/>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.
- ¹² ANI, “US plans semiconductor alliance with Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan”, *Business Standard*, March 29, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-plans-semiconductor-alliance-with-taiwan-south-korea-and-japan-122032900290_1.html. Accessed on August 18, 2022.

¹³ Bryan Tracy and Natalie Andrews, "Senate Approves \$280 Billion Bill to Boost U.S. Chip Making, Technology", *The Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/senate-approves-280-billion-bill-to-boost-u-s-science-chip-production-11658942295>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.

¹⁴ Srikanth Kondapalli, "Nancy Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan: Need to Stand Up to China and Call Its Bluff", *News 18*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/nancy-pelosis-visit-to-taiwan-need-to-stand-up-to-china-and-call-its-bluff-5704915.html>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.



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