

Taiwan and the Virtues of Ambiguity

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In her effort to change the status quo with, Nancy Pelosi might get just the war that she wants to prevent.

When I visited Taiwan in the early 2000s, I was struck by how politically vibrant the country was: the accessibility of the leadership, the intensity of the civil society, the diversity of the culture. How far the county had come from its authoritarian roots!

At that time, it was not uncommon for analysts to look at Taiwan as the future of China. Beijing might aspire to absorb the island militarily, but Taiwan aspired to transform the mainland by the inevitability of its example.

In 20 years, the geopolitical environment has changed dramatically. Beijing has abrogated Hong Kong's status as a semi-independent entrepot on the edge of the mainland. Russia has invaded Ukraine, reviving the prerogative of superpowers to absorb whatever territory they can swallow on their borders. And U.S.-China relations have entered a downward spiral of mutual recriminations. Against this backdrop, Taiwan no longer looks like the future of the People's Republic of China except perhaps as an occupied province.

Enter Nancy Pelosi.

The Speaker of the House visited Taiwan at the beginning of August, the first person of her position to do so since Newt Gingrich traveled there in the 1990s as a way to stick his thumb in the eye of the Clinton administration. Pelosi wasn't going at the behest of President Biden. Indeed, the Biden administration was cool to her trip, conscious that it would unnecessarily provoke Beijing. The president even talked with Chinese leader Xi Jinping to explain that Pelosi was acting as a free agent and he couldn't control her travel itinerary.

As a critic of Beijing's human rights record, Pelosi has also been a long-time defender of Taiwan. Her visit sends a strong signal, ahead of the November mid-term elections, that the Democrats can be just as hawkish on China as the Republicans. Indeed, her visit garnered praise from those very Republicans, even as it, interestingly, generated criticism across the spectrum of the foreign policy commentariat. In *The New York Times*, Thomas Friedman [led the charge](#) by calling her visit "utterly reckless, dangerous and irresponsible" (largely because it detracts from U.S. efforts to aid Ukraine). Over at the Hoover Institution, Larry Diamond [concurred](#): "It provoked a serious escalation of Beijing's military intimidation without really doing anything to make Taiwan more secure."

The commentariat can generally be counted on to support the status quo, which in this case is "strategic ambiguity." The United States recognizes the People's Republic of China as the "one China." Yet it maintains economic ties to Taiwan, provides it with substantial military assistance, and sends periodic delegations of officials there to consult with their Taiwanese counterparts. What the United States won't do—except when President Biden [misspeaks](#)—is promise to come to Taiwan's aid in the case of an invasion from the mainland.

In other words, the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is roughly similar to its commitment to Ukraine. It will send both countries the means to defend themselves. But it won't directly intervene against either Russia or China. In the case of Taiwan, this strategic ambiguity allows the United States to have its mooncake and eat it too: simultaneously maintain a strong economic relationship with Beijing and beef up the military capacity of Taipei.

There has been some movement in the United States, particularly in Congress, to eliminate this strategic ambiguity. The pending Taiwan Policy Act is designed not only to increase military assistance to the island but to [elevate the country's status](#) to a "major non-NATO ally." There is bipartisan support in Congress to end the "One China" policy and clearly state that the United States will directly defend the country in the case of attack. Proponents of this view believe that it will deter China from invading.

Beijing has certainly made more noises about Taiwan in recent years. "Taiwan independence separatism is the biggest obstacle to achieving the reunification of the motherland, and the most serious hidden danger to national rejuvenation," Xi [said in 2021](#). He has vowed to reunify the two lands on many occasions. He is [being pushed](#) toward a more aggressive stance by nationalist voices that Xi himself has encouraged over the years.

As he prepares to assume his third term as the head of the ruling Communist Party, Xi Jinping remains focused on keeping the Chinese economy humming along. The Party believes that it can maintain its hold over the political realm as long as the populace sees continuing economic progress. Economic growth also helps to maintain the country's global status as a superpower, which also keeps Chinese nationalists happy. International sanctions against China in the event of a war with Taiwan would seriously compromise this economic vision.

In response to Pelosi's trip, Beijing has ramped up military exercises in the Taiwan Strait. It conducted live-fire drills and missile launches [to demonstrate](#) "how China could cut off Taiwan's ports, attack its most important military installations, and sever access for foreign forces that may come to Taiwan's aid." China also [suspended discussions](#) with the United States on military matters and climate cooperation as well as imposed trade sanctions on Taiwan. Pelosi has remained unapologetic, [calling Xi](#) a "scared bully."

Of course, China is not the only country engaged in provocative maneuvers in the region. The United States, still eager to assert itself as a preeminent Pacific power, has conducted numerous operations in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, as documented on this [useful webpage](#) maintained by the Committee on a Sane U.S.-China Policy. The enormous RIMPAC exercises, coordinated by the United States with its allies and just finishing up this week, must look from Beijing's standpoint like a dress rehearsal for either a military campaign or an economic strangulation policy like the one directed at Russia.

Strategic ambiguity is not an ideal policy. The best-case scenario is for Beijing to back off, for Taiwan to make a democratic choice about its status, for the Taiwan Strait to be demilitarized, and for the United States to reduce its military footprint in the region. Such strategic clarity would be most welcome.

But second best is a continuation of the status quo in which all sides play-act and thus preserve space for diplomacy. It's [not too late](#) for all three sides to back away slowly from the current confrontation. Beneath all the harsh words and the military preparations, the economic relationships remain strong. China [absorbs 37 percent](#) of all of Taiwan's exports, and those imports have increased by 14.2% so far this year. Taiwan, meanwhile, relies on nearly 20 percent of its imports from China, which increased by 9.5 percent this year. The two countries also face a raft of mutual

challenges—from depletion of fishing stocks to kinks in the global supply chain—that require coordination and cooperation.

For the adherents of strategic ambiguity in the United States, Pelosi's trip was a mistake because it was no substitute for providing [more useful, asymmetric means](#) for Taiwan to defend itself. That means air defense and drones and naval mines rather than tanks or even big ships or fancy jets. The idea is that Taiwan needs to build up its capacity to deny China the ability to invade rather than fight the People's Liberation Army in a more conventional war on the seas and in the air. The virtue of such a strategy is that it's cheaper and doesn't present as much of a potential offensive threat to China.

Pelosi would be well-advised to take another look at the uses of strategic ambiguity. Taiwan is indeed worth defending, both rhetorically and militarily. But there are better ways of doing that than waving a red flag in front of China and daring it to charge.

John Feffer

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