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Why did China react to Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan?

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Introduction

Nancy Pelosi, speaker of United States House of Representative visit to Taiwan brought angry reactions from the Chinese Government. This was the first time in 25 years that a high level United States (U.S.) leader visited Taiwan. China consider Taiwan as a core interest like other sovereign territories such as Tibet and Xinjiang. The Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations was published by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the U.S. in December 1978. It states that the U.S. "recognises the PRC's government as China's sole legal government" and "acknowledges the Chinese position that there is only "One China and Taiwan is a part of China."^[i]

During a news conference, the U.S. House speaker advised not to use force against Taiwan, indicating that the US supports the status quo between Taipei and Beijing. In this case, the status quo means that Taiwan will continue to enjoy democratic freedom without being subjected to outside pressure. Nancy Pelosi also said, "America's support to Taiwan is necessary now more than ever, and that's the message we bring in today."^[ii] Because the U.S.'s previous position has not changed, then, why is China concerned about the U.S speaker's visit ? In order to understand this basic concern, I would like to point out some key aspects of this crisis. The points are categorised under sub-heading – Why is China worried about Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan?

1. Although the US Speaker's visit was unclear and not officially publicised, there were speculation about the visit. Chinese officials registered their explicit objections about her visit since it was not officially disclosed.
2. The U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen on August 3, 2022. Pelosi said, "Today the world faces a choice between democracy and autocracy....America's determination to preserve democracy here in Taiwan and worldwide remains ironclad".^[iii] This claim denotes two things. First, is that China should not meddle in Taiwan's politics because doing so would be a direct warning against the notion of "Middle Kingdom", and second, if China ever sought to disregard the U.S.'s warning, it would be obliged to utilise "ironclad".
3. A lawmaker from the Democratic Progressive Party named Lo Chih-cheng claims that in response to China's threats and warnings, her visit demonstrates that the

United States will not succumb to Chinese pressure and that she chose to stand firmly with Taiwan, or, to put it another way, “she chose to stand with the allies of democracy.”^[iv] Since lawmakers commended the U.S. system and strongly criticised the PRC system in this statement.

4. The meeting between the U.S. speaker and human rights activists is another issue for China. Nancy Pelosi continues to be one of the critics of China, particularly when it comes to the subject of human rights.^[v]

Reaction from mainland China

1. The visit of Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, in the opinion of Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, violates China’s one-China policy, trespasses deliberately on Chinese sovereignty, and engages shamelessly in political provocations. The United States would have become the “greatest destroyer” of regional security and peace across the Taiwan Strait, and “troublemaker” in China-U.S. ties.
2. The Taiwan issue occurred when the nation was weak and chaotic at the time, and China will undoubtedly resolve it as part of its effort to complete national rejuvenation. Provoking controversy over the Taiwan issue to impede China’s growth and undermine its peaceful ascent is entirely pointless and will undoubtedly fail.
3. To avoid further upsetting the Asia-Pacific region, the United States should immediately stop breaching the goals and tenets of the UN Charter and stop playing the “Taiwan card”.
4. The U.S. should not imagine having free reign to falsify information. Although the U.S. initially provoked China over the Taiwan issue and flagrantly violated China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the U.S. side claimed that China was aggravating the situation.^[vi]
5. China denounced the speaker’s presence and issued a military drill warning to Taiwan. Pelosi also encountered opposition from the pro-Chinese faction, who labelled her an ‘arsonist’ and accused her of meddling in China’s domestic affairs. Any attempts by Taiwan to declare its independence will be “shattered by the overwhelming force of the Chinese people”, according to the Taiwan Affairs Office of the Chinese Communist Party.^[vii]

After having an understanding about why China is worried about the Pelosi’s visit. Now, it would be better to understand the two basic questions. The questions are: a) The United States speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan should be treated as a provocation for China. Why?; and b) How is it different from the visit of then (1997) U.S. speaker Newt Gingrich?

To understand these issues, it would be appropriate to begin the discussion with the (military) drill by PLA in Taiwan strait after the Pelosi’s visit that interfered with Taiwan’s ability to define its territorial seas, and triggered a new round of brinkmanship similar to the third Taiwan strait crisis between 1995 and 1996, the year Taiwan conducted its first direct democratic elections. In response to Li Then-hui, the then-president of Taiwan, visiting the United States, China launched missiles into the surrounding waters.^[viii] The US responded by sending two carrier groups and one carrier through the Taiwan Straits.

However, the visit by then-speaker Newt Gingrich (1997)^[ix] was very different from that of the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for two reasons: a) the former visit was well publicised, and Beijing had maintained preconditions for Taiwan, which was followed by the then-speaker; in contrast, the visit by Nancy Pelosi was in which China was a sceptic and had also warned not to visit Taiwan; and b) the relationship between China and the United States during that period was of cooperation, whereas the situation now is of confrontation.

Jiang Zemin's administration saw China rehabilitating its image following the infamous Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, working to attract more foreign investment and facilitating the peaceful unification of Hong Kong. China also engaged the rest of the world through cooperation and competition during this time.

However, "In November 2009, President Obama, on his visit to China, suggested the idea of 'Group of Two' (G-2), where the US and China would lead the major decisions of the world."^[x] However, the G-2 was declined by China. The U.S. then started rebalancing the Asia-Pacific policy followed by its Indo-Pacific policy and trade wars. The U.S. also refused to consider China as a major power.

The shift in the policies of U.S. (cooperation to confrontation) are to be viewed in the background of China's rise especially in economic and military term. The military under the leadership of President Xi Jinping is much more potent than it was in the past. In the summer of 2022, Chinese officials also strongly asserted that no part of the Taiwan Strait could be considered international water, which means they might move and intercept the US warship sailing through the area.^[xi]

To sum up, it can be argued that then U.S. speaker Newt Gingrich visit to Taiwan was completely different from Pelosi's visit and therefore it should be treated as a provocation for China by the existing superpower.

Endnotes:

^[i] White Paper "One China Principle and Taiwan issue"
<https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/celt/eng/zt/zgtw/t125229.htm>

^[ii] As Pelosi Departs Taiwan, China Gears Up for Military Drills 03 August 2022
<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/08/02/world/pelosi-taiwan>

^[iii] ibid

^[iv] ibid

^[v] Pelosi, Nancy Why I'm leading a congressional delegation to Taiwan, 02 August 2022,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/08/02/nancy-pelosi-taiwan-visit-op-ed/?fbclid=IwAR3gfEHq8BJGluKcDVsjkj_02I3f8ZtUMz-tdLwDb2Y66gr7w2EQDjGv7pA

^[vi] "Chinese Foreign Minister makes remarks of U.S. violation of China's sovereignty"
Xinhua <https://english.news.cn/20220803/b747d0581a2948558d0ad4bbb6d75f0a/c.html>

[vii] *ibid*

[viii] As Pelosi Departs Taiwan, China Gears Up for Military Drills 03 August 2022

<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/08/02/world/pelosi-taiwan>

[ix] Laura Zhou , Why Beijing thinks Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit is different to Newt Gingrich's 1997 trip, The South China Morning Post, 03 August 2022

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3187608/why-beijing-thinks-nancy-pelosis-taiwan-visit-different-newt>

[x] Shyam, Madhukar, "China's view on the U.S. role in Indo-Pacific" Apr-June 2022

Strategic Perspective, <https://usiofindia.org/publication/cs3-strategic-perspectives/chinas-view-on-the-us-role-in-the-indo-pacific/>

[xi] Mozur, Paul and Chien, Amy Chang, "Chinese military drills circling Taiwan set up a potential standoff" 03 August 2022

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/03/world/asia/chinese-military-drills-maps.html>

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