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NO WINNER'S GAME

Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan and Geopolitics in Asia

*After House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recent unsolicited visit to Taiwan, it is not only the island, but also China and the United States which are suffering grave consequences. **ANTHONY TOH, ZI YANG,** and **JONGHYUK LEE** argue that the fallout reflects the "tragedy of the commons", whereby the trip, fuelled by personal ambition, has jeopardised the common good of other states in the international order.*



Taipei in calmer times. The frequent tranquillity of Taiwan's landscapes belies the political storms that can beset the island.
Image by Ke Hugo from Pixabay.

Turning a Blind Eye to China's Redline

Before United States Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi [formally announced](#) her Asian tour to Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, and Japan on 31 July 2022, there

was a great deal of speculation that she might [visit Taiwan](#), too. The possibility of Pelosi's Taiwan visit prompted China to issue a tirade of stern warnings. On 25 July 2022, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian made [China's concerns](#) about Pelosi's potential stopover in Taiwan explicit to their American counterparts. Three days later, on 28 July 2022, even President Xi Jinping personally warned President Joe Biden during their [phone call](#) of over two hours, in reference to Taiwan, that "those who play with fire will eventually get burned".

Despite strong opposition from China, Pelosi disregarded China's redline and [arrived in Taipei](#) on 2 August 2022. At a [bilateral meeting](#) with Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen, Pelosi reaffirmed the importance of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and emphasised the strengthening of solidarity between the United States and Taiwan. As a result, on 4 August 2022, a day after she left Taiwan, China conducted [extensive military drills](#) around six areas encircling Taiwan. Furthermore, a [series of economic sanctions](#) against the island was imposed. China suspended the exports of natural sand to Taiwan, which is crucial for semiconductor production, and the imports of agricultural and marine products from Taiwan.

Pelosi's symbolic visit has had grave consequences for Taiwan — China's rage. The United States and China, too, have suffered from Pelosi's visit, blazing away unnecessarily at each other as they have ever since. Not only has China's response to the visit been adamant in protecting its claim on Taiwan under the strict "One China" principle, it also launched unprecedentedly large-scale military operations despite the [further erosion of relations](#) with its neighbours these would cause. Biden's administration for its part cannot but bear responsibility for passing up an opportunity to ease military tensions and promote cooperation with China. Given the negative consequences for all three parties, not Beijing, Taipei, nor Washington can claim to be the emergent winner.

This paper argues that Pelosi's visit, fuelled by personal ambition, is reflective of the "tragedy of the commons" in having jeopardised the common good of all other states in the international order.

Taiwan: Between a High-Profile Visit and China's Retaliation

Taiwan's survival ultimately rests upon [Washington's support](#), given that China's military strength is [far superior](#) to that of Taiwan. Surely, Taiwan can take steps to bolster its military strength, such as improving its [asymmetric warfare capabilities](#) and [ground-based air defence system](#), but such advancements are highly unlikely to completely ward off Chinese invasion. Hence, Taiwan would have to rely on US military support to defend itself terrestrially should there be an invasion by China. Under these circumstances, support from the US Congress is indispensable for Taiwan as the executive arm of American government needs congressional approval to aid Taiwan.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Taiwan finds itself caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. On one hand, Taipei knew that Pelosi's visit would enrage China, but it could not afford to decline the offer of the visit as this might have contributed to the deterioration of the [prevailing congressional favouring](#) of Taiwan. So, on the matter of the conundrum of Pelosi's visit, did Taiwan stand to gain more or lose more?

In 1997, when former US Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich arrived in Taiwan, the visit was cast as a “symbolic victory” for the Taiwanese. He was the [highest-ranking US politician](#) to visit the self-ruled island at that time, and China was not in the same position of strength as it is today. This time, however, Pelosi’s visit garnered no victory symbolic or practical. It was neither intended to change the [status quo of geopolitics](#) concerning Taiwan, nor will it be likely to lead to a historic turnover of US politicians shifting their views on Taiwan such as in 1997.

So far, Pelosi’s visit has had little impact on the United States’ [strategic ambiguity](#) towards Taiwan. Under the separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches in American government, Pelosi does not represent the [position of the Biden administration](#) which indeed maintains the regional status quo around the Taiwan Strait. Thus, no formal treaties, communiqués, nor memorandums of understanding were brokered between the United States and Taiwan to bolster the existing 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. On top of that, Pelosi’s visit unnecessarily gave Beijing [opportunistic justification](#) to stage unprecedented military drills around Taiwan without having to incur the full force of international opposition. Due to the drills, many of Taiwan’s sea routes had to be [cordoned off](#), harming the region’s economy and disrupting parts of larger international shipping routes.

America’s Dilemma: The Administration’s Ambivalence about Pelosi’s Visit

The Biden administration have had their internal differences on Pelosi’s visit. Facing domestic troubles and the ongoing war in Ukraine, President Biden did not want to [worsen US-China relations](#) at this moment. The US economic recovery post-Covid has been sluggish. Due to [high inflation and economic ripples](#), the economy has been meeting roadblocks and recession lurks around the corner. In terms of global security, although the United States sees China as its leading threat, it is Russia that has been on the offensive in Europe and its aggressive actions are much more brazen than China’s. Russia’s [full-scale invasion](#) of Ukraine shattered European peace, and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine has become one of the White House’s immediate concerns to be addressed with concentrated effort.

From this point of view, the regional status quo in East Asia was desirable in order for the Biden administration to facilitate world economic recovery and streamline US global strategy. Quite reasonably, Biden publicly cited the [US military’s dissent](#) to Pelosi’s trip at a time of high tension.

Nonetheless, officials in the Biden administration still offered support to Pelosi, with National Security Council coordinator John Kirby stating her [“right” to visit Taiwan](#), thus indicating conflicting views within the administration on how to make sense of the visit. When the People’s Liberation Army began massive military drills around Taiwan after Pelosi’s visit, the White House had to [harden its stance](#) on China — thereby adding to a crisis Washington was unlikely to have wanted in the first place.

Furthermore, China imposed a cost on the United States and global security by [suspending or cancelling bilateral talks](#) on issues including military exchanges, transnational crime, illegal immigration, narcotics, and climate change, which is certain to contribute to further disorder in the United States, to say the least. Take the issue

of narcotics, for example. In recent years, the United States has been badly devastated by the fentanyl epidemic. China remains the main producer of fentanyl and the suspension of counter-narcotics cooperation will surely reduce the price of fentanyl in the United States, creating more social chaos. In the coming months, Washington and Beijing will likely seek to resolve the aftermath of Pelosi's visit through diplomacy, although any room for negotiation has been severely reduced by China's irate reaction to the visit.

China's Commitment: Pelosi's Provocation and the "One China" Principle

China appears to serve as the villain of the piece, in threatening international quietude around the Taiwan Strait in response to Pelosi's "rightful" visit to the self-ruled island. In the first place, however, massive military exercises and economic sanctions against Taiwan were not in China's best interests. Xi, being in need of further consolidation of his own power for the next stage of Chinese leadership, would likely to have been more willing to focus on internal issues, such as personnel appointments. Earlier this August 2022, the Communist Party of China (CPC) held a [conclave](#), where many incumbent and retired high-ranking officials had discussions on a range of national affairs. There, Xi would have had to persuade the rest of the party members of his [choice of appointees](#) by justifying new arrangements in the CPC leadership. Aiming to reinforce his authority over the party's affairs, Xi would not be wanting to add upon himself or the country the burden of international conflict, especially with regard to China's relationship with the United States.

Moreover, the [20th party congress](#) of the CPC scheduled later this year will be of utmost importance for Xi to declare his official third term, something that throughout CPC history only Mao Zedong has achieved. However, the current domestic situation, marred by the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), [economic recession](#), and [social grievance](#), is not in Xi's favour. Given this internal pressure, any [degeneration of the Sino-US economic relationship](#) may further cripple the Chinese economy and bring about a manifold increase in tensions. Until the big event ends, Xi would prefer to keep a low profile and loosen up the hostile international mood towards the regime. China's agreement to have a bilateral talk with the United States is vivid evidence of China's intent.

However, Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is not something neglectable by the CPC leadership, owing to the ["One China" principle](#) that signifies its strategic commitment to punishing any attempt to involve Taiwan in a diplomatic relationship. Bound by this principle, China had to conduct military drills around the strait in response to Pelosi's provocative visit. In addition, China adeptly exploited Pelosi's provocation as an excuse to [enhance its military capability](#) for future contingencies around the island.

Tragedy of the Commons: Pelosi's Aspirations and International Order

Given that all three parties with the highest stakes involved — Taiwan, China, and the United States — did not particularly benefit by Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, who then is the primary beneficiary of the commotion? As someone with a [proven record](#) of confronting the CPC, Pelosi wanted another chance to demonstrate US support for Taiwan. Backing down in the face of Beijing's threats issued shortly before her visit would have made Pelosi and the US government look weak in the eyes of the international community. Yet, the main driver of Pelosi's visit may have been her

personal aspirations. As the outgoing House Speaker, she might have hoped to cement her legacy with one final bang. Indeed, the trip to Taiwan has helped Pelosi consolidate the public image of herself and her brand as an enemy of the CPC. Meanwhile, the international community bears the consequences following her self-motivated visit.

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