

# USA-China: Why the big fuss over Nancy Pelosi's possible visit to Taiwan?

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**The White House has distanced itself from the US House speaker's potential visit to Taiwan. But does it still signal a shift in policy over diplomatic ties with the island?**

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U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi hasn't confirmed when – or even if – she [is to visit Taiwan](#). Yet such is the sensitivity over the island's status that reports of her possible trip have resulted in a [warning by China](#) of “serious consequences” and a suggestion by [President Joe Biden](#) that the visit was “not a good idea.” Amid the rhetoric and heightened tensions, Taiwan [is conducting military drills](#).

The comments follow a [report by the Financial Times](#) that Pelosi planned to take a delegation to Taiwan in August. The outlet based its report on six people “familiar with the situation”; Pelosi's spokesperson has said she [could neither confirm nor deny](#) the reported trip.

As [someone who has long studied](#) the U.S.'s delicate diplomatic dance over Taiwan, I understand why this reported trip has sparked reaction in both Washington and Beijing, given the current tensions in the region. It also marks the continuation of a process that has seen growing U.S. political engagement with Taiwan – much to China's annoyance.

## Cutting diplomatic ties

The controversy over reports of Pelosi's potential visit stems from the “[one China](#)” policy – the diplomatic stance under which the U.S. recognizes China and acknowledges Beijing's position that Taiwan is part of China. The policy has governed U.S. relations with Taiwan for the last 40-plus years.

In 1979, the U.S. abandoned its previous policy of recognizing the government of Taiwan as that of all of China, instead [shifting recognition](#) to the government on the mainland.

As part of this change, the U.S. cut off formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, with the U.S. embassy in Taiwan replaced by a nongovernmental entity called the [American Institute in Taiwan](#).

The institute was a de facto embassy – though until 2002, [Americans assigned to the institute](#) would have to [resign from U.S. State Department](#) to go there, only to be rehired once their term was over.

And contact between the two governments was technically unofficial.

As the government in Taiwan [pursued democracy](#) – starting from the [lifting of martial law in 1987](#) through the [first fully democratic elections in 1996](#) – it shifted away from the assumption once held by governments in both China and Taiwan of eventual reunification with the mainland. The government in China, however, has never abandoned the idea of “one China” and rejects the legitimacy of Taiwanese self-government. That has made direct contact between Taiwan and U.S. representatives contentious to Chinese officials.

Indeed, in 1995, when Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan’s first democratically elected president, touched down in Hawaii en route to Central America, he [didn’t even set foot on the tarmac](#). The U.S. State Department had already warned that the president would be refused an entry visa to the U.S., but had allowed for a brief, low-level reception in the airport lounge during refueling. Apparently feeling snubbed, Lee refused to leave the airplane.

### **Previous political visits**

Two years after this incident came a [visit to Taiwan by then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich](#).

Similarly to the possible Pelosi visit, the one by Gingrich [annoyed Beijing](#). But it was easier for the White House to distance itself from Gingrich – he was a Republican politician visiting Taiwan in his own capacity, and clearly not on behalf of then-President Bill Clinton.

Pelosi’s possible visit could be different, because she is a member of the same party as President Joe Biden, and China may assume she has Biden’s blessing, despite his comments to the contrary.

Asked on July 20 about his views on the potential Pelosi trip, [Biden responded](#) that the “military thinks it’s not a good idea right now.”

The comment echoes the [White House’s earlier handling of a comment by Biden](#) in which he suggested in May 2022 that the U.S. would intervene “militarily” should China invade Taiwan. Officials in the Biden administration rolled back the comment, which would have broken a long-standing policy of ambiguity over what the U.S. would do if China tried to take Taiwan by force.

Similarly with Pelosi, the White House is distancing itself from a position that suggests a shift in U.S.-Taiwanese relations following a period in which the U.S. had already been trying to [rethink how it interacts](#) with Taiwan.

### **Shifting policy?**

In 2018, Congress passed the bipartisan [Taiwan Travel Act](#). This departed from previous policy in that it allowed bilateral official visits between the U.S. and Taiwan, although they are still considered to be subdiplomatic.

In the wake of that act, Donald Trump’s Health and Human Services secretary, Alex Azar, became the [highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Taiwan](#) since 1979. Then in 2020, Keith Krach, undersecretary for economic growth, energy and the environment, [visited Taiwan](#).

And in April 2022, a U.S. [congressional delegation visited Taiwan](#). Pelosi herself was reportedly due to visit the island that same month, but canceled after [testing positive for COVID-19](#).

Each of these visits has provoked angry statements from Beijing.

A high-profile visit – even one without the public backing of the White House – would signal support to the island at a time when the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has raised questions over the international community’s commitment to protect smaller states from more powerful neighbors.

Meanwhile, the erosion of democracy in Hong Kong has undermined China’s commitment to the idea of “one nation, two systems.” The principle, which allowed Hong Kong to maintain its economic, political and social systems while returning to the mainland after the end of British rule, had been cited as a model for reunification with Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Party also plans to hold its [20<sup>th</sup> congress](#) in the coming months, making the timing sensitive for a Taiwan visit from a high-profile U.S. political figure such as Pelosi. <http://theconversation.com/republishing-guidelines> —>

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