

Pelosi, Taiwan and China

Tuesday 16 August 2022, by [HORE Charlie](#) (Date first published: 16 August 2022).

Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan has further raised tensions between the USA and China, already at a heightened level. Charlie Hore looks at the background to the visit and asks what the USA expected to get out of it.

Contents

- [Taiwan since 1949](#)
- [Great power politics in \(...\)](#)
- [Is Taiwan Chinese?](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan was clearly a provocation to China. What's less clear is exactly what the USA stood to gain from it – especially as Joe Biden [publicly warned](#) against it, telling reporters that 'The military thinks it's not a good idea right now.'

Part of the answer is undoubtedly electoral opportunism, with Pelosi looking to shore up her position as Speaker of the House of Representatives against [internal criticism](#), but also calculating that 'standing up to China' will help the Democrats in what are likely to be difficult mid-term elections.



Taipei, capital of Taiwan. Picture: metrotrekker.com, Creative Commons

There is a deeper logic, however. The Biden administration follows Obama and Trump in [seeing China](#) as the main threat to American military, political and economic hegemony, but one that needs a very different approach from Trump's. Though Biden has kept most of his economic sanctions, there is a widespread consensus across the American establishment that Trump's isolationist 'America first' strategy was counter-productive, with one economist arguing that '...China's cause has been aided and abetted by President Trump, who is pulling the United States back from the liberal economic order it created and championed for the last seventy years.' [1]

One of the key differences is that Biden understands that the USA needs allies in east Asia to confront China, and Taiwan is central to that. However, the recent history of Taiwan shows why that's a far from straightforward project.

Taiwan since 1949

The current Taiwanese state dates back to 1949. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of China after four years of civil war, the former Guomindang (nationalist) government fled to Taiwan, where they declared themselves still the rulers of all China. The Guomindang established what was effectively a military dictatorship. Martial law was declared in 1947, following a widespread uprising which was savagely repressed[2], and was not lifted until 1987.

However, despite the repression, the economy boomed throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with Taiwan becoming one of the 'Asian tiger' economies. This was due to a combination of a comprehensive land reform and massive amounts of American military and economic aid, with Taiwan becoming a base for the wars in first Korea and then Vietnam.

The fiction that Taiwan 'represented' China couldn't last, however. In 1971 Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations, which recognized Beijing instead. Richard Nixon's trip to China the following year signaled that the USA would follow suit, and in 1979 the USA signed up to Beijing's one-China policy (which states that Taiwan is part of China), broke all diplomatic ties and withdrew all troops, though military aid continued at a much lower level than before.

Though the economy continued to grow, opposition to the Guomindang increased, and in 1986 the regime was forced to concede free elections. That opposition coalesced around the Democratic People's Party (DPP), who were pro-independence, and in 1989 got 35% of votes. By 2000 they were strong enough to win the presidential election, and the following year they won a majority of seats in parliament. However, they had by then backed away from calling for Taiwan's independence to accepting the 'status quo' - Taiwan acts as an independent country, but doesn't publicly claim to be independent.

The status quo means that Taiwan is in almost all respects a 'normal' state, with its own currency, armed forces and so on, and also a functioning liberal democracy with contested elections, legal trade unions, the right to protest and an uncensored press.

The lack of diplomatic recognition hasn't been a barrier to economic growth. Taiwan is now one of the 25 largest economies in the world, and the biggest producer of computer chips. The economy is also deeply enmeshed with China, which takes over [40 percent of Taiwan's exports](#) and supplies over 20 percent of Taiwan's imports. Taiwanese capitalists are major investors in China, including Foxconn, which makes Apple products and employs over 300,000 workers in China. Cross-Straits tourism was also a major source of income before the Covid pandemic, with several million Chinese visiting each year.

However, inequality has grown significantly in recent years, with the economy recovering only fitfully from the 2008 crash. That was highlighted by the [Sunflower Movement](#), in which hundreds of students occupied the legislature for three weeks in 2014, in protest against a free trade agreement with China, a movement at its high point supported by a 500,000-strong demonstration (two per cent of the population). Covid has again affected the island severely, though Taiwan has had [one of the most successful 'Zero-Covid' strategies](#) until recently - a 2021 study in *The Lancet* of the real Covid death toll found that [Taiwan was one of just five countries](#) to have 'negative excess mortality rates' (meaning that the net effect of the pandemic and the health measures taken against it resulted in fewer deaths than would have been expected).

Great power politics in east Asia

China's reaction to the Pelosi visit has taken multiple forms. The military exercises off the Taiwanese coast have attracted the most attention, but there have also been a variety of economic sanctions on Taiwan, as well as withdrawal from climate change talks with the USA. There are domestic as well as international reasons for this hawkishness – [as one Taiwanese socialist noted](#)

We must understand that Chinese military exercises are as much a show of power to its own citizens at home as an intimidation tactic against the Taiwanese people and the world. Xi, who is preparing for his third governing term, faces enormous domestic problems, especially the fact that the Chinese economy and the country's social life have not recovered from COVID-19.

If there was a strategic point to Pelosi's visit, it was as a wedge, to gradually normalise American contact with Taiwan, with the ultimate aim of re-establishing military bases on Taiwan and furthering the imperialist alliance coalesced around the [AUKUS nuclear submarine project](#). The [recent decision by NATO](#) to declare China a 'security challenge' is similarly an indicator of the extent of this project. And the extent of China's reaction is a clear warning to the USA about the costs that this will entail.

Any further Western interference, whether it's more military moves by the USA, or the mooted visit of British MPs in the autumn, will only increase the tensions in the region. The costs of this will be paid by Taiwan and other countries in the region, but for the USA that is a further advantage, as they can use the spectre of a threatening China to recruit other states in the region to an anti-China alliance. China's increasingly aggressive moves in the South China Sea since 2012, and the clamp-down in Hong Kong, do make the threat appear real, and strengthen the USA's strategy.

Constructing such an alliance won't be as simple as they might think, however, as each state in the region has its own priorities and interests which cut across any simple pro-US/anti-China dynamic. In the Philippines, the new president has [said he intends to continue](#) his predecessor's balancing between China and the USA – and the USA will continue to ignore attacks on democracy such as the [arrest of veteran left oppositionist Walden Bello](#) just days after an official visit from US Secretary of State Blinken. The rise of right-wing Japanese nationalism as part of this alliance is raising tensions with South Korea, whose president [passed up meeting Nancy Pelosi](#) after her Taiwan visit. And the competing claims on island chains in the South China Sea don't simply pit China against everyone else: Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam all have over-lapping claims that clash with each other as well as China.

Paradoxically, the USA's strongest card is that it's no longer a military power in the region and has no territorial ambitions. But the more American military power rebuilds in the region the weaker that card becomes

Is Taiwan Chinese?

China's actions are hardly likely to boost support for reunification. However, for the CCP this doesn't really matter, as the 'one China' formula has an unspoken second half: Taiwan is an integral part of China (irrespective of what the inhabitants think).

The vast majority of Taiwan's population are of Chinese descent – the indigenous (non-Chinese) inhabitants number around five per cent of the population. However, divisions remain between 'Taiwanese' (people whose ancestors arrived from China over the past eight centuries) and

'Mainlanders' (descendants of the Guomindang forces who arrived between 1945 and 1949 – around ten per cent of the population), largely because the 'Mainlanders' became the ruling caste during the martial law period. Intermarriage and the passing of generations have to some extent blurred the divide, but it remains important.

A Taiwanese university [runs a regular poll](#) asking whether people identify as just Taiwanese, just Chinese or both. In this year's poll almost two-thirds of respondents said 'Taiwanese' and just two percent 'Chinese'. And in the 2020 legislative elections the two biggest pro-reunification parties, the New Party and the People First Party (both right-wing splits from the Guomindang), got between them under five per cent of the vote.

One of the factors that has increased support for Taiwan maintaining its distance from China is undoubtedly [what has happened to Hong Kong](#) over the past couple of years, as China has steadily increased its control over the city. The irony here is that the 'one country two systems' deal under which Hong Kong kept elections, free trade unions and other democratic rights was in large part crafted to persuade Taiwan's population that reunification with China would not change their way of life.

There is of course no intrinsic reason why Taiwan should not be part of China, if that's what the population want. But equally there's no reason why Taiwan must be part of China – the reality is that Taiwan has been repeatedly colonised by different imperial powers, of which China was the most successful. As one classic anthropology text explains

Taiwan's early history is not unlike that of North America. Portuguese explorers 'discovered' the island early in the sixteenth century, and various commercial interest, as well as Japanese and Chinese pirates, laid claim to it for different periods thereafter. The aborigines, a Malayo-Polynesian people, were robbed of their land, their dignity and often their lives by the Chinese colonists who followed the explorers.[3]

Taiwan was formally absorbed into the Qing empire in the 1680s following a war of conquest against supporters of the previous Ming dynasty who were using Taiwan as a base, and was ceded to Japan following a war in 1895. There were repeated uprising by both the indigenous population and colonists against both the Qing and Japan, and when the Guomindang retook Taiwan in 1945 they were treated as invaders rather than liberators: *Political repression was, as on the mainland, combined with economic prodigality. The island was looted to line the pockets of the [Guomindang] elite, and to back the war effort on the mainland.[4]* The result was the 1947 uprising and 40 years of martial law.

Conclusion

Though the immediate crisis has passed, the rivalries between the USA and China continue to make Taiwan and the South China Sea one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints. There are parallels here to NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but also very important differences. China is a much more serious rival for the USA, and crucially an economic as well as military and political rival. While that raises the stakes considerably, that does also constrain both sides.

China and the USA are mutually economically dependent, and Taiwan has a much greater economic importance than Ukraine. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would also be [logistically far more difficult](#) than Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and is less politically desirable for the CCP, who would still prefer

a peaceful reunification. The USA equally faces big logistical problems in keeping substantial forces in the region, hence the importance of a return to bases in Taiwan. But there remains the very real danger of an accidental clash between US and Chinese forces that could quickly escalate.

Socialists in the West have to oppose all interference by our rulers in the politics of east Asia, which can only lead to further military tensions and a greater threat of war – no to AUKUS, no to American or British bases anywhere in the region! In Britain we need to be aware that the Tories are following Biden's lead, with both Truss and Sunak using cold war rhetoric to argue for a tougher stance on China. And we also have to keep echoing the warnings by [Taiwanese socialists](#) that other imperial powers cannot be relied upon as a bulwark against China

... America has only backed Taiwan or Hong Kong because they serve as useful proxies in its geopolitical contest with China. Support for Taiwan and Hong Kong will only go as far as both are useful for the US...This has always been true of Taiwan and Hong Kong's relations to the US and, despite wishful thinking, continues to be true of the present.

Charlie Hore

[1] George Magus, *Red flags; why Xi's China is in jeopardy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) p 2. The same argument can also be found in Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) among others.

[2] See Denny Roy, *Taiwan; a Political History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp 67-75

[3] Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972), p 1.

[4] Simon Long, *China's Last Frontier* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p 55.

P.S.

• rs21. 16 August 2022:
<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2022/08/16/pelosi-taiwan-and-china/>