

Pelosi's visit would reset agenda

Written by Joseph Bosco
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US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi is planning to lead a bipartisan delegation of members of the US Congress on a fact-finding trip to Asia next month, including a stopover in Taiwan, the Financial Times reported.

The disclosure — unconfirmed by Pelosi, her office or the US Department of State, which would have to make the diplomatic and logistical arrangements — has nevertheless precipitated anger from China and consternation in the White House, starting with US President Joe Biden.

Biden told reporters last week: “The military thinks it’s not a good idea right now.”

China’s reaction was predictably more emphatic. Beijing’s mouthpiece, the Global Times, said the Taiwan visit “will be one of the most egregious provocations by the US to China on the Taiwan question since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US... If Pelosi goes to Taiwan, it will be a huge historic mistake for Washington.”

Curiously, Beijing seems to have forgotten the only other time a sitting US House of Representatives speaker visited Taiwan, when Newt Gingrich did so in 1997. China’s reaction then was more muted, probably because it had not yet built the military capabilities needed to successfully attack Taiwan or intimidate the US from intervening — although the year before it had stared down a White House plan to send two aircraft carriers through the Taiwan Strait by threatening “a sea of fire.”

Pelosi’s trip was originally scheduled for April, but was postponed when she reportedly contracted COVID-19. China’s reaction to the news at the time was equally colorful.

“If the speaker of the US House of Representatives knowingly commits a sneaky visit to Taiwan, it will be a malicious provocation to China’s sovereignty, gross interference in its internal affairs and an extremely dangerous political signal to the outside world,” Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (王毅) said.

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Wang and his colleagues apparently thought that was the end of the matter, and that their loud protests and the Biden administration's behind-the-scenes pressures had persuaded Pelosi to abandon her plans. If so, they misjudged Pelosi as badly as her domestic political opponents have often done, and despite China's long bill of particulars against her that the Global Times recounted.

"Pelosi, 82, once said she has been considered the most disliked person in China for over 30 years. She should be ashamed of that apt label," the newspaper said in an editorial. "Over the years, Pelosi has never been absent from the areas where troubles could be made in China-US relations. On the Taiwan question in particular, she was one of the first US congressional leaders to call to offer congratulations when [former president] Chen Shui-bian (陈水扁) was elected ... back in 2000."

The editorial went on to criticize her other contacts with Taiwanese officials, but failed to mention perhaps her boldest act of defiance against the communist dictatorship. During a visit to Beijing in 1991, she went to Tiananmen Square, and unfurled a banner in memory of the thousands of students and workers who were massacred there two years earlier.

Recollection of that event, while too embarrassing for China to openly acknowledge, might be behind the current vitriol directed her way, to the point of issuing a direct threat against her in the Global Times.

"Visiting Taiwan is definitely a red line that Pelosi must never cross," it said. "China is resolute in defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and has the right to take forceful measures against 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces and extraterritorial forces ... including against the trip and Pelosi herself."

Later, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised "resolute and strong measures" if Pelosi makes the trip.

Asked about Biden's comment on US Department of Defense concerns, Pelosi said: "I think what the president was saying is that maybe the military was afraid our plane would get shot down or something like that by the Chinese."

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Biden administration officials, and Biden himself, should muster the same gumption Pelosi displays. They should make clear that such threats are absolutely unacceptable and, if acted upon, would bring an immediate break in diplomatic relations with Beijing, recognition of Taiwan and an unequivocal US declaration of intention to defend Taiwan.

When Pelosi's first scheduled trip was postponed, China's press mocked the explanation as a "tactical positive" and will surely see a further change as another US backdown. If the trip does not occur for whatever reason, Biden should collaborate with Pelosi to arrange an address to Congress by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). It would be a fitting follow-up to the Washington visit by Olena Zelenska, spouse of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, as both Taiwan and Ukraine are on the front lines of the aggression against the US-led international order from "no-limits strategic partners" China and Russia.

Whatever one might think of Pelosi's domestic politics — I am not a fan — her long-standing defiance of the genocidal communist regime in Beijing and her visit to Kyiv to meet with Zelenskiy indisputably make her a US democracy and human rights hero for Republicans and Democrats alike.

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