

Nothing ‘unfortunate’ about visit

Written by Chris van Laak
Thursday, 11 August 2022 04:31

“We support democratic Taiwan, but a visit by US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi is of no benefit to the nation.”

That was the subtext of some op-eds published in the past few days in liberal-leaning Western newspapers and magazines.

The visit was “unfortunate,” Shelley Rigger, a political scientist at Davidson College, said in a New Yorker interview published on Thursday last week, while Pulitzer prize-winning author Thomas Friedman in a New York Times piece published on Monday last week, before Pelosi had even arrived in Taiwan, found her planned trip “utterly reckless.”

China started large-scale retaliatory military drills near Taiwan following Pelosi’s departure, and after Beijing apparently extended the exercises some speculated that such drills could become a new normal. The US pundits’ pro-China peers in Taiwan could in the same vein claim that “thanks to the US, Taiwan is facing a cross-strait crisis, but has received no immediate benefit.”

Their arguments are short-sighted and wrong, although for different reasons, and Rigger, Friedman and their ilk can at least be given the benefit of the doubt that they do not fully grasp the situation. Pelosi’s visit was not unfortunate and did not come at the wrong time, as they implied, although the timing was maybe not right either; right would have been earlier, and more often.

Before Pelosi’s trip, 25 years had passed since a sitting US House speaker — Newt Gingrich — previously visited Taiwan. Her trip was no escalation, as implied by Rigger and Friedman, but a mere reassertion of Taiwan’s well-established sovereign right to receive a US official of her rank. Faced with China’s increasing attempts to salami-slice Taiwan’s frail sovereignty, the nation should reassert its well-established rights whenever the chance arises.

China’s military drills are largely intended by its leadership as a message to a domestic audience — “Do you see how tough we are on Taiwan?” — and while the normalization of such drills might be a mouth-watering slice of the salami for Beijing, they would not bring it any closer to its goal of “unification.”

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Faced with Chinese threats, harsh words and import bans, Taiwan must not falter, now or ever. Should Taipei reassert its right to set its own trade policies and sign a free-trade deal with Washington, as planned under the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade, it would be naive to expect China to do nothing in return.

However, its options with regard to taking decisive steps toward its goal are limited. China can try to impress with its drills, but it does not have the capabilities to force Taiwan to surrender by military means, nor could it weather the global storm that would arise should it try to force Taiwan to negotiate terms of surrender by means of a full-scale economic blockade.

Meanwhile, Taiwan changing its status for the better would also be no easy endeavor, and however pressing it might appear now, the focus should be on using international relations to reassert and safeguard the sovereignty it has.

Going beyond that, and doing so safely, would also require decisive, coordinated action. In contrast to what former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo seemed to envision when he last month urged the US to formally recognize Taiwan, such a step should not be taken in reaction to symbolic Chinese machinations, but should be coordinated between Taipei, Washington and other global capitals to ensure that it is decisive enough to truly end the game of cat-and-mouse over Taiwan.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2022/08/11](#)