

1945

Nancy Pelosi Could Start a War with China Over Taiwan (America Could Lose)

Doug Bandow

July 31st, 2022

With her possible trip to Taiwan still unresolved as of this writing, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi could start a war with the People's Republic of China if she were to indeed touch down in Taipei. Perhaps her objective is to prove that Democrats can be as reckless as Republican President George W. Bush, who invaded Iraq on false premises and caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

A US-China war over Taiwan could result in an even more significant human toll. Thankfully, such a conflict remains unlikely in the near future. However, while the phone conversation between America's and China's presidents may limit the risk of retaliation over this incident but did nothing to defuse the long-term potential for confrontation and war. Indeed, the PRC's Xi Jinping reportedly told Joe Biden: "The will of the people cannot be defied and those who play with fire will perish by it."

The vagaries of history separated Taiwan from the PRC. Beijing's control over the island was lost in 1895 to war, restored in 1945 at World War II's conclusion, only to be lost again in 1949, in civil war. The US then backed Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China, which fled to the island of Taiwan.

In 1972 President Richard Nixon, who began his career as a dogged anti-communist, famously opened a dialogue with the PRC. He flew to Beijing to meet Mao Zedong, Chairman the Chinese Communist Party and dominant revolutionary figure—and also architect of such humanitarian disasters as the Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the latter, a complex mix of party purge, civil war, and mental infarction, had yet to fully end.

However, Nixon's mission was about brutal geopolitics, not human rights. He sought to widen the Soviet-Chinese breach and win Beijing's assistance in exiting the Vietnam War. In return the US allowed the PRC to displace Chiang's government, which held China's United Nations seats in the General Assembly and on the Security Council.

Washington did not shift its formal recognition to China until January 1979 under President Jimmy Carter. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, ensuring unofficial relations with Taipei. The US and PRC agreed that there was only one China, while leaving the contours of that concept undefined.

The PRC continued to assert that it was the rightful government over Taiwan but could do little to regain the island. China was still recovering from Mao's misrule and its GDP was not even five times that of Taiwan, despite possessing a vastly larger population. However, the world has changed. Last year the PRC's GDP was more than 25 times as large. Although Taipei still enjoys a higher per capita GDP—China's population is more than 60 times as great—the PRC's dramatic increase in wealth allowed it to develop what today is the world's second or third best military. Beijing now can pressure and threaten Taiwan in hopes of forcing reunification.

As a matter of principle, the Taiwanese have a right to decide their own destiny. They have created a democratic and prosperous nation and understandably have no desire to be ruled by an increasingly authoritarian, even totalitarian state, whatever the exact form the latter's governance would take. Indeed, Hong Kong's ugly fate has destroyed forever any confidence in Beijing's "one country, two systems" promise.

However, principles of morality and justice are poor shields against the nationalistic fervor of a population of 1.4 billion, which overwhelmingly believes that "Taiwan is Chinese," as an otherwise liberal university student once insisted to me. For the Chinese people, Taiwan is the most important symbol of the "Century of Humiliation," during which an enfeebled Chinese empire was defeated, occupied, and bullied by Japan, the US, and a gaggle of European powers. Today's China is very different, proud of its ancient civilization, filled with a superior sense of mission, enriched from rapid economic growth, and confident in its dramatic international rise.

As the PRC's resources have increased, so has its ability to enforce its will. "China has stood up," declared Mao at China's founding. Beijing is now a surging great power with the wherewithal to demonstrate the truth of Mao's statement. Unfortunately, throughout history juridical arguments over constitutional arcana only rarely have determined the success of secession. Much more often, militaries and battles do the deciding. Hence the ongoing tensions over Taiwan, including Pelosi's travel plans.

China does not want a war. Even Xi, who long ago shed any pretense of being a liberal reformer, as originally imagined by some Western observers, would prefer to achieve his ends peacefully. In this case, a negotiated surrender, with some sort of fig leaf of formal autonomy.

Taiwan's status is a PRC red line. The opposition Kuomintang governed Taiwan throughout the Cold War and maintained the claim that there was only one China, though rightly under the KMT government, not the CCP regime in Beijing. Even out of power the KMT has maintained unofficial ties with the PRC and eschewed support for independence.

In contrast, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party has veered much closer to backing formal separation. Although the current government of President Tsai Ing-wen has carefully avoided making that claim, it has pushed more strongly for a separate identity, especially in international organizations. At the same time, a number of US policymakers have advocated greater support for Taiwanese autonomy, and some, including John Bolton, who served as National Security Adviser to President Donald Trump, have proposed formal diplomatic recognition.

Which explains the near hysterical Chinese objection to the speaker's planned visit. Beijing has an almost neuralgic reaction to anything that even hints of Taiwanese independence. Pelosi leads

the US House of Representatives and is second in line for the presidency. Her going to the island suggests to the PRC official dealings between Washington and Taipei.

Her trip is not unprecedented. House Speaker Newt Gingrich made a similar, though much shorter, trek in 1997. However, the world is very different today, which makes today's cross-Pacific jaunt much more problematic.

A quarter century ago China remained only a middling economic power and modest military power. Estimated military expenditures were under \$40 billion, a fraction of those today. The PRC could bluster and threaten but had no means to conquer the island. At the time China's military was more useful to signal displeasure than initiated a war of conquest.

Moreover, the international climate is much tenser today. In 1997 Europe was not on fire. North Korea did not have nuclear weapons. Afghanistan had not seen off the US after two decades of war. And the PRC was not regularly deploying naval and air forces to intimidate the Taiwan government.

Admittedly, even then East Asia was not entirely calm. In 1996 Beijing had fired missiles near the island in an attempt to intimidate voters from backing President Lee Teng-hui, a native Taiwanese who sought to raise Taiwan's international profile, in the island's first direct presidential election. However, the PRC's ploy backfired miserably and Lee won a convincing majority in a four-way race. Moreover, after the US responded by sending two carrier groups into the Taiwan Strait, there was little that China could do but fume—and vow “never again,” subsequently greatly expanding its military. Finally, Gingrich was something of a Panda-hugger, in contrast to Pelosi, who long has criticized Beijing over human rights.

That world has disappeared. Most importantly, if war broke out today, Washington would likely lose. In recent years US wargames have tended to show the PRC as the victor. The US would be forced to project power halfway around the world and overcome China's increasing anti-access/area denial capabilities. The PRC could rely on mainland bases and achieve air superiority in the region, a condition American forces *have never* confronted. The Pentagon is working to counteract the PRC's advantages and considering plans to strike elsewhere, such as interdicting Chinese trade. However, Beijing's significant edge remains. Washington's “best” hope might be a lengthy conflict.

Thankfully, Pelosi's visit is not likely to result in hostilities. The Chinese military will not attack Pelosi's plane, as some fear: the Beijing leadership is not insane. However, it is aggressive and determined, and thus is likely to act to raise tensions to demonstrate its anger. That won't be helpful but is unlikely to make much difference over the long-term.

There is, however, a more serious danger. The usual coterie of military hawks, concentrated in GOP ranks, have been cheering Pelosi on, assuming that acting “tough” will intimidate the denizens of Zhongnanhai. However, the impact is more likely to be the opposite, convincing them that the US is advancing Taiwan's separate existence if not formal independence. Since reunification is viewed as a historic mission, China will feel the need to devote even greater effort to expeditiously achieve that end. Which means using force. Thus, Pelosi's well-publicized effort to back Taipei is likely to undermine its security.

War would be catastrophic for all concerned. Washington understandably hopes to deter Chinese military action, but Taiwan's status is far more important to China than to America. Beijing will always be willing to spend and risk more. And that includes the possibility of nuclear escalation. The world has never endured a full-scale conventional war between two nuclear-armed powers, in which the temptation to use nukes would be constant. If deterrence failed there would be no victor no matter how the conflict turned out.

The Taiwanese deserve to live free, but Pelosi's junket is more likely to hurt than help their cause. Abandoning the trip would be a PR defeat for the speaker but would be better for America and Taiwan than flying on to Taipei.

A 1945 Contributing Editor, Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry.