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## Gomez: How the US and China can lower tensions around Taiwan after Pelosi trip

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan and China's reaction to it is focusing popular attention on a dynamic that has largely developed outside of public view. Her visit is the latest, high-profile vignette of a dangerous spiral between Washington and Beijing. Pelosi's visit triggered a period of high tension, but pressure was building behind the scenes for years.

Stability in the Taiwan Strait is supported by a delicate political arrangement involving the United States, Taiwan and China. Taiwan is a de facto independent country with its own government and military, but it has not formally declared independence. China maintains that Taiwan is part of China, and its ultimate goal is reunification. Preferably this process will occur peacefully, but Beijing is prepared to use military force against Taiwan if peaceful reunification is impossible.

U.S. policy toward Taiwan is a balancing act between acknowledging — but not accepting — China's position while opposing unilateral actions by either China or Taiwan that could challenge the status quo and spark a conflict instead of upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

While the United States does not have a defense treaty with Taiwan, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 states that the president and Congress shall determine “appropriate action by the United States” in response to “any threat to the security ... of the people on Taiwan.” The United States also frequently sells weapons to Taiwan so it can defend itself.

This leads to a situation where each party is aware of one another's red lines that could trigger a conflict, but there are many actions that fall short of crossing a red line that could challenge the status quo. Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is one such move. Her visit does not change U.S. policy, but Beijing regards the visit as a signal of deepening U.S. support for Taiwan that could portend other, more serious shifts in U.S. policy.

The United States and China are locked in a spiral of threatening actions because both believe that the other party is undermining the delicate political position that keeps the peace in the Taiwan Strait. Each country sees itself as a status quo actor trying to prevent a situation from

deteriorating due to the actions of the other. This creates an action-reaction cycle that is difficult to stop.

China's growing military power combined with repressive domestic policies raise concerns in Washington of an imminent use of military force against Taiwan. In March 2021, the then-commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson testified before Congress that he believes China could attack Taiwan in the next six years.

The Chinese air force is also frequently sending aircraft into Taiwan's air defense identification zone, with large spikes in aircraft numbers coinciding with U.S. military exercises and important political anniversaries such as Oct. 1, the founding day of the People's Republic of China. Beijing's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and implementation of a draconian national security law in Hong Kong have also fueled U.S. fears about China's designs for Taiwan.

China is likewise wary of U.S. activities that shore up support for Taiwan and, China argues, risk "hollowing out" the one China policy. President Joe Biden has said on three occasions that the United States has a commitment to come to Taiwan's defense if China attacks. The administration was quick to state in each instance that U.S. policy toward Taiwan was unchanged, and Biden has told Chinese leader Xi Jinping directly that there is no fundamental change in U.S. policy.

However, when considered alongside other developments such as former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper calling for scrapping the one China policy in a July 2022 trip to Taiwan, growing support for dropping strategic ambiguity and replacing it with a clearer U.S. defense and pending legislation that would strengthen U.S.-Taiwan ties, there is understandable concern within China that the United States could indeed change its policies.

China's aggressive reaction to Pelosi's visit will likely accelerate the U.S. actions that China seeks to prevent, but Beijing may feel like it has no other course of action besides forcefully reminding the United States of the dangers of preceding.

China's reaction to Pelosi's visit has been swift and underscores Beijing's assessment that the visit was a serious and provocative act. The most prominent aspect of China's response was large-scale military exercises in the sea and air around Taiwan, which began during Pelosi's visit and concluded on Aug. 10. Three aspects of the exercises are particularly noteworthy.

► First, segments of the exercise areas overlapped with Taiwan's territorial waters. Taiwan's government has not reported any Chinese military presence in territorial waters, but past Chinese exercises have stayed further from Taiwan. The exercise areas and statements by China's Eastern Theater Command indicated that the military practiced conducting a blockade against Taiwan, a likely component of Chinese war plans should it invade.

► Second, on Aug. 4 China launched 11 ballistic missiles that landed in the ocean east of Taiwan with at least one missile flying over the island. The missile was outside Earth's atmosphere as it passed over Taiwan and did not present an immediate danger. However, this marked the first time that China has fired a ballistic missile that flew over Taiwan's territory.

► Third, Chinese military aircraft frequently crossed over the Taiwan Strait's median line during the drills. The median line is not an internationally recognized boundary, but Taiwan and China have generally kept their military forces on their respective sides of the median line. Chinese military aircraft have crossed over the median line more frequently since 2020, but they occurred nearly every day of the recent exercises according to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense.

Breaking the current spiral of tension between the United States and China over Taiwan requires restraint. The longer the spiral lasts, the more grievances each side can point to as evidence of the other side not being serious about peace and stability. Moreover, both the United States and China will likely portray their behavior as demonstrations of resolve, which increases the costs of backing down to try and find a way out of the spiral.

There are also good domestic political reasons for both sides to not back down. China has an important Communist Party congress coming up later this year. Xi Jinping has an incentive to enter that meeting in as strong of a position as possible. A war with the United States would unleash a great deal of danger and uncertainty, which makes it unlikely. A managed crisis that signals China's red lines without sparking a conflict, however, could pay off handsomely.

The United States, meanwhile, is leaning hard into great power competition with China. Congress, which has typically been a strong supporter of close U.S.-Taiwan relations, is eager to demonstrate support for tougher policies that demonstrate U.S. competitiveness.

Washington's one China policy is unlikely to be completely discarded, but there will probably be increased support for deepening U.S.-Taiwan relations across a wide spectrum of policy issues, especially U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan.

Breaking the spiral of tension may be impossible right now, but the United States could take some actions to slow the degradation and reduce the risk of a crisis or conflict. Militarily, Washington should continue to improve Taiwan's asymmetric defense capabilities, especially its land-based anti-ship and anti-air systems and encourage Taiwan to take steps to improve its ability to protect itself.

The Biden administration's decision to postpone an intercontinental-range ballistic missile test was a prudent measure.

Politically, the United States should recognize that its one China policy and strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan are important parts of maintaining stability with China, and that abandoning either will make deterring an invasion of Taiwan harder instead of easier. Careful and purposeful U.S. policies will produce better outcomes for both the United States and Taiwan than high-profile visits.

China's military exercises around Taiwan are winding down, but this does not mean the United States and China are out of the woods yet. U.S.-China relations are very tense and neither side has taken actions to break out of the spiral of tension. The immediate danger has passed, but things will likely get worse before they get better.

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