

the japan times

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE IN ASIA

Pelosi becomes the highest-ranking official to visit Taiwan in 25 years

Jesse Johnson

August 2nd, 2022

U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Tuesday became the highest-ranking American official to set foot in Taiwan in a quarter century, prompting a furious China to announce missile tests and military drills encircling the democratic island.

The U.S. Air Force plane carrying Pelosi and a delegation of lawmakers on a trip to several Asian allies and partners landed at Taipei's Songshan Airport in the Taiwanese capital, live-streamed video showed. The House speaker and her fellow lawmakers were greeted on the tarmac by Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu and Sandra Oudkirk, the director of the American Institute in Taiwan, the island's de facto U.S. embassy.

In a statement released soon after she arrived, Pelosi said the delegation's visit "honors America's unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan's vibrant Democracy" and is part of a broader trip focusing on "mutual security, economic partnership and democratic governance" in the Indo-Pacific.

"Our discussions with Taiwan leadership will focus on reaffirming our support for our partner and on promoting our shared interests, including advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region," the statement said. "America's solidarity with the 23 million people of Taiwan is more important today than ever, as the world faces a choice between autocracy and democracy."

Pelosi, a California Democrat and second in the presidential line of succession, was scheduled to hold talks with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen on Wednesday morning and attend a luncheon with her in the afternoon, the island's Presidential Office said in a statement.

Media reports said Pelosi could also meet a group of activists who have been outspoken over China's human rights record that afternoon.

In an opinion piece published in The Washington Post shortly after she landed, Pelosi detailed her reasons for visiting, praising Taiwan's commitment to democratic government while criticizing China as having dramatically increased tensions with the democratic island in recent years.

"We cannot stand by as the CCP proceeds to threaten Taiwan — and democracy itself," Pelosi said, referring to the Chinese Communist Party.

Ahead of the trip, the mere possibility of a visit by Pelosi to Taiwan — which China considers an integral part of its territory that must be brought back into the fold, by force if necessary — had sparked strong condemnation from Beijing and even raised eyebrows in the White House.

China has said it is concerned over what it has labeled a "hollowing out" of the United States' long-standing "One China" policy, under which Washington officially recognizes Beijing rather than Taipei. The U.S. is also bound by the Taiwan Relations Act to provide the self-ruled island with the means to defend itself.

In the run-up to Pelosi's widely anticipated arrival in Taiwan, Chinese officials had vowed a powerful response, and less than an hour after Pelosi's arrival, China's Defense Ministry slammed the move as "a malicious provocation to create a crisis." It said that the military would conduct "a series of targeted military operations" to counter "external interference" and moves by "Taiwan independence separatists."

Separately, the Chinese military's Eastern Theater Command said it will conduct joint military operations in six locations near Taiwan starting Tuesday night. The exercises will include joint air and sea drills in the north, southwest, southeast of Taiwan, long range live-firing in the Taiwan Strait, and missile test-launches in the waters east of the island.

China's Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, said in a statement that it had made a strong protest with Washington over the visit, which it claimed "gravely undermines peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" and would have "a severe impact on the political foundation of China-U.S. relations."

In Washington, the White House has appeared to be gearing up for a strong response from China — including military operations "that break historical norms," raising the specter of miscalculation.

On Monday, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby repeatedly attempted to play down the significance of any trip, saying that it would "break no new ground" and represented no change to policy, a stance he said U.S. President Joe Biden had conveyed to Chinese leader Xi Jinping in their phone call last week. "There is no reason for Beijing to turn a potential visit consistent with long-standing U.S. policy into some sort of crisis or conflict, or use it as a pretext to increase aggressive military activity in or around the Taiwan Strait," he said.

Kirby also said that Biden had emphasized the U.S. separation of powers during his call with Xi, telling the Chinese leader that Pelosi makes her own decisions about her travel.

China, however, appeared to refute this view late Tuesday, with the Foreign Ministry saying in its statement that "the U.S. executive branch has the responsibility to stop such visit."

Pelosi, for her part, also used her post-arrival statement to point out that the trip was "one of several Congressional delegations to Taiwan — and it in no way contradicts longstanding United States policy."

But Kirby — noting that China has ramped up its rhetoric over the visit — said that Beijing appeared to be positioning itself to potentially take further steps “in the coming days and perhaps over longer time horizons.”

He also revealed for the first time what steps the U.S. expects China could take in response to the trip, including firing missiles into the Taiwan Strait and around the island, crossing the unofficial no-fly “median line” between Taiwan and the mainland and making “spurious legal claims” that the strait is not an international waterway.

“Some of these actions would continue concerning trend lines that we've seen in recent years, but some could be of a different scope and scale,” he added.

On Tuesday, Taiwan’s Defense Ministry “reinforced” its combat alertness level for a period of three days through Thursday, according to the island’s official Central News Agency.

That report came as Reuters said that Chinese warplanes had flown close to the median line on Tuesday morning, while several of its warships had remained nearby since Monday. Neither side's aircraft normally cross the median line.

Kirby said earlier that while the administration would not “take the bait or engage in saber rattling” with Beijing, the U.S. would “not be intimidated” and would continue to operate militarily in the seas and the skies of the Western Pacific.

Highlighting this point, fleet-tracking data from Tuesday showed that two U.S. capital ships — the Reagan and the USS Tripoli amphibious assault carrier — were operating in the vicinity of Taiwan, near the edge of the South China Sea.

Pelosi — a longtime China hawk — is leading a six-member congressional delegation on a tour of Asia that will also include official stops in South Korea and Japan. Neither the speaker nor the White House had publicly confirmed that she would visit Taiwan prior to her arrival.

The timing of Pelosi’s has stoked concern in some corners.

It comes as China’s Xi looks to present himself as a strong and decisive leader ahead of a rare Communist Party conclave this fall that is widely expected to grant him an unprecedented third term at the country’s helm.

Analysts have said that a weak response to what many in the party view as an unnecessary provocation at this critical juncture could have a decidedly negative impact on Xi’s political ambitions.

The Biden team, meanwhile, had hinted that they were opposed to a trip, with the president saying last week that he thought the Pentagon believed a visit was “not a good idea right now.” The U.S. president also has a number of pressing domestic issues on his plate as COVID-19 cases surge and as he presses on with his economic agenda.

On Monday, Kirby said that although there had been direct conversations between Pelosi and her staff before she left “at various levels in the national security establishment,” Biden did not speak directly with her about this trip.

Taiwan has increasingly found itself at the center of the growing Sino-U.S. rivalry. Beijing has in recent years ramped up its military activities around the democratic island, while Biden has appeared to break with decades of American policy by vowing multiple times to defend Taiwan if it were to be invaded. Though those comments were later walked back, they have resonated among the Chinese leadership.

A number of U.S. officials and lawmakers have visited Taiwan in recent years, including sitting Cabinet members. Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper and ex-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who both served under Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, have also visited the island this year.

But experts have said they expect the Chinese reaction to Pelosi's visit to be different and stronger than when other U.S. officials have traveled to the island.

"The response will almost certainly include a military component, most likely with a show of force in the first instance — live fire exercises, a much greater military presence within the Taiwan Strait and esp across 'the median line,' even missile tests," Taylor Fravel, an expert on the Chinese military at MIT, wrote Tuesday on Twitter, adding that the response would likely unfold "over days if not weeks, but likely start after Pelosi departs Taiwan."

Fravel said that while the Chinese goal will be "to underscore resolve without sparking escalation," the likely prominence of the military component "will include the potential for miscalculation."

His remarks echoed those of Kirby, who earlier said that the threat of Chinese military exercises "raises the stakes of a miscalculation."

"There's no reason that (any visit by Pelosi) should spark some kind of conflict or that it should precipitate increased tensions or serve as some sort of pretext for some sort of what they would consider a reaction," Kirby said.

In an attempt to head off such scenarios, Kirby said the U.S. remains "committed to keeping open lines of communication with Beijing," and encouraged China "to keep that commitment as well."

But the trip, coupled with Biden's later-walked-back comments about coming to Taiwan's defense in the event of a Chinese attack, appeared to be part of larger and more worrying developments in cross-strait relations, analysts say.

"Pelosi's trip is unlikely to start a new crisis in the Taiwan Strait by itself, but it is indicative of a bigger spiral of tension that could lead to a serious crisis, or even an armed conflict, between the United States and China," said Eric Gomez, director of defense policy studies at the Cato Institute.

"Hopefully the angst around Pelosi's visit will remind leaders in both countries of the dangers of actions that demonstrate toughness or resolve, as they are more likely to deepen the current spiral of hostility rather than stopping it."

