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Washington and Beijing play with fire in Taiwan



Sources: La Diario

The progressive departure by increasingly influential sectors of the U.S. government from the "One China" doctrine comes as Xi Jinping seeks a third term.

As Washington and Beijing strain forces, pragmatic de-escalation measures are needed to scare away the risk of armed conflict.

Long before U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's plane hit Taiwanese soil on Aug. 2, Sino-U.S. relations were already in a negative spiral. From Washington, President Joseph Biden

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and his government dedicated themselves to weaving a network of hostile alliances to corral China; for its part, Beijing multiplied aggressive military maneuvers in the East and South China Seas. However, their bilateral ties had not deteriorated to the point of making any high-level dialogue on climate change or other vital issues impossible. As proof of this, Presidents Biden and Xi Jinping discussed those issues during their July 28 video conference.

In reality, Pelosi's visit created a new fissure in the relationship between the two powers, wiping out any prospect of cooperation. Only an exacerbated military rivalry remains.

Since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1978, under the administration of James Carter (1977-1981), U.S. leaders have always adhered (at least publicly) to the "one China" principle, with Taiwan and the mainland being a single country, though without necessarily relying on the same political entity. This was summed up in the famous formula adopted a little later: "One China, two systems". At the same time, under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) passed by Congress in 1979, the United States must deliver defensive weapons to Taipei according to its needs, and regard any Chinese attempt to modify the island's status by force as an "extremely troubling" fact – a formulation known for its "strategic ambiguity," to the extent that it does not clearly say whether Washington would intervene or not.

So far, those two precepts combined helped to ensure some form of stability: by suggesting the existence of an intrinsic link between Taiwan and the mainland, the "one China" principle deters Beijing from any hasty attempt to appropriate the island; while the "strategic ambiguity" leaves both the Taiwanese and the Chinese in uncertainty about the American response in case of declaration of independence by the former or a project of invasion by the latter. It is a way of deterring one from any reckless initiative. (1)

Even as U.S. leaders continue to claim to adhere to these two principles, in recent months the highest officials in the administration and Congress have given the impression that they had moved away from them, in favor of a policy that suggests the existence of two states, "China on the one hand, Taiwan on the other" ("One China, one Taiwan"), and in favour of greater "strategic clarity". Biden himself contributed in this regard: asked by

CNN if Washington would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack, he responded clearly. "We are obligated to do so," (2) he said, even if it is not the official U.S. line.

Both the president and other senior leaders also suggested a change in policy, seeking to obtain from their allies in the region – Australia, Japan and South Korea – a commitment to assist U.S. forces in case they are involved in a war against China. In addition, Congress furthered that process by providing bipartisan support for arms deliveries to Taiwan, organizing there, repeatedly, visits by high-level delegations, and planning to amend the 1979 TRA to end "strategic ambiguity," which would be replaced by a firm commitment to help the island defend itself in the event of a Chinese attack. (3)

Path to inflection

China has watched these events with increasing bewilderment. For its leaders – and in particular for Xi, who aspires to a third five-year term in the supreme post of first secretary of the Communist Party and president of the PRC – the reunification of Taiwan to the mainland was imposed as the ultimate goal of government policy, a *sine qua non* condition for the national "renaissance". (4) "The Chinese people, with more than 1.4 billion people, are determined to resolutely defend China's sovereignty and territorial integrity," he told Biden during their July 28 conversation, according to the Chinese statement. "No one can oppose the will of the people, and when you play with fire, you end up burning." (5)

Pelosi was aware of all this when she traveled to Taiwan. He knew perfectly well that his visit could only aggravate the situation. Both Pentagon officials [Defense Department] and those in the White House [the president's headquarters] warned him that doing so at that time would arouse the anger of Chinese leaders and provoke in one way or another a strong reaction on their part. Regardless, Pelosi chose to go to Taipei – while making sure to attract maximum international attention by leaving the possibility of her visit under a cloak of doubt. It is not possible not to think that he traveled with the firm intention of provoking and accelerating the process of inflection of US policy towards the doctrine "China on the one hand, Taiwan on the other", with all the risks that this entails.

If that was his intention, his initiative was extremely successful. Despite efforts by White House officials to reassure their Chinese counterparts about the separation of powers within the U.S. political system, Beijing found it hard to believe that Pelosi only represented herself – and not the U.S. government. From the point of view of Chinese leaders, this visit is nothing more than the culmination of a joint campaign by the US Congress and the White House to repudiate the one-China principle, a first step towards the recognition of Taiwan as an independent state. The Biden administration tried to salvage the situation by insisting that there had been "no change" in its policy, but those statements did not seem to convince anyone.

Rhetorical and forceful response

On August 10, just one week after Pelosi's trip, the Information Office of the State Council [Executive Branch] published a new white paper on "the Taiwan question," reaffirming Beijing's willingness to carry out the reunification of the island by peaceful means, without excluding the use of military means in order to break all resistance by Taiwanese independence forces or their foreign supporters: "We are willing to create ample space [for cooperation] in order to achieve peaceful reunification, but we will not give an inch to separatist activities, whatever form they take," it reads. The Taiwan issue is an internal matter that concerns China's core interests [...], no outside interference will be tolerated." (6)

The official statements were accompanied by a series of military and diplomatic operations, which aimed to show that the leaders had lowered their degree of tolerance for "external interference" such as that of Pelosi. They increased the country's level of preparedness for an eventual blockade of Taiwan and even for the invasion of the island if it made moves towards independence. Thus, several worrying measures were taken, reflecting this new position.

On 4 August, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fired 11 DF-15 ballistic missiles into waters in the east, northeast and southeast of Taiwan – hinting at its intention to organize a blockade of the island in the event of a new crisis or conflict. Five of them hit Japan's exclusive economic zone, a sign that any war linked to Taiwan could quickly spread to the Japanese archipelago, which is home to numerous U.S. military bases. (7)

On August 6, representatives of the Chinese government announced that the dialogue between PLA officials and those of the US military, which aimed to prevent any involuntary confrontation between their respective naval and air forces, was interrupted. At the same time, discussions on such vital issues as climate change and global health were also suspended. (8)

On August 7, several Chinese state media announced that from now on the PLA would conduct "on a regular basis" military exercises east of the midline of the Taiwan Strait (Taiwanese side), when until now Chinese forces had mainly conducted their operations west of this line (Chinese side). Thus, they accentuate the psychological pressure on the island, while carrying out simulations of an invasion.

Pragmatism needed

All these measures were branded as "irresponsible" and "provocative" by the Americans. "We must not take cooperation on issues of global concern hostage in the name of divergences between our two countries," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a press conference in the Philippines on Aug. 6. "The other [countries] rightly expect us to continue to work on issues that concern the existence and livelihoods of both their peoples and ours." (9)

Sadly, Blinken's words contain a great deal of truth. But it would be wrong to take China solely responsible for the impasse in which the relationship between the two countries finds itself. The secretary of state himself spent most of the last year building alliances to try to contain China's growing power, and sending Chinese leaders ultimatums on a wide range of internal problems, such as the persecution of Xinjiang's Uighurs or political repression in Hong Kong – ultimatums to which they could not yield. Of course, Blinken also called for greater cooperation on climate change, but always second. From the Chinese point of view, Washington is the one that takes hostage the discussions on the issues that represent a crucial problem for the planet.

Is it not time to put an end to this little game of shifting responsibility for the situation to the other, and to resume pragmatic discussions on measures to reduce the risk of violent conflict? The United States should pledge that its warships no longer transit the Taiwan

Strait, and Beijing, not to cross the middle line of the strait with its military forces. While it is impossible to return to the era prior to Pelosi's visit, everything possible must be done to prevent this new configuration from generating armed conflict.

Notes:

1) Michael J. Green and Bonnie S. Glaser, "What is the US 'one China' policy, and why does it matter?", Centre d'Études Stratégiques et Internationales, www.csis.org, 13-1-2017.

2) John Ruwitch, "Would the US defend Taiwan if China invades? Biden said yes. But it's complicated", National Public Radio (NPR), Washington, 28-10-2021

3) Olivier Knox, "Senate looks to update and deepen US-Taiwan relationship," Washington Post, 1-8-2022.

4) Tanguy Lepesant, "The Missing Piece of the 'Chinese Dream'", Le Monde diplomatique, Southern Cone edition, October 2021.

5) "President Xi Jinping speaks with US president Joe Biden on the phone", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, Beijing, 29-7-2022.

6) "The Taiwan question and China's reunification in the new era", State Council Information Office, Beijing, August 2022.

7) Sam LaGrone and Heather Mongilio, "11 Chinese ballistic missiles fired near Taiwan", US Naval Institute News, 4-8-2022.

8) Vincent Ni, "China halts US cooperation on range of issues after Pelosi's Taiwan visit", The Guardian, 6-8-2022.

9) "Blinken: China should not hold global concerns 'hostage'", Associated Press, 6-8-2022.

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