

The Nancy Pelosi Conundrum: Another Missed Opportunity in US-China Relations

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The Washington Post reports that Xi Jinping personally asked President Biden to find a way to put off House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s trip to Taiwan. According to the Post’s account, Biden explained to Xi that the independent role of Congress made it impossible for him to stop her, even though US intelligence officials were (correctly) convinced that China would follow through on its warnings and make a forceful response.

China’s ambassador to the US said:

“We had warned that if Pelosi made the visit, there would be very serious consequences. China would firmly and forcefully respond. To our regret, the United States chose not to listen.”

Pelosi’s trip was not written in stone: She said she would not go if Biden explicitly asked her not to.

So Biden had an out, but:

“In the end, Biden never spoke to Pelosi about her trip despite Xi’s request . . . In an offhand comment, Biden told reporters shortly before Pelosi’s expected visit that military officials believed the trip was not a good idea.”

Now just imagine a different scenario:

Biden, concerned about China’s reaction to the visit, says to Xi:

“I will do my best to persuade her, out of respect for China’s sensitivity regarding Taiwan. But in return for her postponing her trip, I want your assurance that China’s military will stop air naval maneuvers that threaten Taiwan. And let’s plan on holding high-level military-to-military and diplomatic discussions to promote mutual security in

the Taiwan Strait area.”

It was an engagement moment, prompted by the US national interest in competitive coexistence with China.

Would Biden “look weak” if he succeeded in stopping the trip? That’s the usual retort, but Biden could have responded to such a charge by pointing out that Taiwan’s security would not be undermined by the postponement, whereas Pelosi’s trip would force China to make a show of strength. Biden could readily point to the many ways his administration is supporting Taiwan: three recent military aid packages, Biden’s public comments upholding strong ties with Taiwan, and the array of security arrangements, such as the Quad (US-Japan-Australia-India), that are focused on any Chinese threat in the Asia Pacific.

A positive response to Xi was an opportunity to put US-PRC relations onto a more positive track at a time when those relations are rapidly deteriorating. At the least, Biden’s proposal would have tested Xi’s frequent assertions in support of improved relations.

One Chinese foreign policy expert recently wrote a lengthy defense of China’s Taiwan policy and a sharp critique of how the US is eroding the One China policy. Yet the expert ended not with a warning but with a suggestion that the two countries find common ground:

“On the Taiwan Strait issue, China and the United States need to further negotiate more practical and in-depth cooperation on confidence-building measures and crisis management at the strategic and technical levels, based on the two countries’ current crisis management mechanisms. The existing crisis management mechanisms of China and the United States mainly have three types of institutional arrangements: high-level interaction, dialogue and communication channels, and military rules of behavior.”

The article suggests that there are voices inside the policymaking apparatus in China that are open to dialogue even on Taiwan, the most important of Beijing’s core interests and ordinarily a subject closed to “external interference.”

Tensions in the Taiwan Strait will probably cool down in coming weeks. But the Pelosi trip has created new circumstances that do not bode well for moderating Taiwan’s role in US-China relations. More official US visits to Taiwan are in the offing, and in Congress the mood favors bipartisan efforts to upgrade Taiwan’s status.

Meantime, the Chinese military will continue testing Taiwan’s defenses, breaking with previous patterns that had avoided directly challenging Taiwan’s territorial waters and air space. As a Chinese military adviser said the other day, the strategy is to “close the door and beat the dog.”

Spiraling confrontations will end in open conflict unless Washington and Beijing seize diminishing opportunities for engagement.

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