

Breaking the US-China cycle of escalation over Taiwan

There are steps both sides can take to arrest the action-reaction cycle that's driving them towards the brink of war

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For The Straits Times

Even before Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's recent visit to Taipei, China and the United States had entered a fraught escalatory action-reaction cycle regarding Taiwan.

Beijing had been chafing at the Taiwanese public's increasing support for independence and perceiving growing American backing for the island. Recently, it bolstered its campaign of economic coercion of Taipei and increased the cadence of cyber-attacks and intrusions into the island's air defence identification zone.

Though Washington repeatedly communicated that its position had not changed, President Joe Biden's several public comments on Taiwan, which sent mixed signals about the US commitment to strategic ambiguity, led China to believe the US is hollowing out its One-China policy. Continued American support for Taipei's inclusion in international organisations, weapons sales and other steps to enhance support for Taiwan have also unsettled Beijing.

Mrs Pelosi's visit ushered in an unprecedented and dangerous stage, one that could lead to inadvertent escalation, as evidenced by Taiwan's shooting down of a Chinese drone last week. This situation will require the three presidents to exert real leadership in order to minimise the prospects of violence.

What is to be done? First, a close-up look at the dynamics driving policy responses in the US, China and Taiwan.

THE UNITED STATES

China's military modernisation, increasing coercion of Taiwan, and tougher rhetoric have led the US to believe the chances of conflict over the island are growing. Of late, the executive and legislative branches of the US government, however, do not appear to be completely on the same page when it comes to the Taiwan issue and how to best deter Chinese aggression in the broader Asia-Pacific.

Since his inauguration, President Biden has tried to enmesh his China policy within a wider approach to the Asia-Pacific. If Washington succeeds in working with allies and partners in the region, the thinking goes, it will be better able to constrain China's ambitions, including towards Taiwan. It is a belief in deterrence

by shaping the environment around China, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted in his May 2022 China policy speech.

So far, the Biden team has strengthened or rolled out initiatives on security (the Quad and Aukus), economics (IPEF), and technology (Chips 4), while working with the G-7 on a global infrastructure push to counter Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. On Taiwan, the administration is stepping up support via the recently announced US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade talks and US\$1.1 billion (\$\$1.54 billion) provisional arms sale agreement.

Mrs Pelosi's highly provocative visit was at strategic odds with Mr Biden's carefully calibrated approach to dealing with the China challenge. Her decision to make the trip, as well as subsequent August congressional delegation visits, reflects Congress' hardening position towards China and growing US domestic political support for Taiwan. What's more, Congress is mulling over the Taiwan Policy Act (TPA), a Bill designed to improve the island's defences and bolster bilateral ties. It would also label Taiwan a "major non-Nato ally". If passed (and signed by President Biden), the TPA would usher in a new era of tighter US-Taiwan ties.

Congressional calls to jettison the US policy of strategic ambiguity on Taiwan in favour of strategic clarity have also been getting louder. Going forward, Congress will likely provide Taiwan with growing support, and it is unclear to what degree lawmakers will coordinate their actions with the executive branch. A lingering executive-congressional split on how best to deter China could adversely affect Taiwan's, and broader East Asia's, security.

CHINA

China's response to Mrs Pelosi's visit included economic coercion measures and extensive military drills around Taiwan. It is clear that Beijing's response has established a "new normal" by regularising an upgraded military posture around Taiwan. Given this development, it is unlikely that Mrs Pelosi's visit has improved Taipei's security. The US, however, should receive credit for not immediately responding to China's provocative military manoeuvres; Washington waited almost four weeks before sending naval vessels through the strait.

The subsequent release of a White Paper on Taiwan, only the third such document in the



The Arleigh-Burke class guided-missile destroyer USS Kidd in the Taiwan Strait during a routine transit last year. The US has repeatedly said its position on Taiwan has not changed, but President Joe Biden's remarks sent mixed signals about US commitment to strategic ambiguity, leading China to think it is hollowing out its One-China policy. PHOTO: AFP

People's Republic's history and the first since 2000, is further evidence of China's hardening position on the island.

Conspicuously absent from the paper are assurances that Taipei would maintain its own administrative and legislative powers should the mainland absorb it. Furthermore, previous guarantees that Taiwan could manage its own political, economic, military, and foreign affairs have been removed from this White Paper. Indeed, this suggests that China is losing patience with the cross-strait situation and is moving towards sticks, rather than carrots, to achieve its goals.

In addition to the government's tougher stance, the Chinese public has embraced a harder line on Taiwan, with netizens decrying the government's response to Mrs Pelosi's visit, which many deemed too soft.

TAIWAN

Taiwanese sentiments are also hardening. Increasing Chinese bellicosity, coupled with Beijing's passage of the Hong Kong national security law, is leading more and

more people to support independence rather than unification; few believe they would be better off under Chinese rule.

In sum, all three parties' positions are stiffening, which has led to a deteriorating security environment around Taiwan and throughout greater East and South-east Asia.

To stabilise the situation, leaders on the three sides must revitalise diplomacy, exert real leadership and find creative solutions. If we cannot rise above current dynamics, the risk of a disastrous, mutually disadvantageous outcome will continue to grow.

SUGGESTIONS FOR COURSE CORRECTION

Though the new White Paper expresses Beijing's frustration with the Taiwan situation, it still emphasises that China would prefer to "reunite" with the island peacefully. If that is indeed the goal, Beijing should realise that by continuing to coerce the island and conduct more military exercises, it will push the Taiwanese further towards supporting independence, an outcome China is specifically

trying to prevent.

China's assertiveness is strengthening the grip of the China-sceptic Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on the island's politics. Beijing's behaviour is also pushing the DPP rival Kuomintang to dial back support for closer ties with China. Furthermore, Beijing should understand that its belligerence is pulling the US, as well as its allies and partners, further into its own backyard, complicating China's security outlook. A more measured approach to Taiwan, perhaps counter-intuitively, might better help Beijing realise its goals.

The US, for its part, should focus on redressing the growing executive-congressional divide on Taiwan policy. Though American lawmakers may believe their approach best safeguards the island's security, it could threaten President Biden's preferred strategy of building mini-lateral, issue-specific coalitions to deal with challenges from China.

Indeed, many South-east Asian nations are uncomfortable with Beijing's desire to rearrange the regional security order, but many also see Mrs Pelosi's trip as unnecessarily provocative. While

governments are reluctant to blame the US directly, conversations with regional officials and scholars have revealed concerns about the repercussions of a more aggressive, and at times provocative, US policy of support for Taiwan.

A better policy would balance American interests with those of the Asia-Pacific nations with which it has been working to manage Beijing's regional ambitions. Such an approach would also concentrate on materially aiding Taiwan rather than playing up the big, symbolic gestures that mostly serve to ratchet up tensions.

As difficult as this may be, Washington must try to separate the Taiwan issue from the broader great-power competition with Beijing. The US should support Taiwan but, given the risk of conflict, refrain from using the island as a tool in its strategic competition with China.

Finally, the US must put diplomacy front and centre. As several scholars have pointed out, the China-Taiwan issue is principally political, not military, in nature. Therefore, Washington, as well as Taipei, should engage Beijing diplomatically to communicate that disagreements over Taiwan's status should be resolved through peaceful means.

Beijing's cancellation or suspension of eight US-China dialogues in the wake of Mrs Pelosi's trip makes this more difficult. But higher-level political channels remain open, and they should be used during moments like these.

Chances are that President Biden and President Xi Jinping will meet at the mid-November G-20 summit in Bali. The two leaders should use this meeting to lay out their concerns and communicate their respective views on the sources of increased tensions over Taiwan. From that starting point, the two sides could then begin a process to lower frictions through phased and corresponding de-escalation steps and, over time, develop a longer-term framework to reverse the escalatory action-reaction cycle on Taiwan.

The two presidents' meeting is set to take place after the 20th Party Congress in China and the US midterm elections, which may give the two leaders more political space for constructive exchange.

Despite the trilateral hardening of positions, the Taiwan issue is too important to let slip out of control. By aligning the US government's approach on the Taiwan issue, taking regional equities into consideration, and emphasising robust diplomacy, the US can help itself, China, and Taiwan to retreat from the edge of conflict, while reclaiming its status as a stabilising force in the Indo-Pacific.

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