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THE FOURTH TAIWAN STRAIT CRISIS IS JUST STARTING

CHRISTOPHER P. TWOMEY
COMMENTARY

AUGUST 22, 2022



The Chinese military exercises that began on Aug. 3, 2022, have initiated the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis. The most immediate reason for this was Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei. But this is a bigger crisis, driven by bigger factors. There has been a steady erosion in Sino-American relations and — not unrelated — a shift in the nature of U.S.-Taiwan relations that Beijing finds deeply threatening. As a result, expectations of a rapid resolution to the crisis are chimeric, as too are blithe expectations of a quick return to the status quo ante.

Like the previous three Taiwan Strait Crises, this will likely mark a turning point in Sino-American relations. As in previous crises, domestic political dynamics among all three participants will drive opportunism and complicate crisis management and diplomacy, extending its duration. This creates further potential for misperceptions, miscalculations, and mistakes, all increasing the risk of inadvertent escalation. Leaders in Beijing, Washington, and Taipei should recognize the dangers inherent in this crisis and engage in both selective restraint and cautious diplomacy.

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Origins of the Current Crisis

All the previous Taiwan crises had important implications for regional security, and we should expect the same today. The First Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-1955 had the most potential to escalate. It involved intense

shelling of offshore islands, nuclear saber rattling by the United States, and successful amphibious operations by the People's Liberation Army that led to the seizure of several small islands. The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, in 1958, involved such bravado from Mao Zedong that even Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was put off, contributing to the Sino-Soviet rift. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis erupted out of Chinese anger at Taiwanese President Lee Denghui's visit to the United States in 1995. Although it arguably had limited potential to escalate given the relevant military balance across the Taiwan Strait at the time, there were major implications nonetheless: It sparked double digit growth in China's military budget and led the People's Liberation Army to develop anti-access, area-denial doctrines to threaten U.S carriers deployed during future incidents. When it is finally resolved, the current crisis will likely have had similarly significant effects.

Thankfully none of the previous crises escalated into a major Sino-American war, and there are reasons to be hopeful that this crisis will not either. China has a great need for stability in the run up to the Party Congress in the fall, and Beijing recognizes that initiating a military offensive would be highly unpredictable.

Nonetheless, we are in the early stages of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis: It is likely to continue for weeks and months and even now it is more severe than the third. Already, events have surpassed important thresholds. Some five to nine missiles passed *over* Taiwan en route to targets east of the main island. Portions of two of the initial exercise boxes fell within territorial waters claimed by Taiwan, and one comes within just a few miles of a small

Taiwanese island. The initial set of six declared boxes bracket the island as a whole and key ports, much more than the closure zones in 1995 and 1996. Five missiles targeted areas within Japan's claimed exclusive economic zone beyond those that China disputes. Although violations of Taiwan's air defense identification zone have become more common in recent years, they too have intensified in the past weeks. Chinese helicopters have buzzed Taiwan's offshore islands, two Chinese carriers have been put to sea, and additional exercises have been announced.

Beyond China, the military involvement of other actors has also been significant. The United States has gathered substantial naval capabilities in Northeast Asia, far more than a routine deployment. According to the U.S. Naval Institute, of the 114 ships currently operationally deployed across the entire globe, 59 are attached to the Seventh Fleet, the forward-based fleet originally ordered to patrol the Taiwan Strait in 1950. This includes one super carrier and two smaller carriers, with an additional super carrier and another smaller carrier finishing Rim of the Pacific exercises near Hawaii. All of those are capable of launching F-35 strike aircraft. Beyond this, a B-2 taskforce is deployed in Australia, a rotational deployment of F-35s arrived in Korea last month, and a 12-day command and control exercise centering on the Southern Pacific began on Aug. 3. Some of these deployments may have been long planned (China's carrier deployment may have been as well). But others, including one of the small carriers put to sea in recent days, are clearly reactions to Chinese escalations. The result is a major

concentration of forces available to monitor the situation surrounding Taiwan. And on top of all this, an additional congressional delegation visited the island later in the month.

Of course, Taiwan's military is also monitoring the situation and on high alert. The overflight of Taiwanese airspace obviously increases the need for monitoring and the potential for direct engagement of forces. During China's exercises, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense announced that its missile defense capabilities "have been activated." In addition to conducting pre-scheduled exercises aimed at repulsing amphibious assaults, other capabilities are in higher states of readiness as well. Finally, Japan's military has actively monitored the situation as well, vociferously protesting China's missile tests.

Not only has the military component of this crisis already escalated beyond the last one, but China has also escalated diplomatically and economically as well. A severe statement was released by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Pelosi landed. The U.S. ambassador in Beijing, Nicholas Burns, was called into the Foreign Ministry to receive a formal *démarche* late that evening as well. Beijing also suspended or cancelled a series of planned bilateral exchanges. A set of well-crafted economic sanctions were levied against Taiwan, including several that appeared optimized to target the more assertive Democratic People's Party constituencies. Basic distributed denial-of-service attacks have shut down official and media web pages in Taiwan intermittently since Pelosi's visit. A polished white paper on the Taiwan issue was released, laying out the contemporary elements of

China's policy. This coordinated activity is a significant achievement within the stove-piped Chinese political system, suggesting Beijing clearly planned well for the first stage of the crisis.

These are just the opening weeks. The historical record and current context suggest the situation is unlikely to settle quickly, even if Beijing wraps up its next round of military exercises in short order. In all of the previous Taiwan Strait crises, tensions and military activity ebbed and flowed. The first and third crises lasted approximately eight months, and the second over three.

International Factors

Today, international and domestic factors will interact to further complicate crisis management. All three primary actors will assess the messages they have sent and received and may conclude that additional signaling of resolve is necessary. China is trying to use military signals to dissuade the United States and Taiwan from continuing past policies. The United States and Taiwan are trying to show that they are not being deterred from continuing what they see to be rightful and consistent policies.

At first, China's actions were driven by the simple question of whether Pelosi would visit Taiwan or not. Going forward, Beijing will be responding to much more complicated questions. For instance, how "official" were Pelosi's activities in Taiwan? Does Japan's responses suggest Tokyo's policy

is also shifting? If so, how much? In classic security dilemma fashion, Beijing may find that it has provoked more official engagement between Japan and Taiwan.

More fundamentally, Beijing sees Washington as moving away from its “One China Policy” and increasingly creating an official relationship with Taiwan. This undermines a core strategic interest for Beijing. Beginning with a cabinet level visit under the Trump administration and revision of rules for diplomatic engagement signed by then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Beijing began to worry Washington was violating the commitments it made in establishing relations with the People’s Republic of China during the Cold War. Public discussion of U.S. military forces in Taiwan, repeated off-the-cuff statements from President Biden, and changing language on official State Department web pages all, in Beijing’s view, provide further evidence of this shift. Thus, an important goal for Beijing in the crisis is to deter further such salami slicing of the U.S. “One China Policy” more generally, as well as protesting the specific sliver that Pelosi’s visit represents. This raises the stakes in the crisis and makes bringing it to a quick resolution less likely.

Furthermore, just as with economic sanctions leveled against Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine, China’s economic tools will take time to exact costs on the Taiwanese economy. There will be a strong logic for Beijing to retain these in place in the absence of any concession from Taipei. This too will keep tensions escalated.

America's national security apparatus will also be loath to let the appearance of Chinese military coercion go unchallenged. This is important for Washington's continued (if strategically ambiguous) support for Taiwan but also to help assure allies in the region, some of whom will be far more concerned with the Chinese exercises than U.S. domestic audiences. The mere presence of U.S. deployments discussed above will help on this front, but may, in themselves, be deemed insufficient. Indeed, the United States has already started talking about imminent Taiwan Strait transit missions and has deployed additional capital ships.

Another complication, from Beijing's side, is that the bureaucratic Chinese political system — not least the national security apparatus — remain sclerotic. This will make maintaining an integrated and coordinated response more challenging for Beijing as the pace of actions and reactions increase. Slow decision-making in Beijing characterized previous crises, such as the EP-3 incident in 2001 and the Belgrade embassy bombing of 1999. If the United States, Taiwan, and China intensify the tempo of military activity as the crises continues, such inertia will be dangerous.

Domestic Political Factors

Domestic factors in China, Taiwan, and the United States have also played a key role in creating this crisis and will continue to drive it. The Chinese Communist Party's reliance on nationalism in general, and specifically as related to Taiwan, will create pressure on the regime to live up to its self-proclaimed status as defender of China's unity. This will be particularly important from now through the fall when Xi Jinping, in a move

unprecedented since the 1980s, plans to be reappointed to lead the party. There is some social media grumbling about Beijing's response inside China already. While censorship and repression can contribute to managing public opinion, Chinese leaders remain sensitive to it nonetheless.

In the United States, maintaining a confrontational approach to China now has bipartisan backing. As demonstrated by the recent passage of the CHIPS bill, treating China as a threat to be confronted is one of the few things that garners support from both sides of the aisle. This makes it harder for the United States to back down, just as it complicated internal discussions to dissuade Pelosi from going in the first place.

Finally, the Taiwanese people's deepening identification as Taiwanese rather than Chinese will make managing the cross-strait relationship even more difficult. This will color Taiwan's local electoral campaigns in the fall and in the more distant 2024 elections for president. It has already put the Democratic Progressive Party — which is committed to creating more “international space” apart from Beijing — in full control of most elements of Taiwan's government.

Risks of Escalation

While both strategic and political elements will exacerbate this crisis, it is not a prelude to a Chinese invasion. The timing is not suitable given China's political calendar, the Chinese military is too early in its modernization for an adventurous amphibious assault, and there is no sign of wholesale military mobilization. There is, as a result, no prospect of imminent U.S.

preemption either. But despite this, there will be a lot of force posturing and militarized signals over the coming weeks and months. Inadvertent escalation is a concern, and the exacerbation of the existing security dilemma is guaranteed.

Inadvertent escalation can come in many forms. At the simplest level, human errors might occur. These are more likely during periods of high stress and long hours. Relatively junior officers have tremendous responsibilities in the U.S. military, and the Chinese system relies on rigid top-down command and control. Both raise risks in this regard.

Misperceptions of military signals sent by opposing forces is also a major concern. One could imagine a variety of scenarios: Close monitoring, whether shadowing naval vessels or observing missile flights, will require high tempo operations. China engaged in a series of “unsafe” intercepts of U.S. and allied aircraft earlier this year. Those practices would presumably have been approved at high levels within the military and restraining them in a time of crisis will be challenging. Again, while not likely to lead directly to war, any escalation of tensions that is not deliberate serves no one’s interest. In the longer term, we should expect a ratchet effect from this crisis. Beijing will certainly face future provocations that it will want to respond to. In those cases, China will view its response this time as a baseline and try to “do more.”

This crisis will also inevitably exacerbate mutual suspicions in Washington and Beijing. There has already been a deterioration of relations between both sides, arguably beginning in 2008 and certainly accelerating since

2018. This crisis will deepen tensions and reify beliefs on both sides that the relationship is one of military competition.

Looking forward, there are steps all sides should take to minimize the damage and avoid conflict. The underlying military balance across the strait has changed, Chinese nationalism has taken on an ugly militarist tone, and Xi has implied some need for “progress” on the Taiwan issue. Clearly, the United States cannot unilaterally “solve” the crisis without abandoning an important regional partner. But provocations should serve strategic purposes. Selling man-portable surface-to-air missiles and potent coastal defense cruise missiles will certainly provoke the ire of Beijing, but their benefits in maintaining the cross-strait military balance will outweigh that. By contrast, flashy F-16 sales do little to defend Taiwan from China’s missile force. More realistic military policy and vastly increased budgets coupled with diplomatic efforts to reduce Beijing’s fear of abrupt pro-independence initiatives can help lower tensions. And, of course, if policymakers in Beijing are reading, they should also show greater restraint in place of the provocative attitude that has marked the last decade.

Whatever happens, the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis will be regarded as another important milestone in the deterioration of Sino-American relations. We have already crossed a number of worrisome thresholds, and the two main actors continue to posture for various strategic and domestic reasons. China, in particular, seeks to prevent a slow but steady shift in Taiwan’s status, while the United States seeks to reassure Taiwan and other allies. With careful statesmanship and a little luck, outright war can be avoided — but neither of these is ever guaranteed.

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