

‘PEOPLE IN TAIWAN DO NOT WANT TO BE TREATED AS A PAWN IN A GREAT POWERS’ GAME’

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The Taiwan question is in the international spotlight following China's unprecedented military drills surrounding the island in the wake of the recent visit by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the most high-profile from the U.S. to Taiwan in 25 years. While Taiwan has emerged as a key flashpoint in already tense U.S.-China ties, lost in the focus on the geopolitics is the question of how Taiwan and its 23 million people view the current moment. In an interview, Yu-Jie Chen, Assistant Research Professor at Academia Sinica in Taiwan, whose work focuses on international law and cross-strait relations, says Taiwanese are "pragmatic" and don't want war, but want to preserve the status quo. Edited excerpts.

What has been the general reaction in Taiwan so far, both to the Pelosi visit, and to China's exercises?

While some Taiwanese were understandably nervous and concerned, most have remained calm and collected during China's military exercises. The general situation on the ground is business as usual — we still carry on with our daily lives. The main reason for this relative placidity is that the people in Taiwan are quite used to China's hostility whenever the relations across the Taiwan Strait deteriorate, and China's threats have escalated in recent years. Additionally, the assessment in Taiwan was that there would be no invasion at this time. Having said that, China's military exercises have largely made Taiwanese more aware of the possibility of a real strike. The next question is what to do about it. Discussion in Taiwan has revolved around reforming the military, including better training for our reserve forces and extending the conscription period from four months to one year. Yet, in addition to these military discussions, I believe that the Taiwan government must also better prepare civilians for a conflict scenario.

One criticism of the Pelosi visit is that it was "only symbolism", and ultimately left Taiwan with a more adverse strategic environment. Has it been seen that way in Taiwan?

Symbolism matters in diplomacy, not to mention powerful symbolism that emanates from the strong support of the U.S. Congress. I do not see Pelosi's visit as changing the adverse strategic environment with which Taiwan has already been confronted, and a number of colleagues that I've spoken to agree. The visit might have accelerated this trend, but China's Taiwan policy had already been trending towards more hostility since 2016 after Taiwan elected, and reelected in 2020, current President Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Given those developments, the escalation of adversity across the Taiwan Strait would appear to be a matter of course. Pelosi's visit is seen not so much as a genuine trigger point, but as a pretext under which Beijing could launch more drills that it had already planned to carry out around Taiwan.

How have views in Taiwan evolved on the future of cross-strait relations? Until recently, it seemed the status quo, or some version of it, was something broadly acceptable to all parties. Each is now accusing the other of trying to change it. Is the status quo no longer sustainable?

Taiwanese are pragmatic — we don't want a war, so, when polled, people tend to choose the "maintain status quo indefinitely" option (currently standing at 28.6%), instead of directly choosing independence, in order not to provoke a conflict with China. In Taiwan's perspective, the "status quo" means de facto independence. This polling tendency is what I call "coerced

non-decision". If poll respondents were able to voice their true preferences, or weigh potential political outcomes without also having to consider China's threat to use force against Taiwan, Taiwanese may not necessarily choose the "status quo".

All in all, the rapidly coalescing Taiwanese identity and the strong inclination to retain our democratic way of life have considerable implications for cross-strait relations, suggesting that as time presses on, China's plan to absorb Taiwan peacefully and "reeducate" the Taiwanese [as China's Ambassador to France advocated this month] are unlikely to work. On the other side of the Strait, we also see mounting aggressiveness towards Taiwan with China's increasing military penetration of Taiwan's airspace and surrounding waters. This kind of bilateral interaction, situated in the context of an international environment where the United States and China are competing to determine who is the greater power in the region, is a very dangerous combination...

The people in Taiwan do not want to be treated as a pawn in a great powers' game. I recall when Donald Trump was the U.S. President, he suggested that Taiwan could be a bargaining chip to reach a deal with China on trade. That incident was alarming to many in Taiwan and a lesson to us that, as a small country in between two superpowers, Taiwan needs to tread water very carefully, playing our own cards just right.

(Read the full interview at <https://bit.ly/3wgcOrW>)

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