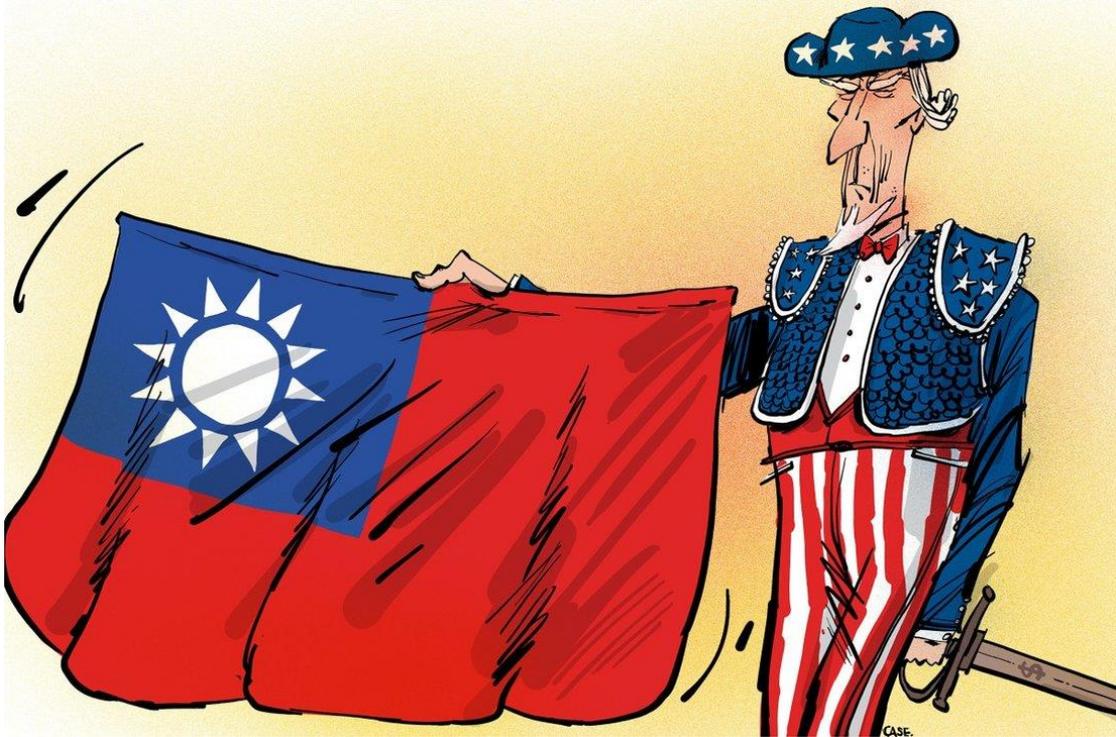


# Why an increasingly confident US is baiting Beijing over Taiwan



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By Terry Su  
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Back in December, I voiced my fear in a column that some in Washington believed Beijing could be baited into attacking Taiwan, which would allow the United States to dust off its Cold War toolkit and apply comprehensive sanctions and decouple – tactics that secured victory in the US rivalry with the Soviet Union.

That ominous prospect looms large now, it seems. Russia is under just such pressure for its attack on Ukraine and the US Treasury has said the Biden administration is prepared to use all its sanctions tools against China too, if Beijing were to move aggressively towards Taiwan. Talk in Washington is increasingly linking Ukraine with Taiwan.

On April 6, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said at a House committee hearing that Beijing should “take away the right lessons” for the coordinated Western

response over Russia's war on Ukraine – that any moves to reunify Taiwan by force would be unacceptable. This only served to anger Beijing.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen echoed Sherman's position in a speech to the Atlantic Council on April 13. She warned: "China cannot expect the global community to respect its appeals to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the future if [it] does not respect these principles now when it counts." She means Taiwan, of course.

By calling for a "friend-shoring" of supply chains to "trusted countries", she firmly linked economic issues with broader national security concerns, leaving unsaid the consequences of an economic decoupling for China.

And then there was the provocation of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's reported plan to visit Taiwan after an official trip to Japan earlier this month. The visit was never confirmed officially, and has not materialised – Pelosi contracted Covid-19 and postponed the Japan trip. At the time, however, given Pelosi's stature in American politics, the sudden disclosure by the media on April 7 of her planned visit to Taiwan on April 10 immediately stirred waves in Beijing.

The Chinese foreign ministry had strong words, as expected. But what raised eyebrows was Foreign Minister Wang Yi's phone call to French diplomatic counsellor Emmanuel Bonne on the same day, in which he made a rare direct comment and warned that a visit to Taiwan by Pelosi would cross Beijing's "red line" and that Washington would bear sole responsibility for the consequences.

Wang's call was reminiscent of a similar manoeuvre 72 years ago, when Chinese premier Zhou Enlai summoned the Indian ambassador to say that, if American troops crossed the 38th parallel in pursuit of the North Korean army, China would intervene. Americans disregarded the message and the rest is history.

The Pelosi episode, for all its melodramatics, came to an abrupt end. But the possibility of her visiting Taiwan in future has not been dismissed and in all likelihood, a crisis could be ignited again.

The Sino-US relationship will only slide to the point of crisis if Washington cannot resist considering the possibility of retaliation against Beijing over Taiwan, as against Russia over Ukraine, or where the US provokes Beijing to the point of military action over Taiwan. And, just as in Ukraine, the US would not necessarily involve itself in a direct military confrontation.

This is especially so given that the US is confident of guardrailing the situation by dealing devastating blows via sanctions and assisting Taiwan while staying out of the war zone – largely the way it did during both world wars before the optimal moment to join the fray. An encouraging test run of this scenario seems to be unfolding in Ukraine.

Perhaps Washington has realised that time is not on its side. Its domestic investment and agenda to “build back better” may not be met quickly enough with China breathing down its neck in the great power catch-up game. Americans’ current lifestyle may well be eroded as China chips away at the US share of the world’s wealth pie.

And more imminently, America’s global alliance system may crack if the liberal international order under its stewardship fails to rein in a recalcitrant Russia, to which Beijing looks set to throw a lifeline one way or another.

Hence the need, in the eyes of the US, to stay focused on China: on moves by Beijing that are often seen as provocative, on Nato’s expansion into the Western Pacific being rehearsed with Australia, Japan and South Korea, while India’s defiance of sanctions on Russia is tolerated and Turkey’s invasion of Iraq in the name of removing the Kurdish “menace” is ignored.

Last week, Chinese defence minister Wei Fenghe warned his US counterpart Lloyd Austin that a mishandled Taiwan issue risked having a “subversive impact” on US-China relations, and demanded that the US stop using the Ukraine issue to “slander, frame, threaten and pressure China”.

But don’t count on the April 20 phone call between the two countries’ defence chiefs to arrest the downward trend in US-China relations.

Back in October 2004, an unnamed senior aide to then-president George W. Bush, bloated with pride over the initial success of America’s wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, told his *New York Times* interlocutor that: “We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”

That mood of hubris seems to be returning, towards Russia after its Ukraine invasion, and towards China over Taiwan.

Two years ago, Robert Daly, director of the Henry Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, worried that America’s China policy would be “set by crisis”. One cannot

help but be saddened by the thought that, when the crisis involves the shattering of America's creation of its own reality over Taiwan, the collateral damage will be too much to bear.

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