

Years ago, one of Nancy Pelosi’s most noteworthy predecessors as Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O’Neill, uttered the famous phrase: “All politics is local”. These words may have been on Pelosi’s mind when she decided to go to Taiwan.

O’Neill cut his political teeth in the Irish wards of Boston. Pelosi is the Italian American daughter of a former Mayor of Baltimore. People who succeed in those political environments continue to prosper because they remember what got them to where they are.

True, Pelosi has form on China. In 1991, she unfurled in Tiananmen Square a banner “to those who died for democracy in China” and – as some suggest – she may well have been looking to her legacy as a promoter of democracy if the Democrats lose the House in November. But politicians – particularly those of Pelosi’s stature – do not like to lose.

Polling suggests that the chances of the Democrats winning the House are currently as low as between 17 and 25%. The favourable publicity overall which has accrued to Pelosi in the United States on the Taiwan issue would have entered into her political calculus.

But in terms of America’s international interests, the visit was a silly thing to do.

For President Xi Jinping also domestic factors have been in play. No Chinese leader would misunderstand how merciless failure can be in the Chinese system – especially a politician like Xi who was exiled to the provinces following the purge of his father during the Cultural Revolution.

Beset by problems related to Covid 19 and a spluttering economy, Xi faces in November the Communist Party Congress which will inter alia decide if he has another 5 year term. He cannot afford to look weak on Taiwan. This had to be an important aspect of a Chinese reaction to the Pelosi visit which was rightly described by Secretary of State Blinken as “disproportionate.”

But whoever is most to blame for the crisis, the United States and its allies are now in the process of weighing up just how critical this recent set of incidents is for our national security.

Although the United States’ relationship with China began to worsen following China’s activities in the South China Sea and Obama’s subsequent “pivot to Asia” in 2012, the major changes began early in the Trump Administration, particularly with the 2018 Trade War.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine preceded by the summit between Xi and President Putin added a further raft of challenges to American and other western strategic policy – the foremost being the complexities of dealing with threats in two theatres at once at a time when our antagonists in each theatre had achieved a proximity of interests not seen in decades.

Now the Taiwan crisis, focusing sharply as it does on the nub of Sino-American security dealings since Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, could just herald a third major change in the strategic circumstances in which the United States and its allies finds themselves.

The fact that both major powers have put some discipline into their actions and reactions over Taiwan suggests that the current crisis will not get out of control. The problem is that it will be the backdrop to the next crisis that comes along. Mutual distrust will be greater and public opinion in each country more inflamed.

The current escalation in tension will also give rise to pressures in the United States to abandon the doctrine of “strategic ambiguity” – essentially the avoidance of a firm guarantee that the United States would intervene militarily on Taiwan’s behalf should the latter be threatened with invasion.

As noted by scholar Richard McGregor, former Trump Secretary of State Pompeo and Secretary of Defence Esper both said in Taiwan earlier this year that the One China Policy and doctrine of strategic ambiguity should be abandoned.

Given that President Biden has also been less than precise in public statements relating to these doctrines, Chinese suspicions about the direction of American policy are likely to grow. The abandonment of these doctrines would significantly increase the prospect of war.

In the meantime, China's suspension of bilateral dealings with the United States, including on climate change, will diminish what slim possibilities existed for gradual confidence building in the overall relationship. Equally, any prospect of China influencing Russia on Ukraine must be drastically reduced.

Another drawback of the Pelosi fiasco has been the degree to which it has made United States policy on China appear a shambles to others in the region. Even those knowledgeable about the separation of powers in the United States cannot quite grasp how the visit went ahead.

While close American allies such as Japan and Australia have done the right thing by the team in criticising Chinese actions rather than American ones (the Japanese having the added reason that the Chinese fired missiles into their EEZ), other regional countries such as South Korea have made known their view – although mostly indirectly – that the visit was irresponsible.

Regrettably the countries most perturbed by the visit – including some of those on the Pelosi itinerary – are those whom the United States and its allies are seeking to persuade of the correctness of their policies on China.

If there is a hope, albeit remote, arising from the recent week of turmoil, it is that China and the United States might now pull back from the brink. If this can be achieved, the next stage would be to move policy away from a series of episodes in crisis management to the more structured approach to the relationship initially envisaged by the Biden administration involving areas of cooperation as well as competition and contestation.

Such an approach would require not only American political will but Chinese reciprocity. With the US congressional mid-terms and the all-important Communist Party Congress coinciding in November, we might need to be patient. Until the vagaries of domestic politics play out in both countries, emotions over Taiwan will remain high.

But in the long run it will be in the interests of both Beijing and Washington to ensure all politics is not local.

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