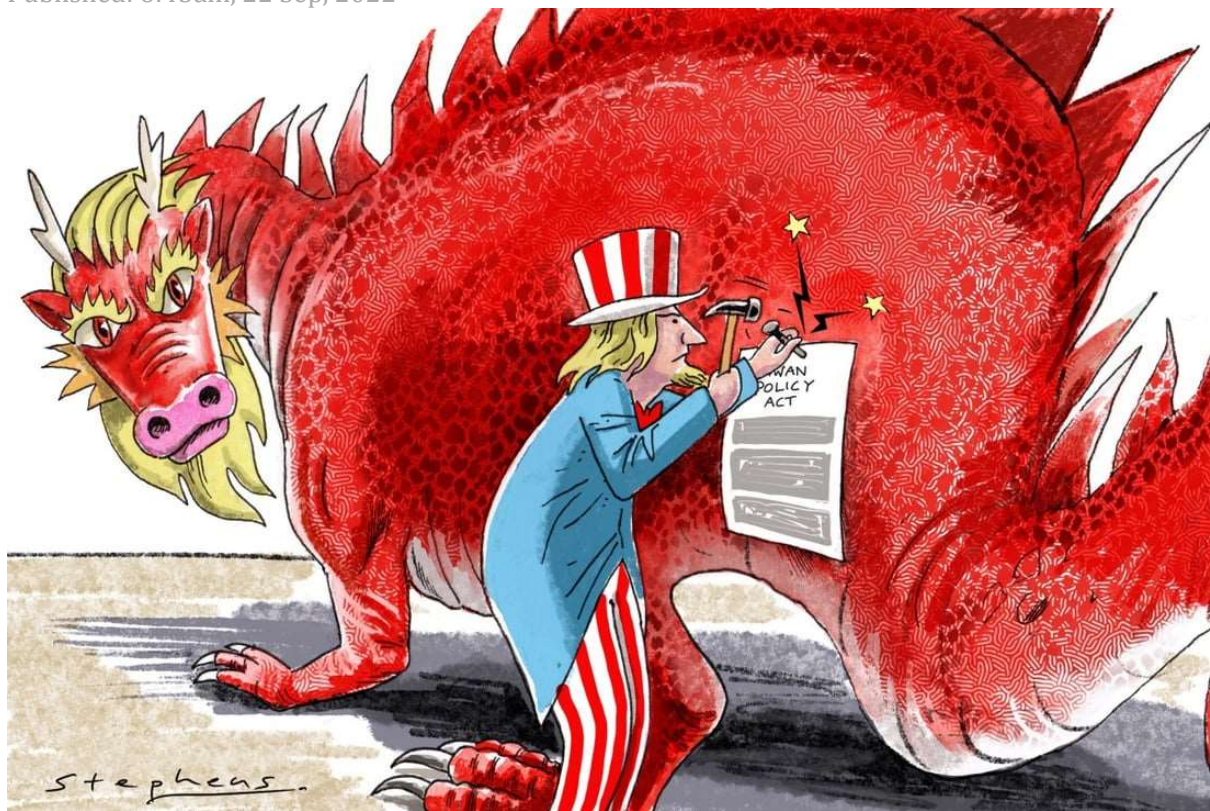


Terry Su

How will Beijing react to the US pushing its buttons with the Taiwan Policy Act?

- Washington's plan to upgrade ties with Taiwan, much like Nancy Pelosi's trip to the island, makes it clear there will be no letup on China
- While Beijing is likely to bide its time and continue using salami slicing tactics, if the US tries to 'Ukrainise' Taiwan, Washington cannot expect to sit out the ensuing war

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The current state of the conflict in Ukraine, where Ukrainians are believed to have given Russian troops quite a licking, has strengthened the opinion in Washington that while Russia may be its most pressing problem, China – as the only country with both the intent and all-round power to threaten US supremacy – remains its biggest threat in the long term.

That is why US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's melodramatic trip to Taiwan materialised in early August, despite repeated warnings from Beijing, and US President Joe Biden's personal disapproval. The signal from the US was unequivocal: there will be no letup on China, and Taiwan is the best lever to pull, both symbolically and materially.

Moreover, the trip showed that the US remains unreceptive to the notion that its diplomacy requires some degree of realist finesse. Or, perhaps more than that, it underscored a belief that America, an empire of

truly global reach, is capable of creating its own reality that others must adapt to, as Zbigniew Brzezinski, the late US national security adviser, once worriedly observed.

Either way, we now see another drama unfolding, potentially much more disruptive to the Sino-US relationship, and which will punch Beijing in the same spot – yes, I’m talking about Taiwan Policy Act, which passed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week by a big margin.

In a nutshell, the legislation redefines the US’ position towards Taiwan: it accords it quasi-diplomatic status by rebranding Taipei as Taiwan, treats it as a Nato-like ally, and makes military aid fully open-ended.



US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (left) speaks during a meeting with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei on August 3. Photo: Taiwan Presidential Office/AP

If passed by the US Congress and signed off by the White House, the act will be the finishing touch to the hollowing-out of the US’ one-China policy in the eyes of Beijing, and Washington’s official insistence that this is not the case will seem like nothing more than lip service.

It has been reported that Qin Gang, China’s ambassador to Washington, cautioned US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in a meeting on August 23 against the passing of the bill, warning that the Sino-US relationship would “disintegrate” under its weight.

Yet Beijing should harbour no delusions about such warnings being heeded by the White House, especially after what happened with Pelosi. The Chinese side remained hopeful until almost the last minute that her Taiwan trip would not go ahead, but it overestimated Biden’s leadership.

The Taiwan Policy Act is a case of déjà vu. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on September 7 eulogised “elements” of the draft bill as “quite effective and robust” while softly speaking of “some other elements that give us some concern”.

This characteristically gentle nudge by Biden's team only resulted in two revisions worthy of note: the rebranding of Taipei as Taiwan is now "suggested", not "required", by Congress; and the demand for appointees to the American Institute in Taiwan to require endorsement by Congress, as with other ambassadorial posts, has been dropped.

One can therefore safely predict that the bill is set to become law by the time the current Congress session ends in January. Biden won't even bother to veto it in anticipation of being overruled by a majority vote in Congress.

What will Beijing do about it? My guess is that it will recall its ambassador to Washington for consultations and continue using the same salami slicing tactics over Taiwan it used last month, while waiting to see how America's domestic politics play out between the midterm elections in November and the 2024 presidential election. These events will provide a temperature reading of the bilateral relationship for the following four to eight years.

During this time, developments in the US and the world may lead to an abatement of US hostility towards a China determined to manufacture and sell its way up to the position of superpower.

This would be the best alternative to a war over Taiwan that Beijing could hope for. It calls for a continuation of China's "keep a low profile and bide one's time" stratagem, even to the extent of moving forward under the yoke of humiliation and disgrace, in an era hallmarked by the concentrated enmity of the US, whose political elites collectively seem stuck in their self-righteous obsession with its supremacy.

With this "decisive decade" (in Biden's words) passing, there is a chance that Washington may see the world less from a binary perspective, as if a crusade were going on.

There is a catch, though. While China manifests its willingness to rise peacefully and patiently, Washington may still be on tenterhooks and manoeuvre to push China off-course and into a war with the "Ukrainisation" of Taiwan, thus decisively arresting China's ascent.

Washington may be tempted to think that Beijing will play the game the way Russia has done in Ukraine, with the US and its allies safely outside the war zone looking on as China becomes bogged down.

Washington should believe this at its own peril. China's sinews stretch over much of the world, while its elites, whose inherited political acumen has been honed for thousands of years, put up a united front against an avowedly hostile America. It will put these assets to good use to pull Washington into a war in a forced showdown.

Two thousand years ago, Roman senator Cato the Elder exclaimed repeatedly "Carthage must be destroyed!", and it was. Today, many in Washington are effectively chanting the same slogan about China, and such an outcome is among the "possibilities" Biden loves to speak of. It's just that, as I have observed before, possibilities go both ways.

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