
Nancy Pelosi in Taiwan. Francesco Sisci: “China, an aggressive tiger to be put in a cage or a paper tiger to be ignored?”

Tensions are running high in Taiwan and in the Strait that separates Taiwan from mainland China as a result of the visit (August 2-3) of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The visit unleashed Beijing's wrath, and it responded by sending fighter jets into the Strait's defence zone, announcing military drills on the island. China accused the US of carrying out “provocative actions”, and said they would suspend imports of several Taiwanese products. Russia also protested. “Washington is destabilising the world,” Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova wrote on Telegram, while Putin's spokesperson Dmitri Peskov said that Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is “purely provocative.” Yet while Russia and China protest, military drills are set to take place in maritime areas and jets fly overhead, the US and Taiwan shake hands in Taipei, sealing a strong and long-lasting friendship. Meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen, Nancy Pelosi was praised for her efforts to promote cooperation between Washington and Taipei. Tsai said Pelosi is one of Taiwan's “most devoted friends”, pointing out that the island “is a reliable partner of the US” and that it “will not back down in the face of heightened military threats.” For her part, Pelosi said the visit to Taiwan “honours America's unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan's vibrant Democracy”, assuring that the US “will not abandon Taiwan”. However, late in the evening came the news that the Chinese Foreign Ministry had summoned the US ambassador to Beijing, Nicholas Burns, to protest against the visit, expressing its “strong opposition and firm condemnation.”

SIR asked **Francesco Sisci**, renowned expert on the Chinese world, journalist and correspondent from Beijing for many years, to help us understand what is happening in that region. **Was it necessary to raise such a ruckus?** The visit was desired not only by one part of America, but also by Taiwan, Japan and other Asian countries, namely by those in the region who consider this to be a good time to rein in China by moving it, so to speak, a little further away. **What are they afraid of?** They are afraid of an aggressive China and of its military expansion. They fear that sooner or later it could attack Taiwan. That is why a part of America, which identifies with Speaker Pelosi, felt it necessary to make this visit to reconfirm to both the Taiwanese and the Chinese that the US is present in the region, that it will defend Taiwan and the status quo. **What about China?** China has reached a dead end. What steps will it take now? Will it respond? And how? If it retaliates, it proves to be an aggressive and threatening tiger. And if it does not, it proves to be a paper tiger. If it is a real tiger, it must be put in a cage. If it is a paper tiger, it can be ignored. Both options are not ideal for China and, at this point, whatever it chooses, will be the wrong choice. **Isn't the same thing true for Washington since, no matter its next move, it risks destabilising the Region?** Yes, but again, the US is not alone in making a move, the entire region is demanding it. In Pelosi's case, Malaysia organised the flight. Taiwan has invited her. And Japan is observing and acquiescing. They all agree that there are tensions in the area and that the time has come to rein in China. **Was it really the best moment?** I don't know. In my opinion, it may have not been opportune. However, Pelosi has made her move and there is no going back now. Now the question is whether China and Russia are going to forge an even closer alliance in this respect. It might be the case, but it might not, because while a closer alliance suits Russia, which is in dire straits because of Ukraine, it might not suit China. **Which scenarios could unfold? A war?** I do believe that China would find it very difficult to wage a war today. For three reasons: China imports a huge amount of proteins, 150 million soybeans and meat. The country produces wheat and rice but no source of protein, and without proteins, the Chinese diet is seriously depleted and inflation soars. Moreover, trade surplus is a mainstay of China's economy, which is secured by exports, especially to Europe, America and Japan. Shutting it down would cause China to suffer very serious consequences. Finally, although the Chinese population is large, there are few young people. Nearly all of them are only children, and sending an only child, a male, to die in war would mean losing an important part of the population. These three factors makes it difficult to wage a war. **What could**

help ease tensions? The problem is that a vicious or virtuous circle (depending on which way you look at it) has been triggered between countries close to China and countries close to America. Both sides are afraid of China, and their fear reflects like two mirrors placed opposite each other with infinite reflections. The reflection is very hard to interrupt because it is something that has accumulated over the years and it involves many countries. **In this chessboard, to what degree does North Korea unknown variable play a role?** It's a wild variable. Meaning that no one knows when and if North Korea might decide to intervene at some point and make thoughtless moves.

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