

OPINION

Why Australian MPs must dare to visit Taiwan



[Benjamin Herscovitch](#)

International security researcher

November 5, 2022 — 9.30am

Australia risks looking like a laggard when it comes to supporting a fellow liberal democracy under siege. In the past two weeks alone, lawmakers from Germany, Indonesia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the European Union have visited Taiwan in public shows of solidarity.

These rapid-fire rendezvous with the Taiwanese government come on the back of a slew of similar trips in recent months by representatives from Japan, Canada, the United States and France. Meanwhile, British parliamentarians are planning to visit later this year and Indian lawmakers have mooted a similar trip.



A Taiwanese frigate fires an anti-air missile. Chinese and Taiwanese and Chinese forces have staged rival military demonstrations in the Taiwan Strait amid heightened tensions.

CREDIT: AP

By contrast, it's now been more than five years since a publicised visit from an Australian parliamentary delegation. However, like their counterparts in

other democracies, Australian MPs have compelling reasons to make the trip to Taipei.

Although Beijing seeks a “world-class” military capable of prevailing in any military clash in the Taiwan Strait, the Chinese government would still prefer to weaken and eventually annex Taiwan without the dangers of war.

To intimidate, test and punish Taiwan and its people, [China has levelled sustained campaigns of economic coercion](#) and increased the tempo of flights by the People’s Liberation Army Air Force in and around the strait.

Beijing also hopes to undermine Taiwan’s de facto independence through isolation. As well as persuading countries such as Solomon Islands and Kiribati to cut official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, China is campaigning to deny international space for this liberal democracy.

Beijing has stepped up efforts to keep Taipei out of trade pacts such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, while also seeking to stop Taiwan from being even an observer at multilateral organisations like the World Health Assembly.

By delegitimising engagement with Taipei and denying Taiwan a role on the world stage, China can incrementally move towards its desired outcome: an isolated Taiwan that can be seized with minimal international opposition and without the need to launch a risky full-scale invasion across the strait.

Although the prognosis seems bleak, Australia can assist. Parliamentary visits to Taipei directly counteract Beijing’s isolation efforts by building connections between Taiwan and foreign legislators.

These visits also draw government and public attention to the existential threat that China poses to Taiwan’s political freedoms, while equally signalling to Beijing and other capitals that fellow democracies won’t leave Taipei to face the belligerence of the Chinese Communist Party alone.

To maximise its authority and impact, an Australian parliamentary delegation should be bipartisan. And given the growing diversity of political voices in the Australian parliament, independents and minor parties should also join.

The visit should be announced in advance and freely covered by the press to raise public awareness and send a strong signal to the world.

Conducting such visits discreetly might moderate China's ire. But such a hush-hush approach would neither help Taipei push back against Beijing's efforts to isolate it, nor increase the Australian public's understanding of the dire threat Taiwan's liberal democracy faces from across the strait.

Would Beijing object to a publicised parliamentary visit? Almost certainly. The Chinese government may even misleadingly claim it was inconsistent with the Australian government's recognition of the "People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China". But the Australian public and its parliamentarians shouldn't be deceived.



Nancy Pelosi and Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen during their August meeting in Taipei.

CREDIT: AP

Although Australia doesn't recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state, there is nothing in the Australian government's one-China policy that precludes MPs from visiting Taiwan and engaging with its leaders and lawmakers. Moreover, beyond some negative bluster from China, the risks of such a visit for Australia are modest.

Canberra and Beijing are at loggerheads on a wide range of severe and longstanding disputes – everything from Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines to China's systematic human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Given the already famously fractious Australia-China relationship, a publicly telegraphed Australian parliamentary visit is likely to only incrementally raise bilateral tensions.

The experiences of other countries also suggest a further dramatic downturn in ties is unlikely. Except for the unusually senior and high-profile visit by [US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi](#), trips by lawmakers from a range of other countries have been met with relatively low-key reactions from the Chinese government.

China's response to an Australian parliamentary visit might even be more muted, coming as it would in the wake of a steady stream of visits from other countries.

Statecraft is often thought of as the preserve of the pragmatic pursuit of the national interest. Yet sometimes higher ethical imperatives intrude.

Taiwan is just such a case. Its people now face an authoritarian state determined to eviscerate many of their hard-won rights and freedoms.

If Australia's liberal democratic values are to live up to their full promise, our parliamentarians must publicly and proudly visit Taiwan.



Dr [Benjamin Herscovitch](#) is a research fellow in the School of Regulation and Global Governance at the Australian National University.