



## WILL THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION ADVANCE SUPPORT FOR TAIWAN DESPITE CHINA'S OBJECTIONS?

BY ROBERT SUTTER

*Robert Sutter ([sutterr@gwu.edu](mailto:sutterr@gwu.edu)) is professor of practice of international affairs at the George Washington University. The judgments here are from Sutter's latest book *US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present* [third edition] (Rowman & Littlefield 2018).*

Chinese officials and commentators foresee US government moves to increase support for Taiwan despite strong objections from China. They warn against legislation regarding US Navy ship visits and visits by higher-level officials. Increased US support for Taiwan is seen as consistent with authoritative strategy statements by the Trump administration that view Beijing as the primary US rival. The strategies call for closer collaboration with allies and partners. Taiwan is mentioned but not emphasized. Also favoring greater US assistance for Taiwan are bipartisan backing in Congress and strong Republican Party support.

An early phone call between President-elect Trump and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen has been less important than originally feared, but the Trump government offered a large arms sales package and Secretary of Defense James Mattis unusually highlighted US commitments to Taiwan. He also squelched speculation that the US would use partners as “bargaining chips” in negotiations with opponents.

Indications that President Trump will not upset Beijing over Taiwan include his personal relationship with President Xi Jinping, a public record showing little interest in Taiwan, and a focus on the North Korean threat and China's important role there.

### Relevant context

Since the opening of US relations with China almost 60 years ago, most US administrations have followed “one China” policies that deferred to Chinese sensitivities about US relations with Taiwan. The last 15 years (since 2003) featured the US avoiding support of Taiwan that risked seriously alienating China. President George W. Bush curbed such backing to counter Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's provocations against China. President Barack Obama's rising complaints over Chinese

challenges – notably bullying of neighbors – did not impact cautious dealing with Taiwan.

Departures from this pattern of deference have occurred on four notable occasions. They provide lessons on how US leaders can deal with Washington's ambiguous “one China policy” amid tougher measures against China today.

- Late 1970s-early 1980s. Bipartisan congressional assertiveness against Carter administration accommodation of China's demands over Taiwan registered in the Taiwan Relations Act and subsequent congressional maneuvers supporting arms sales and other advances despite Chinese objections and administration concerns. *Possible relevance for today – low.* Congress is generally very supportive of Taiwan but more risk averse than in the late 1970s-early 1980s. Congressional assertiveness in foreign affairs has declined enormously from the highpoint of that time.
- 1983-1989. During the tenure of Secretary of State George Shultz, policy makers Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Armitage, and Gaston Sigur led a re-evaluation of US need for China. China pressed ever more demands. The administration remained firm; it downgraded China's importance, relying on allies (Japan in Asia) and revived US strength to deal with USSR. Rebuffing Chinese demands on Taiwan, the administration challenged Beijing's strong objection to US fighter jet sales to Taiwan by selling 130 new fighters as “kits” that were assembled in Taiwan with close US support. China avoided public comment.

*Possible relevance for today – seems important.* US frustration with China's behavior today has led to calls by the Republican Party, and Senate and House leaders for a comprehensive re-evaluation of sensitive elements of US China policy. The importance the US government places on maintaining a positive relationship with China has declined substantially since the Obama government, as it did in 1983.

- 1989-1996. A broad decline in US need for China came with the end of the Cold War and the USSR. US disapproval of China's Tiananmen crackdown shattered relations. Democratizing Taiwan was much more attractive. President George H. W. Bush valued relations with China but he scrapped a US-China agreement by selling 150 F-16 fighters to Taiwan. In a first, he sent a Cabinet-level official to Taiwan. Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui lobbied the new Republican congressional leadership in 1995, successfully visiting the US. The resulting US-China crisis over Taiwan saw President Clinton reverse policy, seeking smoother relations with China and criticizing Lee.

*Possible relevance for today – seems low.* These dramatic events showed gross US disregard for Chinese sensitivities over Taiwan; the US seemed strong and China seemed weak. That trend turned with the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996 graphically demonstrating very negative consequences for US antagonizing China over Taiwan. Today China is much stronger and the US seems in relative decline.

- 2001-2002. President George W. Bush initially saw China as a strategic competitor taking advantage of Clinton's weaknesses. As with the 1983 re-evaluation, (involving some of the same people – notably Wolfowitz and Armitage, and the latter's close colleagues James Kelly, Randall Schriver, and Torkel Patterson) the new administration deterred China's challenges with US strength backed by allies and partners and closer US relations with India and Russia. The recalibrated regional policy involved Taiwan at the center – strong arms sales, prominent treatment of Taiwan leaders, and Bush's public pledge to defend Taiwan if attacked. Beijing muted reaction and emphasized reassurance that China's rise would not challenge the US.

*Possible relevance for today – seems important.* This episode seemed to show that US power – if appropriately managed and with international support – can allow for stronger US ties with Taiwan despite Beijing's objections. Subsequent developments appear to have weakened the US while China has become stronger; the Trump administration strategy documents see that change as a reason for more resolute US strengthening against China, not accommodation of China.

### **Outlook for Trump administration support for Taiwan**

Most likely: Near-term policy inertia subject to change prompted from within the administration.

The Trump government inherited a State Department and related agencies that have spent many years dealing with the Taiwan issue. The experience of the last 15 years has reinforced the tendency to avoid actions toward Taiwan that would upset more important relations with Beijing. Available evidence is not clear on the position of the US Department of Defense (DoD) on Taiwan. As seen in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, the Pentagon has tended to view China more warily. This reflects the DoD's responsibility in the ultimately futile Obama government effort to halt the egregious Chinese expansion of control in the South China Sea.

Against that background, this assessment does not forecast changes in US Taiwan policy as a result of heavy congressional pressure or a drastic change in the policy environment seen with the Tiananmen crackdown. More likely are efforts roughly in line with developments in 1983-89 and 2001-2002 featuring Republican appointees favorably disposed to increase support for Taiwan in accord with the administration's greater resolve in protecting US interests against Chinese challenges.

A main argument against advancing US support for Taiwan remains the risk of retaliation from China. A counter is that continued US deference to Chinese sensitivities in the face of expanded Chinese bullying, coercion, and intimidation challenging US interests in Taiwan and elsewhere undermines any avowed effort to right the balance in the US-China relationship.

Major variables influencing the likelihood and effectiveness of increasing US support for Taiwan include the president's unpredictability and the immediate administration concern with the North Korean nuclear weapons program and China's important role in that problem.

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