



## ON STRENGTHENING US-TAIWAN RELATIONS

BY DAVID G. BROWN

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For the past 18 months, China has been putting increasing economic, diplomatic, military, and psychological pressure on Taiwan to get President Tsai Ing-wen to accept Beijing's one China position. Predictably, Washington has responded to these pressures by strengthen its support for and ties with Taipei. The US Congress has adopted legislation recommending further enhancements to political and security ties. Beijing has objected to the Taiwan Travel Act and to provisions in the National Defense Authorization Act, while ignoring the reality that these actions were in large part a reaction to its pressures on the Tsai administration.

Since the new congressional acts are sense-of-congress legislation, the Trump administration has flexibility on how they will be implemented. Past practice provides some guidelines on how these new tools can be used to the best advantage.

The most important guideline is that changes should be implemented in close consultation with Taiwan. Consultation is particularly important now because President Trump's tweets and posturing have created considerable anxiety in Taiwan. Since the Chen Shui-bian era, the US has been urging Taipei to consult on any significant actions affecting US interests. The goal has been a surprise-free relationship. The Tsai administration has taken US interests into account and consulted closely. Generally, Washington has reciprocated by keeping Taiwan informed. However, President Trump's unpredictable statements have undermined the

mutual trust that is the basis of a solid US-Taiwan relationship.

There is a recurring fear that Taiwan will be treated as a pawn or bargaining chip in US-China relations. The president's recent trade actions against China have reignited these fears. That incoming National Security Adviser John Bolton has advocated using the "Taiwan card" to counter PRC assertiveness will sustain such fears. Regrettably, these fears undermine confidence in the US as a friend and partner. The way to counter those fears is to treat the US-Taiwan relationship as something that is important in its own right and to consult closely with the Tsai administration about any proposed changes. It is also important to recognize that US-Taiwan and Taiwan-mainland relations are crucial domestic policy issues affecting President Tsai's future. Unilateral actions, even well intentioned ones, will further undermine confidence in the US and our interests in Taiwan.

Past practice shows the wisdom of taking pragmatic steps to improve relations rather than focusing on symbolic actions. The primary US interest in Taiwan is to maintain the peace that will ensure that Taiwan can prosper free from coercion. Taiwan faces real security threats from an increasingly capable PLA. Washington has been engaged in a quiet dialogue about the best ways to address those threats. As Beijing will likely continue to increase pressure on Taiwan, concrete steps to strengthen Taiwan's self-defense capabilities and to develop US-Taiwan security cooperation are justified and should be implemented. Some concrete first steps include: establishing a pattern of routinely approving individual arms sales as they are agreed upon; conducting a first US-Taiwan joint search and

rescue operation, and sending a serving flag officer observer to Taiwan's annual military exercise. Grander proposals to sell next generation fighter aircraft raise deterrence strategy and budget priority issues. Taiwan will need new, more advanced aircraft, but which planes at what cost and with what priority is yet to be decided.

Traditionally, Taipei has sought symbolic signs of US support; The Tsai administration appears to be placing greater importance on substantive improvements. That should be encouraged. Gradually increasing practical support in response to PRC actions will convey reassurance. Unilateral symbolic actions will likely undermine Taiwan's confidence in the prudence and predictability of US policy.

Past practice has also shown the wisdom of acting without unnecessary publicity. Just do it. The administration should implement improvements incrementally, emphasizing that they do not represent changes in our long-standing one China policy. One can count on the Taiwan press to closely examine the facts. The Taiwan public knows how to read between the lines. At a time when the public is concerned about perceived US unpredictability, concrete steps accompanied by affirmations of policy continuity will be reassuring and contribute to confidence in the US. Of course, some actions will occur in public. Yet, in general, the less said the better.

Whatever specific steps are taken, Beijing will object. They have their own positions. It is China's standard practice to accuse the US of being the one responsible for creating problems in US-China relations. In fact, to a large extent recent congressional support for strengthening US-Taiwan relations is a reaction to Beijing's pressure on Taiwan and its more assertive actions in East Asia generally.

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