



**THE US AND TAIWAN EMBRACE
DESPITE CHINA'S OBJECTIONS, BUT
WILL IT LAST?**

BY ROBERT SUTTER

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A bright spot amid the mediocre accomplishments of the Trump administration's foreign policy is unprecedented improvement in US relations with Taiwan despite objection by China – a change in US policy warmly welcomed by Taiwan's leaders.

Many incremental and some more substantial advances in US military, diplomatic, and economic support for Taiwan reached a highpoint in 2019. They represent a significant US counter to increased Chinese pressure on Taiwan in the lead-up to the island's January 2020 elections. Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen refuses to bow to Beijing's demand to adhere to the so-called "1992 consensus" on the issue of "One China," insisting that such a position is unacceptable to Taipei.

The US seeks to reassure Taiwan and preserve the status quo that Beijing wants to change through intimidation and coercion. Thus far, the US steps have not resulted in a major backlash from China, although that could change. The key variables shaping the future include President Trump's avowed unpredictability, possible changes in Taiwan and the United States resulting from elections, and China's uncertain leadership calculus. This analysis judges that acute US rivalry with China is likely to advance, and so too should positive US relations with Taiwan.

Recent US advances despite China's objections

Military advances involve joint consultations, planning, exercises, exchanges of intelligence, and other matters out of public view. Visible steps forward involve the sale of over \$11 billion in military equipment to Taiwan, including 66 F-16 jet fighters approved in 2019. US warships are passing regularly through the Taiwan Strait. In past efforts to improve ties with Beijing, the US publicly halted warship patrols in the Taiwan Strait, although some US warships passed through the Straits in later years without publicity. The Trump administration began publicizing these transits (nine from mid-2018 to mid-2019). And the Department of Defense's June 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy declared that Taiwan was a "country," the first such statement by an authoritative Executive branch document in several decades.

On the diplomatic front, the Department of State no longer acts as a gatekeeper more concerned with avoiding offending Beijing and thus restricting relations with Taiwan. Showing often unprecedented support for Taiwan, widely publicized visits by deputy assistant secretaries, rare in the past, are now common. Such high-profile meetings in Taiwan in 2019 dealt with Southeast Asia, China's advances in the Pacific Islands, and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Also unprecedented was the recall in September 2018 of US ambassadors from three Latin American countries after their governments switched diplomatic relations from Taiwan to Beijing.

Consistent with this shift was National Security Advisor John Bolton's publicized meeting with his Taiwan counterpart in May 2019. Traditionally, such meetings were kept secret and occurred at the level of deputy national security advisors. This meeting occurred while US ambassadors in the Pacific Island States were publicly helping Taiwan sustain its official relations among those small nations. Secretary Pompeo in October issued a statement urging Tuvalu to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Vice President Pence in September 2019 registered disapproval of the Solomon Islands breaking ties with Taiwan.

The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), responsible to the State Department, offered unprecedented pledges of US support for Taiwan. The AIT director said in June 2019 that Taiwan can “count on” US support for a “shared future” between the two, adding that “Taiwan will always have a home in the community of democracies.”

Economic support came notably in June 2019 when the visiting director of the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) promised assistance in helping Taiwan retain its diplomatic partners. Meanwhile, the scope and activism of the US-Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework grew markedly in the past two years, impacting more foreign governments.

Key determinants

Factors that drive US efforts to advance relations with Taiwan are strong. They include:

- Beijing’s military, diplomatic, and economic pressure on Taiwan to change the status quo. US pushback sustains the status quo.
- Taiwan’s location and role in the Indo-Pacific region are important for US efforts to counter adverse Chinese advances.
- Taiwan’s democracy, free market economy, and support for international norms are valued by US leaders.
- The strategic assessment that relations with Taiwan impose costs on Beijing.

Brakes on advances in US relations with Taiwan are weaker. Those factors include:

- Concern that improved ties will serve to intensify US rivalry with China.
- Concern that US-China tensions over Taiwan will upset US allies and partners in Asia-Pacific (another result of US-China rivalry).
- Concern that Taiwan leaders might use greater US support to move provocatively toward independence.

- Concern that Beijing’s rising military, political, and economic power could prompt strong PRC reactions. This is the most important brake on US support.

Outlook

Intensifying US rivalry with China generally supports closer US-Taiwan ties. The Trump administration’s improved ties with Taiwan depart from the practice of most US presidents since Nixon, which have sought to improve relations with Beijing and limit ties with Taiwan. Nevertheless, there were similar departures in the past. The biggest came after the Tiananmen crackdown, which led to strong US repudiation of China and an embrace of democratizing Taiwan. That six-year episode ended badly, with a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1995-1996. There were other occasions, however, when the US moved forward with arms sales and other support for Taiwan despite strenuous Chinese objections and the result was minimal Chinese reactions: Beijing had a moderate reaction to the US sale of 130 Chiang Ching-kuo fighter jets to Taiwan in the mid-1980s and had a similar reaction to George W. Bush’s initially very strong support for Taiwan in 2001.

Key variables that could change the recent pattern of improved US relations with Taiwan are:

President Trump. He has little known commitment to or concern for Taiwan. Candidate Trump did not feature Taiwan in his 2016 election campaign. He accepted President Tsai’s 2016 phone call but he came to side strongly with Xi Jinping against Taiwan. He reportedly disapproved of a high-profile visit to Taiwan by a State Department official in 2017 and sought to avoid friction over Taiwan in the lead-up to his June 2018 summit with Kim Jong Un. Thus, if he tries to seek favor from Beijing, he could curb US support for Taiwan.

Taiwan election. President Tsai favors US support. The opposition party has a notably more favorable posture toward Beijing. Its leaders presumably would be less likely than Tsai to welcome US support that Beijing strongly opposes.

US election. Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign pledged no change in strict curbs on Taiwan that were part of the Obama administration's China policy. Her advisers remain active in the Democratic Party and if returned to power they may see less merit in moving forward in US relations with Taiwan than the Trump administration does.

Uncertainty in Beijing. Xi Jinping has adopted a defensive posture and a generally moderate approach toward US government pushback against China's challenges. Experts disagree on whether he will sustain this posture or be prone to more forceful actions against Taiwan and/or the United States, perhaps recalling the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996.

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