

US MIDTERMS WEAKEN TRUMP AND STRENGTHEN TAIWAN'S HAND

BY ROBERT SUTTER

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Taiwan is well aware that the US is by far its leading foreign influence and that US support cannot be taken for granted. Even today, officials sometimes recall with considerable bitterness the US cutting off support for the Chiang Kai-shek government fleeing to Taiwan after defeat in the civil war on mainland China in 1949. The cutoff came after nine years of close US support for Chiang's government as America's leading ally in the fight against Japan during World War II and support for Chiang's government against Mao Zedong's communist forces in the Chinese civil war.

US shifts on Taiwan over the years

America recalibrated its priorities and left Chiang to face alone the expected communist assault on Taiwan. Chiang survived because the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 saw the US government reverse its policies and support Taiwan under Chiang's rule as a key link in US containment efforts countering Soviet Union-backed China during the first two decades of the Cold War. But America shifted again in the 1970s as all official relations and a US defense treaty with Taiwan ended through no fault of Taiwan. The US sought normalization of relations with China, and Beijing set strict conditions requiring the cutoff of American official ties with Taiwan.

Taiwan is also well aware that US domestic politics, and especially the role of Congress, have long had more importance in determining US policy toward Taiwan and China than any other issue in the Indo-Pacific region. Job one for Taiwan officials in its large Washington representative office and 13 consular posts throughout the US is to encourage America to support Taiwan. They have observed with satisfaction over the past nine years the end of US engagement with China and the hardening of American policies to counter multifaceted Chinese challenges. Taiwan has benefited greatly from increased US military, economic and diplomatic support against threatening Chinese coercive actions.

Congress has never been more important in the making of US policy toward China as bipartisan majorities in Congress have been in the lead in the hardening of US policy toward China and increasing support for Taiwan. The bipartisan congressional majorities have remained much more consistent and resolute than President Trump. Joseph Biden and his aides were dismissive of the dangers posed by Chinese behavior until they received briefings upon entering office, which prompted them to join with the congressional majorities in a so-called Washington Consensus determined to counter Chinese challenges and support Taiwan.

Taiwan in a good position after midterms

Today, the results of the mid-term elections are on balance favorable for Taiwan. On the one hand, Taiwan officials, ever attentive to changes in US support, worry that so many members of Congress supportive of Taiwan lost their seats. Replacing them are many newcomers with little familiarity with Taiwan. And some of the incoming Democrats are populists with inclinations to pare back US commitments abroad and focus more on the welfare of Americans at home. In this regard, they mirror the small but sometimes influential congressional cohort on the Republican side which also favors international disengagement.

On the other hand, the elections further constrain President Trump's remarkable efforts over the past year to accommodate Chinese leader Xi Jinping in summit meetings in October 2025, May and September 2026, with two more summits slated for November and December. This accommodation has come at Taiwan's expense as the US president has dismissed Taiwan and held up $14 billion in arms sales for over a year as a bargaining chip in negotiating

purported deals with China. President Trump also avers a strong interest in establishing a "G2" relationship with China, using bilateral talks to determine world developments, which China could use to its advantage at Taiwan's expense.

I wrote for *Think China* in July that President Trump would be unlikely to actually sacrifice Taiwan in seeking deals with Beijing because a substantial number of congressional Republicans would join Democrats in strong opposition to such a move, adding another major negative to Trump's domestic stature already reeling from the failure in the Iran war. And, Xi Jinping's resolute determination to continue his assertive practices challenging the US meant that China was unlikely to compromise in ways that would make Trump look like a winner after sacrificing Taiwan. Adding to the mix and showing likely negative consequences that would preclude Trump's deal-making from hurting Taiwan, is that Congress has, over the past two years, shown little enthusiasm for Trump's accommodation of China and has not let up in its strong efforts to defend America from a wide range of dangerous Chinese challenges.

The November election results reinforced these constraints on Trump, with Republicans headed by Vice-President JD Vance increasingly distancing themselves from close association with controversial Trump policies. Democrats, led now by Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, would attack sacrificing Taiwan in a deal with China for strong partisan as well as substantive reasons. Schumer has a record of several decades of opposition to China.

Putting further constraints on Trump

On the worry in Taiwan that many new members do not yet know much about Taiwan, this situation is offset by the stature of likely leaders of key congressional committees who are critical of China and, unlike Trump, committed to working with US allies and partners, including Taiwan, to meet Chinese challenges. In the Senate, they include Chris Coons (Foreign Relations); Jack Reed (Armed Services), who is likely to be joined by Republican Roger Wicker, who has already voiced strong opposition to Trump's accommodation of Xi Jinping; and Patty Murray (Appropriations), who is likely to be joined by Republican Lisa Murkowski, who has a long record standing against Trump policies.

In the House, experienced committee leaders who favor working with allies and partners like Taiwan include Gregory Meeks (Foreign Affairs), who accompanied Speaker Nancy Pelosi on her visit to Taiwan in 2022, Rosa Delauro (Appropriations) and Adam Smith (Armed Services). Meanwhile, the worry that Democratic populists will encourage US withdrawal from Taiwan is countered by the need for Democratic leaders to accommodate all the moderate Democrats from so-called red states who have no interest in posturing with Democratic populists, now a distinct minority in the party's congressional caucus.

One final constraint on Trump compromising on Taiwan is his much-weakened stature with Xi Jinping. With the wholesale repudiation of the president in the November elections, China has no assurance that promises Trump makes now will not be reversed once he leaves office, if not before. The new situation reinforces China's rigidity in not compromising in significant ways with the US to provide justification for possible Trump concessions on Taiwan.

The above assessment shows a complicated and still uncertain situation which could be further upset by futile, disruptive actions by President Trump, but overall favors Taiwan in the months ahead.

The Pilot *commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.*