

# US Experts Call on Trump Administration to Stand up For Taiwan



Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen (C) arrives at a polling station to vote during local elections in Zhongho, New Taipei City, Nov. 24, 2018 – AFP

Scholars and experts at the Asia Society have called for a 'course correction' in U.S.-China policy, with more initiatives to help the democratic island of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory.

The society's task force on U.S.-China policy warned on Wednesday that bilateral ties are at a "dangerous crossroads," against a background of growing tensions and conflicts of interest.

The report identified regional security, human rights and "China's influence-seeking and interference abroad" as among the key issues in the relationship, calling on the administration of President Donald Trump to take steps to support Taiwan, amid calls from Beijing for the island's "unification" with the People's Republic of China.

"Washington must maintain a strong and credible military presence in the Western Pacific to convince Beijing that the United States still has serious military options," the report said, although it didn't recommend any shift in Washington's support for the One China policy, the principle under which the Chinese Communist Party claims Taiwan as its territory, for fear of precipitating military action by Beijing.

Instead, Washington should "assist Taiwan in developing asymmetric capabilities to hold off the massively superior mainland military until the United States can bring forces to bear."

The island's defenses should be shored up to withstand China's hugely superior military might, the report said, which was signed by 17-strong task force that included Susan Shirk, a former US deputy assistant secretary of state in president

Bill Clinton's administration, and Orville Schell, director of the Center on US-China Relations.

"Robust shore batteries, improved air defenses, mobile response units, and sea mines to counter landing craft can all pose major problems for an invading People's Liberation Army (PLA) force," the report said.

## **Trade talks**

Former Taiwan naval officer Chang Ching, who works at the Society for Strategic Studies think-tank, said the report doesn't represent a significant departure from existing U.S. policy on Taiwan, and that rising cross-straits tensions are unlikely to affect ongoing trade negotiations.

"Washington knows that there are some very clear red lines on the Taiwan issue, and it lacks room to maneuver in the trade negotiations," Chang said.

"That's why [Taiwan] won't be used as a bargaining chip ... and cross-straits tensions won't have an impact on progress at the trade negotiations," he said. "This report from the United States is an articulation of its basic stance on the Taiwan issue."

Beijing has never accepted the status of Taiwan as a sovereign power, although the Republic of China government established by the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) fled to the island in 1949 after losing a civil war to Mao Zedong's communists.

Officially, Taiwan is still known as the Republic of China, which controls the four islands of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu. Beijing has refused diplomatic ties with any country that also recognizes the Republic of China, and actively encourages Taiwan's partners to switch recognition.

Instead, China insists that Taiwan is a breakaway province of the People's Republic of China, and refuses to engage in government-to-government talks.

The Asia Society report called on Washington to risk Beijing's ire with more high-level official visits between the U.S. and Taiwan, and to support the island's bid for participation in international organizations and activities for which statehood is not a requirement.

“Beijing has further isolated Taiwan on the international stage by establishing diplomatic relations with five countries, which had to break relations with Taiwan,” the report said, adding that China had also “refused meaningful contact” with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government led by President Tsai Ing-wen.

“It has exerted political pressure through Taiwanese businesses on the mainland and through Taiwan media owned by entrepreneurs beholden to China,” the report said, adding that the PLA continues to conduct military exercises designed to threaten the island.

“Rising tensions across the [Taiwan] Strait and the emergence of a harder line in Beijing raise the risk of a confrontation between American and Chinese forces,” it said.

### **Xi ignores Taiwan voters**

Last month, President Tsai rejected calls from Xi Jinping for the democratic island to “unify” with the People’s Republic, saying its people have no wish to give up their sovereignty.

In a Jan. 2 “Letter to our Taiwan compatriots,” Xi swapped the Chinese Communist Party’s previous insistence on the idea that Taiwan is part of a divided “One China” for a new theme: “unification.”

“It has been a historical and unavoidable duty of the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese government and the Chinese people to resolve the matter of Taiwan and unify the motherland ever since 1949,” Xi said in the statement.

But he made scant reference to public opinion among the 23 million inhabitants of Taiwan, which his party has never ruled, and warned: “We make no promise to renounce the use of military force, and reserve the right to take all necessary measures to deal with hostile foreign forces and a tiny minority of separatists and their splittist activities.”

Xi urged Taiwan to work towards “unification” under the “one country, two systems” model that was promised to Hong Kong after its 1997 handover to China, rather than the direct imposition of Communist Party rule. However, that city’s autonomy has been eroded in recent years by a series of high-profile

interventions from Beijing, according to U.S. and U.K. officials, Hong Kong's Bar Association, and international rights groups.

Tsai responded by asserting the right of Taiwan's 23 million inhabitants to decide their own fate through democratic means.

Hui Ching, research director at the Hong Kong Zhiming Institute, said Washington is neither Beijing's ally, nor its enemy, however.

"China's growing power, in particular, its growing economic power, means that there is currently more of a will in the U.S. to contain China than to cooperate with or trust it," Hui said.

"But that doesn't mean that they are going to get diplomatically or militarily involved in cross-straits politics, even to the point of a military conflict," he said.

***Reported by Wen Yuqing for RFA's Cantonese Service. Translated and edited by Luisetta Mudie.***

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