

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## China, the United States and the Taiwan Factor

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### Key Points

- The Chinese Communist Party sees the reintegration of Taiwan with the mainland as a sacred duty.
- As a corollary, any declaration of Taiwanese independence would be a red line to Beijing, irrespective of whether Taiwan had foreign assistance in that endeavour or not.
- A US law that demands that Washington support Taiwan in any fight against Beijing, coupled with an American President who shows scant respect for China, impedes any Chinese instinct to use military force to retake the island.
- Polls that show a rising anti-China sentiment among Taiwanese citizens can only add to that sense of caution in Beijing.

### Summary

The ongoing tensions between the United States and China, which have come to partly define the Trump presidency, have seen both sides strive to gain economic, military and geopolitical advantage. Their ongoing trade negotiations appear to have captured the interest of observers and analysts but a close second, if that is indeed what it is, would have to be their dispute over the Republic of China (Taiwan). Having reacquired Hong Kong and Macau, Taiwan remains the last geographical region that Beijing claims it must “re-integrate” in order to right some of the wrongs it has historically suffered. So important is

that reintegration to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that it comes second only to the very survival of the Party itself. From the political perspective, if the CCP is to claim a legitimate hold on power and, simultaneously, maintain the legitimacy of its authoritarian rule, it must necessarily absorb a democratically-run region to demonstrate that its authoritarian rule is superior to democracy. Taiwan also remains an embarrassment to Beijing in that it is proof that the citizens of a democratically-run Chinese country, which Beijing considers a breakaway province, enjoy a standard of living, including various personal freedoms, far above those of Chinese citizens on the mainland.

Those aspects aside, Taiwan represents the most tangible and immediate impediment to the securitisation of China's sea trade, together with any maritime ambitions it may have in the region and further afield. The island's geographic position allows it to thwart virtually all power projection from the mainland. The island chain, of which Taiwan is a major part, stretches from Japan to the Philippine archipelago, virtually encompassing the entire Chinese mainland which arcs into the Pacific Ocean. Taiwan lies offshore in the centre of the Chinese coastline; it has, therefore, the potential to block all of China's access to the ocean. In naval terms, Taiwan could potentially block the Chinese north and south fleets from amassing. It is also the most effective barrier to Chinese naval operations beyond the island chain.

China learned the value of Taiwan during the Korean War of 1950-53. After US President Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait, General Douglas MacArthur stated that Formosa (Taiwan) was "an unsinkable aircraft carrier", able to project American power along China's coast in a containment strategy. The island's position, along with its ties to the US, has caused resentment in Beijing because the CCP cannot achieve its goal of national unification while also posing a potentially major security threat to China's development. The Chinese analyst Lin Zhibo sums up the situation:

Militarily, Taiwan is a potential which the USA could use in the western Pacific. The use of Taiwan could enable effective control of sea lines of communication between North-East Asia and South-East Asia and the Middle East. ... Thus, the USA sees Taiwan as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier", giving it a maximum degree of control over China's East and South Sea fleets.<sup>1</sup>

China has, in short, more than one reason to wish to absorb Taiwan and bring it under CCP rule.

### Analysis

China faces a major impediment to its objective of absorbing Taiwan: the United States. Washington is bound by [law](#) to protect Taiwan. That policy has received renewed and reinvigorated emphasis under the Trump Administration. It is that reinvigorated emphasis, moreover, that causes tensions beyond their trade dispute between both sides. President

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<sup>1</sup> Lin Zhibo, 'New Academic Analysis: Will There Be an All-out US intervention in a Taiwan Strait War?', *People's Daily Online*, 20 July 2004; cited in Holmes, James R., and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2008, p. 55.

Trump has, on several occasions, publically referred to his “great” relationship with President Xi of China. As strong as that relationship may be, however, it has not stopped him from taking several measures that appear to be specifically designed to counter or even block China from achieving its goals.

Mr Trump has made it clear, from the time of his election campaign and before, that he considered China to be a trade cheat that was manipulating international trade rules. When a Chinese ship brazenly seized an unmanned underwater drone from the USS *Bowditch*, a research vessel, in the South China Sea, therefore, President-Elect Trump said that China could keep it, effectively calling the CCP, which controls the Chinese Navy, common thieves. That caused no small embarrassment for the CCP which had previously been left reeling when Mr Trump accepted a congratulatory phone call from President Tsai Ing-Wen of Taiwan, something no previous US president appeared willing to do for fear of upsetting China, and then tweeted about it. He later announced to Mr Xi, during a dinner at his golf resort, that he had authorised air strikes on targets in Syria and that they had been carried out. He had not provided Mr Xi with prior notification of the strikes. Their friendship may, indeed, be a strong one, but it has not prevented Mr Trump from taking a hard line with China on such matters as their trade negotiations, the renegotiation of NAFTA so as to prevent Chinese steel and aluminium from being shipped into the US indirectly via Central American countries, his confrontation with Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei, the role he played in almost closing down another Chinese electronics giant, ZTE, and the tariffs that he imposed on imported Chinese steel and aluminium products. He has enacted [legislation](#) that would punish Chinese officials who prevent American citizens and officials from travelling to Tibet. He is said to be considering, and will probably enact, [legislation](#) to prevent Chinese students from enrolling on certain technology study programmes in the US.

The US appears to have some justification for this approach. In February 2017, Mr Xi [instructed](#) his government ‘to unite the overseas Chinese and returned overseas Chinese’ to help in ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.’ (Translation provided.) At the [19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China](#) in October 2017, he similarly announced that, ‘We will maintain extensive contacts with overseas Chinese nationals, returned Chinese and their relatives and unite them so that they can join our endeavours to revitalise the Chinese nation.’

Apparently not satisfied with enacting legislation pertaining only to the United States, Mr Trump has decided to carry the fight closer to the Chinese mainland and has used Taiwan as the means to do so. When President Tsai of Taiwan announced on 19 March that her government had made a formal request to the United States for advanced fighter jets, it therefore came as little surprise that the Pentagon announced that it would consider the request. It came as even less of a surprise that the Trump Administration had given [tacit approval](#) to the Taiwanese request to buy more than 60 F-16 fighter jets, even though such a policy reversal would likely provoke China amid their trade dispute. Even if the move is designed to place additional pressure on China during the trade negotiations, the fact that Mr Trump is willing to countenance upsetting China in order to achieve a goal is a direct reversal of previous US policy.

So strong has anti-China sentiment grown in the US that FBI Director, Christopher Wray, in [his testimony to the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence](#), warned that China posed ‘not just a whole of government threat, but a whole of society threat’. He specifically referred to Chinese professors, scientists and students in US academia as immediate threats due to their role as ‘non-traditional collectors’ of technology, research and intelligence to help China build up its economy and military. The “whole of society” concept is noteworthy as it implies that the “Chinese threat” goes beyond academia to permeate every part of American society. Wray was calling, effectively, for a whole of US society response to that perceived threat. The US appears to have adopted, under Trump, an approach that one observer [describes](#) as a ‘broad hardening of US defence, internal security, and economic operations against China’. Mr Wray noted how China seeks to undermine the US’s military, economic, cultural and information power around the world, saying, ‘... one of the things we’re trying to do is view the China threat as not just a whole-of-government threat, but a whole-of-society threat on their end. And I think it’s going to take a whole-of-society response by us.’ The US Director of National Intelligence, Mr Dan Coates, stated to the same Committee on the same day that, ‘there is no question that what you have just articulated is what’s happening with China. They’re doing it in a very smart way. They’re doing it in a very effective way. They are looking beyond their own region.’

Maintaining the aggressive moves close to the Chinese mainland, the US Navy sent a Coast Guard vessel, the cutter USCGC *Bertholf*, and a guided-missile destroyer, the USS *Curtis Wilbur*, through the Taiwan Strait on 24-25 March, causing a great deal of anger in Beijing. A US Seventh Fleet spokesman announced that ‘USS *Curtis Wilbur* and the coastguard cutter USCGC *Bertholf* conducted a routine Taiwan Strait transit [on] March 24-25 in accordance with international law’, before adding the now-standard mantra that denies China’s claim to the South China Sea: ‘The ships’ transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The US will continue to fly, sail and operate anywhere international law allows.’ In the US Senate, Republican and Democratic US lawmakers jointly introduced the [Taiwan Assurance Act](#) on 26 March 2019 that sought to boost Washington’s relations with Taiwan, including conducting joint military exercises. Strikingly, the Act echoes a call by National Security Advisor John Bolton to revisit the US’s one-China policy, albeit not directly.

The question that now must be asked is, what is Taiwan’s position in the tensions between the two economic and military giants? The answer must unequivocally be on the side of the United States. On 5 November 2018, for instance, Taiwanese Defence Minister, Yen Teh-fa, told legislators that his government would consider allowing the US Navy [access](#) to Taiping Island if Washington requested it. The island is one of two that Taiwan controls in the South China Sea. It lies around 1,600 kilometres from Taiwan, in the Spratly Chain. It has its own fresh water supply and has previously served as an important logistics base due to its location.

Any US military presence on Taiping Island, let alone Taiwan itself, would be viewed by China as a very serious provocation. Such a presence would be construed by Beijing as a rebuttal of its claim to sovereignty over Taiwan and, by extension, to the legitimacy of the CCP’s rule over China. Beijing has declared any formal Taiwanese declaration of independence to be a

red line that it will not permit Taiwan or any of its allies to cross. It is very likely that Beijing would be constrained to consider open warfare with Taiwan and the US if the latter is given access to Taiping Island. For the US, on the other hand, access to Taiping Island would give it greater mobility in the South China Sea but, more importantly, perhaps act as an incentive for other South China Sea claimants that have territorial disputes with China to undermine China's claims in that region.

China has not helped its own cause with Taiwan, tending to drive Taiwanese citizens towards more defiant and anti-China attitudes because of its direct and implied threats to their independence. On 2 January, for instance, Mr Xi spoke overtly of using the Chinese military to retake Taiwan. He declared that China would fight not only the minority of Taiwanese who resisted reintegration with the mainland, but also with any foreign agents who attempted to assist Taiwan when China did so. That warning was not well-received by either the Taiwanese President or people. Responding to Mr Xi's threat, Ms Tsai declared that Taiwan would never accept the "one country, two systems" formula that Beijing proposed and that unification under her tenure was impossible. Her approval ratings, which had languished in the 30s prior to Mr Xi's warning, now shot up to close to 50 per cent after her rebuttal of it. If that were not enough, both the US Congress and the Trump Administration stated that the US would support Taipei against Beijing.

The response from the Taiwanese public was just as forthright. In response to a [poll](#) conducted by National Chengchi University in Taipei, from 3-5 July 2018, a sample of 1001 Taiwanese who were aged above 20 was asked how willing they would be on a 10-point scale to 'join the military or take action' to defend against a Chinese invasion of their island. The poll found that a Taiwanese call for, or declaration of, independence would not influence the public's decision to fight against Chinese troops. That observation raises several issues about the Taiwanese public's negative perceptions of China. The poll also found that, while the average support for defending Taiwan was 4.09 if Taiwan fought alone against China, that figure jumped up to 4.84 if the US were to support them in their fight. The figure of close to five should give the CCP pause for thought in how it approaches the subject of unification with the Taiwanese public.

The CCP may well regard the unification of Taiwan as a sacred duty and vitally important to its legitimacy. The party would be wise, nevertheless, to pay very close attention to the anti-China sentiment that is growing across the United States among people of differing political persuasions and in Taiwan. The fact that that sentiment is also permeating other parts of the world ought to make its leaders try to determine why China is viewed with such a large degree of suspicion worldwide. Any talk of reunifying Taiwan under those circumstances would be little more than an exercise in futility.

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