

Trump signs Taiwan Travel Act in new provocation against China

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President Donald Trump signed into law on Friday the Taiwan Travel Act, a calculated provocation that will only heighten tensions with China. The bill, which was passed unanimously by Congress, states that it should be US policy to encourage US officials at all levels to travel to Taiwan to meet their Taiwanese counterparts, and permit high-level Taiwanese officials to enter the US for talks with American officials, including from the Departments of State and Defence.

By facilitating stronger ties with Taiwan, the legislation overturns decades of diplomatic protocol that maintained only low-level US contact with an island that China regards as an integral part of its territory. Beijing has threatened to take military action to bring the island under its control if the government in Taipei ever formally declared independence.

In 1979, following the 1971 US rapprochement with China, Washington formally broke diplomatic relations with Taipei and supported the “One China” policy, indirectly acknowledging Taiwan as part of China. At the same time, it passed the Taiwan Relations Act, committing the US to defend the island against any attempt at forcible reunification by China.

As it ramps up its confrontation with China over trade and the South China Sea, and threatens war with Beijing’s ally North Korea, the Trump administration is also ending the delicate balancing act over US policy toward Taiwan that sought to obscure the underlying contradiction—upholding a One China policy, while maintaining ties with Taipei.

Even before his inauguration, Trump broke with precedent and took a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in December 2016, supposedly for Tsai to congratulate him on his election win. It was the first contact between the top leaders of the two countries since 1979. As the *Washington Post*

explained at the time, the call was not a diplomatic gaffe by Trump but “the product of months of quiet preparations and deliberations” in which “hard-line advisers” urged him “to take a tough opening line with China.”

Just days before his inauguration, Trump called into question US adherence to the “One China policy.” In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, the president-elect declared he would not commit to the policy unless there was “progress” from Beijing on trade. “Everything is under negotiation including ‘One China’,” he said.

Now, just when he is considering trade war measures against China over intellectual property and other issues, Trump has signed the Taiwan Travel Act. The *South China Morning Post* reported last month that the annual US-Taiwan defence industry conference, which traditionally has been held in the US to avoid frictions with China, could be held for the first time in Taiwan.

The bill hailed Taiwan as “a beacon of democracy” whose “democratic achievements inspire many countries and people in the region.” In reality, Taiwan was long ruled by a US-backed military dictatorship under the Kuomintang (KMT), which fled the mainland after its defeat in the 1949 Chinese revolution. The Taiwanese ruling class only conceded elections in a bid to quell mass social and political unrest in the late 1980s, but retained the police-state apparatus built up under the KMT regime.

China reacted angrily to Trump’s approval of the legislation. Foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said the bill’s clauses, while not legally binding, “severely violate” the “One China” principle and send “very wrong signals to the ‘pro-independence’ separatist forces in Taiwan.”

Taiwanese President Tsai is from the Democratic

Progressive Party (DPP) that favours greater international recognition for Taiwan but has stopped short of calling for independence from China. Beijing has already cut communications with Tsai because she has refused to acknowledge that the island is part of “One China.”

Chinese defence ministry spokesman Wu Qian said the US bill “interferes in China’s internal affairs.” He called on the US to “stop pursuing any US-Taiwan military ties and stop arms sales to Taiwan, so as to avoid causing serious damage to the bilateral and military relations between China and the US, and to the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”

Far from heeding these warnings, the Trump administration already has taken steps that will exacerbate tensions with China. Last June, the White House approved a major arms deal with Taiwan that included MK-48 torpedoes, high-speed anti-radiation missiles and early-warning radar technical support to significantly enhance Taiwan’s military capabilities.

In December, Trump signed the National Defence Authorisation Act into law. In addition to reaffirming US defence guarantees to Taiwan, it included a clause that it was “the sense of the Congress” that the US should invite Taiwan to participate in military exercises and consider “re-establishing port of call exchanges” between their navies. The Pentagon has not yet taken such steps.

As the US military build-up against China accelerates throughout the Indo-Pacific region, Beijing is particularly sensitive to US military ties with Taiwan. Its strategic location less than 200 kilometres from the Chinese mainland led US General Douglas MacArthur to remark in 1950 that in any conflict in East Asia the island would function as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” for the United States. Taiwan also controls several heavily-fortified, small islands just kilometres off the Chinese coast.

The US is steadily expanding its ties with Taiwan. Later this year, it is due to move the location of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), its de-facto embassy in Taipei. The new site covers 6.5 hectares, more than twice the size of the existing 2.6-hectare compound, where the lease runs out this July. While the move has been planned since 2009, the Trump administration has proceeded with the facility, which is likely to include an expanded staff.

In an interview on Taiwanese radio last month, William Stanton, who was AIT director from 2009 to 2012, suggested that the US will station 10 to 15 Marines at the new AIT facility when it opens later this year. There has been no official confirmation. However, any move to establish an American military presence on Taiwan, no matter how small, will provoke an angry reaction from China.

The US think tank Stratfor commented last month: “From China’s perspective, the issue of Taiwan is nonnegotiable. Any event that alters the island’s status or pulls it further from the mainland’s grasp will guarantee an immediate and firm response from China. Beijing regards Taiwan as the last holdout from the Chinese civil war awaiting national reunification, as well as a critical missing piece to securing China’s trade and economic interests in the region. By contrast, if Taiwan allied itself to a strong, anti-Beijing rival, it would become an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’ that would challenge the Chinese mainland.”

By threatening to strengthen diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan, Trump is playing with fire—creating another volatile flashpoint that could become the trigger for war between the US and China.



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