

Tensions deepen between Beijing and Taipei

Robert Campion
3 July 2018

Tensions between mainland China and Taiwan have risen in recent weeks, driven in large part by the Trump administration, which is boosting relations with Taipei. This is an integral component of a concerted effort by Washington to undercut Beijing economically and militarily throughout Asia and internationally.

Last Friday, CNN reported that the US State Department has requested Marines be dispatched to Taipei to guard its de facto embassy, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT). While the number will likely be less than ten, it would be the first time in nearly 40 years that armed troops have guarded a US diplomatic office in Taiwan. Typically US Marines are only stationed at embassies and offices where Washington has formal diplomatic relations.

The request follows the formal opening of a new, \$255 million AIT building on June 12, attended by the US Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce. The participation of a senior US official sparked concerns in Beijing.

Washington's moves call into question the "One China" policy, under which the US recognises Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. The US has no formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, but has maintained contact informally through the AIT and has continued to sell arms to the island.

Responding to the announcement that US Marines could be stationed on Taiwan, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang called on the US last Friday to "exercise caution" and to "[abide] by its 'One China' pledge and [refrain] from having any official exchanges or military contact with Taiwan."

In fact, the US has been doing the exact opposite with support from both the Republicans and Democrats. The massive \$716 billion military budget for 2019, which easily passed both houses of Congress, called for stepped up military cooperation with Taipei, including

taking part in joint war games like the annual Han Kuang drills, the most important in Taiwan.

In April, Washington passed the Taiwan Travel Act allowing increased diplomatic visits between US and Taiwanese officials. The *Financial Times* noted in a June 9 article that the "period of relative calm [between Washington and Beijing] has been overturned by the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act," as well as by the appointment of China-hawk John Bolton as Trump's national security advisor and the imposition of massive US tariffs on Chinese goods.

Bolton has previously called for rethinking the "One China" policy. In 2017, before entering the Trump administration, he wrote: "Taiwan's geographic location is closer to East Asia's mainland and the South China Sea than either Okinawa or Guam, giving US forces greater flexibility for rapid deployment throughout the region should the need arise."

The main island of Taiwan is about 100 kilometres from the mainland but it also maintains control of several small, highly fortified islands that are just kilometres from China's shoreline. At the beginning of the Korean War in 1950, General Douglas MacArthur in highlighting the strategic significance of Taiwan in a US war with China described it as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier."

Responding to the Travel Act, Beijing has increased military exercises around Taiwan, including naval drills last week in the Taiwan Strait and Bashi Channel, as a warning to Taipei and Washington.

In response, the US and Taiwan have accused China of being the main aggressor. In an interview with the Agence France-Presse (AFP) on June 25, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen denounced China as a threat to regional stability and called on major powers to "constrain" Beijing.

"This is not just Taiwan's challenge, it is a challenge for the region and the world as a whole, because today

it's Taiwan, but tomorrow it may be any other country that will have to face the expansion of China's influence," Tsai claimed.

Tsai is a member of the Democratic Progressive Party, which cautiously advocates a more independent position for Taiwan, without publically repudiating the "One China" policy. As a result, relations have soured between the two sides since she came to office in 2016. A declaration of independence could lead quickly to war as Beijing has previously declared it will use force to prevent such a move. China is unwilling to allow Taiwan to become a staging ground for the US military.

Washington exploits Beijing's military exercises as well as its territorial claims to islands in the South China Sea to justify further militarizing the region. Defence Secretary James Mattis, who recently visited Beijing where the topic of Taiwan was discussed, stated in May that the US will continue "a steady drumbeat" of naval exercises to challenge China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Last month, Reuters reported that the Pentagon was discussing sending warships through the Taiwan Strait. Under consideration was sending an aircraft carrier group through the Strait for the first time since 2007 and making naval port calls to Taiwan. Such a step would be highly provocative and heighten the danger of an incident or accident leading to clashes.

The US and its allies claim such military operations are to defend "freedom of navigation." Writing in the *Guardian*, the Chinese ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, pointed to the hypocrisy of the US position. "Is there any problem with freedom of navigation in the South China Sea? The reality is that more than 100,000 merchant ships pass through these waters every year and none has ever run into any difficulty with freedom of navigation," he stated.

Washington's goal is not to defend "freedom of navigation" or "democracy" in the Asia Pacific but to step up its war preparations aimed at China and any other potential rivals.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)