Washington bullies Central American countries for adopting “One China” policy

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This weekend, Washington temporarily recalled its ambassadors from the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, and its charges d’affaires from Panama over “recent decisions to no longer recognize Taiwan.” This referred to the decisions to establish diplomatic relations with the Chinese government in Beijing by El Salvador in August, the Dominican Republic in May and Panama last year.

The Trump administration also canceled a meeting scheduled for this week with foreign ministers and top military officials of the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

Having based its relations with China since 1979 on the “One China” policy, recognizing Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all of China, Washington’s measures against countries adopting the same policy constitute a remarkable level of imperialist bullying and rank political hypocrisy.

The spokesperson of the Salvadoran government, Roberto Lorenzana, declared Monday that “We have no objections to this meeting [the recalling of the ambassadors], the only thing we ask is that our decisions are respected.” Far from protesting and sharply exposing the predatory character of Washington’s response, officials of the countries affected have only made meek appeals and otherwise insisted that relations with the US remain unchanged.

The previous Monday, Republican Senators Cory Gardner and Marco Rubio, and Democrats Ed Markey and Bob Menendez, introduced a bill authorizing the State Department to suspend US aid and break diplomatic relations with any other countries that decide to establish ties with Beijing. With unbelievable cynicism, the press release announcing this proposed intimidation of impoverished and historically-oppressed countries denounces “Chinese pressure and bullying tactics.”

The White House said in a statement in late August that it would “re-evaluate” its relations with El Salvador and condemned “China’s apparent interference in the domestic policies of a Western Hemisphere country.” China’s Foreign Ministry responded: “We hope that the relevant country [the US] can respect other sovereign states’ right to choose and formulate their foreign policies and stop interfering in other countries’ domestic affairs.”

Significantly, Beijing sent its business charge d’affaires to Sunday’s conference of the FMLN, the ruling bourgeois party in El Salvador, after leaders of the far-right opposition party, ARENA, declared that if elected in 2019 it would switch the country’s diplomatic ties back to Taiwan. The opposition’s obsequious appeal to the US led to widespread condemnations citing the theft of $15 million in Taiwanese aid intended for families affected by the devastating 2001 earthquakes by the ARENA administration of the late President Francisco Flores.

The diplomatic decision by the FMLN, however, in no way reflects a defense of “national sovereignty” against US imperialism, as some leaders claimed Sunday. It is, above all, a desperate quest for new sources of loans after two years of persistent public debt defaults—particularly at a time when the US central bank is raising its interest rates—while continuing to impose Wall Street’s diktats of social austerity.

Washington had previously stopped denouncing the Dominican Republic’s switch to China after the Dominican government adopted a tougher stance against the Maduro government in Venezuela. However, the political alliance of FMLN and the Venezuelan government and now its shift to Beijing could result in efforts of the Trump administration to forcibly undermine the FMLN government. The FMLN has ruled the country since 2009, but has never gained the support of the dominant and fascistic sections of the military, which fought against the FMLN guerrillas during the 1980s, with the backing of the US, terrorizing and killing tens of thousands of peasants and workers.

Relations between Taiwan and El Salvador were cemented by outright bribes and Taipei’s extensive support for the Salvadoran military, supplying weapons and training its officers during this horrific slaughter.

These factors, as underlined by comments to CNN Tuesday by former senior adviser at the US State

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Department, Daniel Erikson, "made El Salvador a particularly attractive target for a White House ready to draw a line in the sand regarding the deepening ties of the Asian rival in Latin America." He added: "El Salvador, in part, has become a battle axis in the new strategic context between the US and China in Latin America."

At the same time, China has invested heavily in the Panama Canal and become the second top user after the US. Chinese companies have also become the main supplier for Panama's Colon free-trade zone, the second largest in the world, and manage the main port terminals on both entrances of the Canal. This growing presence provoked warnings to Congress last year by Adm. Kurt Tidd, chief of the US Southern Command, which considers the "defense" of the Panama Canal one of its main tasks.

The Taiwanese government of Tsai Ing-wen has used the affair to further reassure Washington of its interest in having a greater role in the US confrontation with China. Taipei's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that resources previously allocated to its missions in the Dominican Republic and El Salvador will be transferred to lobbying efforts in the US Congress and expanding the Global Cooperation and Training Framework with the US. The Ministry of Defense announced last weekend that it will increase its budget to upgrade air-to-air capabilities of its US-provided F-16 fighters to "maintain parity" with Chinese fighters, according to *Taipei Times*. This is on top of the 5.6 percent increase in Taipei's military budget to $11 billion between 2018 and 2019.

The historical context of the US response highlights its hypocrisy, but also the grave danger posed to workers in Taiwan, Latin America and the entire world by the rapid escalation of the confrontation between the US and China.

The United States had a close alliance with Taiwan during the Cold War under the US-Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty, signed after the Korean War. However, the treaty was annulled in 1980 as the Carter administration renewed relations with Beijing and adopted the One-China policy in January 1979.

However, despite criticisms by Beijing, the US continued military sales and cooperation unofficially with Taiwan. This military partnership has strengthened and become increasingly open, particularly since the implementation of Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" against China.

The growing US challenge to Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region and globally has also severely undermined diplomatic relations between Beijing and Taipei. Now, the Trump administration threatens to openly turn Taiwan and its 24 million people into a US frontline state against China. In December 2016, Trump complained about "being bound by a One China policy" and, once he assumed office, accepted a call from the Taiwanese president as the first direct contact since 1979 between leaders of the two countries.

The 2018 US military spending bill, approved last month with overwhelming bipartisan support, takes Washington-Taipei relations to a new stage, indicating that the "Six Assurances" of military cooperation are a cornerstone of US-Taiwan relations, and calling for stronger defense and security ties, including joint exercises and training. Earlier this year, in a highly provocative step, two US warships sailed through the Taiwan Strait.

The recall of diplomatic personnel from El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Panama last week constitutes a new step in the use of Taiwan by US imperialism to counter growing Chinese economic influence across the world. This is in the context of the most recent US National Defense Strategy document describing China and Russia as Washington's main geopolitical rivals. "Great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security," announced Defense Secretary James Mattis in January.

As Chinese economic presence in Latin America was growing exponentially at the beginning of this century, Washington agreed to a US-China sub-dialogue on Latin America in April 2006. The minutes made available on WikiLeaks report that the Chinese Latin American Affairs director, Zeng Gang, exhorted; "Taiwan's authorities use relations with these countries as tools to further their secessionist activities and damage China's core national interests," but "some of the leaders of these countries have told the PRC (People's Republic of China) that they must take US concerns into account" demanding "clarification of US views."

At the time, the chief US diplomat for Latin America, Thomas A. Shannon—most recently Trump's acting Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary of State—claimed that "The United States does not encourage or discourage" ties with the PRC and cannot "dictate" other countries' position on this issue."

As its economic position internationally deteriorates and global capitalism sits on the verge of major economic and political shocks, US imperialism is abandoning the pretense of respecting the internal politics of other countries as it seeks to defend its hegemony over Latin America.

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