

# Another US provocation against China: Two warships sail through Taiwan Strait

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In another provocative move, the US sent two warships on Monday through the narrow Taiwan Strait between the Chinese mainland and the island of Taiwan. The naval operation—the second such passage this year—follows an inflammatory speech by US Vice-president Mike Pence earlier this month criticising China on all fronts. It also comes as the Trump administration has pulled out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty enabling the US to develop mid-range nuclear missiles to counter China as well as Russia.

A bland statement issued by US naval spokesman Nate Christiansen declared that the USS Curtis Wilbur, a guided missile destroyer, and the USS Antietam, a guided missile cruiser, made a “routine” transit through the Taiwan Strait “in accordance with international law.” He said that the operation was to demonstrate “the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

While the US navy might be operating in strict accordance with international law, the sailing of two warships close to the Chinese mainland is calculated to further raise tensions with China and make a show of US support for Taiwan. If Chinese military vessels or aircraft appeared in international waters close to the American coastline, the US media would be filled with denunciations of a “Chinese provocation”. The Taiwan Strait is just 130 to 220 kilometres wide.

The Chinese government is yet to make any official statement, but is likely to criticise the US operation as it did after two American warships transited the Taiwan Strait in July. The foreign ministry “expressed concerns” to the US and urged Washington to “at once scrupulously abide by the One China principle” and “avoid harming China-US relations and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”

In reality, the Trump administration has

systematically heightened tensions over Taiwan as part of its increasingly aggressive confrontation with China over trade, the South China Sea and unsubstantiated claims that China is interfering in American politics. Even before formally assuming office, Trump suggested last year that continuing US adherence to the One China principle was dependent on concessions by China on trade and economic issues.

Taiwan is one of the world’s most sensitive and potentially explosive flashpoints. Since 1979, when it ended diplomatic ties with Taipei, the US has abided by the One China principle that effectively acknowledges Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. China regards Taiwan as a renegade province and has warned that it would forcibly take over the island if Taipei ever declared formal independence.

The Trump administration has been strengthening military ties with Taiwan. It has approved two large arms sales of \$1.4 billion in June 2017 and \$330 million last month and is providing assistance to Taiwan in developing its own diesel-powered submarines. Earlier this year Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act into law that authorises contact and visits, including by top-level Taiwanese and US military officials.

The US is encouraging allies to conduct their naval operations in sensitive waters close to the Chinese mainland. The *Australian* reported last week that an Australian frigate, HMAS Melbourne, passed through the Taiwan Strait late last month after taking part in exercises with the Chinese navy. Australian researchers were on board a US naval research ship that docked last week in the southern Taiwanese port city of Kaohsiung, provoking criticism from Beijing.

Washington has also been developing ties with

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, whose Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) advocates a more independent stance by Taiwan. After winning the US presidential election in 2016, Trump provoked angry condemnation from China by accepting a phone call from Tsai. In August, Tsai toured the NASA's space centre in Houston, becoming the first Taiwanese leader in decades to visit an official US government facility of any kind.

The Trump administration's attitude is clearly encouraging Taiwan to take a more confrontational stand towards China. On Saturday, protesters organised by the pro-independence Formosa Alliance took to the streets of the capital Taipei to call on the Tsai administration to hold a referendum on formally declaring Taiwan independent of China—a move that could rapidly lead to conflict. China has always feared that any step towards Taiwanese independence would boost separatist movements in other areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

Taiwan is a key element of the Trump administration's strategy to intensify the pressure on China across the board. While the most evident steps have been US trade war measures against China, Trump has continued the US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region that was begun under President Obama's so-called "pivot to Asia". Taiwan's strategic value in a war with China was underscored by General Douglas MacArthur who once described it as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier."

In his speech on October 2, Vice President Pence berated China for putting pressure on countries to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan and turn to Beijing. For decades, Taiwan and China have offered competing economic rewards to small countries, mainly in the Pacific and Central America, to shift their diplomatic recognition. However, Pence claimed that Beijing's activities now "threaten the stability of the Taiwan Strait."

Given that the US has no formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Pence's remarks are significant. Trump's National Security Adviser John Bolton, a staunch advocate for Taiwan, went one step further in August by reportedly suggesting that the US should penalise El Salvador for breaking diplomatic ties with Taiwan and turning towards China. This opposition to a shift in diplomatic relations by other countries to China

suggests at the very least that the Trump administration is actively considering open diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

A renunciation by Washington of the One China principle or support for Taiwanese independence would dramatically escalate the existing tensions between the world's two largest economies. Trump's aggressive confrontation with Beijing is driven by deep concerns in American ruling circles that China's economic rise threatens US global dominance of the United States. The latest naval provocation is another warning that US imperialism will stop at nothing, including a catastrophic war, to subordinate China to American economic and strategic interests.



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