

US-China tensions to rise over Taiwan

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Taiwan is looming as a major flashpoint between the US and China as the Trump administration steps up its confrontation with Beijing over a range of issues, from trade and allegations of intellectual property theft, to provocative operations by the US Navy in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

US President Trump signed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) into law on Monday. The legislation provides \$1.5 billion for a comprehensive and “multifaceted US strategy” for the Indo-Pacific in line with Trump’s National Defense Strategy which explicitly targets China and Russia as US rivals.

The Act specifically calls on the White House to sell arms to Taiwan on a regular basis as well as urging top US military and civilian officials to visit Taipei for talks with their counterparts. Both steps are likely to raise tensions between the US and China, which regards Taiwan as an integral part of its territory.

On assuming office, Trump called into question Washington’s adherence to the One China policy under which it effectively recognised Beijing as the legitimate ruler of all China, including Taiwan. Trump suggested that he would tear up the One China policy if Beijing did not make major concessions on trade and other issues.

The Trump administration has already approved two major arms deals to Taiwan of \$1.4 billion in June 2017 and \$330 million last month. It is providing assistance to Taiwan to develop its own diesel-powered submarines. The ARIA legislation suggests that such sales will occur more regularly.

The Taiwan Travel Act, which Trump signed into law last year, authorises top level contact between US and Taiwanese officials even though the US officially ended all diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1979. Beijing is highly sensitive to US talks with officials from what it regards as a renegade province.

The Trump administration’s steps towards closer ties

with Taiwan has encouraged the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen, whose Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) advocates a more independent stand by Taiwan. China has repeatedly threatened to use force to take control of Taiwan should it ever formally declare independence.

In a key note speech on Wednesday, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for the start of talks between Beijing and Taipei on reunification on the basis of the “one country, two systems” formula under which Britain handed back its former colony of Hong Kong to China. Beijing would allow nominal self-rule for Taiwan under negotiated terms in return for the acceptance of Chinese sovereignty.

Xi said that the political division across the Taiwan Strait could not continue indefinitely. The speech marked 40 years since Beijing issued a call for the end to military confrontation with Taiwan and called a halt to its bombardment of tiny fortified islands controlled by Taiwan just kilometres from the Chinese mainland.

“The problem of Taiwan existed because the Chinese nation was weak and in chaos, but it will end along with national rejuvenation,” Xi stated. In the aftermath of the 1949 Chinese Revolution, the defeated bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT) fled the mainland and, protected by the US Navy, established a military dictatorship on Taiwan. The KMT maintained that it was the government-in-exile of all China.

When it established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979, the US declared that it would continue to oppose any forcible attempt by China to seize control of Taiwan and would continue to sell Taiwan arms. The US Navy has continued to send its warships through the Taiwan Strait, most recently last October, in a tacit warning to Beijing.

As part of its increasingly pronounced anti-China rhetoric, the US media focused on Xi’s declaration that China would “make no promise to renounce the use of

force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means.” However, Xi pointedly directed his warning against any intervention by “foreign powers” on the issue of Taiwanese independence, adding that “Chinese people will not fight Chinese people.”

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is deeply concerned that the US will exploit a push for Taiwanese independence to encourage separatist sentiments elsewhere in China, including in Tibet and among Muslim Uighurs in western Xinjiang province. Beijing is also acutely aware of Taiwan’s strategic importance and has reacted angrily to any suggestion of closer US-Taiwanese military ties.

Taiwanese President Tsai immediately rejected Xi’s proposal of talks about reunification. “I must reiterate here that Taiwan will never accept one country, two systems, and the majority opinion in Taiwan is also against it,” she said just hours after Xi’s speech.

In her New Year’s speech on Tuesday, Tsai dismissed suggestions that the DPP’s landslide losses in local elections in November signified opposition to her party’s opposition to reunification. She said that the results “absolutely do not mean that grass-roots public opinion in Taiwan favors abandoning our sovereignty, nor do they mean that the people want to make concessions regarding Taiwanese identity.”

However, according to an opinion poll last September by the Taiwan Public Opinion Research Foundation, support for Taiwanese independence had fallen from 51.2 percent in 2016 when Tsai was elected to 36.2 percent. Support for unification with China was also lower at 26.1 percent.

Concerns among working people are driven by the mounting confrontation between the US and China, and the increasing probability that Taiwan will be drawn into it. But within the ruling elite, the divisions are motivated by economic considerations. Significant sections of big business have invested heavily in China and look to closer ties as a means for enhancing their opportunities. Others, however, regard the lack of international recognition for Taiwan as an impediment to doing business globally.

In the November election, the KMT and other candidates sympathetic to reunification with China won control of Taiwan’s four largest cities. In December, the independent mayor of Taipei, Ko Wen-je, hosted officials from Shanghai at an annual forum held by the

two cities, leading to speculation that other cities might do the same.

President Tsai made a thinly veiled warning to the new mayors not to hold secret talks with China or undermine her government’s policy towards China. While declaring that she did not oppose “cross-strait interactions between cities,” Tsai insisted that such interactions had to be “healthy and normal.”

Having signed the ARIA legislation into law, Trump will undoubtedly proceed to step up arms sales to Taiwan and engage in high-level exchanges with Taiwanese officials, heightening tensions with China and throughout the region, including within Taiwan itself.



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