

US names Taiwan a “country,” stoking tensions with China

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21 June 2019

The United States continues to pursue a reckless course in the Asia-Pacific by ratcheting up tensions with China over Taiwan. This includes the possibility of a break with the longstanding “one China” policy, as well as deepening political and military ties between Washington and Taipei.

The US Defense Department’s “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report,” released June 1, designates Taiwan a “country.” The wording is highly provocative to Beijing, which views Taiwan as a renegade province that should one day rejoin the Chinese mainland. As such, Beijing has repeatedly stated that any moves to declare an independent Taiwan will lead to a military confrontation.

The report denounces China as a “revisionist power,” stating, “As democracies in the Indo-Pacific, Singapore, Taiwan, New Zealand, and Mongolia are reliable, capable, and natural partners of the United States. *All four countries* contribute to US missions around the world and are actively taking steps to uphold a free and open international order.” (emphasis added)

The statement was neither an innocuous remark nor a mistake, given the emphasis Washington is placing on its military build-up in Asia. Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan made this clear when he wrote in the report’s opening line, “The Indo-Pacific is the Department of Defense’s priority theatre.”

Beijing is deeply sensitive to any suggestion of Taiwanese independence, including even the use of the name Taiwan in an official capacity. The reference to Taiwan as a country, rather than as part of China, goes against the “1992 Consensus” in which both Beijing and Taipei accept that there is only one China but agree to disagree on which is the rightful ruler of China. In addition, since 1979, the United States has formally

recognized Beijing as “China,” despite maintaining close economic and military ties with Taipei.

The decision to flout this longstanding policy in a prominent defence paper is highly provocative and aimed at placing additional pressure on China while deepening relations between Washington and Taipei in preparation for war. It comes as the Trump administration has increased weapons sales to Taiwan, held exchanges between high-level officials, and increased the number of warships passing through the Taiwan Strait.

On Monday, the *Wall Street Journal*, quoting three anonymous White House officials, published an article claiming a rift exists in the Trump administration over its Taiwan policy, with a faction fearing that closer relations with Taipei will harm the chance of a trade deal with Beijing. At one point, Trump reportedly greeted attempts by anti-China hawks to build closer relations with Taipei with anger. However, Trump came around “and he now sees the value in using Taiwan as a bargaining chip in his talks with China,” the *Wall Street Journal* writes.

Regardless of the behind-the-scenes machinations, Washington’s moves to strengthen Taipei politically and militarily are worrying Beijing. “There is growing anxiety in China that the administration is really pushing the envelope and no longer adhering to any sense of maintaining an unofficial relationship with Taiwan, and maybe even moving toward abandoning the One China policy,” stated Bonnie Glaser, a senior adviser for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

China has repeatedly stated it will use military force to prevent Taiwan from declaring or being recognized as a separate independent country. Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore earlier this

month, Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Wei Fenghe stated, “China must be and will be reunified. We find no excuse not to do so. If anyone dares to split Taiwan from China, the Chinese military has no choice but to fight, at all costs, for national unity.”

Beijing’s concerns are driven by other recent provocations. On June 6, US and Taiwanese officials met in Taipei for the re-naming ceremony of Taiwan’s de facto embassy in Washington. Previously known as the Coordination Council for North American Affairs, the new agency is called the Taiwan Council for US Affairs, utilizing both the name of the island and the US. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who attended the event, called the renaming a “milestone” in relations between the two. She was joined by the de facto US ambassador to Taiwan, Brent Christensen.

In May, Taiwan’s national security chief David Lee met his counterpart, national security advisor John Bolton, in Washington—the first such top-level visit since 1979. The visit is one of an increasing number of high-level exchanges since Washington passed the Taiwan Travel Act in March 2018, authorizing such contact.

US naval incursions as a show of force through the Taiwan Strait are also becoming routine despite the fact that Beijing has threatened to retaliate militarily if it believes a US war ship is likely to dock at a Taiwanese port. The latest provocation through the strait took place on May 22 involving the guided missile destroyer USS Preble and the oiler USNS Walter S Diehl.

Washington also intends to sell \$2.6 billion worth of tanks and missiles to Taiwan, including 108 M1A2 Abrams tanks as well as 250 Stinger anti-air missiles, 409 Javelin and 1,240 TOW anti-tank missiles. Undoubtedly, this is what the “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report” refers to as “sustaining a credible combat-forward posture; strengthening alliances and building new partnerships; and promoting an increasingly networked region.”

The online military magazine *Defense One* criticized the sale for being insufficient, saying, “This would be fine if Taiwan were preparing for a ground war, but the real conflict if China invades will be at sea and in the air. Taiwan should focus on acquiring the most cost-effective methods of stopping a Chinese invading force before it lands.”

The reality though is that for all the talk of “Chinese

aggression,” it is the US that is preparing for war on the Asian continent, with Taiwan a major base for launching attacks. Since 2008, the US has sold more than \$22 billion worth of arms to Taiwan.



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