

US makes “significant adjustments” to its Taiwan policy

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The United States is continuing to ramp up tensions in East Asia over Taiwan, inflaming a situation that could lead to armed conflict with Beijing. This is part of a bipartisan effort in Washington to surround and intimidate mainland China on the economic, diplomatic and military fronts, while deflecting growing domestic tensions outwards.

On August 31, David Stilwell, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, delivered a speech to the right-wing Heritage Foundation in which he stated that Washington would be making “significant” changes to its engagement with Taipei. His remarks were filled with effusive praise for Taiwan’s supposedly flourishing democracy and denunciations of Beijing for allegedly upending the status quo in the region.

Attempting to paint capitalist Beijing and its policies as the continuation of Marxism, Stilwell claimed these changes were necessary because “the Chinese Communist Party has targeted Taiwan with diplomatic isolation, bellicose military threats and actions, cyber hacks, economic pressure, ‘United Front’ interference activities—you name it.”

Stilwell drew attention to high-level trips by US officials to Taiwan, including that of US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar in August, as well as a “Joint Declaration on 5G Security” between American Institute in Taiwan director Brent Christensen and Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu that Stilwell claimed would “[expand] cooperation on data protection, freedom, and human rights.”

Stilwell spent a significant portion of his speech discussing the declassification of two cables from Washington in 1982 that made “Six Assurances” to Taiwan as part of a more aggressive stance by President Reagan.

One cable, dated July 10, 1982, stated that the US: 1) would not set a date to end arm sales to Taiwan; 2) would not agree to prior consultation with Beijing regarding the military sales; 3) would not play a mediation role between Beijing and Taipei; 4) would not revise the Taiwan Relations Act; 5) would not agree to take a position on Taiwanese sovereignty; 6) and would not pressure Taipei to negotiate with Beijing.

In highlighting these cables, Stilwell claimed that Washington stands by the “One China” policy, before adding: “What we are doing, though, is making some important updates to our engagement with Taiwan to better reflect these policies and respond to changing circumstances. *The adjustments are significant*, but still well within the boundaries of *our one-China policy*.” (Emphasis added.)

Beijing responded on September 1 with Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying calling on Washington to adhere to the “One China” policy. She stated that it “is the political basis and fundamental precondition for the establishment and development of China—US diplomatic ties” and that the US should “stop lifting its substantial relationship with Taiwan and to cease any forms of official contact with Taiwan, so as not stray further down an erroneous path.”

Stilwell also claimed last Monday: “The US has long had a one-China policy. This is distinct from Beijing’s ‘One China Principle’ under which the Chinese Communist Party asserts sovereignty over Taiwan. The US takes no position on sovereignty over Taiwan.”

Contrary to Stilwell’s assertions, the declassification of the cables is meant to call the “One China” policy into question. In 1979 the US took the de facto position that Taiwan is a part of China when it ended formal relations with Taipei. The acceptance of this position has also governed cross-strait relations since the 1992

Consensus, under which both Beijing and Taipei accept that there is one China, but agree to disagree over which is the legitimate government.

The statements from senior US officials that Washington does not agree with Beijing's interpretation of the "One China" policy and does not currently take a position on Taiwanese sovereignty have significant implications. They open the door to the declaration of a new US stance that would up-end the four decades old status quo and directly challenge Beijing over Taiwan. Such a decision would risk the outbreak of war. Beijing has made clear that any declaration of Taiwanese independence would be met with a military response.

Beijing's position is not rooted in aggressive expansion to impose dictatorship on so-called peace-loving democracies as Washington and Taipei would have people believe. Defeated in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalists) fled to Taiwan to establish a separate military dictatorship, backed by the US. Taipei received global recognition and even occupied China's seat on the United Nations Security Council.

As the Cold War developed and the United States waged bloody imperialist wars in Korea and Indochina, the threat of a US war launched from Taiwan against the Chinese mainland persisted. President Nixon made a major tactical shift in relations that culminated in his visit to Beijing in 1972, setting the stage for formal US-China relations and a quasi-alliance against the Soviet Union. As Beijing moved to restore capitalism, China became a cheap labour platform for US corporations. Now that China has developed into an economic competitor with Washington, the latter is intent on subordinating Beijing to its own interests, even at the risk of nuclear war.

To this end, Washington is deepening its relations with Taipei. The *New York Times* on August 17, citing unnamed officials in Washington, wrote: "Those officials, as well as Republican and Democratic lawmakers, aim to do as much as possible to show explicit US support for Taiwan. They want to send military signals to China and to make relations with Taiwan as close to nation-to-nation as possible, short of recognizing sovereignty."

As such, Stilwell last Monday also announced that Washington and Taipei would establish a new annual

bilateral economic platform. This occurred after Taiwan agreed to remove longstanding restrictions on the importation of American pork and beef. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's spokesman Xavier Chang stated: "We hope that the dialogue will be an opportunity to forge new areas of economic cooperation between the two countries and allow Taiwan to better integrate with other world economies and become a key power in global supply chain."

The US has backed these changes with military threats. On August 30, Washington sent the USS Halsey, a guided-missile destroyer, through the Taiwan Strait, the second such trip for a US naval vessel in less than two weeks. There have so far been 11 transits through the Taiwan Strait this year, one shy of the annual record, according to the US Pacific Fleet.



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