

Trump administration fuels tensions with China over Taiwan

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Amid the ongoing coup threat and political turmoil in Washington, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a loyal Trump supporter, has provocatively ramped up tensions with China over Taiwan, one of the most dangerous flashpoints in Asia.

Last weekend, Pompeo announced a sweeping shift in diplomatic protocols in dealing with Taiwan, giving the green light for lifting all restrictions on contact between Washington and Taipei. The move is another step to overturning the One China policy under which the US has de facto recognized Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including the island of Taiwan, and has limited contact with Taipei.

In his statement, Pompeo called Taiwan “a vibrant democracy and reliable partner” of the US and declared that interaction with Taipei was hamstrung by “complex internal restrictions.” He announced the lifting of “all of these self-imposed restrictions,” which he claimed were “an attempt to appease the Communist regime in Beijing.” All “contact guidelines” issued by the State Department were “to be null and void.”

What Pompeo described as the appeasement of Beijing flowed in fact from the shift in US foreign policy that was marked by President Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1971. The rapprochement with the Chinese Communist Party was a quasi-alliance aimed at isolating and confronting the Soviet Union that also laid the basis for the subsequent restoration of capitalism in China. The establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing in 1979 was based on the One China policy, although the US continued to oppose any forcible Chinese takeover of Taiwan and continued to supply it with arms.

Over the past decade, first under the Obama administration and since intensified under Trump, the US has mounted an aggressive, across-the-board effort

to undermine China diplomatically and economically, and has engaged in a massive military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region. No longer regarded in Washington as a useful strategic partner, China is now viewed as its chief rival and threat to US global domination.

From the outset of his administration, Trump openly called the One China policy into question, declaring that he would overturn it if China did not bow to his trade demands. Trump’s administration has ratcheted up tensions with Beijing across a range of issues from US naval provocations in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, to trade war measures. This has included the development of closer military and diplomatic ties with Taiwan, which is regarded by the Pentagon as a critical element of any US war with China.

In a landmark speech last July, Pompeo effectively overturned three decades of US foreign policy, declaring that “the old paradigm of blind engagement with China” had to be replaced by a strategy whereby “the free world must triumph over this new tyranny.” Most significantly, he ruled out any return to the Cold War policy of “containment,” thus implying that all means, including war, were to be used in combating China.

The significance of Pompeo’s abrogation of previous US diplomatic protocols with Taiwan was not lost in Beijing. “Any actions which harm China’s core interests will be met with a firm counter-attack and will not succeed,” foreign ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao told reporters on Monday.

The US had already announced that its ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft, would make a three-day trip to Taipei this week. Craft herself publicly lunched last September with James K.J. Lee, director of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York, Taiwan’s

de facto embassy, and described the meeting as “historic.”

In a statement last week, the Chinese mission to the UN warned that the US “will pay a heavy price for its wrong action,” referring to the trip. “China strongly urges the United States to stop its crazy provocation, stop creating new difficulties for China-US relations... and stop going further on the wrong path,” it stated.

On Monday, the US ambassador in the Netherlands, Pete Hoekstra, pointedly hosted Taiwan’s representative to the country at the US embassy, in the first such contact since Pompeo announced the end of restrictions. In a tweet, Hoekstra boasted: “Made some history today: Welcomed Taiwan Representative Chen to our Embassy,” accompanied by pictures of the two of them.

However, with Craft due to fly to Taipei yesterday, the trip was called off at the last minute, along with a planned visit by Pompeo to Europe. Craft would have been the third high-level US official to visit in recent months. US Health Secretary Alex Azar visited Taipei last August, becoming the most senior American official to do so in over three decades.

State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus declared in a statement that all planned travel had been cancelled citing the need to plan for the transition to a new Biden administration next week. The cancellation of trips undoubtedly has much more to do with the political chaos in Washington, under conditions where Trump refuses to declare defeat, sections of the Republican Party still falsely claim that the election was stolen and fascistic Trump supporters continue to plot to keep him in power.

Pompeo’s trip was called off amid concerns that he would receive a very cold welcome in Europe. One of the legs of the trip was to be Luxembourg whose foreign minister Jean Asselborn had declared on RTL radio that Trump was “a criminal” and a “political pyromaniac who must be brought before a court.” Citing unnamed US officials, Reuters reported that Pompeo’s visits to Brussels and Luxembourg were called off after Asselborn and EU officials refused to schedule meetings with him.

The Taiwanese government was publicly supportive of Craft’s trip, which under other circumstances would have been hailed as a diplomatic victory over Beijing. However, given the uncertainty over who will occupy

the White House next week, the visit could potentially complicate relations with the US if Biden is finally installed.

While tactics might change under a Biden administration, there will be no let-up in the US confrontation with China. Biden, who served as vice president in the Obama administration, was a crucial element of its bellicose “pivot to Asia” against China that laid the foundations of Trump’s trade war and provocations against Beijing. Biden has already indicated that he will not immediately reverse the sweeping US trade sanctions on China.

In a further indication of his stance towards China, as reported in the *Financial Times*, Biden is to appoint Kurt Campbell to a powerful, newly-created position of Asia policy coordinator. Campbell, as assistant secretary of state of Asia and the Pacific in the Obama administration, played a central role in planning and implementing the “pivot to Asia” and will undoubtedly pursue an aggressive course towards China.



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