

Taiwan's geopolitical importance

Written by Parris Chang 0000

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For decades Taiwan has enjoyed widespread bipartisan support in the US Congress, no matter what the stance of the executive branch.

In 1979, when then-US president Jimmy Carter established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), derecognized the Republic of China (ROC) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime, and terminated the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty, Congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) — over Carter's objection and amid the PRC's protest.

The TRA contains provisions committing the US to Taiwan's security and restoring a semblance of sovereignty to Taiwan's status.

Specifically, it defines future US commitments to Taiwan's defense, by mandating that the US provide Taiwan with "such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary" for Taiwan's defense, by openly declaring an intention to "resist any resort of force" against the people of Taiwan and by putting Beijing on notice that any such use of coercion directed against Taiwan would be a matter of "grave concern to the United States."

Observers have pointed out that the TRA is the "functional substitute" of the terminated mutual defense treaty.

When former US president Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, Beijing mounted an intense campaign to press the US to end arms sales to Taiwan. Under the guidance of then-US secretary of state Alexander Haig, the US accepted the PRC's demands in a joint communique in August 1982 that aimed to freeze the quality and quantity of weaponry Taiwan could purchase and gradually reduce US arms sales to Taiwan.

Reagan was outraged, as the communique was in direct violation of the TRA and made huge concessions to the PRC, and thus he dismissed Haig.

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Seeking to downplay the inconsistency between the communique and the TRA, Reagan conveyed to Taiwan's government the "six assurances," including pledges that the US would not terminate arms sales to Taiwan, would not change the TRA and would not change its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan, meaning that the US would not agree to China's claim over Taiwan.

It is regrettable that in past decades US administrations, Democratic and Republican, have failed to fully and faithfully implement the provisions of the TRA and the "six assurances" so as to appease Beijing.

It is in this context that from May to June 2016, both chambers of Congress passed a concurrent resolution to reaffirm that the TRA and the "six assurances" are the cornerstone of US-Taiwan relations.

The resolution conveys a strong "sense of Congress" of support to Taiwan, as well as a rebuke to then-US president Barack Obama's administration.

On July 18, 2016, the US Republican National Convention included, for the first time, the "six assurances" in its official platform.

Calling Taiwan "a loyal friend of America," the Republican platform also expressed support for the timely sales of defensive arms and technology to build diesel submarines, and Taiwan's full participation in the WHO, the International Civil Aviation Organization and other international institutions.

In addition to Taiwan's geopolitical importance, members of Congress recognize and appreciate the democratic values and support for human rights that Taiwan shares with the US.

Hence congressional bills such as the Taiwan Travel Act, the Taiwan Security Act and the National Defense Authorization Act mandate senior military and diplomatic exchanges with Taiwan, US Navy port visits to Taiwan and Taiwanese port visits to the US, and Taiwan's participation in US naval and air force exercises, and direct the Pentagon to help Taiwan

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develop an indigenous undersea warfare program and strengthen strategic cooperation with Taiwan.

Critics have characterized Obama's policy toward Taiwan as "benign neglect."

However, US President Donald Trump's administration has placed strong emphasis on the commitment to Taiwan's defense and security. In June last year, the US announced his first arms sales package to Taiwan for US\$1.4 billion.

During his state visit to Beijing in November last year, Trump told Chinese President Xi Jinping (000) that the US would not terminate arms sales to Taiwan and, in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act, the US would continue to provide Taiwan with defensive weapons.

Less than six weeks after his trip, Trump personally unveiled the National Security Strategy report on Dec. 18 last year. For the first time since the publication of the strategic document by the executive branch in 1990, the report mentioned Taiwan by name and clearly reaffirmed the US' defense commitment to Taiwan.

The US intends to "maintain our strong ties to Taiwan in accordance with our 'one China' policy, including our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act to provide for Taiwan's legitimate defense needs and deter coercion," the report said.

It is significant that Taiwan was presented in the context of the "military and security" of the "Indo-Pacific" region and "priority actions" sections of the report.

The document also states that: "We [the US] will maintain a forward military presence capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any adversary. We will strengthen our long-standing military relationship and encourage the development of a strong defense network with our allies and partners."

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Equally important, the US briefed the Democratic Progressive Party government led by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) on the report before its public announcement, apparently because the US considers Taiwan a partner.

Tsai has, on several occasions, pledged that Taiwan is a dependable US regional security partner.

In the wake of the US briefing, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official expressed hope that the nation would strengthen cooperation with the US on various aspects of the new strategic framework.

It is no secret that the US is wary of China's rise and its challenge to Pax Americana. US officials have closely monitored China's military expansion in the Indo-Pacific region, especially militarization of the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative to enhance China's global economic and political influence and Xi's "China Dream" to build a world-class military to defeat the US and supplant it as the world's superpower.

The Pentagon's National Defense Strategy made public last month enclosed the Trump administration's answer to China's challenge. The US national security team has devised the Indo-Pacific regional strategy to forge a broad alliance to contain and counterbalance China — the rising hegemon.

This is to be a US-led coalition of Asian democracies, including Japan and India, as well as Australia, at the outset, that would then enlist Taiwan and concerned members of the ASEAN.

Former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) during his eight-year tenure steadily reduced the defense budget, well below 2 percent of GDP. US officials have warned that the rapid growth and modernization of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is aimed at winning high-intensity, short-duration conflict on Taiwan and called for Taiwan to increase its defense budget to 3 percent of GDP to complement US support.

The Tsai government must heed the advice if Taiwan truly wants to be a dependable US

regional security partner.

Likewise, Taiwan's decision to move to an all-volunteer armed forces is unwise and wrong, as it has weakened the nation's military strength and capacity to mobilize.

Experts in Taiwan and the US have said that an all-volunteer force is more, not less expensive.

Tsai needs a seasoned national security team to guide and shape a sound defense strategy and arms procurement policy. Taiwan must fully utilize its potent, sophisticated information technology to develop and deploy advanced cyberwarfare capabilities and build a high-caliber Internet army to wage a cyberwar.

If Taiwan develops the capabilities to cripple the PLA's command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, then Beijing is less likely to contemplate a preemptive attack on Taiwan.

In the past decade, China's espionage offensive has seriously compromised Taiwan's national security agencies and stolen top military secrets, including information on advanced US weapons sold to Taiwan.

As former American Institute in Taiwan director William Stanton said, the loss of sensitive secrets serves to undermine US confidence in security cooperation with Taiwan.

An aggressive and intensive counterespionage drive to catch spies and safeguard national secrets should be the top priority of the Tsai government.

National security experts inside and outside the governments of Asian democracies should be bold and creative in devising "track two," "track 1.5" and/or other channels for consultation and dialogue.

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Intelligence sharing is good and can be elevated to exchange of sensitive information and a higher level of strategic dialogue, thereby they would compare notes on their respective threat perception and strategic assessment. These efforts would enhance mutual understanding and confidence-building, and facilitate security cooperation among Asian democracies.

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