

## If the US is 'first,' what is Taiwan?

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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Putting the US first is what US presidents do. Post-war US presidents have consistently interpreted this as cultivating, and claiming stewardship of, an international order of peace and stability that creates conditions amenable to the furtherance of US interests. There is concern that US President Donald Trump has a narrower, less nuanced, more direct understanding of what putting the US first means, but it is impossible to tell.

On Friday, Trump gave his inaugural address.

“From this moment on, it’s going to be America first,” he said, making international trade and foreign relations integral to his theme.

This “decree,” he said, is to be heard “in every city, in every foreign capital and in every hall of power.”

Governments worldwide have been put on notice and were surely listening — many in anxious anticipation — over concerns that Trump’s business instincts would leave former allies abandoned or — as with Taiwan — as dealmaking fodder.

At a dinner celebrating 80 years of diplomacy at Twin Oaks in Washington on Wednesday last week, Taiwan’s Representative to the US Stanley Kao (高志彬) said that the relationship between the two nations had “never been better in recent memory,” albeit with a “quiet and low-key” engagement. The Taiwanese government would like the momentum to remain intact, although the relationship “should be based on its merit and not used ... as some kind of bargaining chip,” he said.

Former premier Yu Shyi-kun (吳敦義) — in Washington at the head of a Taiwanese delegation for the inauguration — asked Washington-based Heritage Foundation founder Edwin Feulner whether he thought Trump might sell Taiwan out.

Feulner said that the US’ Taiwan Relations Act would prevent him from doing so and that even

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if he wanted to, he would have to get past US Congress first.

The idea that the US could abandon Taiwan if it were in the US' interest was mooted in 2011 by Charles Glaser of the Elliott School's Institute for Security and Conflict Studies. The idea received short shrift in Congress and yet Trump's address also signaled his willingness to distance himself from the policies of both parties.

However, there is reason for optimism. White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus is known to be well-disposed toward Taiwan.

Trump also said in his address that: "We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world," and "reinforce old alliances."

Kao said Taiwan intends to ensure that Taiwan-US relations remain sustainable and predictable. Unfortunately, it takes two to tango. Nobody is sure what Trump's foreign policy goals are, or how well thought out his ideas might be.

How important is it for the US to protect Taiwan from China, whether it be for the sake of democracy in Asia, a valuable trading partner, the maintenance of the first island chain or of the US' soft power influence in Asia?

Trump's opening salvo on abandoning the "one China" policy is not the only threat he is throwing Beijing's way — he has also made much of a possible 45 percent tariff on Chinese goods that could well trigger a trade war that Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) would be keen to avoid. There are no winners in war, only casualties, and Xi would also have to contend with increased economic problems that such a conflict would cause. The distraction this would create might even benefit Taiwan.

Nevertheless, concerns have been voiced over whether Trump's approach to foreign affairs and security might actually benefit China, which is being more assertive in Asia, and even challenge the US-led international order maintained by his predecessors. Will Trump decide to cash in the Taiwan "bargaining chip"? The government will have to make him understand why it would not be in the US' best interests to do so.

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