

## Taiwan must focus on 'hard power'

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The US House of Representatives earlier this month unanimously passed the Taiwan Travel Act, which stipulates that the US government should encourage US-Taiwan visits at all levels. It is no surprise that Beijing is not happy about this development, but for the act to become law, it needs to be passed by the US Senate and then signed by US President Donald Trump.

The Senate's version of act was proposed in May last year. The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2018 signed by Trump suggested naval port of call exchanges between the US and Taiwan, leading the Chinese ambassador to the US to warn: If a US warship arrives in Taiwan, China will activate its "Anti-Secession" Law.

As China becomes increasingly powerful, it is reacting to US shows of friendliness toward Taiwan, politically and militarily. However, going from this to suggesting there is in any way a "normalization" of Taiwan-US relations is going too far.

Having evolved from a one-party state to "one-man rule," Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) threat to Taiwan has also become even more serious. Xi has carried out a sustained campaign to remove his political enemies, such as the life imprisonment of disgraced official Bo Xilai (薄熙来), whose father, Bo Yibo (薄一波), was executed by former Chinese president Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) and former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝); Sun Zhengcai (孙政才), who was once tipped to become a member of the party's top leadership, being stripped of Chinese Communist Party membership and removed from office; and the arrest of Wen Yunsong (文云松), Wen Jiabao's son.

It is apparent that the joint leadership and fixed-term appointment system from the eras of former Chinese leaders Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), Jiang Zemin (江泽民) and Hu has become an empty shell, and a new dictatorship has emerged.

New authority, new state strength and new science and technology have pushed China's levels of state violence to a new historic high. Democracy activist, dissident and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波) died in custody and his wife, Liu Xia (刘霞), has yet to be freed.

The special message that Xi sends to Western nations is that China has its own specific

situation and will not accept the “universal values” espoused by the Western world. Will China become the modern version of the “yellow peril?”

Its newly gained national strength enables China to continuously pressure neighboring nations — including Taiwan — using force and economic strategies. Of all these nations, Taiwan bears the brunt, as China regards Taiwan as the strategic breaching point in the first island chain to break out to the Pacific Ocean.

During former president Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) terms, Taiwan not only willingly cooperated with the rise of China’s hegemony, allowing China’s political and economic influence in, but also readily played a minor and subordinate role for Beijing in the international dispute over the South China Sea and Diaoyutai Islands (釣台). Even on the international stage, Taiwan was content to be seen as some kind of vassal state.

However, nothing can be taken for granted in politics, and the Taiwanese electorate reacted to Ma’s pro-China trajectory in 2016, when for the first time, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lost the presidency and its legislative majority, and is still showing little sign of recovery from this rout.

China’s strategic collision in the Asia-Pacific region has triggered the strategic reform of the Indo-Pacific region.

Taiwan, in the geopolitical transition led by the US extending from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, remains an indispensable piece of the jigsaw puzzle.

Over the past few years, and especially since Trump took office, the US has increasingly emphasized increased independence for Taiwan, in the sense that it has developed new interpretations of how the Taiwan Relations Act and the “six assurances” might be implemented. For Taiwan, this is certainly a positive development.

That said, Taiwanese must be aware of the bigger picture — the rise of China’s hegemony, which has obliged the US to act out of its own interests and look for a strategy to balance

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Beijing's power. This is something entirely different from the discourse on "Taiwan independence."

Over the past 20 years or so, Taiwan's comprehensive national strength has been slowing and its "hard power" — the economy, diplomacy and national defense — has trailed China's.

If Taiwan continues to fall behind, the US, under Trump's "America first" approach, is unlikely to offer any blank checks. Therefore, Taiwan needs to have sufficient "hard power" to be able to develop a closer partnership with the US.

During the Cold War, Western democracies saw Taiwan's main function as a front line for containing the expansion of communist forces, providing a military alliance in practical terms while symbolically being a poster boy for Asian democracy. Now that the Cold War is over and globalization has won, the value of democracy has gradually been replaced by market forces.

Western rhetoric on China is all about markets and factories; urging a democratic evolution in China is no longer the main theme. Therefore, although nobody denies the value of having a thriving democracy in post-Cold War Taiwan, the market value of democracy has changed.

Only in the military sense, due to the strategic collision of China's rising hegemony, does Taiwan still have value. As former US general Douglas MacArthur said: With Taiwan as an unsinkable aircraft carrier, US power in the region is immeasurably enhanced. From a pivot to the Asia-Pacific to a free Indo-Pacific, Taiwan's military role has been given a more pragmatic emphasis than democracy.

Therefore, Taiwan needs to reinforce its democracy and rule of law, and avoid infiltration of its democratic system. At the same time, facing China's assaults, Taiwan needs to secure its economy and the livelihoods of its people through economic growth and a fairer distribution of wealth.

As for free trade with other nations, Taiwan must rationally calculate what it wants and what to give — economic rationality must not be subjugated to populist policies, making it even more

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difficult to extract Taiwanese from China's prodigious economic influence.

Equally pressing for Taiwan is to play its role as a military ally — taking national defense as its hardest power, so that it can be connected to a collective security system to resist its powerful rival across the Taiwan Strait.

From the Taiwan Relations Act to the National Defense Authorization Act, Taiwan's strategic position has been made visibly clearer by the US: Reinforce its ability to act for itself, with military assistance, to safeguard the common interests of Taiwan and the US. This is not only leverage for Taiwan, but also space for making itself more independent in practical terms.

Translated by Lin Lee-kai

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