

Revamping Taiwan-US relations

Written by Parris Chang 蕭蕭

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On June 12, when the world was transfixed on the summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore, a major ceremony was taking place in Taipei to mark the opening of a new diplomatic complex of great geopolitical significance. Occupying 6.5 hectares, with a cost of US\$225 million, the new five-story American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) is the biggest diplomatic compound in Asia, bigger even than the US embassy in Beijing.

An official US government delegation, headed by US Assistant Secretary of State Marie Royce, took part in the ceremony.

“The AIT’s new home is both a tangible symbol that reflects the strength of our ties and a state-of-the-art facility that will make possible even greater cooperation for years to come,” Royce said at the ceremony, which was attended by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九).

In her capacity as a senior US Department of State official, Royce added: “As free and open democracies, we have an obligation to work with one another to defend our values and protect our joint interest.”

Almost 40 years have elapsed since then-US president Jimmy Carter normalized relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), severed diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (ROC) and terminated the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty in 1979.

However, the US Congress provided staunch bipartisan support to Taiwan and enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) over Carter’s objection and amid China’s protests.

The TRA contains provisions committing the US to Taiwan’s security and restoring a semblance of sovereignty to Taiwan’s status. It authorizes the US to provide Taiwan with “such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary” for national defense and declares an intention to “resist any resort of force” against Taiwanese.

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However, in a joint communique with China in August 1982, then-US secretary of state Alexander Haig accepted Beijing's demands to freeze the quality and quantity of weaponry Taiwan could purchase and gradually reduce arms sales to Taiwan. The communique was a direct contravention of the TRA and made huge concessions to the PRC.

An outraged then-US president Ronald Reagan forced Haig to step down and took actions to reassure Taiwan.

Through then-AIT director James Lilley, Reagan conveyed to then-president Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) the "six assurances" that the US would not terminate arms sales to Taiwan, would not consult with the PRC on arms sales, would not undertake the role of mediator between Taiwan and China, would not pressure Taiwan to negotiate with China, would not revise the TRA and would not change its position regarding Taiwan's sovereignty — namely, the US would not accept China's claim over Taiwan.

To appease the PRC, US administrations were unable and/or unwilling to faithfully implement the provisions of the TRA and the "six assurances."

The first Taiwan Policy Review under then-US president Bill Clinton in 1994, which initiated a new policy not to support Taiwan's membership in any state-based international organization, also contradicted the TRA.

According to Section 4(D) of the TRA: "Nothing in this act may be construed as a basis for supporting the exclusion or expulsion of Taiwan from ... any international organization."

Critics have characterized former US president Barack Obama's policy toward Taiwan as "benign neglect."

The government made several requests for advanced US fighter planes and other weapons systems as the balance of military power tilted considerably to China, and concerned members of US Congress loudly echoed such requests, but all to no avail.

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It was in this context that both chambers of US Congress passed a concurrent resolution in the middle of 2016 to reaffirm that the TRA and the “six assurances” are the cornerstones of Taiwan-US relations.

In July 2016, the Republican National Convention included for the first time the “six assurances” in its official platform. Calling Taiwan a “loyal friend of America,” the 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 organizations.

Taiwan became a thorny issue almost from the beginning of the Trump presidency when Tsai made a congratulatory telephone call to the president-elect on Dec. 2, 2016, enraging the PRC leadership.

After less than six months in office, Trump announced his US\$1.4 billion arms sales package to Taiwan. During a state visit to China in November last year, Trump told his host, Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平), that in accordance with the TRA, the US would continue to provide Taiwan with defensive weapons.

Xi was then shocked when Trump, without any warning, unveiled his US National Security Strategy report on Dec. 18 last year, which identifies the PRC as the US’ principal threat and rival.

The report also said that the US intends to “maintain our strong ties to Taiwan in accordance with our one China policy, including our commitments under the TRA to provide for Taiwan’s legitimate defense needs and deter coercion.”

Trump’s security experts have closely monitored China’s military expansion in the Indo-Pacific region, its militarization of the South China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative and Xi’s “China Dream” to build a world-class military that can fight and defeat the US.

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The Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, which was announced in January, has devised ways and means, including the Indo-Pacific strategy, to contain and counter China. The strategy seeks to forge a broad alliance, a US-led coalition of Asian democracies that includes Japan, India and Australia at the outset, and then enlist Taiwan and partners from ASEAN.

Beijing strongly resents the warming relations between Taiwan and the US, and accuses Washington of "playing the Taiwan card," which it claims harms its core interest.

China has dispatched its warplanes and warships to encircle Taiwan in an effort to intimidate and threaten the nation.

From the US perspective, the Taiwan Travel Act, which Trump signed into law in March, and the Taiwan-friendly provisions in the US National Defense Authorization Acts are reactive and preventive defense measures responding to China's provocations and threats.

In a visit to Beijing in June, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis was candid and emphatic in his talks with Xi that the US is ready to confront the Chinese threat if necessary.

A free, democratic and secure Taiwan is in the best strategic interest of the US, Japan and other US allies in Asia.

The US Congress, in accordance with the TRA, should adopt a resolution to authorize the president to use all means necessary to defend Taiwan.

As the US sees Taiwan as a beacon of democracy and freedom in Asia, it is time for the Trump administration to conduct a new Taiwan policy review and reset Taiwan-US relations.

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