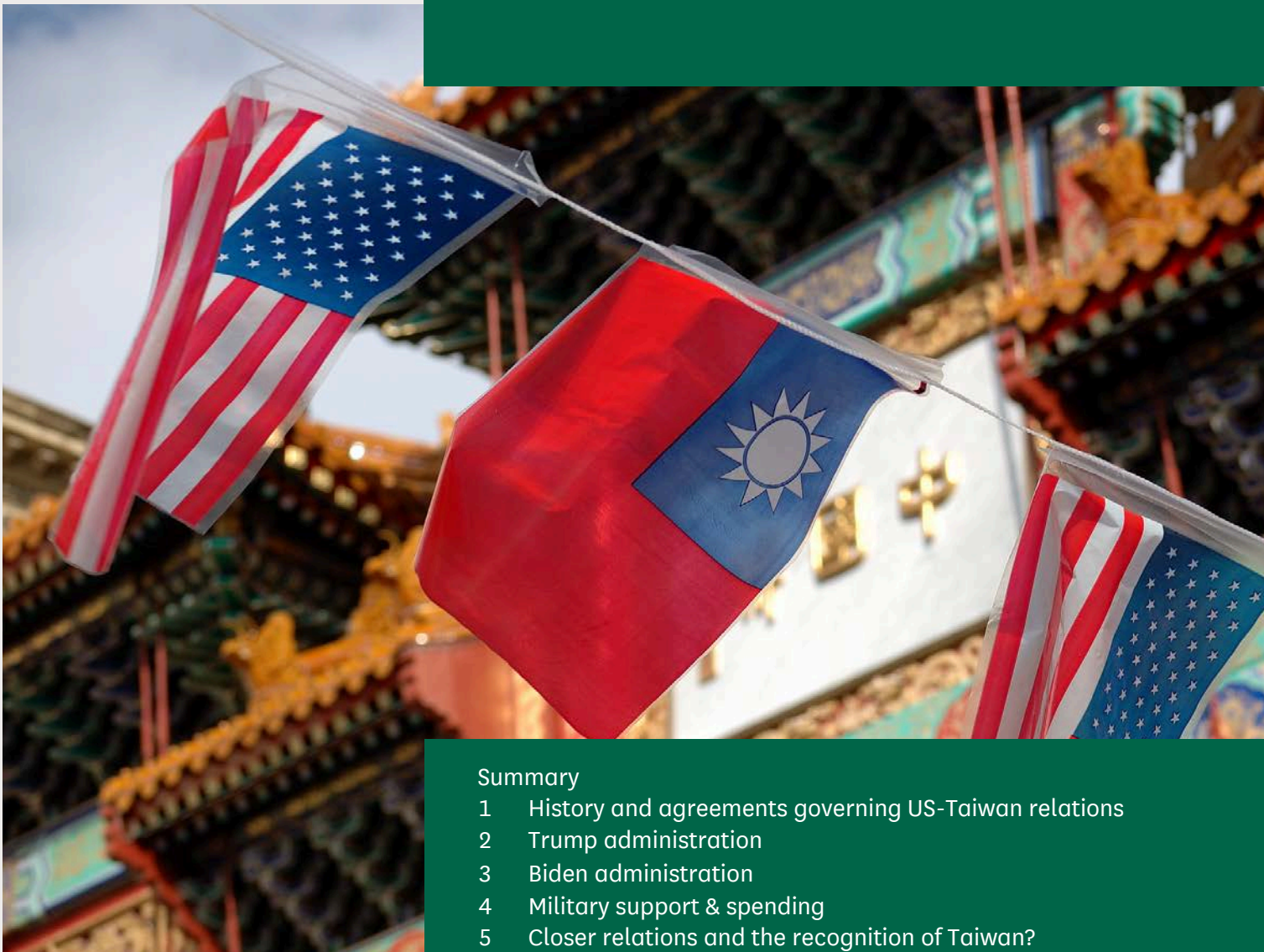


By John Curtis

24 June 2021

Taiwan: Relations with the United States



Summary

- 1 History and agreements governing US-Taiwan relations
- 2 Trump administration
- 3 Biden administration
- 4 Military support & spending
- 5 Closer relations and the recognition of Taiwan?

Image Credits

Taiwan-US-flags by Photo Phiend. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing [‘Legal help: where to go and how to pay’](#) for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Contents

Summary	5
1 History and agreements governing US-Taiwan relations	7
1.1 1945 to 1972	7
1.2 Nixon and the Joint Shanghai Communiqué	7
1.3 1979 recognition of PRC and ROC relationship becomes unofficial	8
1979 Second Joint Communiqué	9
1.4 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)	9
1.5 The Third Joint Communiqué and Reagan’s “six assurances”	10
1.6 What do all these documents mean when taken together?	12
2 Trump administration	13
2.1 2016-19 Trump increases engagement	13
2.2 2020 visits by administration officials	14
2.3 2021 Pompeo lifts State Department restrictions	15
3 Biden administration	17
Taiwan official invited to inauguration	17
US Cabinet nominees stress support for Taiwan	17
Support for Taiwan emphasised after Chinese military incursions	17
Unofficial US delegation visits island	18
State Department largely continues with Trump policy	18
Trade talks	19
4 Military support & spending	20
4.1 Military support	20
4.2 Freedom of navigation operations	21
5 Closer relations and the recognition of Taiwan?	22

Closer relations	22
Clarifying US support	23
Recognition of Taiwan	24

Summary

The United States' relationship with Taiwan is intertwined with its relationship to China.

The US is Taiwan's most important ally, and its most effective bulwark against Chinese diplomatic and military pressure.

The US was one of the Republic of China's (ROC's) principal backers during and after the Chinese Civil War. It refused to recognise the People Republic of China (PRC). However, as part of President Nixon's policy of "[détente](#)" during the Cold War, the US sought to normalise relations with China. This policy came to fruition in 1979 when President Jimmy Carter established full diplomatic relations with the PRC and terminated its formal diplomatic relations with the ROC/Taiwan.

The relationship between Taiwan and the US is regulated by three joint communiqués it agreed with China, in 1972, 1979 & 1982, the Taiwan Relations Act passed by Congress in 1979, and "six guarantees" President Reagan made to the government in Taipei in the 1980s. Taken together these documents maintain an over-arching policy of what is often called "strategic ambiguity" towards Taiwan.

"Strategic ambiguity" sees the U.S acknowledging the PRC's "One China" policy, without actively endorsing it, and stating it wishes to help find a peaceful solution between China and Taiwan. The US continues to sell arms to Taiwan, and Washington commits to "maintain the capacity... to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardise the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan".

The US is not obliged to come to the defence of Taiwan, should it be attacked. The strategy aims to dissuade Taiwan from declaring formal independence and the PRC from using direct force against the island to achieve "reunification".

Under President Trump US policy towards Taiwan became less ambiguous and more overtly supportive. This is in large part due to the deteriorating relations between China and America. Mr Trump increased military support to Taiwan including naval operations in the Taiwan Strait, sent senior officials to the island, and his Secretary of State relaxed restrictions on US diplomats and Taipei representatives.

The new administration of President Biden has largely continued with President Trump's closer relationship with Taiwan, continuing naval

operations in the Taiwan Strait, and further relaxing policies on meetings between officials.

1 History and agreements governing US-Taiwan relations

1.1 1945 to 1972

After the Second World War, the US supported the return of the island of Formosa, as Taiwan was then known, from Japan, who had ruled the province since 1895, to the Republic of China.

In December 1949 the US Embassy to the ROC was moved to Taipei, Taiwan's capital, in response to the ROC's move there in retreat from the Chinese Communist forces on the mainland.

The US refused to recognise or establish relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) after it was established in October 1949. The United States continued to recognize the ROC government located on Taiwan as the legitimate government of China and maintained diplomatic relations only with the ROC.¹

1.2 Nixon and the Joint Shanghai Communiqué

The next significant change came in 1972 when the US President Richard Nixon started to pursue closer relations with the PRC. Mr Nixon visited the PRC in February 1972, and at the end of his visit the two countries released a [Joint Communiqué](#) setting out their intention to normalise relations.

The Communiqué also set out the US and China's policy positions towards many of the countries and regions in Asia, including Taiwan. The Chinese side reaffirmed its position that Taiwan is an integral part of China:

The Taiwan question is the crucial question obstructing the normalization of relations between China and the United States; the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government of China; Taiwan is a province of China which has long been returned to the motherland; the liberation of Taiwan is China's

¹ US State Department: Office of the Historian, '[A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: China](#)', accessed 19 January 2021.

internal affair in which no other country has the right to interfere; and all US forces and military installations must be withdrawn from Taiwan. The Chinese government firmly opposes any activities which aim at the creation of “one China, or one Taiwan,” “one China, two governments,” “two Chinas,” and “independent Taiwan,” or advocate that the status of Taiwan remains to be determined.²

The US responded with its own formulation of a “one China” policy:

The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. With this prospect in mind, it affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all US forces and military installations on Taiwan as the tension in the area diminishes.³

In 1973 both the US and China established Liaison offices in each other’s countries to handle relations, but stopped short of formal diplomatic recognition.

1.3 1979 recognition of PRC and ROC relationship becomes unofficial

The Carter Administration recognised the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China on 1 January 1979. On the same day, the United States withdrew its recognition of, and terminated diplomatic relations with, the Republic of China as the government of China. This included abrogating the [1954 mutual defence treaty](#) signed between the US and the ROC. The US embassy in Taipei was closed in February 1979.⁴ All of its military bases on the island were also closed.

Since then, relations between the US and Taiwan have been “unofficial”.⁵

² American Institute in Taiwan, ‘[US-PRC Joint Communiqué \(1972\)](#)’, accessed 1 June 2021.

³ Ibid.

⁴ US State Department: Office of the Historian, ‘[A Guide to the United States’ History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: China](#)’, accessed 19 January 2021. .

⁵ Congressional Research Service, ‘[Taiwan: Political and Security Issues](#)’, 4 January 2021.

1979 Second Joint Communiqué

A [second joint communiqué](#) from the US and China was released just before the establishment of relations, which set out how the US would work with Taiwan in the future:

The United States of America recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.⁶

It also set out that “the government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China”.

The acknowledgement of China's “One China” position in both communiqués, is not the same as endorsing it. The US has used this ambiguity as a way to navigate diplomacy between itself China and Taiwan over the last several decades.

1.4

Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)

Also in 1979 the US Congress passed the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) (TRA) which provides a legal basis for this unofficial bilateral relationship as well as commitments to Taiwan's security. The TRA has three significant elements.

Firstly, it established the “American Institute in Taiwan” as a not for profit body to maintain US-Taiwan ties in place of the Embassy.

Secondly, it set out policies on providing arms stating that it is US policy:

- “to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character”;
- “to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan”; and
- That the President and Congress “shall determine the nature and quantity of such defense [sic] articles and services based solely upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan”.

⁶ American Institute in Taiwan, '[Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China \(Normalization Communiqué\) January 1, 1979](#)', accessed 1 June 2021.

The TRA is sometimes wrongly said to mandate that the US must provide arms to Taiwan and defend it should it be attacked. The Act does neither.

Thirdly, the TRA set out policy on threats to Taiwan and its defence:

- it directs the President to “inform the Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people on Taiwan”; and that
- “The President and the Congress shall determine, in accordance with constitutional processes, appropriate action by the United States in response to any such danger”.

The TRA is sometimes wrongly said to mandate that the US must provide arms to Taiwan and defend it should it be attacked. The Act does neither. It is commonly accepted, however, that the TRA is a strong political commitment to Taiwan and its autonomy.

1.5

The Third Joint Communiqué and Reagan’s “six assurances”

Third Joint Communiqué

The [Third Joint Communiqué](#), published in August 1982, once again saw the US “acknowledge” the PRC’s “One China” policy, and that it recognised the PRC as the “the sole legal government of China”.⁷

The issue of arms sales to Taiwan by the US was not fully settled in negotiations between the Reagan administration and the PRC. This lack of agreement is acknowledged in the Communiqué. However, the document also saw the U.S agree to longer term policy aims on the issue, saying:

The United States Government states that it does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms, the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China.⁸

and “that it intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution”.

⁷ American Institute in Taiwan, ‘[US-PRC Joint Communiqué \(1982\)](#)’, accessed 1 June 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

Six assurances

While negotiating the third Joint Communique with the PRC, the U.S sought to reassure Taiwan by clarifying the policy embodied in the TRA into a six-point explanation, that became to be known as the “six assurances”.

The assurances are not law and are non-binding on the Executive branch (the Presidency). But they have become an integral part of US policy towards the island, and Congress has passed legislation and resolutions making reference to them, including [a resolution](#) in 2016 saying the TRA and assurances are a “cornerstone” U.S relations with Taiwan, and urging the President and State Department to “affirm the Six Assurances publicly, proactively, and consistently”.

A senior Reagan Administration official included language from the assurances in his testimony before Congress in 1982, on the day of the third communiqué’s release, but successive administrations kept the precise text of the assurances classified, “creating lingering uncertainties about their content”.⁹

The Trump administration declassified the relevant documents in 2019, showing that there were different formulations, one that was conveyed to Taipei for their personal consumption, and another that they authorised Taipei to make public.¹⁰

The version Taipei was authorised by the Reagan administration reads as follows:

The United States:

1. has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan;
2. has not agreed to hold prior consultations with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan;
3. will not play any mediation role between Taipei and Beijing;
4. has not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act;
5. has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan;
6. will not exert pressure on Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC.

⁹ Congressional Research Service, ‘[President Reagan’s Six Assurances to Taiwan](#)’, 8 October 2020.

¹⁰ For the precise text of the different version see Table One in Congressional Research Service, ‘[President Reagan’s Six Assurances to Taiwan](#)’, 8 October 2020.

Officials in the administrations of Presidents George W Bush and Barack Obama both reaffirmed these assurances to Taiwan.¹¹

1.6 What do all these documents mean when taken together?

The United States has its own “one China” policy separate to the PRC’s “one China” principle and position on Taiwan’s status. It neither explicitly recognises the PRC’s claim over Taiwan, nor Taiwan as a sovereign state. The United States makes clear that the island’s status must be settled in a peaceful manner between the PRC and Taiwan.¹²

In short, the Congressional Research Service states “US policy focuses on the process of resolution of the Taiwan question, not any set outcome”.¹³

The US supports providing arms to Taiwan to help it resist force, maintain its security and stop it from being coerced to change its way of life. It leaves open the possibility of supporting Taiwan should it come under threat.

This policy maintains the US position of “strategic ambiguity”, allowing it to remain flexible, and to try and maintain relations with both the PRC and Taiwan, and to help prevent tensions over the Taiwan Strait from boiling over into full conflict.

This policy orthodoxy has come under pressure, however, as relations between China and the U.S have become more strained under the Trump and Biden administrations.

¹¹ Congressional Research Service, ‘[China/Taiwan: Evolution of the “One China” Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei](#)’, October 2014

¹² Congressional Research Service, ‘[China/Taiwan: Evolution of the “One China” Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei](#)’, 10 October 2014.

¹³ Ibid.

2 Trump administration

2.1 2016-19 Trump increases engagement

Trump congratulates Tsai Ing-wen

President Trump immediately signalled that he was charting a new path in US-Taiwan relations, when a few weeks after his election he spoke over the phone with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. It was reported that this was the first time a President or President-elect had spoken directly with a Taiwanese leader since at least 1979.¹⁴

In response to the call the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it opposed any official interaction or military contact between the US and Taiwan. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the conversation between Mr Trump and Ms Tsai was "just a petty trick by Taiwan" that he believed would not change US policy toward China:

The One China policy is the cornerstone of the healthy development of China-US relations and we hope this political foundation will not be interfered with or damaged.¹⁵

US upgrades de facto embassy

In 2018, the United States unveiled \$250 million worth of upgrades to the American Institute in Taiwan, its de facto embassy in Taipei. A dedication ceremony was held for a new building which was attended by President Tsai, and from the US Marie Royce, the then US assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, and Congressman Mark Harper.

China lodged a protest with the US over the ceremony. A spokesperson for China's foreign ministry was quoted as saying:

I must point out that the US, by sending officials to Taiwan under whatever pretext, severely violates the one-China principle and three

¹⁴ ['Trump Speaks With Taiwan's Leader, an Affront to China'](#), New York Times, 2 December 2016.

¹⁵ ['Trump-Taiwan call breaks US policy stance'](#), BBC News, 3 December 2016.

China-US joint communiqués, interferes in China's internal affairs and exerts negative impact on China-US relations.¹⁶

2.2

2020 visits by administration officials

In 2020 President Trump's administration dispatched several senior civilian and military officials to the island, ramping up tensions with China.

In August 2020, then US Secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, became the first Cabinet-level official to visit Taiwan since 2014. The official purpose of Mr Azar's visit was to discuss coronavirus prevention measures, but the visit was interpreted to be a "highly symbolic show of support" by the Trump administration for Taipei.¹⁷

In September 2020, Keith Krach, the Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, was dispatched to represent the US at the memorial service for former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui. Paying tribute to Lee would likely upset China, as he was associated with a period of Taiwan pushing for greater autonomy. Yinan He, an associate professor at the Department of International Relations at Lehigh University, said of Lee and the visit by Mr Krach:

That makes him [Lee] No. 1 or No. 2 most-hated person on Beijing's list for Taiwan. So by paying tribute to this person the Trump administration is really poking Beijing in the eye.¹⁸

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Wang Wenbin reacted to the news of Krach's visit by saying that the US and Taiwan must "immediately stop" official exchanges. "China firmly opposes any form of official exchanges between the United States and Taiwan. This position is consistent and clear," added Wang.¹⁹

At the end of November 2020, it was [reported that](#) US Navy Rear Admiral Michael Studeman, who oversees US military intelligence in the Asia-Pacific region, made an unannounced visit to the island.

In January 2021, in the final weeks of the Trump administration, a visit was planned for the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Kelly Craft. It was reported that Ms Craft's trip appeared to be another part of an effort by

¹⁶ ['De Facto US Embassy In Taiwan Dedicating New Complex — Over Chinese Objections'](#), NPR, 12 June 2018.

¹⁷ ['US holds its second high-profile visit to Taiwan in two months as Beijing escalates military pressure'](#), CNN, 18 September 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

President Trump’s administration to “lock in a tough approach to China” before Joe Biden took office on 20 January.²⁰

However, on 12 January, a day before Ms Craft’s scheduled visit then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, said that all travel by officials that week including his own trip to Europe had been cancelled as part of the transition to the incoming Biden administration.

Taiwan’s government expressed “understanding and respect” for the decision, but also regret.²¹ President Trump’s policies of strengthening links with Taiwan earned him popular support on the island.²²

1 Visits by Cabinet-Rank Officials to Taiwan After 1979²³

- 1992: US Trade Representative (USTR), Carla Hills
- 1994: Secretary of Transportation, Federico Pena
- 1996: Small Business Administrator, Phil Lader
- 1998: Secretary of Energy, Bill Richardson
- 2000: Secretary of Transportation, Rodney Slater
- 2014: Environmental Protection Agency Administrator, Gina McCarthy
- 2020: (August) Health and Human Services Secretary, Alex Azar

2.3

2021 Pompeo lifts State Department restrictions

Another last-minute effort to change US-Taiwan policy was announced by Mr Pompeo on 9 January 2021. He announced that restrictions on meetings between US State Department Officials and their counterparts from Taiwan were to be relaxed.

These restrictions were said to have included Taiwanese officials not being able to enter the State Department, but instead having to meet at hotels.²⁴

²⁰ [‘US cancels U.N. envoy’s trip to Taiwan, citing Biden transition’](#), Reuters, 12 January 2020

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ This information is sourced from [‘China/Taiwan: Evolution of the “One China” Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei’](#), October 2014 Table 1; and [‘Factbox: Recent Taiwan visits by top US officials’](#), Reuters, 7 January 2021

²⁴ [‘Pompeo lifts restrictions on US-Taiwan relationship as clock runs out on Trump administration’](#), Reuters, 9 January 2020.

Following the announcement, Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu thanked Mr Pompeo, saying he was "grateful".²⁵ Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan's de facto ambassador in Washington, tweeted "Decades of discrimination, removed. A huge day in our bilateral relationship. I will cherish every opportunity".²⁶

China condemned the decision saying the island was "the most important" part of its relations with Washington. Zhao Lijian, foreign ministry spokesperson said, "any move that harms China's core interests will be met with China's resolute counter-strike".²⁷

Wu Xinbo, Dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, said Mr Pompeo's decision put the incoming Biden administration in an awkward position that will complicate reconciliation efforts.

"From the point of view of America's internal politics, it is actually just a way of leaving the Biden administration a big mess, to prevent him from quickly recovering and repairing relations with China".²⁸ However, the decision could be easily reversed by the Biden administration if they wished.

²⁵ ['Pompeo: US to lift restrictions on contacts with Taiwan'](#), BBC News, 10 January.

²⁶ ['Pompeo lifts restrictions on US-Taiwan relationship as clock runs out on Trump administration'](#), Reuters, 9 January 2020.

²⁷ ['China hits out at US move to elevate relations with Taiwan'](#), Financial Times, 11 January 2021.

²⁸ ['China hits out at US move to elevate relations with Taiwan'](#), Financial Times, 11 January 2021.

3

Biden administration

Taiwan official invited to inauguration

President Joe Biden's administration has so far signalled that it will largely pick up where the Trump administration left off.²⁹

One of its earliest signs of support for Taiwan was that it chose to invite Taiwan's representative in the United States, Bi-khim Hsiao, to President Biden's inauguration. It was reported that this was the first time since the US broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1979 that its Government's representative was formally invited to a presidential inauguration.³⁰

US Cabinet nominees stress support for Taiwan

Both Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense [sic] Lloyd Austin underscored their support for Taiwan during their confirmation hearings before the US Senate. Mr Blinken stated the US commitment to providing Taiwan with the capabilities it needs to defend itself "will absolutely endure in a Biden administration," noted he "would also like to see Taiwan playing a greater role around the world," and that "the commitment to Taiwan is something that we hold to very strongly".³¹ On State Department policies on meetings between US and Taiwanese officials he said that he wanted to create "more space for contacts".³²

Mr Austin said US "support to Taiwan has been rock solid over the years" and he would "make sure that we're living up to our commitments to support Taiwan's ability to defend itself".³³

Support for Taiwan emphasised after Chinese military incursions

Chinese jets entered Taiwan's air defence identification zone a few days after President Biden took office. The State Department released a [statement](#) on 23

²⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, '[Biden Administration Sends Important Signals for the Future of US-Taiwan Ties](#)', 29 January 2021.

³⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, '[Biden Administration Sends Important Signals for the Future of US-Taiwan Ties](#)', 29 January 2021.

³¹ Ibid.

³² '[US to make it easier for diplomats to meet Taiwanese officials](#)', Financial Times, 30 March 2021.

³³ Council on Foreign Relations, '[Biden Administration Sends Important Signals for the Future of US-Taiwan Ties](#)', 29 January 2021.

January saying that it noted “with concern” China’s “attempts to intimidate its neighbours, including Taiwan”.³⁴ It urged Beijing to “cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan’s democratically elected representatives”. The statement said the US’ commitment to Taiwan is “rock-solid”.

The Statement also said the US maintains its “longstanding commitments as outlined in the Three Communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act, and the Six Assurances”.

Unofficial US delegation visits island

In April 2021 an unofficial delegation of three former US politicians visited the island: former US Senator Chris Dodd and former Deputy Secretaries of State Richard Armitage and James Steinberg. They were said to have visited at President Biden’s request and a White House official reportedly described the visit as a “personal signal” of the President’s commitment to Taiwan. All three men are said to be close friends of the President.³⁵

Asked about future official-level contacts with Taiwan, a State Department official said: “We don’t have specific plans at this time, for particular travel, but... I certainly do expect for us to be having engagements and travel consistent with our one-China policy”.³⁶

State Department largely continues with Trump policy

In April, the US State Department also issued new guidelines on meetings between US officials and officials from Taiwan. State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement, that the new guidelines would “liberalize [sic] guidance on contacts with Taiwan, consistent with our unofficial relations”.³⁷ Mr Price said the aim of the guidelines was “to encourage US government engagement with Taiwan that reflects our deepening unofficial relationship”.³⁸

In practice, these guidelines mean that working-level meetings with Taiwanese officials are now encouraged in federal buildings and could also take place at Taiwan’s representative office. However, the guidelines are also said to contain some “guard rails,” such as not allowing officials to attend

³⁴ US Department of State Press Statement, ‘[PRC Military Pressure Against Taiwan Threatens Regional Peace and Stability](#)’, 23 January 2021.

³⁵ ‘Biden sends unofficial delegation to Taiwan in ‘personal signal’’, 13 April 2013.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ ‘[US issues guidelines to deepen relations with Taiwan](#)’, Reuters, 9 April 2021.

³⁸ Ibid.

functions at Taiwan's office during major Taiwanese holidays "that might complicate the US "One-China" policy".³⁹

Trade talks

In June, Anthony Blinken suggested that the US might be ready to resume trade and investment talks with Taiwan, that had been stalled since the Obama administration. But it appears that these may not result in the full-scale trade agreement that Taiwan has been seeking.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ ['Blinken signals possible resumption of US-Taiwan trade, investment talks'](#), Reuters, 7 June 2021.

4 Military support & spending

4.1 Military support

Despite ending its mutual defence pact when it broke off official relations in 1979, the US has continued to provide arms sales to Taiwan, as set out in the Taiwan Relations Act.

Although some other countries such as France have provided weapons to Taiwan over the last few decades, the US is by far the biggest provider of arms to Taiwan.⁴¹

Sales in the two Presidential administrations before President Trumps were broadly similar. Around \$16 billion in arms were provided to Taiwan during George W Bush's two terms, and \$14 billion during Barack Obama's two terms.⁴²

Trump administration sales

In the first two years of Trump's Presidency, arms sales to Taiwan were fairly modest, around \$1 billion in 2017, and \$330 million in 2018. However, in the last two years of his administration sales jumped, with \$11 billion in 2019 and \$6 billion in 2020, so more than \$18 billion in total over his term of office.⁴³

Significant sales included:

- 100 M1A2 Abrams [main battle tanks](#);
- Stinger missiles (a portable air-defence system);
- 135 precision-guided [cruise missiles](#);
- [Harpoon anti-ship missiles](#); and
- An upgrade to its [Patriot Surface-to-Air missiles](#) (to which China responded by placing sanctions on the manufacturer Lockheed Martin).⁴⁴

⁴¹ 'Is Taiwan Looking to Diversify Its Defense Partnerships?', The Diplomat, 20 May 2020.

⁴² See Council on Foreign Relations, 'Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense', 10 May 2021; and US-Taiwan Defense And Security, [Taiwan Arms Sales Notified to Congress, 1990-2020](#), accessed 01 June 2021.

⁴³ Council on Foreign Relations, 'Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense', 10 May 2021.

⁴⁴ 'China will sanction Lockheed Martin over arms sales to Taiwan', CNN, 14 July 2020

Most significantly for Taiwan, Mr Trump's administration [agreed to provide](#) F-16 fighter aircraft for the first time since 1992. Taiwan has desperately wanted to replenish its aging fleet of F-16s, the sale of these weapons required Congressional approval. The sale of 66 of the aircraft was approved with strong bipartisan backing. In 2011 the Obama administration had decided against providing the fighters to Taiwan, reportedly to avoid antagonising China, agreeing instead to help refurbish the old fleet.⁴⁵

Biden administration first sale

In April 2021 it was reported that the first arms sale to Taiwan under the Biden administration will include 40 self-propelled howitzers (artillery). The sale started being negotiated under the Trump administration.⁴⁶

4.2

Freedom of navigation operations

The Trump administration increased the frequency of the US Navy's [freedom of navigation operations](#) (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, and through the Taiwan Strait in particular. According to the Council for Foreign Relations, during the Obama administration passages through the Taiwan Strait by the US Navy would occur "one to three times per year".⁴⁷ At the beginning 2019, US ships sailed through the Strait three months in a row.⁴⁸

Although not directly comparable, as not all the voyages would have passed through the Taiwan Strait, a spokesman told VOA news that there were five FONOPs operations in the South China Sea in each of the years 2017 and 2018, and that increased to ten times in 2019 and ten times in 2020.⁴⁹

The pace of operations has kept up under the new Biden administration with five US warships, all Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers, passing through the Strait between 20 January and mid-May 2021.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ ['No New F-16's for Taiwan, but US to Upgrade Fleet'](#), New York Times, 18 September 2011.

⁴⁶ ['Joe Biden set to make his first arms sale to Taiwan'](#), The Times, 20 April 2021.

⁴⁷ Council for Foreign Relations, ['US Military Support for Taiwan: What's Changed Under Trump?'](#), 3 April 2019.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ ['Why Biden Sends Warships to the South China Sea, Just as Trump Did'](#), VOA News, 22 March 2021.

⁵⁰ ['US Navy ship sails through Taiwan Strait, 5th time under Biden'](#), Focus Taiwan, 19 May 2021.

5

Closer relations and the recognition of Taiwan?

Closer relations

Most analysts believe that closer relations between the US and Taiwan are here to stay. However, some have cautioned that the repercussions of this shift haven't been fully thought through.

Ryan Hass, Senior Fellow at the Brookings' Center For East Asia Policy Studies, argues that while those in the Trump administration may have thought that their steps to deepen relations with Taiwan came mostly "cost-free", and that Beijing would over time "grudgingly tolerate" the shift in US policy as long as they stopped short of establishing formal diplomatic relations, such judgements reflect a "callous disregard" of the fact that it is Taiwan, not the US that typically bears the brunt of Chinese retaliation.⁵¹ Hass warns that China has more tools to impose costs on Taipei than on Washington and is "more comfortable using them".

Hass believes that those responsible for US policy to Taiwan in the Biden administration are aware that "not all expressions of American support for Taiwan are helpful for Taiwan or healthy for US-Taiwan relations". He identifies "pragmatic" policy areas where he believes the new administration will want to further develop relations:

- Deepening technology policy coordination and enhancing supply chain security;
- strengthening Taiwan's economic and national security; and
- supporting Taiwan's efforts to garner dignity and respect on the world stage.

Not all analysts urge such caution. In April 2021 two retired US officials and diplomats who worked in East Asia, Chip Gregson and Stephen Young, and a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, Russell Hsiao, set out how they believe the Biden administration should deepen ties.

In their view the US and Taiwan should take further steps to enhance "extensive, close, and friendly commercial, cultural, and other relations", which

⁵¹ ['The path to protecting bipartisan US support for Taiwan'](#), Brookings, 25 January 2021.

would be consistent with the language of the Taiwan Relations Act.⁵² Specifically, they advocate:

- Developing a “co-ordinated messaging campaign” along with its allies and Taiwan, to counter the narrative that Taiwan has “no hope” in resisting China;
- Developing further economic links by continuing the newly launched Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue and “actively consider” pursuing a bilateral trade agreement with Taiwan;
- Creating “greater clarity and assurance of U.S. commitments to defend Taiwan”, which are critical for purposes of deterrence and stability.

They also advocate that the Biden administration, in close consultation with the US Congress, should review current policy toward Taiwan with “an eye toward strengthening the scope and breadth of the cooperative relationship – economically, politically, and militarily” and the review should include “an early signal that the United States will not tolerate threats or actions aimed at intimidating or attacking Taiwan”.

Gregson, Young and Hsiao, however, do acknowledge that “some ambiguity, strategic or otherwise”, will “always be present” in US Taiwan policy.

Clarifying US support

In September 2020, Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and David Sacks, a CFR Research Fellow, argued that the US should ditch its policy of strategic ambiguity as it is “unlikely to deter an increasingly assertive China with growing military capabilities”. Instead they advocate for a policy of “strategic clarity” that makes explicit that the US “would respond to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan”.⁵³

Haass and Sacks believe that this can be done in a way that is still consistent with the US “One-China” policy and that “minimizes the risk to US-Chinese relations”. Indeed, they argue that such a change should strengthen US-Chinese relations in the long term “by improving deterrence and reducing the chances of war in the Taiwan Strait, the likeliest site for a clash between the United States and China”.⁵⁴

However, Joshua Keating, writing in Slate magazine, suggests that the problem of a “strategic clarity” policy is that it would raise pressure on President Tsai Ing-wen from her party’s nationalist base to be bolder and pursue independence more aggressively.⁵⁵ Keating believes that the Biden

⁵² [‘How the Biden Administration Can Support Taiwan’](#), The Diplomat, 30 April 2021.

⁵³ [‘American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous: To Keep the Peace, Make Clear to China That Force Won’t Stand’](#), Foreign Affairs, 2 September 2020.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ [‘How Long Can the Biden Administration Stall a Crisis in Taiwan?’](#), Slate, 2 February 2021.

administration will seek to preserve the “strategic ambiguity” of its predecessors, even while it continues with the closer ties inherited from the Trump administration. But he notes that “geopolitics abhors ambiguity”, and that “sooner or later the US position will stop being sustainable”.

Recognition of Taiwan

The most radical way the US could deepen its relationship with Taiwan would be to formally recognise the Taipei government and re-establish full diplomatic ties.

There are a few advocates for the policy in [Washington](#) and [Taipei](#), but it is outside the mainstream of foreign policy thinkers and makers.

However, the deepening ties between Taiwan and the US have seen the idea being raised. Retired US Admiral James Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, wrote in September 2020 that there would be a “temptation” for whoever won the November US Presidential election to move closer to Taiwan and “even consider formally recognizing Taipei”.⁵⁶

Mr Stavridis warned that recognition would have “an explosive effect on the US-China relationship and could trigger a full-scale Chinese invasion of the island”. He also cautioned that events could then “easily spin out of control, leading to a US military response against any Chinese offensive action on Taiwan”.

⁵⁶ [‘What would happen if the US recognized Taiwan?’](#), Nikkei Asia, 25 September 2020.

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)