

Research Briefing

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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?

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Summary

Taiwan, or the Republic of China, as named in its constitution, is located in the South China Sea approximately 100 miles off the coast of mainland China.

There are 13 countries that recognise Taiwan as a state, which does not include the United States. The US is, however, an important ally and has in recent years become more openly supportive of Taiwan as its relationship with the People's Republic of China has soured.

This briefing looks at the history of the relationship between the US and Taiwan, the approach of recent administrations and US military support.

US, Taiwan and China history

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

The US is one of Taiwan's most important allies and its most effective bulwark against Chinese diplomatic and military pressure.

The Republic of China was the state founded in mainland China in 1912, and the US was one of its principal backers during and after the Chinese Civil War it fought against the Chinese Communist Party (CPC), on and off between 1927 and 1949.

After a CPC victory in 1949, the Republic of China government and its backers fled to Taiwan. In the same year the CPC formed the People's Republic of China, which was formed by the Communists in the same year and the US refused to recognise it.

US normalises relations with People's Republic of China

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 People's Republic of China and terminated its formal diplomatic relations with the Republic of China government in Taiwan.

US Taiwan policy and strategic ambiguity

The relationship between Taiwan and the US is regulated by three joint communiqués it agreed with China in 1972, 1979 and 1982, the Taiwan Relations Act passed by Congress in 1979, and “six guarantees” President Reagan made to the government in Taipei (Taiwan’s capital) in the 1980s.

Taken together these documents maintain an overarching policy of what is often called “strategic ambiguity” towards Taiwan.

“[Strategic ambiguity](#)” involves the US acknowledging the [People’s Republic of China’s ‘One China’ principle](#), 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 in the Taiwan Relations Act](#) 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”.

US military intervention policy

The US is not obliged to come to the defence of Taiwan, should it be attacked, and past administrations have not specified whether the US would intervene in such a situation. The strategy aims to dissuade Taiwan from declaring formal independence and the People’s Republic from using direct force against the island to achieve “reunification”.

President Trump’s policy

Under President Trump US policy towards Taiwan became less ambiguous and more overtly supportive.

This was 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 meetings between US diplomats and Taipei representatives.

Nancy Pelosi’s visit

A visit by the then Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan in August 2022, triggered a furious response from China [which](#)

[launched military exercises surrounding Taiwan](#) at a scale not seen since the [1995 to 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis](#).

President Biden's policy: Closer relations with Taiwan

President Biden's administration has maintained President Trump's policy of closer relations with Taiwan, continuing naval operations in the Taiwan Strait, and further relaxing policies on meetings between officials.

[On several occasions President Biden has stated the US would intervene militarily if China invaded Taiwan](#). Each time [his office has claimed there has been no change in official US policy](#), despite these comments seeming to make a commitment to come to Taiwan's defence, when previously there was none.

Further reading

For more on Taiwan see Library research briefings:

- [Taiwan: History, politics and UK relations](#)
- [Taiwan: Relations with China](#)

1 History and agreements governing US-Taiwan relations

1.1 1911 to 1945

In mainland China a revolution in 1911 brought down the Qing dynasty that had ruled the country since 1636. A new Republic of China was formed in 1912. One of the leaders of the 1911 revolution was Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China) and was briefly the Republic's President. In 1913, the United States was among the first countries to establish full diplomatic relations with the new Republic.¹

The Republic struggled to maintain control of China, with warlords taking over swathes of territory. Another challenge to its authority was the Communist Party of China, founded in 1921. Tensions between the Communists and the Kuomintang-led Republic of China Government led to the start of a civil war in 1927.

The US backed the Kuomintang-led government during the war.² In 1937 when Japan invaded mainland China, in a conflict called the Second Sino-Japanese War. The Kuomintang and the Communists agreed to a truce to both fight the Japanese forces.

1.2 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 Republic was moved to Taipei, Taiwan's capital, in response to the Republic of China'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 after it was established in October 1949. The United States continued to recognize the Republic of China government located on Taiwan as the

¹ Department of State: Office of the Historian, [The Chinese Revolution of 1911](#), (accessed 3 August 2023).

² C. Vinodan and Anju Lis Kurian, [US-China Relations in the 21st Century](#) [online], 2021, accessed on 3 August 2023, P14.

legitimate government of China and maintained diplomatic relations only with the Republic.³

1.3 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, known as its 'One China' principle (or sometimes, confusingly 'One China' policy):

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 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.⁴

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.⁵

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.

³ 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.

⁴ American Institute in Taiwan, "[US-PRC Joint Communiqué \(1972\)](#)", accessed 3 August 2023.

⁵ As above.

1.4

1979 recognition of the People's Republic of China and the US's relationships with the Republic of China becomes unofficial

The Carter Administration recognised the People's Republic of China 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 Republic. The US embassy in Taipei was closed in February 1979.⁶ All of its military bases on the island were also closed.

Since then, relations between the US and Taiwan have been “unofficial”.⁷

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.⁸

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”.⁹

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

⁶ 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 3 August 2023.

⁷ Congressional Research Service, “[Taiwan: Political and Security Issues](#)”, 4 January 2021.

⁸ 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 3 August 2023.

⁹ As above.

1.5

Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)

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

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 articles and services based solely upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan”.¹⁰
- 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”.¹¹

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.¹²

1.6

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 People's Republics 'One China' principle, and that it

¹⁰ Congress.Gov, [H.R.2479 – Taiwan Relations Act](#), accessed 3 August 2023.

¹¹ Congress.Gov, [H.R.2479 – Taiwan Relations Act](#), accessed 3 August 2023.

¹² See, for example, Brookings, Richard C Bush, “[The United States security partnership with Taiwan](#)”, 13 July 2016.

recognised the People's Republic of China as the "the sole legal government of China".¹³

The issue of arms sales to Taiwan by the US was not fully settled in negotiations between the Reagan administration and the People's Republic. This lack of agreement is acknowledged in the Communiqué. However, the US also agreed in the document 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.¹⁴

It also states that "it intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution".¹⁵

Six assurances

While negotiating the third Joint Communiqué with the People's Republic of China, the US sought to reassure Taiwan by clarifying the policy embodied in the TRA into a six-point explanation that became 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" of US relations with Taiwan, and urging the President and State Department to "affirm the Six Assurances publicly, proactively, and consistently".¹⁶

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".¹⁷

The Trump administration declassified the relevant documents in 2019, showing that there were different formulations, one that was conveyed to

¹³ American Institute in Taiwan, "[US-PRC Joint Communiqué \(1982\)](#)", accessed 3 August 2023.

¹⁴ As above.

¹⁵ As above.

¹⁶ Congress.Gov, "[H.Con.Res.88 - Reaffirming the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances as cornerstones of United States-Taiwan relations](#)", accessed 3 August 2023.

¹⁷ Congressional Research Service, "[President Reagan's Six Assurances to Taiwan](#)" (PDF), 8 October 2020.

Taipei for their personal consumption, and another that they authorised Taipei to make public.¹⁸

The public version 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 [People's Republic of China] 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.

Officials in the administrations of Presidents George W Bush and Barack Obama both reaffirmed these assurances to Taiwan.¹⁹

1.7

What do all these documents mean when taken together?

The United States has its own 'One China' policy separate to the People's Republic's 'One China' principle and position on Taiwan's status. It neither explicitly recognises the People Republic of China'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 People's Republic and Taiwan.²⁰

In short, the Congressional Research Service states "US policy focuses on the process of resolution of the Taiwan question, not any set outcome".²¹

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 People's

¹⁸ For the precise text of the different version see Table One in Congressional Research Service, "[President Reagan's Six Assurances to Taiwan](#)" (PDF), 8 October 2020.

¹⁹ Congressional Research Service, "[China/Taiwan: Evolution of the 'One China' Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei](#)" (PDF)", 10 October 2014.

²⁰ Congressional Research Service, "[China/Taiwan: Evolution of the 'One China' Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei](#)", 10 October 2014.

²¹ As above.

Republic of China 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 US have become more strained under the Trump and Biden administrations.

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 1979.²²

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.²³

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 China-US joint communiques, interferes in China's internal affairs and exerts negative impact on China-US relations.²⁴

²² [“Trump Speaks With Taiwan’s Leader, an Affront to China”](#), New York Times, 2 December 2016.

²³ [“Trump-Taiwan call breaks US policy stance”](#), BBC News, 3 December 2016.

²⁴ [“De Facto US Embassy In Taiwan Dedicates New Complex — Over Chinese Objections”](#), NPR, 12 June 2018.

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.²⁵

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 was considered likely to 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.²⁶

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson 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.²⁷

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.²⁸

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 President Trump’s administration to “lock in a tough approach to China” before Joe Biden took office on 20 January.²⁹

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

²⁵ [“US holds its second high-profile visit to Taiwan in two months as Beijing escalates military pressure”](#), CNN, 18 September 2020.

²⁶ As above.

²⁷ As above.

²⁸ [“US Navy admiral visits Taiwan as Trump admin solidifies ties before exit”](#), CNN, 23 November 2020.

²⁹ [“US cancels U.N. envoy's trip to Taiwan, citing Biden transition”](#), Reuters, 12 January 2020.

including his own trip to Europe had been cancelled as part of the transition to the incoming Biden administration.³⁰

Taiwan's government expressed "understanding and respect" for the decision, but also regret.³¹ President Trump's policies of strengthening links with Taiwan earned him popular support on the island.³²

1 Visits by US cabinet-rank officials to Taiwan after 1979³³

- 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: 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.³⁴

³⁰ ["US cancels ambassador's controversial trip to Taiwan"](#), AP, 13 January 2021.

³¹ ["US cancels U.N. envoy's trip to Taiwan, citing Biden transition"](#), Reuters, 12 January 2020.

³² As above.

³³ This information is sourced from Congressional Research Service, ["China/Taiwan: Evolution of the "One China" Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei"](#) (PDF), October 2014 Table 1; and ["Factbox: Recent Taiwan visits by top US officials"](#), Reuters, 7 January 2021.

³⁴ ["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”.³⁵ Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan’s de facto ambassador in Washington, said “Decades of discrimination, removed. A huge day in our bilateral relationship. I will cherish every opportunity”.³⁶

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”.³⁷

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.³⁸

However, the decision could have been reversed by the Biden administration if they wished.

³⁵ [“Pompeo: US to lift restrictions on contacts with Taiwan”](#), BBC News, 10 January.

³⁶ [“Pompeo lifts restrictions on US-Taiwan relationship as clock runs out on Trump administration”](#), Reuters, 9 January 2020.

³⁷ “China hits out at US move to elevate relations with Taiwan”, Financial Times, 11 January 2021

³⁸ “China hits out at US move to elevate relations with Taiwan”, Financial Times, 11 January 2021

3 Biden administration

3.1 Events of 2021

Taiwan official invited to inauguration

President Joe Biden signalled from the start of his administration that he would largely pick up where the Trump administration left off.³⁹

In an early sign of support for Taiwan he chose to invite Taiwan's representative in the United States, Bi-khim Hsiao, to his 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.⁴⁰

US Cabinet nominees stress support for Taiwan

Both Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense 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,” noting that 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”.⁴¹ On State Department policies on meetings between US and Taiwanese officials he said that he wanted to create “more space for contacts”.⁴²

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”.⁴³

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

³⁹ “[Biden Administration Sends Important Signals for the Future of US-Taiwan Ties](#)”, Council on Foreign Relations, 29 January 2021.

⁴⁰ As above.

⁴¹ As above

⁴² “US to make it easier for diplomats to meet Taiwanese officials”, Financial Times, 30 March 2021.

⁴³ “[Biden Administration Sends Important Signals for the Future of US-Taiwan Ties](#)”, Council on Foreign Relations, 29 January 2021.

January saying that it noted “with concern” China’s “attempts to intimidate its neighbours, including Taiwan”. 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”.⁴⁴

The Statement also said the US maintains its “longstanding commitments as outlined in the Three Communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act, and the Six Assurances”.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶

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”.⁴⁷

State Department largely continues with Trump policy

Also in April 2021, the US State Department issued new guidelines on meetings between US officials and officials from Taiwan. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement, that the new guidelines would “liberalise guidance on contacts with Taiwan, consistent with our unofficial relations”.⁴⁸ Mr Price said the aim of the guidelines was “to encourage US government engagement with Taiwan that reflects our deepening unofficial relationship”.⁴⁹

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 functions at Taiwan’s office during major Taiwanese holidays “that might complicate the US “One-China” policy”.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ US Department of State Press Statement, “[PRC Military Pressure Against Taiwan Threatens Regional Peace and Stability](#)”, 23 January 2021.

⁴⁵ As above.

⁴⁶ “[Biden sends unofficial delegation to Taiwan in ‘personal signal’](#)”, Reuters, 13 April 2021.

⁴⁷ As above.

⁴⁸ “[US issues guidelines to deepen relations with Taiwan](#)”, Reuters, 9 April 2021.

⁴⁹ As above.

⁵⁰ “[US issues guidelines to deepen relations with Taiwan](#)”, Reuters, 9 April 2021.

Trade talks

In June 2021, 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.⁵¹

In August 2022 the two sides announced a negotiating mandate for formal trade negotiations.⁵² The first negotiating round started in January 2023.⁵³

The US Government has stated that the negotiations are “being conducted in accordance with the United States’ ‘One China’ policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three US-China Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances”.⁵⁴

3.2

August 2022 visit by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and reaction from China

On 2 August 2022, the then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi embarked on a trip to Taiwan, becoming the most senior US politician to visit the island in decades (and the first sitting Speaker in 25 years).⁵⁵

The move was strongly condemned by China, with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stating that it proved “the United States has become the ‘biggest destroyer’ of peace across the Taiwan Strait and for regional stability”. The spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned, “China will definitely take all necessary measures to resolutely safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity in response to the US Speaker’s visit. All the consequences arising therefrom must be borne by the US side and the ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces”.⁵⁶

China announced a series of measures intended to punish Taiwan for Pelosi’s visit, including blocking the import of thousands of different types of food. Cyberattacks, believed to be launched from China, temporarily took down some Taiwan government websites, as well as those of larger businesses.⁵⁷

⁵¹ [“Blinken signals possible resumption of US-Taiwan trade, investment talks”](#), Reuters, 7 June 2021.

⁵² Office of the United States Trade Representative, [“United States and Taiwan Commence Formal Negotiations on U.S. – Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade”](#), 17 August 2022.

⁵³ Office of the United States Trade Representative, [“United States and Taiwan to Hold Negotiating Round for the U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade”](#), 4 January 2023.

⁵⁴ As above.

⁵⁵ [“Explained: What happened when a US House Speaker visited Taiwan in 1997?”](#), FirstPost, 3 August 2022.

⁵⁶ [“As China Punishes Taiwan for Pelosi’s Visit, What Comes Next?”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 4 August 2022.

⁵⁷ [“As China Punishes Taiwan for Pelosi’s Visit, What Comes Next?”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 4 August 2022.

The most serious measures, however, involved major military exercises that began on 4 August 2022, and included live fire exercises in several locations in the waters surrounding Taiwan.⁵⁸ It was reported that Chinese missiles flew over Taiwan, though Taiwan's defence ministry said these “flew high into the atmosphere and constituted no threat to it”.⁵⁹ When China’s armed forces first announced the scale of the plans it was reported that they would “surpass by far the scale of exercises that occurred during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis”.⁶⁰

The drills finally ended on the 10 August.⁶¹ However, the Council on Foreign Relations also predicted that China would continue to apply military pressure over the next few months:

Over the coming weeks and months, China can be expected to continue to increase its military pressure on Taiwan, potentially through more frequent incursions into its air defence identification zone that feature more aircraft and additional crossings over the median line. China could also choose to escalate by flying military aircraft into Taiwan’s territorial airspace or over the island of Taiwan. China will likely also ban additional Taiwanese products and make it more difficult for Taiwanese businesses to operate on the mainland. Diplomatically, China could attempt to poach some of Taiwan’s few remaining diplomatic partners and try to exclude it from various international organizations.⁶²

On 15 August 2022, another US Congressional delegation visited Taiwan, led by Democratic Party Senator Ed Markey.⁶³ In a statement China’s Defence Ministry called the trip an “ambush visit” that “violates China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity”.⁶⁴ China then launched further military drills in the Taiwan Strait in response.

President Tsai meets new US Speaker

In April 2023, Kevin McCarthy, who took over as Speaker of the House of Representatives in January, met President Tsai Ing-Wen during a trip she made to California.

Ahead of Tsai’s visit, China stated her planned meeting with McCarthy was a “provocation” and threatened “countermeasures” should the meeting go ahead. A few days before the meeting China's People's Liberation Army

⁵⁸ [“China to begin series of unprecedented live-fire drills off Taiwan coast”](#), The Guardian, 3 August 2022.

⁵⁹ [“Furious China fires missiles near Taiwan in drills after Pelosi visit”](#), Reuters, 5 August 2022.

⁶⁰ [“As China Punishes Taiwan for Pelosi’s Visit, What Comes Next?”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 4 August 2022.

⁶¹ [“Following China’s Military Drills, Taiwan Settles Into New Normal”](#), The Diplomat, 16 August 2022.

⁶² [“As China Punishes Taiwan for Pelosi’s Visit, What Comes Next?”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 4 August 2022.

⁶³ [“China conducts fresh military drills around Taiwan as US congressional delegation visits”](#), CNN, 15 August 2022.

⁶⁴ As above.

“began live-fire joint force training exercises for its air force, navy and ground forces”.⁶⁵

Mr McCarthy is also reported to have expressed his desire to visit Taiwan, following the example of his predecessor.⁶⁶

3.3 President Biden comments on potential US military support to Taiwan in event of invasion

President Biden has on several occasions since he took office indicated that the US would support Taiwan militarily in the event of an invasion by China, while at the same time his administration has maintained it has not changed its official “strategic ambiguity” policy.

Comments by President Biden

Since coming to office President Biden has on several occasions said directly that the US would come to Taiwan’s aid should it be attacked by China, and each time his office have claimed this was not a change in official US policy.

In October 2021, during a CNN town hall event with voters, when asked twice whether the US would protect Taiwan if China attacked, Biden said it would. “Yes, we have a commitment to do that,” he said.⁶⁷ A White House official said afterwards that the President was “not announcing any change in our policy and there is no change in our policy” in his remarks about China and Taiwan.⁶⁸

In May 2022, during a press conference in Tokyo, President Biden was asked, “Are you willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan if it comes to that?”. The President responded “Yes”, adding: “That’s the commitment we made”.⁶⁹ An aide was then reported to have said “the president’s statement represented no change in the longstanding American stance to the island”.⁷⁰ It was reported that a “source familiar with the President’s thinking” suggested that President Biden’s comments were referring to the US providing arms to Taiwan in such a scenario, not deploying US forces.⁷¹

⁶⁵ [“Taiwan’s President Tsai meets Kevin McCarthy despite China’s warnings”](#), NPR, 5 April 2023.

⁶⁶ [“US house speaker Kevin McCarthy confirms he will meet Taiwan president in California”](#), The Guardian, 4 April 2023.

⁶⁷ [“Biden vows to protect Taiwan in event of Chinese attack”](#), CNN, 22 October 2021.

⁶⁸ As above.

⁶⁹ [“Biden’s Taiwan vow creates confusion not clarity – and raises China tensions”](#), The Guardian, 23 May 2022.

⁷⁰ [“Biden’s Taiwan vow creates confusion not clarity – and raises China tensions”](#), The Guardian, 23 May 2022.

⁷¹ Jim Sciutto (@JimSciutto), Twitter, [23 May 2022](#), [accessed 3 August 2023].

Addressing these comments several days later the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, "Our approach has been consistent across decades and administrations", and "As the president has said, our policy has not changed. The United States remains committed to our One China policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three joint communiques, the six assurances. We oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side".⁷²

However, in September 2022, Mr Biden seemed to be clear that the US would respond with direct assistance from its armed forces. In an interview with CBS's "60 Minutes", the President said that the United States would defend Taiwan "if in fact there was an unprecedented attack".⁷³ The host pushed for a clarification, asking "So unlike Ukraine, to be clear, sir, US forces — US men and women — would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion?". The President responded "Yes".⁷⁴

3.4 US passes CHIPS Act on semiconductors and the effect on Taiwan

In August 2022, the US passed a piece of legislation called the [CHIPS and Science Act](#). The Act seeks to increase semiconductor chip manufacturing in America, investing more than \$200 billion over the next five years in these efforts, and to make the US more competitive with China.⁷⁵

The legislation was also motivated by fears that the US is too reliant on Taiwan's world-leading semi-conductor industry, and if there was a conflict between China and the US, the severe impact it would have on its economy.⁷⁶

Taiwan is concerned about efforts that might impact an industry described as "the crown jewel of the island's economy".⁷⁷ The industry makes up 15% of Taiwan's GDP,⁷⁸ and the country's market share by revenue was 64% of global revenue for 2021.⁷⁹

Taiwan's semiconductor companies, aware of US fears of being cut off from its chips, and of the desire of the US to have more domestic manufacturing

⁷² "[After Biden's Taiwan remark, Blinken insists US 'remains committed' to One China policy](#)", Fox News, 26 May 2022.

⁷³ "[Biden says U.S. troops would defend Taiwan in event of attack by China](#)". The Washington Post, 19 September 2022.

⁷⁴ "[Biden says U.S. troops would defend Taiwan in event of attack by China](#)". The Washington Post, 19 September 2022.

⁷⁵ "[Biden signs bill boosting US chip manufacturing as he kicks off victory lap](#)", CNN, 9 August 2022.

⁷⁶ "[Raimondo warns of 'deep and immediate recession' if U.S. were to be cut off from Taiwan chip manufacturing](#)", CNBC, 20 July 2022.

⁷⁷ "Taiwan's chip industry under threat as drought turns critical", Financial Times, 9 March 2021.

⁷⁸ "[Taiwan's dominance of the chip industry makes it more important](#)", The Economist, 6 March, 2023.

⁷⁹ "[Taiwan to increase foundry market share in 2022](#)", EE News Europe, 25 April 2022.

capacity in this area, have been investing in new factories in the United States.

Taiwan-based TSMC, one of the world's leading semiconductor companies, completed construction on a \$12 billion new facility in Arizona in July 2022, with production expected to begin in early 2024.⁸⁰ The company has also now announced it will build a second facility in, which is set to come online in 2026.⁸¹

US export controls on chips to China

In October 2022 the US imposed export controls to prevent advanced semiconductors from reaching China. The controls are not just focused on the US but seek to “cut China off from certain semiconductor chips made anywhere in the world with US equipment”.⁸²

Taiwanese semiconductor companies said that they would cooperate with these controls, and the island's government said the companies attach “great importance” to complying with the law.⁸³

In June 2023, the US was reported to be contemplating strengthening the export controls, targeting chips used for artificial intelligence.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ [“Apple Chip Supplier TSMC Celebrates Arizona Factory Nearing Completion”](#), Mac Rumors, 29 July 2022.

⁸¹ [“TSMC Unveils Major U.S. Fab Expansion Plans: 3nm and \\$40 Billion by 2026”](#), AnanTech, 7 December 2022.

⁸² [“U.S. aims to hobble China's chip industry with sweeping new export rules”](#), Reuters, 10 October 2022.

⁸³ [“Taiwan signals its chip firms will follow new U.S. rules on China”](#), Reuters, 8 October 2022.

⁸⁴ [“US weighs tougher restrictions on AI chip exports to China”](#), Financial Times, 28 June 2023.

4 Military support & spending

4.1 Military support during the Trump administration

Overview

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.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷

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

⁸⁵ [“Is Taiwan Looking to Diversify Its Defense Partnerships?”](#), The Diplomat, 20 May 2020.

⁸⁶ See, [“Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense”](#), Council on Foreign Relations ,10 May 2021; and [“Taiwan Arms Sales Notified to Congress, 1990-2020”](#), US-Taiwan Defense And Security, accessed 01 June 2021.

⁸⁷ [“Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 10 May 2021.

- An upgrade to its [Patriot Surface-to-Air missiles](#) (to which China responded by placing sanctions on the manufacturer Lockheed Martin).⁸⁸

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, and the sale of these weapons required Congressional approval. The sale of 66 aircraft was approved with strong bipartisan backing. Previously 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.⁸⁹

4.2 Military support under the Biden administration

Biden administration first arms sale

In April 2021 it was reported that the first arms sale to Taiwan under the Biden administration would include 40 self-propelled howitzers (artillery). The sale had started being negotiated under the Trump administration.⁹⁰

Congress passes new legislation strengthening military support to Taiwan

On 23 December 2022, President Biden signed the Fiscal 2023 National Defense Authorization Act into law. The Act implemented a subsidiary piece of legislation, the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act (TERA), that significantly upgraded US military assistance to Taiwan, and for the first time directly finances weapons exports to Taiwan.⁹¹ VOA News gives further details of this financing programme reporting it:

[W]ould establish a specific defence modernization program for Taiwan. If the secretary of state verifies that Taiwan is increasing its own defence budget, the United States would be authorized to provide up to \$2 billion in military financial assistance to Taiwan each year from 2023 to 2027, for a total of up to \$10 billion over five years.⁹²

The final version of TERA did not include some significant proposals that were put in the original version of the legislation that was drafted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. These proposals included the imposition of sanctions on China in the event of "significant escalation in aggression" against Taiwan by the People's Republic of China, as well as a proposal that

⁸⁸ "[China will sanction Lockheed Martin over arms sales to Taiwan](#)", CNN, 14 July 2020

⁸⁹ "[No New F-16's for Taiwan, but US to Upgrade Fleet](#)", New York Times, 18 September 2011.

⁹⁰ "Joe Biden set to make his first arms sale to Taiwan", The Times, 20 April 2021.

⁹¹ "[US House Passes National Defense Authorization Act, Including \\$10B for Taiwan](#)", VOA News, 9 December 2022.

⁹² As above.

Taiwan be treated as a "major non-NATO ally".⁹³ This status is also held by Japan and Australia and allows preferential access to US equipment and technology.

The \$2 billion in financial assistance was also originally to come in the form of grants rather than loans. However, for the next financial year assistance will only be available in the form of loans, which Taiwan would be required to pay back within a 12-year period. Future decisions on whether the next four years of assistance will be given in the form of loans or grants will be decided by Congress, during discussions on future National Defense Authorization Acts. These are passed each year to authorise the financing of US military spending.⁹⁴

Recent arms sales

In early March 2023 the US announced an arms package worth \$619 million in new weapons to Taiwan, including missiles for its F-16 fleet.⁹⁵ This is the most recent in a number of purchases by Taiwan's military, including a \$1.1 billion arms package in September 2022,⁹⁶ and a \$180 million arms sale for a Volcano anti-tank mine-laying system in December 2022.⁹⁷

On 10 March 2023 Taiwan's envoy to the United States Hsiao Bi-khim also met with the chair of the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China, Chris Smith, to discuss Taiwan's security needs.⁹⁸

4.3

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

⁹³ "[U.S. military bill features up to \\$10 billion to boost Taiwan](#)", Reuters, 8 December 2022.

⁹⁴ "[Congress forgoes \\$2 billion Taiwan security grants in favor of loans](#)", Defense News, 21 December 2022.

⁹⁵ This includes 200 anti-aircraft Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) and 100 AGM-88B HARM missiles that can take out land-based radar stations. "[Taiwan military to get \\$619 million U.S. arms boost as China keeps up pressure](#)", Reuters, 2 March 2023.

⁹⁶ This includes a \$655m logistics support package for Taiwan's surveillance radar air defence systems programme. "[US announces \\$1.1bn arms sale to Taiwan, angering China](#)", The Guardian, 3 September 2022.

⁹⁷ "[U.S. approves potential sale of anti-tank systems to Taiwan for \\$180 mln](#)", Reuters, 29 December 2022.

⁹⁸ Chris Smith US Representative website, Press release: "[Smith meets with Taiwan Ambassador Bi-khim Hsiao](#)", 10 March 2023, accessed 3 August 2023.

US Navy would occur “one to three times per year”.⁹⁹ At the beginning 2019, US ships sailed through the Strait three months in a row.¹⁰⁰

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 2020.¹⁰¹

The pace of operations kept up under the first several months of the Biden administration with five US warships, all Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers, passing through the Strait between 20 January and mid-May 2021.¹⁰²

The number of operations appears to have reduced slightly in 2022 and 2023. According to press reports, which might not include all transits, there were eight operations by the US Navy through the Strait in 2022,¹⁰³ and three so far in 2023.¹⁰⁴ The Congressional Research Service collects data on US Navy FONOPS in the South China Sea and through the Taiwan Strait but has yet to receive updated figures for 2021 and 2022.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ [“US Military Support for Taiwan: What’s Changed Under Trump?”](#), Council for Foreign Relations, 3 April 2019.

¹⁰⁰ As above.

¹⁰¹ [“Why Biden Sends Warships to the South China Sea, Just as Trump Did”](#), VOA News, 22 March 2021.

¹⁰² [“US Navy ship sails through Taiwan Strait, 5th time under Biden”](#), Focus Taiwan, 19 May 2021.

¹⁰³ See, [“China says U.S. warship sailing in Taiwan Strait ‘provocative’”](#), Reuters, 26 February 2022; [“Chinese carrier sails through Taiwan Strait hours before Biden-Xi call”](#), Reuters, 18 March 2022; [“Destroyer USS Sampson Transits Taiwan Strait”](#), United States Naval Institute (USNI), 26 April 2022; [“U.S. Cruiser Transits Taiwan Strait Days After Chinese Naval, Air Exercises”](#), USNI, 10 May 2022; [“USS Benfold Transits Taiwan Strait Following South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Ops”](#), USNI, 19 July 2022; [“China Criticizes U.S. Navy Taiwan Strait Transits, F-35B ‘Lightning Carrier’ USS Tripoli Now in South China Sea”](#), USNI, 29 August 2022; [“USS Higgins Joins Canadian Warship to Transit Taiwan Strait”](#), USNI, 20 September 2022; [“USS Benfold Conducted Taiwan Strait Transit in Early November”](#), USNI, 20 November 2022.

¹⁰⁴ [“U.S. warship sails through sensitive Taiwan Strait; China angered”](#), Reuters, 5 January 2023; [“US warship sails through Taiwan Strait days after China drills”](#), France 24, 17 April 2023; [“Today’s D Brief: Taiwan Strait close call; Ukraine advancing?; Fighting resumes in Sudan; Sonic boom over DC; And a bit more”](#), Defense One, 5 June 2023.

¹⁰⁵ See [“U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress”](#) (PDF), Congressional Research Service, 8 February 2023, Table 4, P43.

5 Closer relations and the recognition of Taiwan?

5.1 Closer relations

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

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. Hass warns that China has more tools to impose costs on Taipei than on Washington and is "more comfortable using them".¹⁰⁶

Hass states 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
- supporting Taiwan's efforts to garner dignity and respect on the world stage.¹⁰⁷

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

¹⁰⁶ "[The path to protecting bipartisan US support for Taiwan](#)", Brookings, 25 January 2021.

¹⁰⁷ As above.

would be consistent with the language of the Taiwan Relations Act.¹⁰⁸ 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 US commitments to defend Taiwan”, which are critical for purposes of deterrence and stability.¹⁰⁹

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”.¹¹⁰

Gregson, Young and Hsiao, however, do acknowledge that “some ambiguity, strategic or otherwise”, will “always be present” in US Taiwan policy.¹¹¹

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”.¹¹²

Haass and Sacks believe that this can be done in a way that is still consistent with the US “One-China” policy and “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”.¹¹³

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

¹⁰⁸ [“How the Biden Administration Can Support Taiwan”](#), The Diplomat, 30 April 2021.

¹⁰⁹ As above.

¹¹⁰ As above.

¹¹¹ As above.

¹¹² [“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.

¹¹³ As above.

pursue independence more aggressively.¹¹⁴ Keating believes that the Biden 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”.¹¹⁵

5.2 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 most foreign policy thinkers and makers.¹¹⁶

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 US Presidential election to move closer to Taiwan and “even consider formally recognizing Taipei”.¹¹⁷

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”.¹¹⁸

Patrick M. Cronin and Ryan Neuhard writing for the Hudson Institute caution that recognition of Taiwan would force Chinese President Xi Jinping into conducting military action:

If the United States and Taiwan cross that line, it would not just create a pretext for Xi to seize Taiwan with military force; it would almost certainly create a requirement for him to do so. Failing to act would be a political death sentence for Xi.¹¹⁹

They also argue that “formal recognition arguably carries all risk and no tangible reward for either the United States or Taiwan”, and if the US wants to “strengthen Taiwan’s independence or punish China, there are better

¹¹⁴ [“How Long Can the Biden Administration Stall a Crisis in Taiwan?”](#), Slate, 2 February 2021.

¹¹⁵ As above.

¹¹⁶ See for example, [“Have the courage to recognize Taiwan”](#), The Hill, 20 May 2020; and [“It’s Time to Stop Pandering to Beijing Over Taiwan”](#), Hilton Yip, Foreign Policy, 8 May 2020.

¹¹⁷ [“What would happen if the US recognized Taiwan?”](#), Nikkei Asia, 25 September 2020.

¹¹⁸ As above.

¹¹⁹ [“Defending Taiwan Short of Diplomatic Recognition”](#), Stimson Center, 20 May 2020.

alternatives. These options centre on improving Taiwan's defences for denial or punishment and enhancing the scope and depth of engagement".¹²⁰

5.3 2023 military memo on potential China-US conflict and response

A [memo from an Air Force general](#), Michael A. Minihan, published in January 2023, in which he predicted that the US could be at war with China within a few years has brought renewed focus on whether a conflict could break out, most likely due to a confrontation over Taiwan.

This is not the first time that senior military figures have commented on the possibility of conflict breaking out between Taiwan and China, and the US getting drawn in.

In March 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, then commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that "Taiwan is clearly one of [China's] ambitions", and "I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years".¹²¹

In January 2023, when asked whether a Chinese invasion of Taiwan was imminent, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin responded, "What we're seeing recently, is some very provocative behaviour on the part of China's forces and their attempt to re-establish a new normal. But whether or not that means that an invasion is imminent," said Austin, "I seriously doubt that".¹²²

Ryan Haas, a Brookings scholar specialising in China, has suggested [in commentary on Twitter](#), that General Minihan's memo may be as much about bolstering deterrence against China and increasing urgency in his forces than actually predicting the course of events. Haas points to Lloyd Austin's comments quoted above and suggests that commentary from Minihan and others predicting military action may break out soon as unhelpful:

This is a big problem. Beijing wants to wear down the psychological confidence of Taiwan people in their own future. In the face of PRC's growing threat to Taiwan, it is imperative that the US project a sense of purpose, cohesion, and steady determination and confidence.¹²³

Eric Sayers, a former US Indo-Pacific command adviser speaking to the Financial Times, suggested that while Minihan would have a good sense of the military situation in the region, cautioned that the memo should not be

¹²⁰ As above.

¹²¹ "[Air Force general predicts war with China in 2025, tells officers to prep by firing 'a clip' at a target, and 'aim for the head'](#)", NBC News, 27 January 2023.

¹²² As above.

¹²³ Ryan Haas (@ryanl), Twitter, [29 January 2023](#), [accessed 3 August 2023].

treated as an intelligence assessment but rather a tool to increase the preparedness of the forces he commands.¹²⁴

John Culver, in [an analysis for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), argues that any military campaign by China to invade Taiwan would be of such a scale that it “would not be subtle”, and “that if the American intelligence community saw some of that happening, they would right now be releasing that information publicly, just as they did almost four months before Russia invaded Ukraine”.¹²⁵

5.4 NATO holds dedicated debate on Taiwan

In September 2022, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), held a dedicated debate on Taiwan, for the first time. James Stavridis, a retired US admiral and former NATO supreme allied commander, said “It is notable and significant that, for the first time, the alliance is conducting discussions about the status of Taiwan, its democratic government and its critical role in the manufacture of microchips globally”.¹²⁶

The Financial Times reported that the US has been “urging allies, particularly in Europe, to focus more on the threat to Taiwan”, and as part of these efforts the US State Department “recently shared an economic analysis with allies that said a Chinese blockade of Taiwan would cost the global economy \$2.5tn per year”.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ “US air force general predicts China conflict in 2025”, Financial Times, 28 January 2023.

¹²⁵ [“How We Would Know When China Is Preparing to Invade Taiwan”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2022

¹²⁶ “Nato holds first dedicated talks on China threat to Taiwan”, Financial Times, 30 November 2022.

¹²⁷ As above.

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