

The Role Taiwan May Play in the Context of US-China Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Abstract

Confrontation between China and the US has been on the rise. China is challenging US hegemony in both the economy and security. Nevertheless, as a whole, the US remains dominant while China is struggling with internal and external challenges. There exist policy continuities from Obama to Trump in containing China's rising. Trump's Indo-Pacific framework is even wider than Obama's Rebalance to Asia. Moreover, neighboring regional powers such as Japan, Australia, India, and even the EU, are very active in fitting themselves into the Indo-Pacific framework. Taiwan may play a role as an unsinkable aircraft carrier for the US and its allies in checking China's rise. Taiwan may also play the role of a beacon for China's democratization.

Keywords: Rebalance to Asia, A New Type of Great Power Relations, One Belt/One Road, New Southbound Policy, Indo-Pacific Strategy

I. China's Ambition for the G2

1. Requesting Special Recognition from the US

The concept of “A New Type of Great Power Relations (NTGPR),” proposed by Beijing that China should share global leadership with the US as its equal, has become a diplomatic slogan framing China-US relations. The NTGPR was first proposed during the second round of the Sino-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue in May 2010, suggesting that China and the US should “create a new type of great power relations regarding different social systems, cultural traditions and stages of development with mutual respect, harmonious and win-win cooperation during the era of globalization.” This new initiative implies that a rising China demands equal treatment from the US.

China's demands reflect its ambition to rise up to a higher status. Involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s almost paralyzed America's national strength. The US economy started to decline whereas China had very good economic performances linking neighboring countries. China became the number one foreign reserve holder, replacing Japan, in 2006 and the number two economy in the world, replacing Japan, in 2010.

The US was caught up in wars whereas China was expanding its influence in many global and regional areas covering diplomacy, the economy, the military, and the like. China has been silently laying out its global strategic map. China was asked to invest about four trillion yuan in boosting the economy to serve as the engine of global growth when the US suffered from the outbreak of the global financial crisis in September 2008. China became a stabilizing force in the world economy and also the largest creditor of the US.

In February 2012, then Vice President Xi Jinping, during his

visit to the US, asserted that he would “strive to shape the partnership between the two countries into a new type of great power relations in the 21st century.” On June 20, 2012, Hu Jintao proposed “China-US Great Powers Relations” to Obama, but Obama did not respond directly.

On March 14, 2013, Xi Jinping was elected President of the PRC and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. Xi started his great ambition to expose China to the world. The NTGPR has once again become Beijing’s mission, promoting its equal status with the US. Nevertheless, President Obama did not even once mention the NTGPR on his trip to Beijing in November 2014. The Obama administration was cautiously staying away from adopting the concept of the NTGPR.¹ Similarly, ever since Trump was inaugurated in January 2017, he has not touched upon this issue.

2. Developing a Parallel Order outside US Dominance

Unlike the NTGPR, which requests recognition from the US, a parallel order implies that China intends to build a new order outside US dominance. During his visits to Central Asia and Indonesia in September and October 2013 respectively, Xi proposed the “One Belt, One Road (OBOR).” The project covers about 60 countries and international organizations, and in turn, set up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in 2015, and actively applied for a Special Drawing Right (SDR). Together with a series of initiatives, China intends to build a China-centric diplomatic strategy, described as a “home-based” strategy by Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

1. Cheng Li & Lucy Xu, “Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism Over the ‘New Type of Great Power Relations,’” December 4, 2014, *Brookings*, <<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/chinese-enthusiasm-and-american-cynicism-over-the-new-type-of-great-power-relations>>.

Based on its abundant funds, China tends to set up new mechanisms creating an influence beyond traditional financing institutions, covering fiscal and monetary policy, trade and investment, cross-regional structures, security, technology and informal diplomatic forums. Among these investment in infrastructure is the most typical one.

To develop its own circle of influence, China has initiated strategic concepts like the OBOR and the AIIB as well as the “Regional Overall Economic Partnership (RCEP).” The former two are to help Asian countries meet the needs of electricity, transportation, telecommunications and other infrastructure requiring a huge amount of investment. Xi plans to provide around US\$100 billion per year to finance infrastructure projects around the world, building a network of global trade with China at its center.² China emphasizes Asia-Pacific trade and investment liberalization in coping with the US-led “Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP),” which was replaced by “the TPP 11,” after Trump announced the US would withdraw from it on January 23, 2017. The TPP 11 was renamed the “Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPATPP).” The CPATPP is supposedly to be signed in early 2018.

In addition, a “RMB cross-border payment system” was initiated to use RMB as a world currency in trade and investment, to reduce dependence on the US-European bank-led SWIFT system and to increase China’s ability to fight against the US-centric financial market structure.

Clearly, all the efforts by Xi reveal a formula of “Collaboration

2. James Guild, “How the US Is Losing to China in Southeast Asia,” *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017, <<https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/how-the-us-is-losing-to-china-in-southeast-asia/>>.

with Russia, attracting the EU, and stabilizing relations with the US.” Nevertheless, in retrospect, ever since Obama’s second term, China has been gradually plunged into the trap of Obama’s strategy of “re-balance to Asia” and then that of Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

In order to get rid of US dominance, China is also trying to construct a parallel order. On the one hand, China tries very hard to strive in existing international organizations, on the other hand, it greatly promotes a new parallel architecture, and thus power-sharing. Naturally, this new order has challenged the US-centered order.

For Chinese, “Zheng Ming” – using names properly – is a key component of moral cultivation. It is a matter of defining one’s position and role in a society. In strategic terms, if the US were to recognize China as a great power, then, China would be able to easily turn the name into its substance. From a tactical point of view, if China gets equal recognition from the US, it may start from that level and then take the opportunity to move to a higher position, playing a bigger role and preventing itself from being contained by the US and its allies, or even sharing power and benefits on an equal footing.

However, Beijing’s demand for equal status does not fit the interests of the United States. For the US, the new type of US-China relationship must be a compromise under the US-led hierarchical power structure, rather than equal sharing of global power. After all, violating the US doctrine of universal human values, Xi’s sweeping crackdown on Chinese civil society has made any connotation of partnership difficult to be accepted by any US president.³

3. Jane Perlez & Mark Landler, “Wooing Trump, Xi Jinping Seeks Great Power Status for China,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/world/asia/trump-xi-jinping-visit-china.html?_

Since Trump was elected US president, Xi has been trying very hard to accustom himself to Trump's elusiveness. It was reported that Trump might exchange the "NTGPR" for China's pressuring North Korea. But finally, like Obama, Trump has never publicly echoed Xi in this regard. Instead, he pledged to build a "free and open Indo-Pacific" framework, stressing America's democratic allies, including Australia, India and Japan in the region as a balance against China's rise. Trump's call to build a "free and open Indo-Pacific" echoing the view of the national security establishment in Washington that China's growing clout in Asia must be managed or even checked.

II. China Contained by the US and its Allies in Security and the Economy

In view of the confrontational relations between the US and China, Xi's US policy has clearly not yet succeeded. This failure is partly due to strategic suspicion on the part of the US, and partly due to China's wrongdoing. After the US started its Pivot to Asia Policy in 2009 and Rebalance to Asia Policy in 2011, China has become the prime strategic rival of the US. Above all, since Xi came to power, he has not been ready to keep a low profile. Instead, he has revealed his exuberant ambition to compete for hegemony with the US.

In retrospect, Xi's relations with the US have not reached the goal of stability. On the contrary, Xi's policy has enlarged the gaps and mistrust between China and the US. Since the end of 2012, when Xi came to power, in general China's neighborhood from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia has witnessed a series of conflicts which have made China sink deeper into US strategic traps:

(1) China vs. South Korea. The US has clearly shown that North Korea's nuclear tests are a significant threat to the US and its allies. The deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), is to protect US citizens and US allies and serve as a sort of self-defense for South Korea. On July 8, 2016, the US and South Korea announced their decision to deploy the THAAD. China said that this decision undermined the basis of mutual trust between China and South Korea. In retaliation, Beijing imposed boycotts on South Korean goods traded in China and bans on group tours to Korea. On his official visit to Beijing in December 13-16, 2017, South Korean President Moon was humiliated. Two days later, two Chinese bombers, two fighters and one reconnaissance plane violated South Korean airspace for a full three and a half hours.⁴ China-S. Korean relations seem unlikely to return to their status before the deployment of the THAAD.

(2) China vs. Japan. Being against Japan's nationalization of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands on September 11, 2012, China launched anti-Japanese parades in 58 cities. On October 6, 2013, the US, Australia and Japan issued a joint statement on maintaining the *status quo* in the East China Sea and South China Sea. China believed that the US, Australia and Japan were intervening in territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea. The so-called "*status quo*" meant an endorsement of Japan's nationalization of the islands.

Countering the US and its allies, China announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea on November 23.

4. David Volodzko, "Did Beijing just give South Korea's Moon the cold shoulder?" *South China Morning Post*, December 24, 2017, <<http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2125443/did-beijing-just-give-south-koreas-moon-cold-shoulder>>.

Tensions increased. On November 26, two B52 strategic bombers of the US entered China's ADIZ, without notifying China, to negate China's zoning. On July 1, 2014, the Japanese government passed a resolution to amend an interpretation of the Japanese Constitution. In the resolution, Japan lifted restrictions on the exercise of collective self-defense. This provides a legal basis for Japan's participation in war and strengthens the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. On March 29, 2016, Japan officially lifted its ban on collective self-defense. As a result, China-Japan's military confrontation will enter a new round. Abe's LDP won a huge election victory in favor of revising Japan's pacifist Constitution. In December 2017, Abe called for Japan's 'rebirth' in 2020 along with a constitutional revision. Clearly, military competition between China and Japan will be greater in the future.

(3) China vs. Taiwan. Both Taiwan's local elections in 2014 and central elections in 2016 show that Taiwan's political environment has significantly turned green.⁵ In contrast, the blue political landscape not only shrank but was also internally divided. The turning green of Taiwan's political landscape means a structural movement away from a China-centric cross-Strait relationship. This is quite unacceptable for Beijing since the two sides of the Taiwan Strait had been increasingly integrated during collaboration between Ma Ying-jeou and Xi Jinping. Nevertheless, before and after the elections in 2016, Tsai Ing-wen's words and deeds have been highly regarded by the US. Her China policy has been in accordance with the *status quo* of the cross-Strait order appreciated by the US. On the other hand, while Xi may accept it, he is not satisfied, since he would prefer a non-confrontational as well as a non-conflicting stance toward the United

5. The Green Camp, refers to those groups which share similar political ideas with the Democratic Progressive Party while the Blue Camp with the Kuomintang.

States. Naturally, he would not be at odds with US cross-Strait policy. Nevertheless, China will not give up its harassment of Taiwan via “the Three Wars” legal warfare, media warfare, and psychological warfare. The structural tension across the Taiwan Strait lies here.

(4) China vs. ASEAN. It was reported that China has reclaimed 2,900 acres of land from December 2013 to the end of June 2015. China’s move sparked strong dissatisfaction from several ASEAN claimants, especially the Philippines and Vietnam. The US also expressed serious concern. On July 12, 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled that China’s claim to territory within the nine-dash line in the South China Sea has no legal basis. It also ruled that the disputed waters in the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal are within the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines, while Chinese behavior is in violation of the sovereignty of the Philippines. Nevertheless, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said that the Philippines hopes to keep close friendship with China. The Philippines needs more money from China to build roads linking economic zones and farms to markets. He said, “China has money; the US has no money.”⁶

However, although Duterte took a realistic and flexible approach toward China, he also developed closer ties with Trump. During his recent 12-day trip to Asia in early November 2017, Trump focused mainly on North Korea and trade issues. By comparison, the South China Sea is merely regarded as a side issue, but, at a meeting with Vietnam’s president, Trần Đại Quang on November 12, 2017, Trump acknowledged that China’s position on the South China Sea was a problem.⁷ At any rate, for Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy, the South

6. 蔡敏姿,〈中菲將恢復對話 菲總統：因為大陸有錢〉, *United Daily News*, July 24, 2016, <<https://video.udn.com/news/531098>>.

China Sea is definitely a vital part.

(5) China vs. India. In face of China's aggressive expansion in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, India has recently been very active in engaging East Asia, especially strengthening its relations with Japan and the US. Since, without the participation of the member states of ASEAN, there can be no progress in Indian-Japanese partnership in Southeast Asia, Singapore's joining the "India-Japan-ASEAN" initiative was regarded as the key node for offshore partnerships. Strengthening military cooperation between India and Japan in this area not only benefits ASEAN, but also assists the US in sharing the burden of security in the region. Clearly, China's expansionism in this region will be checked.

Basically, the above strategic architecture was set up during Obama's administration. Although Trump fiercely criticized President Obama during the election campaign, he has not discarded Obama's diplomatic legacy after he was inaugurated. The politico-economic structure of the Asia-Pacific region involved confrontation between China and the US as well as its allies in certain areas in Obama's time. Trump has even added more active and large-scale diplomatic efforts. His "Indo-Pacific strategic framework views China as a "competitor."

Furthermore, another active participant is particularly worth noticing: the UK. On January 27, 2017, Trump met with British Prime Minister Theresa May in the White House. May was the first foreign representative hosted by Trump after he was inaugurated. Trump

7. Steve Holland & Mai Nguyen, "Trump offers to mediate on South China Sea," *Reuters*, November 12, 2017, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trump-asia-vietnam/trump-offers-to-mediate-on-south-china-sea-idUSKBN1DC04H>>.

committed himself to supporting NATO and pledged to reshape US relations with Britain in the military, financial, cultural and political fields. Both the US and the UK are linked in a very special relationship. After Brexit, the active engagement of the UK in Asian affairs will be positive to Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy.

III. Taiwan's Geo-Strategic Role Amid Rising China-US Confrontation

Strategically speaking, Taiwan is located in the center of the Asia-Pacific region, linking both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Taiwan is also a vital point of the First Island Chains, safeguarding US interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Taiwan has been described as an unsinkable aircraft carrier preventing China's expansion in this region. In addition, from a historical point of view, it was the US, instead of the KMT or the CPP, which expelled the Japanese from Taiwan. There is no reason for Taiwan to be part of Chinese territory. The fact is that the PRC has never ruled Taiwan for even one minute.⁸

The US has also shown its obligation toward Taiwan in its domestic law: the *Taiwan Relations Act*. US House Representatives passed a resolution in May 2016, which greatly supports Taiwan's *status quo* without officially recognizing China's sovereign claim over Taiwan. Clearly, although the US does not support Taiwan independence, neither does it support China's unification of Taiwan. Hence, in terms of international recognition, it is false to regard Taiwan as part of China.

8. Twclarify, "Understanding the One China Policy," May 31, 2014, *youtube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPb9E9HSAXA>>.

In 1999, the DPP rejected the so-called “One China Principle” defined in 1992 as the basis for official diplomatic relations with the PRC and advocates a Taiwanese national identity, which is separate from that of China. The current official position of the Party is that the “Republic of China (Taiwan)” is an independent and sovereign country whose territory consists of Taiwan and its surrounding smaller islands and whose sovereignty derives only from the ROC citizens living in Taiwan.

Beijing has repeatedly tried to pressure Tsai into accepting its formula, saying it is the only possible foundation for cross-Strait relations. But Tsai insists on maintaining the *status quo*, which is welcomed by the US. The Mainland Affairs Council also reveals that in polls most respondents favor the maintenance of the *status quo*.⁹

To prevent the DPP from further steering in the direction of Taiwan independence, Beijing has, on one hand, announced its own clear-cut position, and, on the other, has tried to “pluralize” its bottom “line” into bottom “lines” so that Beijing can save face and keep its Taiwan policy more pragmatic and flexible. Presumably, Beijing would focus more on cross-Strait trade and socio-cultural exchanges, unilaterally adopting various economic measures to attract Taiwanese people, tactically utilizing psychological intimidation and bypassing the ruling DPP, penetrating grassroots communities, and then cultivating networks for its political interests.

IV. Taiwan’s Future Prospects

Basically, the US-centered security architecture constraining

9. 石秀娟, 〈杭州歐習會談台灣 陸委會：台灣近9成民眾支持維持現狀〉, *The Storm Media*, September 4, 2016, <<http://www.storm.mg/article/162149>>.

China in the Asia-Pacific region, from the Northeast to the Southeast, has been formed. CCP leaders have to face this reality. China tends to believe the part should obey the whole. In a rational calculation, Xi cannot help but consider China's Taiwan policy in the context of the Asia-Pacific strategic environment. What China can do is to play psychological warfare against Taiwan as the writer of the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu, wrote: "to defeat the enemy without combat." In view of maintaining the stable development of China, Xi may use more psychological warfare, mixing threats and inducements, towards Taiwan, and is unlikely to take military action. Basically, the *status quo* may be maintained for a long period of time as long as US dominance in this region persists.

1. Thorny Challenges from China

Clearly, adhering to its claim of sovereignty, Beijing may take any opportunity to press President Tsai to accept the One China Principle. Harassment will appear anywhere and anytime. It will be an endless process. Since the interdependence between Taiwan and China is tremendously high, the occurrence of any problem will offer an opportunity for China to manipulate its harassment of Taiwan. China will use Taiwanese people to encircle Taiwan's government, and push businesses to pressure the government. Likewise, the upgrading of the PLA's military buildup and capacities may endanger Taiwan if any contingencies occur. At least, military coercion may create political pressure in real politics.

Beijing is fully confident that Taiwan's socio-economic dependence on China is very real and urgent. It will try to make every effort to make Taiwan uneasy and uncomfortable by tightening policy unilaterally, or threatening to restrict the quota of Chinese tourists or students allowed to visit Taiwan. This sort of "soft punishment" may

bring about economic harm to Taiwan and social inconvenience in exchanges across the Taiwan Strait. The aim of this soft punishment is not just punishment itself but the strategic goal of compromising Taiwan's government politically until it cannot bear the harassment. From a strategic point of view, implementation of soft punishment is a process of "trial and testing" testifying to China's intentions and bottom lines. Beijing's harassment of Taiwan will be enormous and omnipresent.

2. Opportunities to Be Cultivated

The DPP has strongly rejected the One China Principle, as it may lead neighboring partners to misunderstand the real historic and cultural links between Taiwan and China. As the DPP asserts that Taiwan is not part of China, it sends a strong signal to neighboring countries that Taiwan faces China's expansionism just as they do. From this angle, Tsai's strong commitment to maintaining the *status quo*, promoting democracy, and transforming economic structures will help reaffirm US-led allies in safeguarding Asia-Pacific regional peace, prosperity, and democracy. Both Tsai's maintaining the *status quo* in cross-Strait relations and her southbound policy are in accordance with Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy.

After Xi centralizes power and changes the type of leadership from a collective one into that of a strong man, he seemingly enjoys more freedom in policy implementation, yet, paradoxically, he has encountered a lot of serious challenges from within and without. Structurally, Xi's centralization of power is contradictory to the divergent development of China at the social and economic levels. Internally, the economic downturn and the rise of social conflict have put him in a relatively difficult situation. Externally, China has been contained by the US's Asian allies. Under these circumstances, Xi

has been forced to be more cautious. Both internal and external challenges constrain Xi's Taiwan policy giving him little room to be radical. Similarly, Tsai's low profile and low-key approach toward Beijing, welcomed by the US, also reduces Xi's tension or excuses him from prioritizing his Taiwan policy. However, in order not to make the DPP take the *status quo* for granted, Xi may swing his Taiwan policy between the hard and the soft. Furthermore, with the destructive disposition of the Cultural Revolution, his pattern of policy implementation may fluctuate and vibrate.

In the foreseeable future, the two sides will remain in a state of confrontation via psychological warfare and media war. Beijing may maintain its mysterious character by not confirming the media's information when it takes any unilateral action. Nevertheless, uncertainties and unpredictability will bring about more risks, which will encourage Taiwanese in an all-out effort to reduce their economic dependence on China and find a way to invest in Southeast Asia and South Asia. The pressure from China will push more and more Taiwanese to escape from China and open a new window to the new world.

V. Concluding Remarks

Stabilizing the relationship with the US remains China's priority in its foreign policy, evidenced by Xi's reportedly wanting to send China's economic mastermind, Liu He, to visit the US in early March. Xi knows that it is not wise to confront the US at this very moment. China has invested heavily in Trump's US\$1.5 trillion infrastructure plan.¹⁰ No one can predict how Trump will react to China's checkbook

10. 燕林, 〈美媒: 北京選劉鶴訪美令人意外 其間暗藏大玄機〉, *DWnews*, February 23, 2018, <<http://news.dwnews.com/global/big5/news/2018-02-23/60042042.html>>.

diplomacy. But China's diplomacy may make US partners feel insecure and may indirectly undermine the credibility of US leadership.

On the other hand, China has also been aggressively courting Southeast Asia with checkbook diplomacy through the OBOR while some Chinese tech giants such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Didi Chuxing dominate the Southeast Asian market. China's presence is getting stronger in Southeast Asia. Even though some countries like Indonesia and Vietnam have strong anti-Chinese sentiments at the societal level, they desire a close but not too close relationship with Washington as part of their wider foreign policy.¹¹ Hence, although Trump's Indo-Pacific framework seems ambitious and encouraging, there are still significant reservations and doubts seen in some countries in containing China. In coping with China's rising dominance, there is a lot for the US to do.

Particularly, Taiwan has shown a different mood and pattern. Taiwan has been consistently loyal to the US for decades. In contrast to ASEAN's diplomatic volatility toward the US,¹² Taiwan's strong commitment toward universal human values has never changed, and its long-term friendship with the US and Japan has shown that Taiwan is a solid and reliable partner.

In terms of freedom and democracy, Taiwan is very different to China. More and more socio-economic exchanges across the Taiwan Strait have conversely led to Taiwan drifting away from China. Most Taiwanese understand that Taiwan needs to cultivate more opportunities

11. Prashanth Parameswaran, "What Does Mattis' ASEAN Trip Say About Trump's Asia Policy?" *The Diplomat*, January 23, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/what-does-mattis-asean-trip-say-about-trumps-asia-policy/>>.

12. James Guild, "How the US Is Losing to China in Southeast Asia."

outside China. At the same time, the contribution that Taiwan may make to the world is very positive, pragmatic, and flexible. Taiwan is a treasure for the region and the world.

Finally, Taiwan's presence is very significant for China's future prospects. Basically, democracy is the most vulnerable and fragile point of China. Learning from the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chinese leaders understand that western-style democratic reforms are inconsistent with China's national conditions; any political reform must be curbed by a stable architecture. Nevertheless, Taiwan's democracy has proven that democracy is not a dream but a reality. More and more Chinese democratic dissidents are waiting for the right timing to replace the CCP regime. For them, Taiwan may play a role as a beacon for China's democratization.

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