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Time to Normalize the US-Taiwan Relations

Dr. Parris H. Chang

On June 12, 2018, while the world was transfixed by the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore, a major ceremony was taking place in Taipei, Taiwan’s capital, to mark the opening of a huge new diplomatic complex of great geopolitical significance. Occupying a massive 16 acres, with a cost of \$225 million, the new five-story American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), the de-facto US embassy, is the largest diplomatic compound in Asia, bigger even than the US Embassy in Beijing.

An official American government delegation, headed by Assistant Secretary of State Marie Royce, took part in the ceremony. “The AIT’s new home is both a tangible symbol that reflects the strength of our ties, and a state-of-the-art facility that will make possible even greater cooperation for years to come,” said Ms. Royce at the ceremony, which was attended by Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen, her predecessor Ma Ying-jeou, and hundreds of Taiwanese and foreign VIPs. In her capacity as a





senior US State Department official, she added “As free and open democracies, we have an obligation to work with one another to defend our values and protect our joint interest.”

Beijing’s protest was swift and strong. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman complained that “The US sending officials to Taiwan under any excuses is in serious violation of the ‘one China’ principle, as it interferes with China’s internal affairs.” He called for the US “to abide by its pledge to China and correct its mistake to avoid harming China-US relations and peace in the Taiwan Strait.” Washington has chosen not to respond to China’s protest and the veiled threat of the use of force.

Enactment of the Taiwan Relation Act

Almost 40 years have elapsed since then-US President Jimmy Carter normalized relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan’s Republic of China (ROC) under the Chinese Nationalist (KMT) regime, and terminated the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty in 1979. The US Congress, however, provided staunch bipartisan support to Taiwan and enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) over Carter’s objection and amid China’s protest.

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

Under the guidance of then-US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, the US accepted China’s demands in a joint communique in August 1982 to freeze the quality and quantity of weaponry Taiwan could purchase and gradually reduce US arms sales to Taiwan. The communique was in direct violation of the TRA and made huge concessions to the PRC. An outraged then-President Ronald Reagan forced Haig to step down and took actions to reassure Taiwan. Through James Lilley, then AIT director, President Reagan conveyed to Taiwan President Chiang Ching-kuo the “Six Assurances” that the US would not terminate arms sales to Taiwan, would not consult with the PRC on arms sales, would not undertake the role of mediator between Taiwan and China, would not pressure Taiwan to negotiate with China, would not revise the TRA, and would not change its position regarding Taiwan’s sovereignty (namely, the US would not accept China’s claim over Taiwan).

It is regrettable that, on many occasions since the 1990s, US administrations have been unable and/or unwilling to faithfully implement the provisions of the TRA and the “Six Assurances” in order to appease the PRC. The first Taiwan Policy Review (TPR) under President Bill Clinton in 1994 initiated a new policy of not supporting Taiwan’s membership in any state-based international organizations, which contradicts the TRA. According to Section 4(D) of the TRA, “Nothing in this Act may be construed as a basis for supporting the exclusion or expulsion of Taiwan from...any international organization.” The TRA is clear and unequivocal with respect to US policy regarding Taiwan’s participation in international organizations.



Clinton's ruling was a violation of the law of the US.

Critics have characterized President Barack Obama's policy toward Taiwan as "benign neglect." During the time of the Obama administration, the Taiwan government made several requests for advanced US fighter planes and other weapons systems as the balance of military power tilted greatly towards China, which concerned members of US Congress, who loudly echoed such requests, but all to no avail. It was in this context that both chambers of the Congress passed a concurrent resolution in mid-2016 to reaffirm that the TRA and "Six Assurances" are the cornerstones of the US-Taiwan relations. The resolution conveys a strong "sense of Congress" regarding its support to Taiwan and, according to members of Congress, a rebuke to Obama.

In July 2016, the Republican National Convention included for the first time the "Six Assurances" in its official platform. Calling Taiwan a "loyal friend of America," the platform also expressed support for the timely sale of defensive arms and technology to build diesel submarines and for Taiwan's full participation in the WHO, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and other international organizations.

Trump's Pivot to Taiwan

Taiwan became a thorny issue almost from the beginning of the Trump presidency when President Tsai Ing-wen placed a congratulatory call to the president-elect on December 2, 2016 and Trump took it, enraging the PRC leadership.

After less than six months in office, President Trump announced his \$1.4 billion arms sales package to Taiwan. During his state visit to China in November 2017, Trump told his host chairman Xi Jinping that, in accordance with the TRA, the US would continue to provide Taiwan with defensive weapons.

Furthermore, Xi and his colleagues were shocked as Trump, without any warning, unveiled his National Security Strategy (NSS) report on December 18, 2017, which identifies the PRC as America's principal threat and enemy. The report also said that the US intends to "maintain our strong ties to Taiwan in accordance with our 'one China' policy, including our commitments under the TRA to provide for Taiwan's legitimate defense needs and deter coercion."

It is no secret that the US is wary of China's rise and its challenge to Pax Americana. Trump's security experts have closely monitored China's military expansion in the Indo-Pacific region, militarization of the South China Sea, the belt and road initiative to expand China's global economic and political influence, and Xi's "China Dream" to build a world-class military that can fight and defeat the US to supplant it as the world's superpower. The Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, which was announced in January, has devised ways and means, including the Indo-Pacific strategy, to contain and counter China, the rising hegemon. The strategy seeks to forge a broad alliance, a US-led coalition of Asian democracies that include Japan, India, and Australia at the outset, and then enlist Taiwan and other partners in ASEAN.





President Tsai has pledged on several occasions that Taiwan is a dependable US security partner in the region. In fact, Taiwan played a vital role in supporting US military actions in Afghanistan in 2001 and was a generous contributor to the cost-sharing for the allies' mission. Presently, Beijing strongly resents the warming relations between the US and Taiwan, and accuses the US of "playing the Taiwan card," which it claims harms its core interest. China has dispatched its warplanes and warships to encircle Taiwan in an effort to intimidate and threaten Taiwan.

On the other hand, the Trump administration is rekindling a strategic partnership with Taiwan, as the island democracy faces the existential threat from the Chinese Communists. From the US perspective, the Taiwan Travel Act, which President Trump signed into law in March, and the Taiwan-friendly provisions in the National Defense Authorization Acts in 2017 and 2018 are reactive and preventive defense measures responding to China's provocations and threats. In his visit to Beijing last month, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis was candid and emphatic

in his talks with Chairman Xi and Chinese generals that the US is ready to confront the Chinese threat if necessary. If Beijing has any doubt, the sailing of two Aegis-class US destroyers along Taiwan in early July underlines the US determination to help Taiwan defend itself.

A free, democratic and secure Taiwan is in the best strategic interest of the US, Japan, and other US allies in Asia. Congress should adopt a Congressional resolution, following the example of the "Formosa Resolution 1955," to authorize the US president to use all means necessary to defend Taiwan against external aggression and coercion in accordance with the TRA. Inasmuch as Congress and the Trump administration see Taiwan as a worthy partner and the beacon of democracy and freedom to Asia, it is time to forge a new American policy and establish normal relations with Taiwan.

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Editor's Note: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Prospect Foundation.

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