



## Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# Cross-Strait Relations under Stress: Chinese Pressure and Implications for Taiwan

As China increases pressure on governments and corporations around the world to support its political objectives, Taiwan has emerged as a focal point in the region that exemplifies how to withstand or mitigate Chinese challenges. Nevertheless, Chinese military and political belligerence has numerous implications for Taiwanese security and domestic politics ranging from the [tightening of Taiwan's international space](#) to [the use of Chinese sharp power to influence the electorate](#). The Sigur Center for Asian Studies recently [hosted a conference featuring two expert panels to discuss the impacts of Chinese pressure campaigns on Taiwan and other involved nations as well as how cross-strait relations might proceed because of these actions](#).

## Keeping Taiwanese Democracy Secure

The conference began with opening remarks from Christine M. Y. Hsueh, Deputy Representative at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office. Deputy Representative Hsueh highlighted Taiwan's role as a beacon of democracy, which contributes to pressure and attacks from China, such as election interference. With the recent failure of the "one country, two systems" policy in Hong Kong and Chinese President Xi Jinping's threat to use force in reunification with Taiwan, the Taiwanese government is working to ensure that the status quo is not unilaterally altered by Chinese aggression. Although Taiwan faces many challenges in maintaining security and stability, outspoken support from Vice President Mike Pence and other figures in the current US administration have been encouraging signs for Taiwan moving forward.

## **China's Rising Militarism and Assertiveness**

The first panel offered perspectives on defense and security, and began with June Dreyer, Professor of Political Science at the University of Miami, giving an overview of recent developments in Chinese militarism, including the massive show of military power during the 70th Anniversary of the Peoples Republic of China military parade this past October.

Dreyer dates the belligerent tone epitomized by this event to 2010 during Hu Jintao's presidency, which saw the South China Sea become a Chinese "core interest" and increased conflict with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. US countermoves to this aggression included the Department of Defense's AirSea Battle concept and Hillary Clinton's 2011 articulation of a "pivot to Asia" in US foreign policy under the Obama administration. Nevertheless, a lack of follow-through on these efforts resulted in few tangible gains.

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Dreyer noted a potential option for US policymakers is to avoid confrontation with China in the contested maritime regions while continuing to fly or sail wherever international law allows without being bullied into periodic confrontations with PLAN ships or PLAAF planes. An alternative US approach would be to join with allies and challenge China together; however, past cooperation with partners including India, Australia, and Japan has not taken off due to policy differences across administrations in these countries. A third course of action would be for the US to "meet China halfway" and negotiate. US concession to Chinese pressure in any way, though, is likely to embolden the Chinese government. While this situation seems to leave Taiwan with few options, Dreyer explained that China has numerous other issues of higher priority than cross-strait relations, which include economic stagnation and pollution on the mainland to simmering tensions in Xinjiang and at the border with India.

Michael Mazza, Visiting Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, explored how Chinese pressure campaign have constrained

Taiwan's international space and its ability to engage internationally by restricting Taiwanese participation in international assemblies and encouraging seven of Taiwan's diplomatic allies to sever ties in the last six years. China has also committed to Taiwan's symbolic erasure by pressuring individual companies to withdraw recognition of Taiwan as an independent government. According to Mazza, Beijing's interference in Taiwanese internal politics may be difficult to quantify, but it almost certainly boosted Kuomintang (KMT) gains in the 2018 mid-term election. Moreover, China's Taiwan Affairs Office's "31 Measures" announced in 2018 expresses China's aims to encourage pro-China sentiment in Taiwan and precipitate Taiwanese brain drain by luring Taiwanese students and businesspeople to live, work, and study on the Chinese mainland.

Mazza argued that Xi Jinping wants to isolate Taiwan internationally and achieve global acceptance of the One-China narrative. China's pressure tactics aim to undermine global appreciation of Taiwanese democracy and diminish global concern over cross-strait relations. China's territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea demonstrate this objective, as Chinese control of these maritime territories could empower it to injure Taiwan's regional

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trade. However, Beijing's pressure has not been very successful, as Taiwan has continued to receive international support and engagement. US-Taiwan relations remain particularly strong, and Taiwan's relationships with Japan and the European Union have seen similar advances recently. Because Western powers widely view Chinese assertiveness with concern, many have sought to forge informal relations with Taiwan. This has been especially true since the success of President Tsai Ing-wen's policies to expand Taiwan's international cultural and economic ties.

## **US Support for Taiwan**

According to Robert Sutter, Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the George Washington University, Taiwan's most important ally remains the US and ties between the two have only become stronger in recent years. Sutter describes four earlier periods of American support for Taiwan: in the late 1970s, with the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act; in the mid-1980s under Secretary of State George Shultz; immediately following the 1989

Tiananmen Square Massacre; and in 2001-2002 under the early Bush administration. The current fifth period of support for Taiwan is the strongest yet as the US has reaffirmed the importance of Taiwan's key strategic location and sought to encourage Taiwan's political democracy and free-market economy. Although American leaders avoided going so far as to upset Beijing, the negative impact of the current trade war on US-China relations has lessened the incentive for the US to hold back. Recent US support of Taiwan has included the sale of 66 F-16V fighters valued at \$8 billion at a reportedly special bargain price.

The US's other unprecedented steps taken to demonstrate its commitment to Taiwan include expressing public disapproval of countries such as El Salvador for cutting diplomatic ties with Taiwan, publicizing transits of US warships through the Taiwan Strait, and brazenly [referring to Taiwan as a "country" in the Department of Defense's June 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) which is valued as a "democratic partner" alongside states like New Zealand and Singapore. Compared to past decades, the Trump administration's interpretation of the One-China policy is considerably more flexible, but still not designed to provoke Beijing directly. More than anything, current US policy has stabilized support for Taiwan amidst Chinese pressure campaigns and this support is likely to continue and advance.

## **Mechanisms of Chinese Political Warfare**

Mark Stokes, Executive Director of the Project 2049 Institute, opened the second panel with a discussion of Chinese sharp power and political warfare. According to Stokes, the Chinese use of propaganda, subversion, and covert operations is deeply based in the Soviet tradition of Marxism-Leninism and the model set by Joseph Goebbels in Nazi-era Germany, which emphasized the use of multiple types of propaganda and established the absolute supremacy of intelligence.

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Political warfare, and specifically "liaison work," has continued to play a major role in Chinese aggression towards Taiwan. The Liaison Bureau's focus areas include public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. The bureau is often responsible for so-called "gray" and "black" propaganda, which involve varying degrees of disguising the sources of propaganda messages. In terms of organizational structure, Chinese political warfare is instigated by the Liaison Bureau (which includes clandestine

intelligence collection), the Investigation and Research Bureau, the External Propaganda Bureau, the Border Defense Bureau, and two province-level bureaus in Shanghai and Guangzhou. In order to combat Chinese sharp power and political warfare, Stokes calls for careful examination and scrutiny of Chinese embassies and organizations in Taiwan, Chinese relationships with international media and educational organizations, and Chinese ties to military and political officials outside of China.

## **Preserving Taiwan's International Space and the Outlook for Taiwan**

Jacques DeLisle, Professor of Law and Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, emphasized the importance of “visible identity” to uphold Taiwan’s international status and security. Taiwan is working to bolster its presence in major international organizations through compliance with major treaties and policies as if it were a formal member and maintain what formal diplomatic ties it has left with other states. In response to the Tsai administration’s efforts, Beijing has waged its own counteroffensive to hamper Taipei’s standing in international organizations and by wooing Taipei’s diplomatic allies to its side. Despite these setbacks, Taiwan is enjoying success in strengthening its informal ties, especially with the US and Japan. The construction of a new American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) office in Taipei serves as a tangible signal in US support for the Taiwanese government.

In the long-term, DeLisle argued that Taiwan should pursue opportunities for international engagement whenever possible. Because of Taiwan’s strong free-market economy, there are increasing odds for Taiwan’s accession to economic organizations rather than political organizations. Pursuing ad-hoc access to organizations and assemblies rather than full membership is more likely to be successful. Finally, as Chinese assertiveness has induced American and international pushback, Taiwan can capitalize on this dynamic to seek greater international space.

Bonnie Glaser, Director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, further expanded on strategies for advancing Taiwanese international space. Glaser first highlighted the importance of securing international participation, noting specifically access to information and databases, promoting an image of good global citizenship, and increasing global interaction. In the absence of formal international participation, Taiwan has enhanced its international engagement through the Global Cooperation Training Framework conferences in tandem with the US and, recently, Japan. These conferences enhance international understanding of Taiwan and convey Taiwan’s expertise in many fields, such as [media literacy](#).

Taiwan has also pursued international engagement through foreign aid and humanitarianism, and has focused on countries that have maintained diplomatic ties such as Haiti. Moreover, Tsai Ing-wen's New Southbound Policy has succeeded in enhancing regional relations with South and Southeast Asian countries through export agreements, economic cooperation, and increased study and tourism opportunities for nationals of these countries. Although Chinese pressure presents the foremost challenge to Taiwanese foreign affairs, Glaser argued that increasing international hostility towards China presents many opportunities for global cooperation with Taiwan.

Looking ahead to Taiwan's future prospects amidst increasing pressure from China, the key consensus among the panelists was that rising Chinese militarism and use of coercive tactics not only toward Taiwan, but also in the neighborhood and beyond, is proving to be counterproductive. China's actions are alarming a growing number of countries, and this backlash could give Taiwan new options to withstand Chinese pressure.

*By Olivia Saunders, Staff Assistant, Sigur Center for Asian Studies and the Rising Powers Initiative*

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### ***About the Sigur Center for Asian Studies and the Rising Powers Initiative***

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center

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