

Washington's three-pronged strategy to contain China's military power

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A distinct chill in Washington's relations with the People's Republic of China has developed during President Donald Trump's administration. Indeed, a growing number of analysts now speak openly that a new cold war exists between the two countries, with ominous implications for the global economy as well as prospects for continued peace in East Asia and beyond. Such concerns are well-founded, as US policy toward Beijing has become more confrontational on multiple fronts.

Adopting a more assertive policy toward Beijing also has strong bipartisan support. That aspect has become especially pronounced since the PRC's crackdown on Hong Kong. The measure imposing sanctions on PRC officials for that action passed the US Senate unanimously. During his campaign, former Vice President Joe Biden has gone out of his way to emphasize that he is even tougher than Donald Trump with respect to China policy.

Washington's implicit containment strategy embodies three significant components. One element is an increase in US political, diplomatic and military support for Taiwan. Another component is the expansion of America's own military presence throughout the Western Pacific, especially in the South China Sea and in Taiwan's neighborhood. The third part of the strategy consists of attempting to enlist India, Japan, Australia and other potential allies in a new network of security alliances directed against the PRC.

US support for Taiwan is substantially more robust today than it was when the Trump administration began. Indeed, there were hints that Washington's policy was about to change when President-elect Trump took a telephone call from Taiwan's President, Tsai Ing-wen, in early December 2016. Previously, high-level US leaders had avoided even the appearance of political and diplomatic collaboration with the Taiwanese government. That had been the implicit bargain when the United States shifted official relations to the PRC at the beginning of 1979. Beijing vehemently protested the Tsai-Trump conversation, but the incoming US administration brushed-off the objection.

Since Trump took office, a series of measures have noticeably deepened ties between Washington and Taipei. An especially key step was the Taiwan Travel Act in March 2018. That law not only authorized but explicitly encouraged US national security officials to interact with their Taiwanese counterparts, reversing a four-decades-old policy. It was a sign of developments to come that both houses of Congress passed the bill with little debate and by overwhelming margins. The following year, US National Security Advisor John Bolton met with David Lee, Secretary General of Taiwan's National Security Council, to discuss regional security issues of mutual concern to Washington and Taipei. Operational military cooperation also became evident

when the US Navy invited senior Taiwanese military officials to participate in a May 2018 gathering at US Pacific Command.

Since then, there have been several new milestones in Washington's support for Taiwan. In March 2020, President Trump signed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI Act), which, like previous measures, had passed Congress with strong bipartisan support. The new law instructed the US State Department to report to Congress on steps taken to strengthen Taiwan's diplomatic relations, and it required the United States to "alter" engagement with nations that undermine Taiwan's security or prosperity. The purpose was to impede Beijing's ongoing campaign to poach Taiwan's shrinking number of diplomatic partners. Washington also has tried to strengthen Taipei's diplomatic hand by pushing for Taiwanese membership in the World Health Organization and other international bodies.

Some measures, like the TAIPEI Act, are primarily symbolic. Other measures, though, are much more substantive, and aim to alter the military equation between Taiwan and the mainland. In mid-August, the Trump administration approved an \$8 billion sale of 66 advanced F-16v fighters to Taiwan – the largest weapons sale in many years – to help Taipei's concerted effort to strengthen its own military capabilities. Another, even more important measure, the Taiwan Defense Act (TDA) is now before Congress. If passed, the TDA would obligate the US government to "delay, degrade, and ultimately defeat" any attempt by the PRC to use military force against Taiwan. The proposed law reflects the growing push by Taipei's political allies in Congress and the foreign policy community to inject greater "strategic clarity" into Washington's support for Taiwan's security.

In addition to the growing diplomatic and logistical backing for Taipei, the US military presence near Taiwan is now visible and robust. The transit of US warships through the Taiwan Strait has become noticeably more frequent, even routine. Some Taiwan partisans want to go much further. One military affairs expert even suggested sending four US Army divisions to the island. Although it might seem like an outlandish "fringe" proposal, that is not the case; former National Security Adviser John Bolton once proposed redeploying US Marines stationed in Okinawa to Taiwan.

The increasing US air and naval presence near Taiwan is part of a larger **change in Washington's military posture throughout the Western Pacific**. That move is especially evident in the South China Sea. The number of so-called freedom of navigation patrols has expanded throughout the Trump years, and especially so in the past two years. Washington also has expanded the size and capabilities of those patrols.

Twice in July 2020, the Pentagon sent two aircraft carrier strike groups into those waters for joint drills. Less than a month later, one of the two strike forces, led by the USS Ronald Reagan, returned for yet another set of military exercises. Such large-scale displays of US air and naval power in the South China Sea were infrequent before those episodes.

American military planners are contemplating even more changes regarding Washington's military posture in the Western Pacific. In an important speech delivered in late September, Marine Corps Commandant General David Berger stated that the way the United States military has arrayed its forces for the last 70 years – focused on responding to a conflict on the Korean Peninsula – must change "to meet a new threat environment." The needed change would disperse

those forces, both to reduce their vulnerability to a decapitation attack, and to deal with contingencies away from Northeast Asia.

There was little doubt that China is the target of this new strategy. According to Berger, “We have to have a disbursed, distributed laydown in the Pacific that allows us to work with all the partners and allies and deter forces like the PLA from asserting themselves in a manner that tries to rewrite the global norms that have been well established in the past 70 years.”

The third prong in Washington’s China containment strategy is a **campaign to form stronger strategic links with existing allies and create such links with new allies**. Again, the South China Sea is an important arena for that component of the strategy. This summer, Washington made more explicit its rejection of Beijing’s extensive territorial claims. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also emphasized that the United States would provide active diplomatic backing to Southeast Asian nations who had competing claims with those of China. That comment was a clear invitation not only to the Philippines, a long-standing US ally, but to nations such as Vietnam and Malaysia, that Washington will back them if they resist the PRC’s pressure.

India is the prize jewel in the US effort to secure new allies to contain China. US leaders have had hopes along those lines for years and have actively courted Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government. The level of cooperation gradually increased, but Modi still carefully avoided enlisting in a US-led anti-China strategy. But with the recent armed clashes between Indian and PRC troops along the disputed border between the two countries in the Himalayas, Washington is renewing its push for a *de facto* alliance.

Even before the outbreak of actual combat, the United States and Australia proposed a new “network of alliances” to curb China. At the beginning of September, the Trump administration escalated its efforts, specifically suggesting that the United States, India, Australia and Japan, transform their Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which has existed since 2007, into a full-fledged “NATO-like” security alliance.

These various developments, taken together, strongly indicate that Washington now regards China not merely as a “strategic competitor” (George W. Bush’s term), but as an outright adversary. The three-prongs of a containment strategy are no longer at an embryonic stage either. US leaders are advancing them rapidly, despite the certainty that such moves will create an extremely tense security environment in East Asia and beyond. Nevertheless, given the extensive bipartisan support for a tougher policy toward the PRC, the strategy is likely to continue regardless of the outcome of the US 2020 election.

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