

## Washington's Hong Kong Humiliation Produces Tougher Stance on Taiwan

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China's decision to introduce a national security law in Hong Kong in late May caused considerable consternation in Washington, with both the Trump administration and Congress expressing their strong disapproval of Beijing's alleged dilution of Hong Kong's political autonomy. Immediately, the administration rescinded the territory's special trade status, and congressional leaders made a bipartisan push for economic sanctions targeted against the PRC's top leadership.

Although even the most hawkish elements in Congress and the administration accepted the foreign policy community's consensus that it was impossible for the United States to confront Beijing in a decisive fashion over Hong Kong without incurring excessive risks, they wanted to cause some discomfort and international embarrassment for the communist regime. The centerpiece of Washington's strategy was to enlist its allies in both Europe and East Asia to forge a common front in condemning the PRC's erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy, and to impose at least modest economic sanctions.

There is little question that the Trump administration was deeply disappointed by the response. Only Britain, Canada, and Australia signed on to Washington's proposal; most allies balked at the administration's request for a joint statement condemning the PRC's action. The German government's reaction was typical of the response from other governments. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas contended that the best way for the European Union nations to influence China on the Hong Kong dispute was to maintain a dialogue with Beijing. France was even less willing to join Washington in pressuring Beijing. The South China Morning Post reported that in a telephone call to China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Emmanuel Bonne, diplomatic counsellor to French President Emmanuel Macron, stressed that France respected China's national sovereignty and had no intention of interfering in its internal affairs regarding Hong Kong.

The EU itself adopted a tepid response to the PRC's imposition of the national security law. EU foreign ministers on May 29 adopted Germany's stance and emphasized the need for dialogue about Hong Kong. After a videoconference with the bloc's 27 foreign ministers, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell emphasized that only one country had even raised the subject of sanctions, and that he didn't believe China's actions would adversely affect the EU's diplomatic and economic engagement with the PRC.

The reaction of key Asian allies to Beijing's new restrictions on Hong Kong was not measurably better from Washington's standpoint. Japan's response was especially disappointing. After

more than a week of internal debate, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government declined to join the United States, Britain, Australia, and Canada in issuing a statement condemning the PRC's actions. Press reports indicated that the decision "dismayed" U.S. leaders. South Korea seemed even more determined than Japan to avoid taking sides in the dispute between the United States and China.

In short, the Trump administration's effort failed badly, causing the United States to suffer a major diplomatic humiliation. That outcome will impact Washington's overall policy in East Asia. One likely manifestation is to reinforce a trend that has been underway throughout the Trump years—growing support for Taiwan's de facto independence. U.S. leaders have every incentive to resist suffering another display of policy impotence on the heels of the Hong Kong episode. Moreover, Taiwan has much greater geostrategic significance, and Washington may feel that it cannot afford to concede another (even larger) victory to the PRC.

Already, evidence is emerging that U.S. support for Taiwan will intensify following the disappointing outcome of Washington's diplomatic effort regarding Hong Kong. The latest measures primarily entail symbolic gestures, but at least some of them also have military significance. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that he will address a multilateral forum, the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, later in June. Also in attendance at that gathering will be Taiwan's leader, Tsai Ing-wen. Pompeo's decision irritates the PRC government as readily as did President-elect Trump's infamous telephone conversation with Tsai in December 2016. In both episodes, the U.S. government was implicitly treating the Taiwanese leader as the president of an independent country

Other U.S. moves in the wake of its failures over Hong Kong may be even more provocative. On June 11, a U.S. military aircraft used Taiwan's airspace, with Taipei's explicit authorization, to fly from Okinawa to a destination in Southeast Asia. China's Taiwan Affairs Office charged that the U.S. plane had "harmed our sovereignty, security and development rights, and contravened international law and the basic norms of international relations," terming it "a seriously provocative incident." A week earlier, a guided-missile destroyer, the USS Russell, ostentatiously sailed through the Taiwan Strait despite Beijing's objections. It was the second American warship to transit the Strait in less than three weeks.

Such actions taken after China's imposition of the national security law on Hong Kong came on the heels of other measures confirming that Washington is more firmly in Taiwan's camp than at any time since the United States shifted its diplomatic recognition to the PRC in 1979. Just weeks before the Hong Kong crackdown, President Trump signed into law the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, requiring the U.S. State Department to report to Congress on steps taken to strengthen Taiwan's diplomatic relations. It also requires the executive branch to "alter" engagement with nations that undermine Taiwan's security or prosperity. On May 21, the Trump administration informed Congress that it planned to approve a new arms deal for Taiwan, agreeing to sell Taipei 18 advanced technology torpedoes.

Those measures deepen a trend toward more robust support for Taiwan that has been building since President Trump took office. An especially important step occurred in 2018 with the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act. That law not only authorized, but actively encouraged high-level U.S. national security officials to interact with their Taiwanese counterparts, reversing a

four-decades-old policy. The following year, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton met with David Lee, Secretary General of Taiwan's National Security Council.

Just as the U.S. position regarding Taiwan is hardening, so too is Beijing's stance. In a speech on May 21, Premier Li Keqiang noticeably left out the word "peaceful" in referring to Beijing's intention to "reunify" with Taiwan. That omission signals an ominous policy shift, even as Beijing's ties with Taipei already were on a downward spiral. Relations between Taiwan and the mainland have been increasingly tense ever since the landslide victory of Tsai Ing-wen and her pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in the island's 2016 elections. Tsai's even stronger mandate in the January 2020 elections increased Beijing's frustration and anger.

PRC military exercises in and near the Taiwan Strait have become larger and more frequent over the past four years—with Taiwan reporting an additional spike in 2020, including intrusions into Taiwanese air space. Such developments suggest that Beijing's patience on the reunification issue is coming to an end, just as its patience with disruptive pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong eventually ended.

But Chinese leaders may be making a deadly mistake if they assume that the United States will back away from a confrontation over Taiwan. Granted, the stunning lack of allied support in response to Beijing's actions in Hong Kong must make U.S. policymakers wonder if there would be much support even from America's key East Asian allies in the event of a U.S.-PRC showdown over Taiwan. But keeping Taiwan out of Beijing's orbit has far more importance to U.S. leaders than adopting a firm stance on Hong Kong. The loss of Taiwan would fatally undermine Washington's longstanding policy of strategic primacy in East Asia. The United States would be implicitly conceding that the PRC was now the dominant power in that region.

U.S. leaders are unlikely to conduct such a retreat, even if the United States had to wage an armed struggle alone against China. Indeed, Washington's humiliation regarding Hong Kong makes a determination to adopt an uncompromising stance about Taiwan, and thereby refurbish America's credentials as East Asia's dominant power even more probable. As an increasingly beleaguered hegemon, the United States is under mounting pressure to repel China's challenge to that status. Given its economic, symbolic, and strategic importance, Taiwan is likely to be the place that Washington adamantly refuses to retreat. The chances of a disastrous U.S.-PRC collision are growing.

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