

Taiwan's Strategic Shift: From Defensive to Offensive

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The least noticed but most consequential accomplishment of the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen in its first four years was to change Taiwan's strategic role.

Since 1949, Taiwan's strategic role has gone through three stages, from defensive to offensive, from passive to active. The earliest stage was the Cold War. As part of the U.S. containment of Communist China, Taiwan adopted a strategic defensive position very reluctantly. Time and again, it sought to strike the Chinese mainland but each time it was thwarted by the United States.

Taiwan's democratization ushered in the second stage which coincided with China's "reform and opening-up." Due to the shared culture, the same ethnicity and geographical proximity of the two sides of the Strait, Taiwan's economic development and political democratization were found attractive by quite a few people in the mainland. Thus many in the US and Taiwan believed that the mainland could be nudged towards a pluralistic and open society through cross-strait exchanges. The offensive and pro-active nature of Taiwan's mainland policy at this stage was more pronounced than what was in the previous stage.

A new stage dawned after President Tsai and President Donald Trump took office successively. The driving force for the transformation stemmed from the anti-China hawks within both Taiwan and the US. Ideologically armed with the "two-state theory," Tsai chose the "anti-China and pro-U.S." approach from her day one. She sought not only to suppress opposition parties, but also barred all moderates of her own party from

joining the new administration. However, because the U.S. had not yet adopted “anti-China” policy at her early months, she contented herself with “distancing China” in cross-strait interaction and “China bashing” at home, waiting patiently for the favorable “anti-China” wind to blow from Washington.

Trump also appointed all hawks, excluding moderates at the outset. After the "pragmatic hawks" bowed out one by one and the "ideological hawks" finally gained complete power in his mid-term, "anti-China" policy was enshrined as Washington's “whole of government” approach to China. By then, the U.S. and Taiwan were fully in sync, and "anti-China" moves popped up more loudly and frequently.

They could be seen at three levels. The first is the political level. With the U.S. in the open and Taiwan more covertly, they collaboratively floated such initiatives as "recognizing Taiwan as an independent country", "amending the one-China policy", "inviting Tsai to speak to the U.S. Congress", "promoting high-level visits," and "the U.S. formally committed to the defense of Taiwan (not just arms sales)," and passing several bills such as the "Taiwan Travel Act," etc. Despite the sound and fury, they proved to be mostly lip service till the end of July 2020. Whether the August visit of U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azart to Taiwan would start a new stage of political breakthroughs remains to be seen.

Second, the actions of the U.S. and Taiwan during Hong Kong's turmoil in 2019 were viewed by China starkly as interference in Hong Kong's internal affairs. Beijing was perhaps not surprised by the American role, but Taiwan was an entirely different story. Taiwan had never intervened in Hong Kong's internal affairs before. So its active role last year must have astonished and angered Beijing immensely. For Beijing, this signified not only the linking up of Taiwan independence and HK independence movements, but also Taiwan's strategic offensive against the Mainland. Cross-strait relationship has since crossed the point of no return.

Third, the most sensitive military level. Outsiders have no way of knowing the relevant plans and degrees of their implementation. But canvassing through the open sources in

Chinese and English published in the U.S. and Taiwan would yield quite a few new ideas whose boldness would put to shame former presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian. Just to list a few:

- Stationing one thousand to several thousand U.S. troops in Taiwan, including the Marine Corps and special force
- U.S. naval ships berthed at Taiwan ports
- Deploying U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Taiwan
- Deploying THAAD system or land-based Aegis system in Taiwan
- Acquiescing in Taiwan's development of intermediate-range cruise missiles
- Assisting Taiwan in developing the capability to hit the siloes of China's land-based ICBMs, so as to reduce the pressure on Washington to be retaliated by Beijing when the U.S. came to Taiwan's rescue
- Taiwan using self-made or U.S.-made UAVs to cruise the Taiwan Strait, collecting information on the movements of the People's Liberation Army and sharing such information with the U.S.
- Taiwan fighters flying around certain islands off the coast of the Mainland
- President Tsai boarding a US aircraft carrier
- Taiwan participating in U.S.-Taiwan bilateral or multinational joint exercises

These ideas show that American and Taiwanese strategists are quite open-minded in their mental exercises, with no holds barred. Their purpose seems not only to defend Taiwan, but also to deepen the connection between Taiwan and the U.S. Indo-Pacific layout. In the eyes of Beijing, some of them may simply be political provocations, but most of others appear not only to have a military offensive nature, they even clearly violate the agreement between the U.S. and the PRC on troop withdrawal from Taiwan while establishing diplomatic relations in 1979. Thus their affront far exceeds what triggered off the missile crisis of the 1996 in the Taiwan Strait. So China (especially the People's Liberation Army) most likely would treat them with utter seriousness. At present, the U.S.-Taiwan Marine Corps joint training in Taiwan is no longer a secret, and the signs of probable sales of UAVs to Taiwan have also sprouted in the media. If other ideas are to be implemented in the near future, the Taiwan Strait will definitely be sliding closer to the

brink of conflict.

China had long considered Vietnam to be an "ungrateful Communist brother" in 1970s yet it refrained from violence for many years. After Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978 and occupied its capital in the following month, Vietnam's strategic role was perceived by Beijing to have immediately changed into a "small hegemon" in the Indochina Peninsula, which was likely to join hands with the hostile northern "big hegemon" (the Soviet Union). This posed a new strategic threat to Beijing, which had to be dealt with to avoid unpredictable troubles in the long run. China at the time was still reeling from the aftermath of the tumultuous Cultural Revolution and ill-prepared for war. But the then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping resolutely decided to bite the bullet by launching a punitive campaign against Vietnam in February 1979, so that it would not dare to act rashly in the future. History has proven that the campaign to "punish Vietnam," though costly, contributed to stabilizing China's external environment for decades.

What should worry the Tsai administration now is not allegedly whether Taiwan would become another Hong Kong, but whether it would become the next Vietnam. What pains us is, how we got to such a point.

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