

# The problem with inviting Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen to speak to a joint meeting of Congress

Richard C. Bush Monday, Friday, 8, 2019

A group of United States senators [have called on](#) Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to invite Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, to address a joint meeting of Congress. President Tsai certainly deserves our respect. She is the elected leader of one of America's best friends in the world. I have known her for 20 years and admire her greatly. But the senators' proposal is flawed and Speaker Pelosi should reject it.

The first flaw in the proposal is that it is contrary to a fundamental principle of U.S. relations with China. That is, when we established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1979, we pledged that we would carry out substantive relations with Taiwan and its government on an unofficial basis. This was not our choice. We would have been happy to have diplomatic relations with both Beijing and Taipei. It was those two governments that forced us to choose. First President Nixon and then President Carter decided that it was in our national interest to choose Beijing, and every president since then has reaffirmed that pledge. But even though our relations with Taiwan are conducted on an unofficial basis, successive administrations have worked actively and successfully to improve relations with the island and ensure its well-being.

If the president of Taiwan were to speak to a joint meeting of Congress, any U.S. claim that its relations with Taiwan were unofficial would ring completely hollow. China would interpret the move as Washington's reneging on the fundamental bargain at the heart of U.S.-PRC relations. Although I cannot predict exactly what Beijing would do in response, a radical downgrading of the relationship would be likely. Any hope that

President Trump would have of cutting a trade deal with his New Best Friend Xi Jinping would vanish. U.S. requests for Chinese assistance concerning North Korea would fall on very deaf ears. Many sectors of American society that still value the U.S.-China relationship would be hurt. American multinationals that rely on China as a market or production platform would be vulnerable to retaliation, with attendant effects on jobs and profits. Some Americans in China might suffer the same fate as the Canadians who currently sit in Chinese jails through no fault of their own.

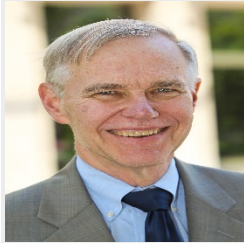
The second flaw in this proposal is Taiwan would suffer. This initiative began in the United States, and Beijing would take the opportunity to pressure and squeeze Taiwan even more than it is already doing. It would likely find ways to get the small number of countries that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei to switch to the PRC. Taiwan-directed exercises by China's People's Liberation Army would intensify. China's efforts to interfere in Taiwan's domestic politics would increase. So, a gesture that senators intended to help Taiwan would only hurt it. What happens then? We might push back, creating the risk of an escalatory spiral with China. Or we might choose to do little or nothing, leading Taiwan and other friends in Asia to conclude that our commitments to support them are not credible.

The third flaw in this initiative is its disregard for Taiwan's view. I'm guessing here, but I suspect that the authors did not ask President Tsai if she thought this was a good idea—and, if they did ask, they didn't listen very carefully to her answer. President Tsai is responsible for the prosperity and safety of 23 million people. She understands that she must maintain some degree of balance between relations with the United States on the one hand and relations with China on the other. Clearly, relations with China are not as good as she might like them to be, but I believe she would not wish to risk a further, serious deterioration in relations with Beijing unless it brought it an extraordinary benefit. That is the risk she would run by speaking for an hour at the podium of the House Chamber, and her country would pay a high price.

Make no mistake: The United States should continuously find ways to improve relations with Taiwan. We need to improve our economic relationship and help Taiwan effectively enhance its deterrence against China. That requires engaging Taiwan leaders on how they realistically

believe American can help them, not how we think we should help. Forty years of American experience in conducting U.S.-China relations has demonstrated the need to be skillful and sometimes stealthy in our Taiwan diplomacy. Public symbols, deftly deployed, are important in relations with Taiwan, but substance is far more important. Ill-considered symbolic gestures like this one would make substantive progress Taiwan more difficult, not less.

## Author



### **Richard C. Bush**

The Michael H. Armacost Chair

Chen-Fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies