

Trilateral Relations under the Trump Administration

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In recent weeks, analysts have been busy dissecting the new year's speeches given by President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and President Tsai Ing-wen of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, commenting on how the relationship has changed and what observers might expect to see this year, the 40th anniversary of China's 1979 New Year's Day statement to Taiwan. It is worth noting that this year also marks another 40th anniversary, that of the enactment of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), and it is worth looking at the current state of trilateral (Washington-Beijing-Taipei) relations and how current trends and trajectories might affect future developments in the Taiwan Strait, with a special focus on the military and security dimensions of this complex relationship.

Many journalists and commentators on the issue begin their analyses of Washington-Beijing ties by referencing the Thucydides Trap. Indeed, the details of that concept itself are less illuminating than the frequency with which it is referenced, revealing an expectation that Beijing's goal of displacing America's perceived regional—if not global—hegemony is close to fruition. This ascendance appears to be the expectation of much of the commentariat on China, just as it is the Manifest Destiny as perceived by the leaders of China. Moreover, for the past several US administrations, there has been remarkably little pushback on aggressive and expansionist actions by China. Despite a strong start to the administration of President George W. Bush, for example, who early in his tenure stated the US would do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan, he quickly shifted focus when, after the 9/11 attacks, America devoted its energies to the fight against terrorism in the Middle East, with little time left for East Asia. Indeed, Washington enlisted the aid of Beijing to handle an increasingly belligerent North Korea while the United States was bogged down in the Middle East. The result was an increasingly nuclearized Pyongyang and an emboldened Beijing.

In the years since, China has abandoned its "peaceful rise" rhetoric and "good neighbour" policy and continued to expand its sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific region (it has done so in other regions as well, including throughout Latin America and Africa, but this is not within the purview of this brief). Other powers in the region have struggled to deal with this through the adoption of either a balancing policy or one of bandwagoning. The Philippines, once a staunch ally of the United States, began the century with a balancing policy but jumped on the China bandwagon after the election of President Rodrigo Duterte.

One of the most interesting aspects of the US-China relationship over the past two decades has been the degree to which Chinese cyber-operations as well as state-supported industrial espionage has contributed to the growth of China's high-tech sector at the expense of US IT firms, as well as firms in other parts of the Western world. Security analysts and academics have been tracking this phenomenon for years, but neither government officials nor Western media outlets overtly acknowledged that it was happening. That is, until recently. It was only with the election of President Donald Trump that the United States started to call Beijing to task on their unfair trade practices and theft of intellectual property. At first glance, it appears that this is little more than a component of a trade war launched by Trump in an effort to secure a better deal with Beijing. However, this interpretation is incorrect.

The real purpose of Trump's trade war with China is not so much to secure a better pact for the dealmaker-in-chief: its aim is to fundamentally restructure the trade relationship between the United States and China to one that is, from the American perspective, on an equal footing. By going after Chinese practices such as stealing intellectual property, the Trump administration is seeking to create a system wherein the United States and China compete fairly in the fast-changing high-tech economy. As a communist society, China is at a natural disadvantage in that it is less entrepreneurial, less innovative, and less dynamic. In Trump's eyes, these are the qualities in which American businesses excel and — on a level playing field — will always outperform their Chinese competitors. The Chinese must surely be aware of this as well, and are at a loss as to how to deal with trump.

Upon first taking office, Trump's unconventional actions caused consternation in Beijing, and Chinese foreign-affairs stakeholders began frantically reaching out to their Western contacts for advice on how to handle this loose cannon. The practice of Sino-US diplomacy had become ritualized under successive administrations of conventional, establishment-approved US presidents, and Chinese leaders knew that the regime could continue its espionage and influence operations in the Western world simply because they had been allowed to do so. Only Trump began calling them to task, and perhaps not unpredictably, the world has largely fallen in line behind Trump in his effort to stop China's theft of high technology.

Why has it taken so long to acknowledge China's behaviour and react to put an end to it? For one thing, governments and corporations are dangerously over-invested in China, and largely stayed mum in order to avoiding putting their investments at risk. For another, it is said that it is the practice of generals to fight the last war. Many policymakers, if they conceive of China as a potential enemy at all, focus on the admittedly impressive growth of that country's conventional military assets. If a conflict between the West and China does erupt, however, it will not (at least initially) be characterized by military action so much as by cyber-attack, trade reprisals, and other non-conventional means of defeating an enemy. In the next inter-state war, it will be the country that best leverages quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and the internet of things that will emerge the victor.

It is these capabilities that China has been tasking its intelligence apparatus to obtain from a heretofore complacent West. Taiwan is on the front line of this effort, with experts in the island's IT industry pointing out that Taiwan has become a rehearsal zone for Chinese cyber attacks. In the past decade of targeted data-theft attacks, they have experience identifying specific attack signatures directed against Taiwanese victims, and those same signatures are then picked up again months later in attacks on US targets. Indeed, some analysts would characterize the state of cyber-attack and defence currently taking place (largely invisible to the average citizen) as already being a full-blown state of war between China and the West, albeit one more akin to the Cold War between NATO and the USSR. This puts Taiwan on the front lines of any such conflict, and like its unconventional approach to China, the Trump administration has been uncharacteristically supportive of Taiwan. In recent years, Washington could be relied upon to admonish Taipei not to unilaterally change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait even as Beijing had been doing exactly that, through incremental means, for decades. It is only since Trump took office that there has been some pushback—at least verbally—for such infractions.

There are several examples of this uncharacteristic behaviour. Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act and National Defence Authorisation Bill allowing high-level official and military exchanges, and approved two batches of weapons sales to Taipei. Vice President Mike Pence on October 4, 2018 spoke at Washington's Hudson Institute in which he recognized that, as a communist country with none of the protections that democracies afford, China was not really an ally of the United States. In a rare move for a US official, Pence castigated Beijing for poaching Taipei's diplomatic partners. Indeed: Washington recalled its ambassadors from three countries (El Salvador, Panama, and the Dominican Republic) over their de-recognition of Taipei in favour of Beijing. This was unprecedented. In addition to speaking positively about Taiwan's "embrace of democracy" and the example this set for "all the Chinese people," Pence criticized the Chinese regime for pressuring US companies, including hotel chains and airlines, to list Taiwan as being in some way a territory belonging to China. While it may seem inconsequential or nit-picking, this latter is an important issue, and the amount of attention it received not just from Taipei but from Washington is illustrative.

The reason why naming conventions are important is that they represent efforts by Beijing to spread the narrative that Taiwan is in some way a "renegade province" of China. If populations in America and other Western countries accept this narrative—and they seem to, in the absence of any effective efforts by Taipei to counter this view—then they will be less willing to commit blood and treasure to defending the island against a Chinese attack. It is small, seemingly unimportant efforts such as this that hint at a larger aim by Beijing to set the stage for annexation of Taiwan within the near to medium term. Indeed, China over the past decade had been very successful in wresting de facto control over the entire South China Sea, and it did so while the nations of the world looked on, or at best issued tepid condemnations of its island-building and militarization efforts there. The method by which this was accomplished is the so-called salami-slicing strategy, wherein small, incremental moves, none of which alone constitutes a *casus belli*, eventually accumulate to a strategic victory gained without fighting. The strategy was so effective in the SCS that the PRC quickly turned to employing it on Taiwan, as evidenced by such actions as the naming issue, military overflights in Taiwan airspace, the aforementioned cyber attacks, and host of other small steps.

What is important at this juncture is that Western nations continue to support the Trump administration's efforts to curtail Chinese theft of cutting-edge technologies and stem the expansion of its sphere of influence. By allowing this behaviour to continue, previous administrations only emboldened the PRC. The difficulty will be in not allowing the near-universal personal disdain for Donald Trump himself to interfere with official support for his administration's efforts on the China issue.