

US stages another provocation in the Taiwan Strait

By Ben McGrath
26 March 2019

The United States sent two warships through the Taiwan Strait on Sunday, only days before the opening of trade talks with China in Beijing. This deliberate provocation over Taiwan, China's most sensitive diplomatic issue, is a clear threat aimed at forcing the Chinese to accept a US-dictates trade deal.

The USS Curtis Wilbur, a naval destroyer, and the Bertholf, a US Coast Guard (USCG) cutter entered the strait dividing Taiwan from the Chinese mainland from the south. The US incursion was the third in as many months, as the Trump administration ramps up measures to bring further military pressure to bear on Beijing. Washington also sent warships through the strait last year in July, October and November.

"The ships' transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," declared Commander Clayton Doss, a spokesman for the US Navy's Seventh Fleet. He added, in an implicit threat to Beijing, "The US will continue to fly, sail and operate anywhere international law allows."

China's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang urged the US to "cautiously and appropriately handle the Taiwan issue to avoid harming Sino-US relations and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." He also stated that "China has lodged stern representations with the US."

The presence of a US Coast Guard vessel raised some eyebrows in the media, summed up by the headline of a *Navy Times* article, "Why did a Coast Guard cutter take a jab at China?" The idea of using the Coast Guard for so-called "freedom of navigation" operations, i.e., provocations against China, has been discussed in US ruling circles since at least January 2017, the same month Trump came to office.

That year, Admiral Paul Zukunft, then head of the

Coast Guard, called for "a permanent USCG presence in the South China Sea and related areas. This would allow us to expand our working relationship with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan. We can spearhead work with allies on freedom of navigation exercises as well." Proponents claimed Coast Guard vessels would be less provocative, in an attempt to justify the further US military buildup in the South China Sea and throughout the region in preparation for war with China.

Trump has continually stoked tensions with China over Taiwan, which Beijing views as a renegade province. While Taiwan and Beijing both adhere to the 1992 Consensus recognizing the "One China" policy, the current government in Taipei of Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party has cautiously leaned towards Taiwanese independence, though not making any formal declarations.

Beijing has maintained that it will use military force to retake Taiwan should it ever declare independence. In this regard, the US navy's moves are not routine, but purposely risk a clash to further US geopolitical interests and measure how far China can be pushed. Beijing, however, has no intention of allowing an independent, US-aligned Taiwan to become a military base for Washington.

Chief Hu Xijin, editor of China's state-owned *Global Times*, said in a statement on Monday, "[US] warships must pass through the Taiwan Strait in an orderly way. They shouldn't make dangerous moves such as interacting with Taiwan's military or docking at a Taiwan port. Or else, the Chinese mainland is bound to retaliate."

China has previously threatened to attack Taiwan if a US warship docks at a Taiwanese port, a red-line the Trump administration came close to breaching last

October when an American naval scientific research vessel docked at the Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung during heightened tensions.

Washington, however, is already moving to build up its relations with Taiwan's military. According to a March 22 *Bloomberg* article, sources within the White House stated that advisors to Trump have urged Taiwan to submit a request for the sale of sixty-six F-16 fighter jets, produced by Lockheed Martin.

The approval of the deal would be the first since 1992, when the US sold Taiwan 150 F-16 jets. The Obama administration rejected a similar request in 2011, instead agreeing to upgrade Taiwan's existing fleet as part of a larger arms deal. Overall, the US has sold more than \$15 billion in weaponry to Taiwan since 2010.

In addition, the Trump administration approved the Taiwan Travel Act last March, allowing increased visits between US and Taiwanese officials. The massive US military spending bill passed last year called for further arms deals and increased cooperation with Taiwan's military, including "opportunities for practical training and military exercises with Taiwan" and "exchanges between senior defense officials and general officers of the United States and Taiwan consistent with the Taiwan Travel Act."

In this regard, the sale of the F-16s to Taiwan is not simply a bargaining chip in trade talks. The build-up of Taiwan's military is part of an overall strategy, backed by the Republicans and the Democrats, to militarily encircle China and force Beijing to acquiesce to US demands.

"There is a consensus that's almost bipartisan in Washington that it's time to be a bit more assertive against China," noted Richard Aboulafia, an analyst from the Teal Group. "This is the part where fighters are geopolitics with wings."

The trade war instigated by Trump is part of this strategy. It centers on demands for "structural reforms" in China that would give US corporations access to cheap labor and resources while eliminating an economic competitor.

US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin will be in Beijing for trade talks on March 28. China's Vice Premier Liu He will lead a delegation to Washington on April 3.

On the negotiations, Wei Zongyou, an expert on China-US relations at Fudan University in Shanghai, stated that "the US has constantly emphasized the verification mechanism and use of punitive tariffs as a counterweight." Washington has threatened to more than double the current ten percent tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese goods while imposing new tariffs.

In essence, Washington is demanding Beijing relinquish sovereignty over its economy and return to a period of semi-colonial status. Naturally, Beijing will be unable to meet such conditions, leaving the US to further inflame tensions, risking the outbreak of a catastrophic war.

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