

Confrontation between Chinese and Taiwanese fighter jets

By Peter Symonds
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A 10-minute aerial confrontation between Chinese and Taiwanese fighter jets over the Taiwan Strait on Sunday has once again highlighted the dangers of a war in Asia fueled by the Trump administration, which has deliberately inflamed the region's volatile flashpoints.

Taiwan condemned what it described as a “reckless and provocative” move by Beijing after two Chinese warplanes crossed the de-facto maritime border in the Taiwan Strait known as the “median line.” The Taiwanese military scrambled its own fighter planes to warn off the Chinese jets.

Taiwanese presidential spokesman Huang Chung-yen declared that China “should stop acting in ways that endanger regional peace and well-being, and not become an international troublemaker.” He said that Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, had been informed and directed the island's armed forces to “take all necessary combat preparedness measures.”

If Chinese warplanes did cross the median line, it would be the first incursion since 2011 which was judged to be accidental. Beijing is yet to comment on Sunday's incident, which comes in the wake of a series of US moves that are aimed at bolstering ties with Taiwan and calling into question its adherence to the so-called One China policy.

US President Richard Nixon's rapprochement with China in 1972 involved the tacit recognition of Beijing as the legitimate ruler of all China, including Taiwan. In 1979, the US formally established diplomatic relations and ended its ties with the military dictatorship on Taiwan established by the Kuomintang (KMT) after its defeat in the 1949 Chinese revolution. At the same time, Washington committed to opposing any forcible reunification with Taiwan by Beijing and to continuing arms sales to Taipei.

Trump, who on assuming office publicly called the

One China policy into question, has repeatedly and deliberately provoked Beijing by boosting arms sales to Taiwan, increasing US naval operations in the tense Taiwan Strait, and by signing the Taiwan Travel Act into law authorising top level contact between US and Taiwanese civilian and military officials.

Prior to Sunday's aerial stand-off, the US military sent two ships—the Navy destroyer Curtis Wilbur and Coast Guard cutter Berholf—through the Taiwan Strait for the third time this year and the sixth time since it resumed such transits last July. The Chinese foreign ministry stated that it had lodged “representations” with Washington and urged caution by the US “to avoid harming Sino-US relations and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”

Last Wednesday, Taiwanese President Tsai used a so-called “transit stop” in Hawaii to launch a broadside against China and call for a beefing up of US arms sales to Taipei in remarks delivered via video link to the right-wing US think tank, the Heritage Foundation.

Tsai accused Beijing of trying to “alter the status quo” and “undermine our democratic institutions.” She dismissed China's “one nation, two systems” proposal for unifying Taiwan with the mainland and declared that China's actions “underscored the need for Taiwan to increase our self-defence and deterrence capacities.”

Tsai belongs to the Democratic Progressive Party, which is based on Taiwanese nationalism and does not accept the current status quo in relations with China. While stopping short of declaring formal independence from China, which could provoke a Chinese attack, the DPP, encouraged by the Trump administration, has adopted a more assertive stance for Taiwan.

Tsai was touring the Pacific in a bid to shore up Taiwan's diplomatic relations with three tiny Pacific Island states—Palau, Nauru and the Marshall Islands.

The three are among the few countries in the world to maintain relations with Taiwan, rather than China.

The most significant aspect of Tsai's comments was a call for the US to sell more than 60 advanced F-16V fighter jets to Taiwan, as well as M1 heavy tanks, which she said would "greatly enhance our land and air capacities, strengthen military morale and show the world the US commitment to Taiwan's defence."

The US has not sold fighter jets to Taiwan since 1992. While the F-16V fighters are fourth generation, not fifth generation warplanes, they are fitted with advanced radar and avionics, unlike Taiwan's present aging fleet of F-16s. The US has so far refused to sell its fifth-generation stealth fighters, the F-22 and F-35, to Taiwan.

While the sale would not immediately alter the military balance between China and Taiwan, it would be a clear sign that Washington is strengthening ties with Taipei and would enhance Taiwan's capacity to take part in a US-led war against China. The island's strategic location just off the Chinese mainland prompted US General MacArthur to describe it in 1950 as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier" in the event of war.

Bloomberg reported on Monday: "Trump administration officials have given tacit approval to Taipei's request to buy more than 60 Lockheed Martin Corp. F-16s, according to people familiar with the matter."

Suggestions that the US sale could proceed have sent shockwaves through Beijing. The Chinese foreign ministry last week said that it had lodged "stern representations" with the US, while the defence ministry warned that the sale undermined the One China policy.

Senior Colonel Wu Qian told the media last Thursday: "Any words or actions that undermine the One China policy are tantamount to shaking the foundation of China-US relations, are inconsistent with the fundamental interests of China and the United States and are also extremely dangerous."

China's show of air power over the Taiwan Strait was clearly meant as a warning to both Taiwan and the US.

Taiwan, along with the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea, are among the most volatile and dangerous flashpoints in the world. Yet the Trump administration is recklessly disrupting longstanding

diplomatic norms as it escalates its confrontation with China over trade and steps up its military preparations for war.

Trump's aggressive stance towards Beijing is a continuation of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" aimed at encircling China and building up US military forces in the Indo-Pacific. US imperialism is determined to maintain its global hegemony if need be through military force against China, Russia or any other potential rival.

The danger is that a minor incident in the Taiwan Strait, whether deliberate or accidental, could become the trigger for a conflict between nuclear-armed powers that escalates out of control into all-out war.

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