

Trump 2.0: A Message to Taiwan

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Taiwan's armed forces hold two days of routine drills to show combat readiness ahead of Lunar New Year holidays at a military base in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, on Jan. 11, 2023. Annabelle Chih/Getty Images



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Commentary

The Taiwanese share something in common with the Japanese. Both nations have deep-seated doubts that the United States really will

defend them—though in Taiwan’s case, it’s probably a more rational concern.

A Taiwanese friend noted that President-elect Donald Trump made no clear statement of support for Taiwan during his electoral campaign and asked a handful of questions about Taiwan’s prospects under the new administration.

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What will Trump’s Taiwan policy look like during his second term? Should Taiwan worry?

Taiwan was not an issue in the U.S. election campaign. It never is—for any candidate. Very few, if any, voters decide on a presidential candidate based on their position on Taiwan.

So, the fact that Trump didn’t deliver a detailed explanation of his Taiwan policy while running his presidential campaign—and even suggested Taiwan wasn’t doing enough—shouldn’t be much of an issue.

More importantly, consider how Trump and his administration handled Taiwan during his first term from 2017 to 2021. While Trump was president, arms sales to Taiwan expanded considerably over the Obama administration’s “weak” on China/“weak” on Taiwan performance.

Also, Taiwan’s isolation eased as the United States paid more attention to Taiwan—and senior U.S. officials (serving and former ones) made visits to Taiwan. Most importantly, Trump’s administration was the first one ever—since former President Richard Nixon opened up to China—to stand up to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and for the free world’s interests.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hated the Trump administration and his advisers handling China policy—in particular, Mike Pompeo, Matthew Pottinger, David Stilwell, and Miles Yu, among others. That tells you everything you need to know.

So remember, always look at what Trump does—not what he says.

How will the new Cabinet members handle Taiwan security issues?

The two Cabinet members most involved in Taiwan matters—Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and Florida Rep. Mike Waltz, designated secretary of State and national security adviser, respectively—have been strong in opposing the Chinese Communists and have track records of specific legislative efforts to resist and roll-back PRC aggression and misbehavior.

Both of them understand Taiwan's importance to the free world and will make strong efforts to defend the island and allow it to defend itself, assuming Taipei is willing to do so.

During Trump's campaign, he demanded that Taiwan pay protection fees, which aroused heated discussions. Should we worry?

This was a concocted controversy. Trump rightly observed that Taiwan does not spend nearly enough on its own defense—and, in fact, has not done so for the last 30 years.

Trump understands that most of the U.S. public will not tolerate sending Americans to die on Taiwan's behalf, while Taiwan will not do everything possible to defend itself. That's the reality of American politics these days. Taipei also needs to understand this.

And this position resonates with most Americans—especially those whose children serve in the U.S. military. It applies not only to Taiwan but also to the European nations, Japan, Australia, and Canada.

It is also expected that the United States will put more pressure on Taiwan's defense budget. What kind of measures do you think Taiwan should take in response to this?

Above all, recognize that pressure over defense spending. This reflects the desire for Taiwan to improve its overall defense—not just to allocate more money to the defense budget.

Then do the following:

- Prepare the Taiwanese public for a possible war. Visitors to Taiwan are often struck by the lack of concern—and outright indifference—among Taiwan’s population over the nearby threat from the PRC.
- Greatly increase defense spending.
- Reorganize the Taiwan military and its operating concepts so it presents a more difficult challenge for the People’s Liberation Army. This will probably require retiring a number of senior officers and giving younger, less hidebound officers a chance to reform Taiwan’s military and how it fights.
- Fix the currently shambolic Taiwan military reserve system. It is not anywhere near as effective as it should be—and could be.
- Develop a real civil defense scheme for all of Taiwan that directly involves the civilian population in national defense activities.
- Counter the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) political warfare, aggressively target its fifth column, which is in Taiwan, and conduct a serious counter-intelligence effort against people spying for the CCP in Taiwan. There are reportedly lots of them.
- Invest heavily in long-range precision weapons, smart sea mines, offensive cyber capabilities, and hardening Taiwan’s communications networks to improve Taiwan’s chances of surviving a Chinese assault.
- End the disastrous move toward renewable energy in Taiwan and bulk up the island’s energy infrastructure and conventional

energy stocks.

- Do everything possible to show the United States that Taiwan is trying to defend itself and that it can defend itself.

Do all this—or even most of it—and American support is far more likely.

Many people describe Trump as isolationist and worry he will withdraw America’s stabilizing presence from world affairs. Should we worry?

No.

Trump (and his supporters) are often called “isolationists”—but what is the evidence? Look at Trump’s first four years (2017–2021) and show me the evidence he was an isolationist.

Did the United States withdraw from the world? No.

Which permanent forward-deployed U.S. forces in the Asia–Pacific or Europe were brought home? None.

Which alliance with an ally ended? None.

Wanting the United States to be careful about getting involved in foreign wars—and sending young Americans to die—does not make one an isolationist.

Similarly, insisting that our allies and friends spend more of their own money and sacrifice more of their own young people does not make one an isolationist.

If anything, it’s common sense.

The United States cannot and should not be the world’s policeman—especially on behalf of partners who’ve taken the Americans and their

protection for granted. And yes, I'm referring to the Europeans, the Australians, and the Japanese, among others.

Also, defending the U.S. economy from unfair trade practices by other nations is not isolationist. For decades, it was assumed that the United States could absorb any damage caused by other countries (even our friends) that manipulated trade practices in their own favor.

Wanting to recover U.S. manufacturing is not isolationist—after too much of it was moved overseas by America's pedigreed class in the last 40 years. The carnage inflicted on the American working class has been as damaging as an actual war.

This word “isolationist” is just an insult that's thrown at Trump without any thought to actual evidence, just like calling Trump (and his supporters) fascists and Nazis. Few of the people calling names have children serving in the military, nor are they affected very much by the harm caused by other nations' unfair trade practices or the open borders of the last four years.

Any final advice for Taiwan?

Do everything possible—and then more—to demonstrate that Taiwan will fiercely defend its freedom. That will give pause to the CCP and, more importantly, will make the United States and the world's free nations more willing to protect Taiwan. This is why Ukraine received so much support. It fought bravely to defend itself. Taiwan needs to get ready now.

God helps those who help themselves.

So does the United States.

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