

Tanks and Think Tanks: How Taiwanese Cash Is Funding the Push to War with China

By [Alan MacLeod](#)

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Twenty years ago, a group of neoconservative think tanks used their power to push for disastrous wars in the Middle East. Now, a new set of think tanks staffed with many of the same experts and funded by Taiwanese money is working hard to convince Americans that there is a new existential threat: China.

At *MintPress*, we have been at the forefront of exposing how [Middle Eastern dictatorships](#) and [weapons contractors](#) have been funneling money into think tanks and political action committees, keeping up a steady drumbeat for more war and conflict around the world. Yet one little-discussed nation that punches well above its weight in spending cash in Washington is Taiwan.

By studying Taiwan’s financial reports, *MintPress* has ascertained that the semi-autonomous island of 23 million people has, in recent years, given out millions of dollars to many of the largest and most influential think tanks in the United States. This has coincided with a strong upsurge in anti-China rhetoric in Washington, with report after report warning of China’s economic rise and demanding that the U.S. intervene more in China-Taiwan disputes.

These think tanks are filled with prominent figures from both parties and have the ears of the most powerful politicians in Washington. It is in their offices that specialists draw up papers and incubate ideas that become tomorrow’s policies. They also churn out experts who appear in agenda-setting media, helping to shape and control the public debate on political and economic issues.

Twenty years ago, a group of neoconservative think tanks like the Project for a New American Century, funded by foreign governments and weapons manufacturers, used their power to push for disastrous wars in the Middle East. Now, a new set of think tanks, staffed with many of those same experts who provided the intellectual basis for those invasions, is working hard to convince Americans that there is a *new* existential threat: China.

A fistful of dollars

In 2019, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) — for all intents and purposes, the Taiwanese embassy — [donated](#) between

\$250,000 and \$499,999 to the Brookings Institute, [commonly identified](#) as the world's most influential think tank. Taiwanese tech companies have also [given](#) large sums to the organization. In turn, Brookings Institute staff like Richard C. Bush (a former member of the National Intelligence Council and a U.S. national intelligence officer for East Asia) vociferously champion the cause of Taiwanese nationalists and [routinely condemn](#) Beijing's attempts to bring the island more closely under control.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rockefeller Brothers Fund Royal Norwegian Ministry of Defense Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Siemens A.G. Squire Patton Boggs Taiwan Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) Tellurian, Inc. Thales Group United Parcel Service United States Department of Energy United Technologies Corp. (now, Raytheon Technologies) Ronald Weiser 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robert Bosch Stiftung Echidna Giving Ford Foundation Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation The Kresge Foundation Leonard D. Schaeffer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Omidyar Network Robert C. Pozen and the Ashurst Foundation Regions Financial Corporation Searle Freedom Trust Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States
<p>\$50,000 – \$99,000 Donations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> African Rainbow Minerals AM General, LLC 	<p>\$500,000-\$999,999</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anonymous (2) Daniel Berger Carnegie Corporation of New York Annie E. Casey Foundation Robert Wood Johnson Foundation JPMorgan Chase & Co. Charles Koch Foundation LEGO Foundation Mastercard Impact Fund, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth 	<p>\$100,000-\$249,999</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tides Center Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD) UBS Optimus Foundation University of Nevada, Las Vegas Antoine and Emily van Agtmael, Sunrise Foundation The Walton Family Foundation Jerry Yang

TECRO featured prominently among myriad defense interests on the donor rolls for both the Atlantic Council, left, and Brookings Institute

Last week, Brookings held an [event](#) called “Taiwan’s quest for security and the good life,” which began with the statement that “Taiwan is rightly praised for its democracy. Elections are free, fair, and competitive; civil and political rights are protected.” It went on to warn that the “most consequential” challenge to the island’s liberty and prosperity is “China’s ambition to end Taiwan’s separate existence.”

According to another organization’s latest [financial disclosure](#), TECRO also gave a six-figure sum to the Atlantic Council, a think tank [closely associated](#) with NATO. It is unclear what the Atlantic Council did with that money, but what is certain is that they gave a senior fellowship to [Chang-Ching Tu](#), an academic employed by the Taiwanese military to teach at the country’s National Defense University. In turn, Tu authored Atlantic Council reports describing his country as a “champion [of] global democracy,” and stating that “democracy, freedom and human rights are Taiwan’s core values.” A menacing China, however, is increasing its military threats, so Taiwan must “accelerate its deterrence forces and strengthen its self-defense capabilities.” Thus he advises that the U.S. must work far more closely with Taiwan’s military, conducting joint exercises and moving towards a more formal military alliance. In 2020, the U.S. sold [\\$5.9 billion](#) worth of arms to the island, making it the fifth-largest recipient of American weaponry last year.

Other Taiwan-employed academics have [chided](#) the West on the pages of the Council’s website for its insufficient zeal in “deter[ring] Chinese aggression” against the island. “A decision by the United States to back down” — wrote Philip Anstrén, a Swedish recipient of a

fellowship from the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs — “could damage the credibility of U.S. defense guarantees and signal that Washington’s will to defend its allies is weak.” Anstrén also insisted that “Europe’s future is on the line in the Taiwan Strait.” “Western democratic nations have moral obligations vis-à-vis Taiwan,” he [added](#) on his blog, “and Western democracies have a duty to ensure that [Taiwan] not only survives but also thrives.”

The reason this is important is that the Atlantic Council is an enormously influential think tank. Its board of directors is a who’s-who in foreign policy statecraft, featuring no fewer than seven former CIA directors. Also on the board are many of the architects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, including Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and James Baker. When organizations like this begin beating the war drums, everybody should take note.

Perhaps the most strongly anti-Beijing think tank in Washington is the conservative Hudson Institute, an organization frequented by many of the Republican Party’s most influential figures, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former Vice-President Mike Pence and Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton. The words “China” or “Chinese” appear 137 times in Hudson’s latest [annual report](#), so focused on the Asian nation are they. Indeed, reading their output, it often appears they care about little else but ramping up tensions with Beijing, condemning it for its treatment of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Uyghur Muslims, and warning of the economic and military threat of a rising China.

“It’s critical that we engage China as it is, not as we wish it were. [Hudson Institute Founder] Herman Kahn...would urge us to think unconventionally, to create persuasive arguments for policy and make those arguments consistently to the American people. We have to think anew, and unconventionally, about the People’s Republic of China.”

—Secretary of State
Mike Pompeo



Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivers remarks on U.S. China policy upon receiving Hudson’s 2019 Herman Kahn Award on October 30, 2019.

An excerpt from a 2020 Hudson Institute report on existential threats to the United States

Over the years, Hudson’s efforts have been sustained by huge donations from TECRO. The Hudson Institute does not disclose the exact donations any sources give, but their annual reports show that TECRO has been on the highest tier of donors (\$100,000+) every year since they began divulging their sponsors in 2015. In February, Hudson Senior Fellow Thomas J. Duesterberg wrote an op-ed for [Forbes](#) entitled “The Economic Case for Prioritizing a U.S.-Taiwan Free Trade Agreement,” in which he extolled Taiwan’s economy as modern and dynamic and portrayed securing closer economic ties with it as a no-brainer.

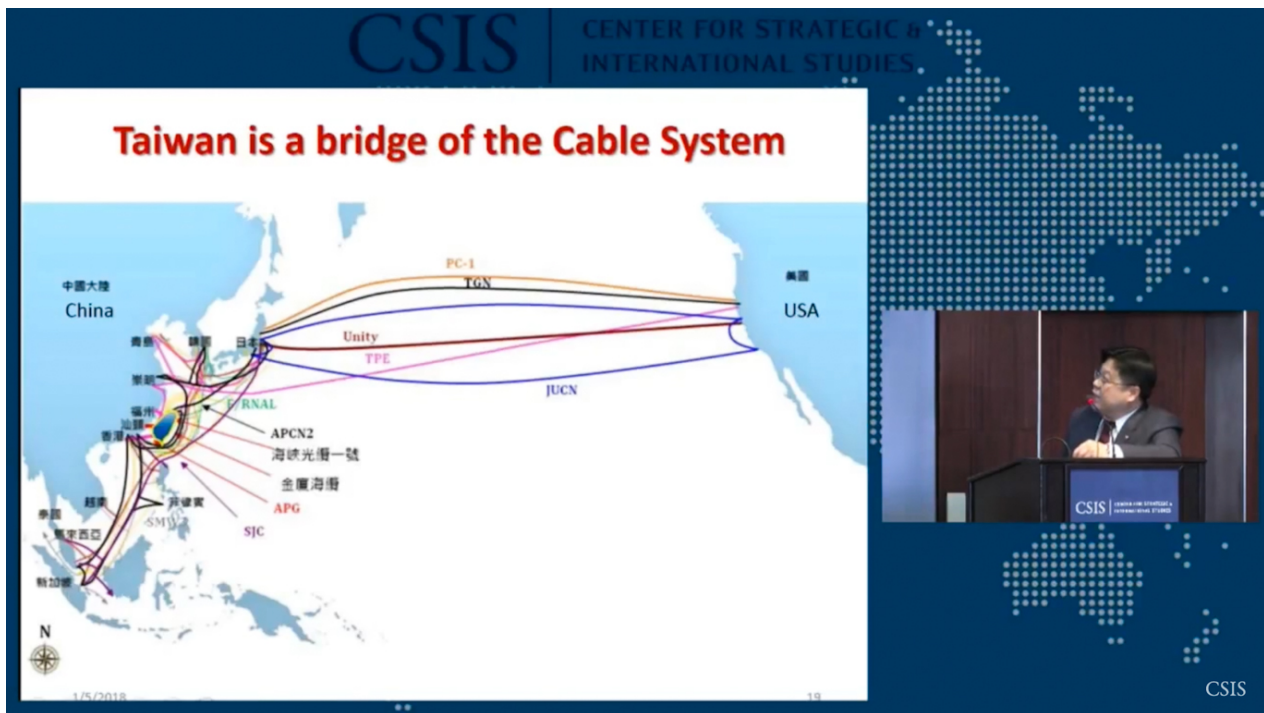
Hudson employees have also traveled to Taiwan to meet and hold events with leading foreign ministry officials there.

The Hudson Institute also recently partnered with the more liberal Center for American Progress (CAP) to host an [event](#) with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who took the opportunity to make a great number of inflammatory statements about the “ever more challenging threats to free and democratic societies” China poses; applaud the U.S.’ actions on Hong Kong; and talk about how Taiwan honors and celebrates those who died at the Tiananmen Square massacre. TECRO [gave](#) the CAP between \$50,000 and \$100,000 last year.

It is the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), however, that appears to receive the most Taiwanese money. According to its [donor list](#), Taiwan gives as much money to it as the United States does — at least \$500,000 last year alone. Yet all of the Taiwanese government money is put into CSIS’s regional studies (i.e., Asia) program. Like Hudson employees, the CSIS [calls](#) for a free trade agreement with Taiwan and has [lavished praise](#) on the nation for its approach to tackling disinformation, [describing](#) it as a “thriving democracy and a cultural powerhouse.” Although acknowledging that the reports were paid for by TECRO, CSIS insists that “all opinions expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the authors and are not influenced in any way by any donation.” In December, the CSIS also held a [debate](#) suggesting that “[w]ithin the next five years, China will use significant military force against a country on its periphery,” exploring what the U.S. response to such an action should be.

Like the Atlantic Council, the CSIS organization is stacked with senior officials from the national security state. Its president and CEO is former Deputy Secretary of Defense [John Hamre](#), while [Henry Kissinger](#) — former secretary of state and the architect of the Vietnam War — also serves on its council.

The CSIS accepts money from the Global Taiwan Institute and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) as well. The former is a rather shadowy pro-Taiwanese group that appears not to disclose its funding sources. The latter is a [government-funded](#) organization headed by former Taiwanese President You Si-kun. Every year, the TFD publishes a human rights report on China, the [latest](#) of which claims that “the Chinese Communist Party knows no bounds when it comes to committing serious human rights violations” — accusing it of “taking the initiative” in “promoting a new Cold War over the issue of human rights” and trying to “replace the universal standing of human rights values around the world.” Ultimately, the report concludes, China “constitutes a major challenge to democracy and freedom in the world.”



Joseph Hwang of The War College in Taiwan speaks at a CSIS about how Taiwan acts a buffer to protect US data infrastructure from China

The TFD has also been a major funder of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, a far-right pressure group that insists that Communism has killed over 100 million people worldwide. Last year, the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation added all global COVID-19 fatalities to the list of Communist-caused deaths on the basis that the virus started in China. The Foundation also employs [Adrian Zenz](#), a German evangelical theologian who is the unlikely source of many of the most [controversial and contested](#) claims about Chinese repression in Xinjiang province.

In the past 12 months, TECRO has also donated six-figure sums to many other prominent think tanks, including the [German Marshall Fund](#) of the United States, the [Center for a New American Security](#), and the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#). *MintPress* reached out to a number of these think tanks for comment but has not received any response.

“It would be naive to believe that Taiwan’s funding of think tanks is *not* pushing them to take pro-Taiwan or anti-China positions,” [Ben Freeman](#), the director of the Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative at the Center for International Policy, told *MintPress*, adding:

After all, why would Taiwan keep funding think tanks that are critical of Taiwan? There’s a Darwinian element to foreign funding of think tanks that pushes foreign government funding to think tanks that write what that foreign government wants them to write. Taiwan is no exception to this rule.”

TECRO is not just sponsoring American think tanks, however. It has also given funds to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a [hawkish](#) and controversial group [described](#) as “the think tank behind Australia’s changing view of China.” The country’s former ambassador in Beijing [described](#) ASPI as “the architect of the China threat theory in Australia” while Senator Kim Carr of Victoria [denounced](#) them as working hand-in-hand with Washington to push “a new Cold War with China.” ASPI was behind Twitter’s [decision](#) last

year to purge more than 170,000 accounts sympathetic to Beijing from its platform.

“We must be ready to fight our corner as Taiwan tensions rise,” ASPI [wrote](#) in January, having previously [castigated](#) the West for being “no longer willing to defend Taiwan.”

ASPI — like Brookings, the Atlantic Council and others — are directly funded by weapons manufacturers, all of whom also have a direct interest in promoting more wars around the world. Thus, if the public is not careful, certain special interests might be helping move the United States towards yet another international conflict.

While the situation outlined above is concerning enough, the Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative’s research has shown that around one-third of think tanks still do not provide any information whatsoever about their funding, and very few are completely open about their finances. Freeman maintains that, while there is nothing inherently wrong with foreign governments funding Western think tanks, the lack of transparency is seriously problematic, explaining:

This raises a lot of questions about the work they’re doing. Are their secret funders saying what the think tank can do in a pay-for-play scheme? Are the funders buying the think tanks silence on sensitive issues? Without knowing the think tank’s funders, policymakers and the public have no idea if the think tank’s work is objective research or simply the talking points of a foreign government.”

Freeman’s [study](#) of the Taiwanese lobby found that seven organizations registered as Taiwan’s foreign agents in the U.S. Those organizations, in turn, contacted 476 Members of Congress (including almost 90% of the House), as well as five congressional committees. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was their most frequent contact, the Californian being contacted 34 times by Taiwanese agents. Pelosi has been a [great supporter](#) of Taiwanese nationalists, successfully promoting pro-Taiwan legislation and proudly announcing that the U.S. “stands with Taiwan.”

Foreign agents working on behalf of Taiwan also made 143 political contributions to U.S. politicians, with former Alabama Senator Doug Jones the lead recipient (Pelosi was third).

Losing China, regaining Taiwan?

The reports listed above understand the dispute as purely a matter of Chinese belligerence against Taiwan and certainly do not consider U.S. military actions in the South China Sea as aggressive in themselves. That is because the world of think tanks and war planners sees the United States as owning the planet and having a remit to act anywhere on the globe at any time.

To this day, U.S. planners [bemoan](#) the “loss of China” in 1949 (a phrase that presupposes the United States owned the country). After a long and bloody Second World War, Communist resistance forces under Mao Tse-tung managed to both expel the Japanese occupation and overcome the U.S.-backed Kuomintang (nationalist) force led by Chang Kai-shek. The United States actually [invaded](#) China in 1945, with 50,000 troops working with the Kuomintang and even Japanese forces in an attempt to suppress the Communists. However, by 1949, Mao’s army was victorious; the United States evacuated and Chang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan.

The Kuomintang ruled the island for 40 years as a one-party state and remains one of the two major political groups to this day. The war between the Communists and the Kuomintang never formally ended, and Taiwan has now lived through 70 years of estrangement from the mainland. [Polls](#) show a majority of Taiwanese now favor full independence, although a large [majority](#) still personally identify as Chinese.

While many Taiwanese [welcome](#) an increased U.S. presence in the region, Beijing certainly does not. In 2012, President Barack Obama announced the U.S.' new "Pivot to Asia" strategy, moving forces from the Middle East towards China. Today, over [400](#) American military bases encircle it.

In recent months, the United States has also taken a number of provocative military actions on China's doorstep. In July, it [conducted](#) naval exercises in the South China Sea, with warships and naval aircraft spotted just 41 nautical miles from the coastal megacity of Shanghai, intent on probing China's coastal defenses. And in December, it [flew](#) nuclear bombers over Chinese vessels close to Hainan Island. Earlier this year, the head of Strategic Command made his intentions clear, [stating](#) that there was a "very real possibility" of war against China over a regional conflict like Taiwan. China, for its part, has also increased its forces in the region, carrying out military exercises and staking claims to a number of disputed islands.

A new Director of National Intelligence (DNI) [report](#) notes that China is the U.S.' "unparalleled priority," claiming that Beijing is making a "push for global power." "We expect that friction will grow as Beijing steps up attempts to portray Taipei as internationally isolated and dependent on the mainland for economic prosperity, and as China continues to increase military activity around the island," it concludes.

In an effort to stop this, Washington has recruited allies into the conflict. Australian media are [reporting](#) that their military is currently readying for war in an effort to force China to back down, while last week President Joe Biden [met](#) with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to shore up a united front against Beijing vis-a-vis Taiwan.

In February, the Atlantic Council penned an anonymous 26,000-word [report](#) advising Biden to draw a number of red lines around China, beyond which a response — presumably military — is necessary. These included any military action or even a cyber attack against Taiwan. Any backing down from this stance, the council states, would result in national "humiliation" for the United States.

Perhaps most notably, however, the report also envisages what a successful American China policy would look like by 2050:

[T]he United States and its major allies continue to dominate the regional and global balance of power across all the major indices of power;... [and head of state Xi Jinping] has been replaced by a more moderate party leadership; and ... the Chinese people themselves have come to question and challenge the Communist Party's century-long proposition that China's ancient civilization is forever destined to an authoritarian future."

In other words, that China has been broken and that some sort of regime change has occurred.

Throughout all this, the United States has been careful to [stress](#) that it still does not recognize Taiwan and that their relationship is entirely “unofficial,” despite [claiming](#) that its commitment to the island remains “rock solid.” Indeed, only [14 countries](#) formally recognize Taiwan, the largest and most powerful of which is Paraguay.

Along with a military conflict brewing, Washington has also been prosecuting an information and trade war against China on the world stage. Attempts to block the rise of major Chinese companies like [Huawei](#), [TikTok](#) and [Xiaomi](#) are examples of this. Others in Washington have [advised](#) the Pentagon to carry out an under-the-table culture war against Beijing. This would include commissioning “Taiwanese Tom Clancy” novels that would “weaponize” China’s one-child policy against it, bombarding citizens with stories about how their only children will die in a war over Taiwan.

Republicans and Democrats constantly accuse each other of being in President Xi’s pocket, attempting to outdo each other in their jingoistic fervor. Last year, Florida Senator Rick Scott [went so far as to announce](#) that every Chinese national in the U.S. was a Communist spy and should be treated with extreme suspicion. As a result, the American public’s view of China has [crashed](#) to an all-time low. Only three years ago, the majority of Americans held a positive opinion of China. But today, that number is only 20%. Asian-Americans of all backgrounds have reported a rise in hate crimes against them.

Cash rules everything around me

How much of the United States’ aggressive stance towards China can be attributed to Taiwanese money influencing politics? It is difficult to say. Certainly, the United States has its own policy goals in East Asia outside of Taiwan. But Freeman believes that the answer is not zero. The Taiwan lobby “absolutely has an impact on U.S. foreign policy,” he said, adding:

At one level, it creates an echo-chamber in D.C. that makes it taboo to question U.S. military ties with Taiwan. While I, personally, think there are good strategic reasons for the U.S. to support this democratic ally — and it’s clearly in Taiwan’s interest to keep the U.S. fully entangled in their security — it’s troubling that the D.C. policy community can’t have an honest conversation about what U.S. interests are. But, Taiwan’s lobby in D.C. and their funding of think tanks both work to stifle this conversation and, frankly, they’ve been highly effective.”

Other national lobbies affect U.S. policy. The Cuban lobby helps ensure that the American stance towards its southern neighbor remains as antagonistic as possible. Meanwhile, the Israel lobby helps ensure continuing U.S. support for Israeli actions in the Middle East. Yet more ominously with Taiwan, its representatives are helping push the U.S. closer towards a confrontation with a nuclear power.

While Taiwanese money appears to have convinced many in Washington, it is doubtful that ordinary Americans will be willing to risk a war over an island barely larger than Hawaii, only 80 miles off the coast of mainland China.

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[Alan MacLeod](#) is Senior Staff Writer for MintPress News. After completing his PhD in 2017 he published two books: [Bad News From Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting](#) and [Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent](#), as well as [a number of academic articles](#). He has also contributed to [FAIR.org](#), [The Guardian](#), [Salon](#), [The Grayzone](#), [Jacobin Magazine](#), and [Common Dreams](#).

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