

U.S. Leads a Coalition of One Against China

Washington is falling dangerously short in its search for allies to defend Hong Kong and Taiwan.

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American diplomatic and military support for Taiwan has grown dramatically during the Trump years. The administration has taken steps to boost that support, but Congress also has pushed its own initiatives. One key measure was the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act in 2018, which not only [authorized but encouraged](#) high-level defense and foreign policy officials to interact with their Taiwanese counterparts.

That was a dramatic change from the policy adopted when the United States shifted diplomatic relations from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979. U.S. policy thereafter had confined all contacts to low-level officials only. More recent congressional measures have sought [to emphasize](#) that the United States is [firmly in Taiwan's camp](#). The trend is not merely a matter of academic interest, since under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), the United States is obligated to regard any attempt by Beijing to coerce Taiwan as a "grave breach of the peace" in East Asia.

The U.S. determination to resist China's attempts to exert its power in the Western Pacific has grown still stronger after Beijing imposed a new national security law on Hong Kong in May, greatly diluting (if not negating) that territory's guaranteed political autonomy. The Trump administration, with bipartisan congressional support, rescinded Hong Kong's special trade status and adopted other punitive measures.

U.S. leaders also sought solidarity from America's allies in both Europe and East Asia for a joint statement of condemnation and the imposition of sanctions in response to the PRC's erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy. The lack of support from European capitals creates serious doubts about how much assistance Washington could expect if a showdown with China emerges at some point over Taiwan's de facto independence. Allied backing on the Hong Kong issue was tepid and grudging, at best.

Among the European powers, only Britain (Hong Kong's former colonial ruler) joined the United States in embracing a hardline approach. Receptivity to a confrontational policy was noticeably lacking among Washington's other European allies. The German government's reaction was typical. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas contended that the best way for the European Union to influence China on the Hong Kong dispute was merely to [maintain a dialogue](#) with Beijing. That stance fell far short of being an endorsement of the U.S. strategy.

France appeared to be even less eager to join Washington in trying to pressure Beijing. The *South China Morning Post* [reported](#) that in a telephone call to PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Emmanuel Bonne, diplomatic counselor to French President Emmanuel Macron, stressed

that France respected China's national sovereignty and had no intention to interfere in its internal affairs about Hong Kong.

The European Union itself adopted an anemic response to the PRC's passage of the national security law. Anxious not to become entangled in America's escalating rivalry with China, EU foreign ministers on May 29 echoed Germany's preference and [emphasized the need for dialogue](#) about Hong Kong. After a videoconference among the bloc's 27 foreign ministers, EU foreign-policy chief Josep Borrell said that only one country bothered to raise the subject of sanctions. Borrell added that the EU was not planning even to cancel or postpone diplomatic meetings with China in the coming months. So much for Washington's goal of a common diplomatic front by the Western allies against Beijing's actions in Hong Kong.

Washington did receive one apparent endorsement of its effort to gain allied cooperation for a stronger stance against the PRC. In early June, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [insisted](#) that alliance members needed to adopt a more global approach to security issues, unlike the Europe- and North America-centric tack that he contended had usually shaped the alliance's agenda. With an implicit reference to China, Stoltenberg stated that "as we look to 2030, we need to work even more closely with like-minded countries, like Australia, Japan, New Zealand and [South] Korea, to defend the global rules and institutions that have kept us safe for decades." Highlighting those nations for special mention was hardly coincidental. And in an unsubtle slap at Beijing, he contended that the greater cooperation with the noncommunist Pacific nations aimed to create an international environment based on "freedom and democracy, not on bullying and coercion."

Stoltenberg is swimming upstream, given the strong indications from leaders of the EU and such key EU powers as France, Germany, and Italy that they have no wish to adopt a confrontational policy toward China. And even Stoltenberg emphasized that NATO cooperation with China's East Asian neighbors would not be primarily military in nature. However, nonmilitary support will be of small comfort to the United States if a showdown over Taiwan materializes.

The reaction of key Asian allies to Beijing's new restrictions on Hong Kong was not measurably better than the level of support Washington received from its European allies. Japan's response likely disappointed Washington the most. After more than a week of internal debate, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government declined to join the United States, Britain, Australia, and Canada in issuing a statement condemning the PRC's actions in Hong Kong. Press reports indicated that the decision ["dismayed"](#) U.S. leaders. South Korea seemed even more determined than Japan to [avoid taking sides](#) in the dispute between the United States and China.

The bottom line was that with the exception of Australia, the United States could not count on its East Asian allies for even diplomatic and economic support against the PRC in response to its actions regarding Hong Kong. Such an outcome does not bode well if Washington seeks stronger backing—especially military backing—in the event of PRC aggression against Taiwan.

Unfortunately, the prospect of such aggression is increasing rapidly. Beijing has explicitly [removed the word "peaceful"](#) from its stated goal of inducing Taiwan to accept unification with the mainland. Equally troubling, PRC [military exercises](#) in and near the Taiwan Strait are becoming ever [more numerous and menacing](#). On June 9, Chinese fighter planes [once](#)

[again violated](#) Taiwan's airspace, causing Taipei to send its own planes to intercept the intruders. The overall level of animosity and tension between Beijing and Taipei is at its worst level in decades.

Washington faces the prospect of being called upon to fulfill its implicit commitment under the TRA to defend Taiwan's security. The trigger could come in the form of a PRC attack on some of Taipei's [small, outlying island holdings](#) directly off of the mainland or in the South China Sea. Even a frontal assault on Taiwan itself cannot be ruled out. Such developments would immediately test the seriousness and credibility of the U.S. defense commitment.

Worse, the United States might well be waging the military struggle alone. The European allies almost certainly would not embroil themselves in a U.S.-China war. The reaction of Australia, South Korea, and Japan is somewhat less certain. PRC coercion against Taiwan would constitute a far more serious disruption of East Asia's security environment than Beijing's decision to tighten its grip on Hong Kong. All three countries would face an agonizing dilemma. If they joined a U.S.-led military defense of Taiwan, they would face severe retaliation. However, if they left the United States hanging, U.S. leaders, enraged at such a betrayal, would likely terminate Washington's security alliances with those countries.

In any case, the United States cannot count on military support from its allies in a showdown with the PRC over Taiwan. It is yet another risk factor that Washington needs to take into account as it does a badly needed, long overdue, risk-benefit calculation regarding America's commitment to Taiwan's defense.

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