

Opinion **Global Insight**

## US shows China its hand on strategic value of 'unsinkable' Taiwan

Washington's clear statement of island's regional security role part of tougher stance towards Beijing

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Taiwanese tank soldiers during a military exercise in Hsinchu just before Christmas © I-Hwa Cheng/Bloomberg

**Kathrin Hille** in Taipei YESTERDAY

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In June 1950 General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of US forces in Asia-Pacific, urged President Harry Truman in a top secret [memorandum](#) not to allow China to gain control over Taiwan.

Its location at the centre of an island chain off the Chinese coast, which would have strategic value in a conflict, meant that the island, more commonly known as Formosa at the time, could be compared to an “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” MacArthur wrote. He warned that “the strategic interests of the United States will be in serious jeopardy if Formosa is allowed to be dominated by a [hostile] power”.

Some seven decades later, echoes of that language are reverberating through US-China relations.

Ely Ratner, assistant secretary of defence for Indo-Pacific security affairs, told a Senate [hearing](#) three weeks ago that Taiwan was “critical to the region’s security and critical to the defence of vital US interests”. In words strikingly similar to MacArthur’s, he emphasised the island’s location “at a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of US allies and partners”.

This may well be remembered as the moment Washington came clean on its intentions regarding Taiwan. In Beijing at least, the statement is being read as dropping all pretence that the US could acquiesce to a unification of Taiwan with

laid out by MacArthur.

Even after establishing diplomatic relations with China, the US “worked to ensure the continuation of a state of separation across the Taiwan Strait”, Wu said. “When we ask the US if they do not hope to see the unification of China, they deny that. But judging from the US’s concrete actions, it is clear that they indeed do not hope to see China unify. Ely Ratner has now said this out loud.”

In Washington, too, some observers [think](#) the testimony allows little conclusion other than that the US should not allow Taiwan to become part of China under any circumstances.

Whether that is a departure from the US’s One-China policy is hard to say. That policy was ambiguous from the beginning: when switching diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, Washington “acknowledged” Beijing’s position that Taiwan was part of China without recognising it. Meanwhile, the US government continued to view Taiwan’s status as [undetermined](#) after Japan relinquished it following its defeat in the second world war.

For the next 30 years, engaging China had priority in Washington’s mind over keeping Taiwan out of Beijing’s orbit. The US hoped China’s economic opening would bring the country to increasingly embrace political values and international norms created by western democracies.

But as US confidence in this scenario has crumbled, its Taiwan policy goals have shifted again. China’s rapid military build-up and its increasingly assertive attitude towards its neighbours — several of them US allies — played a key role.

“In the last Taiwan Strait crisis in the mid-1990s, China’s air force barely even had the capability to fly past the Taiwan Strait centre line, but the People’s Liberation Army has gained enormous capabilities over the past 20 years,” said Bonny Lin, director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think-tank. “If China had Taiwan now, it would give China extra power projection capabilities that would also have an immense impact on the security of US allies, including Japan and the Philippines.”

For Taiwan, where a majority has long [rejected](#) unification with China, the shift in Washington’s rhetoric reflects the increased support from western democracies the

Proponents of a clearer US commitment to Taiwan's security see the new language as a sign of those changes and an attempt at deterring Beijing more effectively.

Whether that will work is an open question: both countries have stepped up military activity around Taiwan as they exercise for a conflict and try to warn each other off. Chinese observers like Wu believe Ratner is stirring up new trouble in bilateral relations.

Washington and Beijing therefore now bear immense responsibility in navigating the course ahead.

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