

## US' Taiwan Fellowship

By Thomas Gold and Robert Parker



When the administration of then-US president Jimmy Carter in 1978 decided to normalize relations with China, Beijing's principal condition was that Washington terminate diplomatic relations with the Republic of China. Since then, the US-China relationship has increasingly been characterized by friction — if not outright tension — over a host of strategic issues.

At the same time, the US' connection with Taiwan has steadily grown stronger, even without the benefit of official ties, based on the shared values between the two societies. Both are democratic political systems that cherish human rights and the rule of law, while committed to fostering peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

Recent developments have brought the two countries even closer. After Taiwan took action early and effectively to control the then-emerging COVID-19 pandemic, the nation earned the gratitude of Americans by donating millions of masks and other protective equipment. Last year, Taiwan ranked as the US' ninth-largest trading partner, with two-way trade totaling US\$91 billion. An ongoing shortage of advanced integrated circuits also made more Americans aware of the vital importance of Taiwan in the production process for US high-tech manufacturers.

However, without official diplomatic recognition, maintaining a solid and productive bilateral relationship has been a constant challenge. Success has been achieved only because of the two sides' willingness to depart from traditional international practice to embrace some innovative approaches. After diplomatic ties were terminated in 1979, with inadequate plans in place for a new mechanism to replace them, the US Congress swiftly passed the Taiwan Relations Act to declare its continued interest in Taiwan's security and ensure that it is treated the same as any other foreign entity under US law.

It is the only piece of legislation ever enacted to specifically govern how the US conducts its relations with another government. Now is the time to extend that spirit of cooperation and innovation to another key aspect of the bilateral relationship: The cultivation of East Asia knowledge, and expertise among US government personnel and other professionals. At one time, before the opening of China to US citizens, almost every young American academic interested in Chinese affairs had spent at least a year or two in Taiwan to study Mandarin or conduct research.

However, in past few decades, most of that language study and research has shifted to China, leaving US government institutions with far fewer Taiwan specialists at a time when the nation is becoming a more important component of the US' Asia policy. The Taiwan Fellowship Act, which passed the US Senate in a bipartisan vote of 68 to 32 on Tuesday last week, would enable selected US civil servants to live, learn and work in Taiwan for two years. After first studying Mandarin, and the region's history, culture and political dynamics, they would be assigned to work in a Taiwanese government department alongside Taiwanese counterparts.

The Taiwan Fellowship is a far-reaching initiative that deserves swift passage by the US House of Representatives and implementation this year. At a time when the interests of Taiwan and the US in the Western Pacific are under mounting threats from China, it would serve to underscore US commitment to democratic Taiwan and its region for years to come.

*Thomas Gold is professor emeritus in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Robert Parker is a retired San Francisco lawyer and investor. From 1979 to 1980, he was chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in Taipei and played an instrumental role in the creation of the Taiwan Relations Act. Gold and Parker serve as volunteer advisers to the nonprofit Western Pacific Fellowship Project, which is developing the proposed Taiwan Fellowship program.*

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