

Donald Trump is No Friend of Taiwan

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E-Notes

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Tsai Ing-wen made a phone call to Donald J. Trump, President-elect of the United States, on 2 December. (Source: Taiwan Presidential Office/Flickr)

When President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan called then-President-elect Donald Trump, it should have been the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

The presidents elected in Taiwan and in the U.S. in 2016 both were committed to building friendly relations between their countries. They put their promises into action with a widely-publicized phone call on December 2, midway through the Trump transition.

Yet, today, barely a month and a half into Trump's presidency, Taiwan is as isolated as ever, and the pressure from Beijing is intensifying.

How did the promise of a new era in U.S.-Taiwan relations go so wrong?

Looking for a Restart

Under Tsai and Trump's predecessors, Ma Ying-jeou and Barack Obama, U.S.-Taiwan relations were cordial but distant. Ma believed he could maximize stability in the Taiwan Strait by focusing his attention on Beijing, and the

Obama administration was content to let that approach play out. As long as relations in the Taiwan Strait were stable and positive, Washington had little incentive to interfere.

Nonetheless, many in Taiwan and in the U.S. viewed this trend with alarm; they feared that Americans were losing interest in Taiwan and that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was gaining leverage and momentum it could use to force Taiwan into an unwelcome political deal.

Among the voices calling most urgently for closer U.S.-Taiwan ties were several Asia policy hands from the George W. Bush administration. As the U.S. presidential campaign unfolded, they made it clear that they believed the next president should do more to confront actions by China that challenged U.S. interests and take a more favorable position toward Taiwan.

Advocates of an upgrade in U.S.-Taiwan relations were especially keen to improve communication between leaders in the U.S. and Taiwan.

In March 2016, George Washington University hosted a panel discussion that included high-ranking officials from the U.S. and Taiwan. A third panelist was Randall Schriver, a Bush-era State department official with a long history of advocating for closer U.S.-Taiwan ties. Schriver called for better communication between Taipei and Washington: "One of my pet issues for a long time has been the need to improve communications at the highest levels. . . . I wish our presidents could talk to each other. I think presidents and elected officials are different creatures and different characters and they think differently and they talk differently and having people at that level talk to each other is important."

In July, Peter Navarro, who later would be tapped to head Trump's National Trade Council, criticized Obama and his predecessors for accommodating China too readily, at Taiwan's expense. He, too, called for better official communication between Washington and Taipei, specifically higher-level visits between U.S. and Taiwanese officials.

Support for upgrading U.S.-Taiwan relations among Republican foreign policy voices also was evident in the GOP's 2016 platform. The platform lauded Taiwan's political and economic values and system and called for its full participation in international organizations. It also advocated enhanced arms sales to the island and included a promise to defend Taiwan in the event of a military confrontation. As June Dreyer pointed out in her January 17, 2016 [FPRI E-Note](#), that promise went well beyond the U.S.'s existing commitment to the island. As Dreyer put it, "it was clear that the Republican Party envisioned changes in American policy toward Taiwan."

According to Stephen Yates, another former Bush administration official with strong links to Taiwan, Donald Trump himself fully supported the platform. Yates told the [Washington Post](#) that Trump had "made clear at the time that he wanted recalibrate relationships around the world and that the U.S. posture toward China was 'a personal priority.'"

After the election, as the Trump transition team came together, reports named several key advocates for upgrading U.S.-Taiwan relations as advisors and potential appointees: Schriver and Yates, as well as Mark Stokes, Peter Navarro, Alexander Gray, Dan Blumenthal, and Edward Feulner.

The Call Heard 'round the World

The first concrete sign that these ambitions would be put into action came a less than a month after the election. On December 2, the Trump transition announced that the president-elect had spoken by telephone with Tsai Ing-wen, accepting her congratulations, offering his own congratulations on her election, and noting the "close economic, political, and security ties" between Taiwan and the U.S.

News outlets quickly picked up the story, usually with the context that no U.S. president or president-elect had spoken directly to a Taiwanese leader since the U.S. switched its diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979. The [Washington Post](#) called the incident "a major departure from decades of U.S. policy in Asia and a breach of

diplomatic protocol with ramifications for the incoming president's relations with China.”

Advisors to the transition swung into action to defend the phone call. In a [New York Times](#) article published on December 5, Schriver returned to the theme of the March panel discussion mentioned above: “It’s absurd that we talk about going to war with China to defend Taiwan, and our presidents can’t talk to each other. . . . The Chinese understand this. They don’t want to see their efforts to isolate Taiwan rolled back, but they also don’t want a bad relationship with the U.S.” Jon Huntsman, Jr., Obama’s ambassador to China and Trump’s pick for ambassador to Russia, applauded Trump’s willingness to “look fresh at the cross-strait relationship.” He predicted, “Taiwan is about to become a more prominent feature of the overall U.S.-China relationship.”

Blumenthal and Schriver offered a lengthy defense of the phone call in a December 5 piece in [The National Interest](#). They wrote, “It is the height of cynicism to view U.S. relations with Taiwan and China in zero-sum terms. We can have good relations with both sides of the strait. The good news is that the Sino-American relationship has matured and has a solid foundation. Ironically, the people who seem willing to take the Tsai-Trump call in stride are Chinese Communist Party leaders. It appears that China is prepared for the United States to return to strenuous advocacy on behalf of its interests and values. China will doubtless do the same. The work of diplomacy will be managing our differences, including on Taiwan, in ways that do not lead to conflict.”

The Best Laid Plans...

Trump’s advisors were quick to defend the call, but not quick enough to stop Trump himself from undercutting their efforts to portray the phone call as a sensible, measured move aimed at recalibrating the relationship.

As criticism mounted in the hours after the phone call was announced, Trump fired back on Twitter. His first tweet, sent a few hours after the phone call, read, “The President of Taiwan CALLED ME today to wish me congratulations on winning the Presidency. Thank you!” An hour later, Trump tweeted: “Interesting how the U.S. sells Taiwan billions of dollars of military equipment but I should not accept a congratulatory call.”

Two days later, Trump continued the tweet storm, writing, “Did China ask us if it was OK to devalue their currency (making it hard for our companies to compete), heavily tax our products going into... their country (the U.S. doesn’t tax them) or to build a massive military complex in the middle of the South China Sea? I don’t think so!”

The effect of Trump’s tweets could not have been more distant from his advisors’ intentions in arranging the call. The swaggering “CALLED ME” threw the responsibility for the incident onto Tsai and touched off a days-long media effort to determine which side had initiated the call (in fact, officials on both sides have confirmed that the call was planned long in advance).

The Tsai administration was unprepared for the massive publicity unleashed when the transition team publicized the call; it was their understanding that the call would be private. Tsai’s government was thrust into the limelight, pressured from all sides for an explanation. In the end, the Taiwan side said as little as possible. Tsai tried to calm the situation in a statement to reporters that “one phone call does not mean a policy shift” and “I do not foresee major policy shifts in the near future because we all see the value of stability in the region.”

Despite Tsai’s efforts to calm the waters, Beijing seized on the “she CALLED ME” narrative to justify blaming Tsai for the incident – a move which allowed China to avoid a rupture with the incoming U.S. administration. On December 3, the Chinese foreign minister said Tsai had fooled Trump with “a petty trick.”

Trump’s tweets about currency, trade, and the South China Sea prompted some in the media to wonder whether Trump and his advisors had intended the phone call to happen at all – a question that both reflected and reinforced widespread doubts about organization, preparation, and leadership within the Trump transition.

Trump’s advisors pushed back against the idea that the call was somehow unintended or poorly thought-out. Yates told the [Washington Post](#) that Tsai had been on a list of foreign leaders slated for calls since the day after the

election. Said Yates, “Once the call was scheduled, I was told that there was a briefing for President-elect Trump. They knew that there would be reaction and potential blowback.”

Republican pollster Frank Luntz put a political spin on the call in a statement to the *Washington Post*: “He campaigned on an ‘America first’ platform... Calls like this may upset the diplomats, but they communicate to Americans that he’s not going to play by the same rules and isn’t just talking differently but will act differently.”

While transition officials, Trump advisors, and other Republican stalwarts strongly defended the phone call, when it came to the president-elect’s tweeting, those same voices were uncharacteristically silent.

Bargaining Over “One China”

The furor from the phone call had barely subsided when Trump took to the airwaves to double down on the idea that U.S.-Taiwan relations might be on the verge of a major change. In a December 11 interview with Fox News, the president-elect undercut much of what his advisors had been saying about the call. Invited to confirm their claim that it had been planned for weeks, the president-elect replied, “Oh, it’s all wrong. No, no. It’s all wrong. Not weeks. I took a call. I heard the call was coming probably an hour or two before.”

The rest of his answer was even more revealing – and controversial:

I fully understand the One-China policy. But I don't know why we have to be bound by a One-China policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade. I mean, look, we're being hurt very badly by China with devaluation, with taxing us heavy at the borders when we don't tax them, with building a massive fortress in the middle of the South China Sea, which they shouldn't be doing. And, frankly, they're not helping us at all with North Korea. You have North Korea, you have nuclear weapons, and China could solve that problem. And they're not helping us at all.

So, I don't want China dictating to me. And this was a call put into me. I didn't make the call. And it was a call, very short call, saying, “Congratulations, sir, on the victory.” It was a very nice call. Short. And why should some other nation be able to say, I can't take a call? I think it would have been very disrespectful, to be honest with you, not taking it.

In less than 200 words, Trump managed to shake the foundations of U.S.-China relations *and* cast Taiwan’s future into doubt. Even for a devotee of short-form writing like master-tweeter Donald Trump, this was an achievement.

The one China policy is a U.S. policy statement first articulated in the 1970s that has allowed the U.S. to pursue economic and political ties with Beijing while maintaining robust unofficial relations with Taipei. Every administration since Richard Nixon’s has affirmed the policy. Suggesting it might be open to revision cast the very basis – even the possibility – of economic and diplomatic interactions between the U.S. and China into serious doubt.

Realizing it could no longer avoid a confrontation with Trump, Beijing reacted strongly to the interview. PRC foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said, the one-China policy was “non-negotiable.” Chinese media chose more colorful language, describing Trump as “a rookie,” “despicable,” and “risible,” and accusing him of “playing with fire.”

The Fox News interview was only slightly more welcome in Taiwan. A long-standing fear among islanders is that the U.S. might be willing to trade away their interests in order to gain concessions from the PRC; many read Trump’s suggestion that aspects of Taiwan policy might change in response to a “deal” with China as an admission that he might do just that. Trump’s economic advisor Navarro had explicitly rejected the idea of using Taiwan as a bargaining chip in a July *National Interest* article, but the president-elect ignored this advice. Lest anyone wonder whether Trump misspoke in the Fox News interview, he reiterated his position two days later in a [Wall Street Journal](#)

interview, saying “Everything is under negotiation, including ‘one China.’”

Everything was under negotiation, including one China, until suddenly it was not.

On February 9, with little warning, Trump reversed himself, telling Xi Jinping, the President of the PRC, in a telephone call that he would “[honor our One China policy](#).” Chinese media provided the most detailed description of the call, saying Trump “stressed that he fully understood the great importance for the U.S. government to respect the One China policy,” and that Trump and Xi accepted the “necessity and urgency of strengthening cooperation between China and the United States.” As far as we know, Trump was not offered any “deals” on other issues in exchange for his capitulation.

Whither Taiwan Policy?

Just a few months ago, the incoming Trump administration seemed poised to be the most pro-Taiwan White House in decades. Today, it is impossible to say whether U.S. policy in the next few years will leave Taiwan better or worse off. We know that the one China policy will be the foundation, but beyond that, it’s anyone’s guess.

For Taiwan, uncertainty may be even more damaging than the Obama administration’s approach, which was cooler, but workmanlike and predictable. If we take into account the ways in which Trump’s actions have ratcheted up tensions between Taipei and Beijing, there is little doubt that Taiwan is worse off under Trump than Obama.

The worst case scenario for Taiwan is for the U.S. to withdraw its support for the island’s continued self-determination (including by ending military sales) in order to secure concessions from Beijing. The idea that Trump would mention Taiwan policy – in the form of one China – in the context of deal-making with Beijing was profoundly worrying to many in Taiwan. Two days before the inauguration, Taiwan’s top official in the U.S., Stanley Kao, expressed that concern politely. He said Taipei anticipated good relations with the new administration, but that the relationship “should be based on its merit and not used . . . as some kind of bargaining chip.”

The absence of a clear explanation as to what went wrong between Trump’s phone calls with Tsai on December 2 and Xi on February 9 also causes anxiety for Taiwanese. If the call with Tsai was part of a strategy created by Taiwan’s friends in Washington, why did the president-elect go so far off script? And why didn’t his advisors prevent him from saying, not once but twice, that the one China policy could be a bargaining chip? Confusing messages from within the Trump camp (such as Vice President-elect Mike Pence saying not to read too much into the phone call at the same time others in the transition were saying it was an intentional policy shift) only exacerbated this anxiety.

Another source of concern is the absence, to date, of people with Taiwan expertise – or even expertise in Asia more broadly – in the Trump White House. According to some reports, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross have ties to China; meanwhile, with the exception of Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, whose policy influence is unclear, and Navarro, none of the Taiwan experts who had been mentioned as possible appointees – Yates, Schriver, Blumenthal, Stokes, Feulner – have been tapped for positions. Matt Pottinger, the National Security Senior Director for Asia, studied in Taiwan, but his views are not well known. In general, the dearth of senior personnel in foreign policy positions makes it hard to see how the administration could do much of anything with regard to Taiwan in the next several months, even if it wanted to.

Yet another question troubling Taiwan (and Beijing) is what Trump has in mind by the “one China policy.” He did not define it, and whether he fully understands the history and context, as he assured Fox News, is uncertain. In other words, his promise to “honor” the policy does not settle the matter for either side.

With these questions standing open, Taiwan cannot help but keep the Trump administration at arm’s length. Hopes for a warm relationship with a White House staffed by familiar faces have faded. The simple act of speaking to Trump on the phone did far more harm than good to Taiwan, and to Tsai herself. Surely she will be much more

careful before accepting any “offer” from this administration. Similarly, China has what it wants – a promise to “honor” the one-China policy – but only after a long and terrifying trip through terrain PRC leaders surely thought they would never have to visit. Beijing will not easily trust the Trump White House, no matter how many rounds of golf Trump and Xi play.

Taiwan’s leaders should also worry about the Trump administration’s overall approach to foreign policy – an approach that seems to abandon America’s long-standing commitment to democracy around the world. Trump’s speeches rarely mention democracy or human rights, and his proposed budget slashes funding for all sorts of values-oriented programs. For Taiwan, this is a very bad sign. As China’s political, military, and economic power increase, making a utilitarian argument as to why the U.S. should support Taiwan gets harder, leaving democracy as Taiwan’s signal virtue. When Navarro used the phrase in his July 2016 article, describing Taiwan as a “beacon of democracy” was a tired cliché. Today, it feels like an important moral statement.

One bright spot for Taiwan is the possibility of an arms sale soon after Trump meets with Xi Jinping, probably in April (although the administration has not made a formal announcement of the sale). The U.S. has other tools to help Taiwan as well – applying diplomatic pressure on Beijing to allow Taiwan to participate in international organizations, or even going back to the playbook Trump’s advisors were using early on, and allowing higher-level visits – and the administration may yet use some of those.

Yet another opportunity to improve U.S.-Taiwan relations would be by enhancing economic ties. The U.S. and Taiwan have been going round and round for years in trade negotiations, with the ultimate goal of signing a bilateral investment agreement or even a free trade agreement.

Yet, it is on the economic front that Trump delivered to Taiwan the most devastating blow of all. By abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Trump shut the door on Taiwan’s best chance to avoid economic marginalization and reduce its political isolation. Although Taiwan was not part of the original group of 12 nations that negotiated the TPP, its leaders had strong hopes that they would be able to enter the agreement in a second round. Being incorporated into a powerful multilateral trade bloc would have had strong economic benefits for Taiwan, and it would have allowed the island to do an end-run around Beijing’s efforts to exclude it from international organizations.

In the absence of the TPP, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is likely to become the basis of economic cooperation in Asia. Taiwan has little to no chance of participating in that China-centered organization.

In sum, after a promising start and with the eager participation of many strong supporters of Taiwan in the transition, the Trump White House has managed to comprehensively botch its Taiwan policy, leaving Taiwan more vulnerable than ever to Beijing’s increasing pressure.

Ironically, one of Donald Trump’s close advisors, Peter Navarro, warned against precisely this kind of disastrous rollout of Taiwan policy. In his July 2016 essay in *The National Interest* entitled “[America Can’t Dump Taiwan](#),” Navarro wrote, “It is critical there be no missteps in American policy towards Taiwan that might, on the one hand, inflame China or, on the other hand, throw Taiwan – once again – under Beijing’s bus.”