

POLITICS

Trump's controversial call with Taipei

US president-elect's talk with Taiwan's leader suggests harder line on China

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U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's telephone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen - unprecedented for a U.S. leader - surprised governments around the world and has sown confusion about his administration's strategy toward the greater China region.

Trump, who many believed was not interested in the decades-old U.S. policy of containment of China amid indications of his isolationist inclination, shook Beijing on Friday night by upending U.S. protocol and talking to Tsai as if she were the head of an internationally recognized nation.

Trump's 10-minute-long chat with Tsai was the first any U.S. leader has had with the head of Taiwan since Washington ended diplomatic ties with Taipei and forged relations with Beijing in the late 1970s. It represents a symbolic blow to Chinese confidence that Trump as U.S. president would be easier to handle than his defeated rival, former Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton.

Symbolism is at the heart of what the Chinese Communist Party calls "core issues" such as Taiwan and Tibet that have a bearing on China's historical identity, sovereignty and territorial expansion. Beijing has used various means of pressure to ensure that the international community shuns Taiwan and accepts the island and Tibet as integral and inalienable Chinese territory. It easily takes offence when any foreign government does anything that remotely bestows recognition on what China portrays as a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland.

By unexpectedly needling China with his conciliatory gesture to Taiwan, Trump is demonstrating a risk-taking propensity that goes against the U.S. foreign policy consensus of not hitting the Chinese where they are most sensitive, while apparently calling into question the "one China" policy. As U.S. and Asian foreign policy experts expressed shock about the call to Tsai, Trump added insult to injury by tweeting about the irony of the U.S. selling advanced military hardware to Taiwan, while being told that he "should not accept a congratulatory call [from the Taiwanese leader]."

Many analysts in Washington and in Asia interpreted Trump's decision to call Tsai as a message to China that it cannot dictate who he can talk to and that Beijing must stay within limits or risk nasty surprises. In this context it is not far-fetched to assume that Trump at some point might even receive the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader and China's bete noire, in the White House with fanfare.

Trump is a classic outsider to diplomatic niceties and appears intent on tearing up the established rules of playing nice with China to maintain stability in this complex bilateral relationship. He seems to be sending a message that he has cards to use against Beijing if he wants.

Hidden meanings?

If Trump's well-publicized penchant for insulting people in politics is any guide, Beijing should prepare itself for losing diplomatic face over the next four years in its dealings with Washington, which could provoke a hostile response.

Does Trump's willingness to talk with Tsai imply a tougher policy of containing China by encouraging its neighbors to defy Beijing? Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party assumed power this year with a vow to end unpopular pro-China policies under the previous Kuomintang government. Trump's phone call might embolden her supporters to seek *de jure* independence for Taiwan, which has all the attributes of a full-fledged nation despite the lack of global diplomatic recognition and a seat in the United Nations.

But Trump is unlikely to encourage DPP radicals to attempt full United Nations membership, while the chances of the U.S. under Trump totally rescinding its adherence to a "one China" policy are low. Trump, who prides himself on his negotiating skills, instead appears to be making an opening gambit using the same surprise tactics he used on domestic political rivals during his election campaign.

Trump's off-the-cuff comments such as praising Pakistan as a "fantastic country" despite widespread Western concerns about its links to Islamic extremism, toasting despotic Kazakhstan as a "fantastic success," and endorsing the wave of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines' war on drugs as "the right way," have raised doubts about his knowledge and grasp of international issues. If one were to assume that Trump is shooting from the hip with such remarks because he has not yet been properly briefed by advisers, then China does not need to worry and Taiwan may be celebrating prematurely.

None of Trump's newly named national security team members are known as rabidly anti-Chinese. Gen. Michael Flynn, the designated national security adviser, is notable for his strident anti-Islamic and anti-jihadist obsession than any publicized fears of China's rise. Meanwhile, Trump's criticism of China for trade and currency manipulation should not be seen as particularly abnormal, since China-bashing is a habitual exercise during U.S. presidential elections.

Beijing might also benefit from Trump's closeness to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has cultivated a strategic relationship with China. Beijing may see its own strategic position in Asia actually strengthen -- in line with Chinese President Xi Jinping's vision of greater regional engagement -- as a result of the U.S. being distracted elsewhere.

On the other hand, Trump tends to view many relationships with foreign countries as being unfair to U.S. interests. His penchant to deliberately irk and even irritate officials among other figures to improve his negotiating position means there will be plenty of hard talk from Washington that could upset Beijing.

If Wall Street interests dominate the Trump administration's policy outlook, as suggested by his choices for the treasury and commerce department posts, maintaining the hegemony of the U.S. dollar by beating down the Chinese challenge through words and deeds cannot be ruled out. Undermining China could be seen as necessary to prevent it from positioning the renminbi as a long-run alternative to the dollar.

So far, China has not overreacted to the Trump-Tsai exchange, despite warnings by some analysts. But if trade wars or worse erupt after Trump enters the White House on Jan. 20, 2017, no one can say it was not warned.



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