Trump’s talk with Taiwanese president heightens US tensions with China

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President-elect Donald Trump signalled a belligerent approach to US relations with China by taking a phone call last Friday with the president of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen. While Trump’s transition team has played it down, the conversation—the first between American and Taiwanese leaders since 1979—undermines decades of diplomatic protocols based on Washington’s acceptance of the “One China” policy.

The US rapprochement with China in 1972 ended Washington’s support for the Kuomintang (KMT) military dictatorship on Taiwan and recognised that the island was part of “One China,” ruled from Beijing. At the same time, the US opposed the forcible unification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland and, despite Beijing’s protests, continued to arm the Taiwanese military. Formal diplomatic relations between the US and Taiwan ended in 1979 but limited informal contact remains.

Trump’s phone call led to a great deal of media speculation about whether it was a diplomatic blunder committed out of ignorance, or a change in US policy toward China. Senior Trump transition adviser Kellyanne Conway claimed on Fox News Sunday that “it was just a phone call” and indicated nothing about a shift in US policy.

Trump, however, clearly did not regard the conversation as a mistake. He dismissed criticisms, insisting that Taiwan’s President Tsai had simply called to congratulate him. In another tweet, he highlighted the contradictory character of US policy toward Taiwan, commenting: “Interesting how the US sells Taiwan billions of dollars of military equipment but I should not accept a congratulatory call.”

Trump’s remark ignores the fact that while arms sales are authorised under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, his phone call breaches a long-established understanding. Moreover, a statement issued by Tsai indicated that the conversation was not just an exchange of pleasantries. Rather, the two presidents “noted the close economic, political and security ties between Taiwan and the United States” and exchanged views on events in Asia.

Trump also congratulated Tsai on her own win in Taiwan’s presidential elections in January—an added affront to China as her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) cautiously advocates Taiwanese independence. Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade Chinese province that will eventually be reintegrated and has threatened reunification by military means if Taiwan ever declared formal independence.

Speaking yesterday, US Vice President-elect Mike Pence defended Trump’s phone conversation as a “courtesy call” but dodged a question as to whether it signalled a break with the “One China” policy. He did, however, indicate that “you’re going to see in a President Trump a willingness to engage the world but engage the world on America’s terms.”

Former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton, who is a contender for secretary of state in the Trump administration, bluntly declared that the US “should shake the relationship [with China] up. For the past several years China has made aggressive … belligerent claims in the South China Sea. Nobody in Beijing gets to dictate who we talk to.”

Bolton’s remarks are a clear sign that Trump’s phone call was deliberate and provocative, designed to put Beijing on notice that his administration will use every means at its disposal to undermine China and assert US dominance in Asia and the world. During the US election campaign, Trump declared that he would brand China as a currency manipulator and impose tariffs of 45 percent on Chinese goods—a move that would trigger

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a trade war.

Over the past five years, the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" has involved a confrontational diplomatic stance toward China, including over the South China Sea, and a huge military build-up in Asia in preparation for war with China. Figures like Bolton, one of the most militarist officials in the previous George W. Bush administration, have been critical of President Barack Obama for not more aggressively challenging China's claims in the South China Sea.

A *Washington Post* article on Sunday night confirmed the call had been a planned provocation. "The historic communication … was the product of months of quiet preparations and deliberations among Trump's advisers about a new strategy for engagement with Taiwan that began even before he became the Republican presidential nominee," it stated.

The White House, which was not informed of Trump's call in advance, responded by insisting there had been "no change" in the "One China" policy. "Our fundamental interest is in peaceful and stable cross-Strait relations [between China and Taiwan]," White House spokesman Ned Price declared. The Obama administration provoked an angry reaction from Beijing last year by announcing a $1.8 billion arms sale to Taiwan, including two frigates, antitank missiles and surveillance equipment.

Trump apparently also did not take advice from the US State Department on the advisability of taking a phone call from the Taiwanese president, but instead is relying on his own advisers. The sidelining of the State Department is another sign that Trump intends to make a break with the past and pursue an even more aggressive foreign policy, toward China in particular.

The Chinese government reacted cautiously to Trump's conversation with Tsai, which clearly took it by surprise. The Chinese foreign ministry issued a statement on Saturday, noting that it lodged a formal protest with the US and "there is only one China in the world." In a barb directed at Trump, it urged "the relevant parties … to handle issues related to Taiwan with caution and care in order to avoid unnecessary interference with overall Sino-US relations."

An editorial in the state-owned *China Daily* on Sunday suggested the phone call was a mistake—a sign of the Trump team's "inexperience" and "lack of proper understanding" of Sino-US and Cross-Strait relations. It criticised Tsai more harshly, saying the call would bring nothing but "illusionary pride." Pointing to the Taiwanese president's falling popularity, the editorial added: "If she managed to divert public outcry from her bad performance, she will not succeed."

Behind the scenes, however, there are deep concerns in Chinese ruling circles over the incoming Trump administration. Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke on Friday with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who masterminded the Sino-US rapprochement in the 1970s. Xi reportedly told Kissinger that "we're watching the situation very closely" in what is "a period of transition."

Chinese commentators are already suggesting retaliation. Shen Dingli, a professor of international relations at Fudan University, told the *New York Times* that if contacts with Tsai continued after Trump's inauguration, China should sever diplomatic relations with the US and end cooperation with the US on issues such as Iran, North Korea and climate change.

Trump's phone call with the Taiwanese president is another sign of the intense uncertainty that the incoming US administration has injected into global politics. His willingness to recklessly tear up longstanding diplomatic protocols in one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints is a sharp warning of the rising dangers of war between nuclear-armed powers.

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