

Trump picks trusted go-between as ambassador to China

Peter Symonds
8 December 2016

The Trump transition team confirmed yesterday that Iowa's Republican governor Terry Branstad has been selected as the next US ambassador to China. Throughout his election campaign Trump adopted a belligerent anti-China stance. But, in picking Branstad, he is installing a trusted go-between with top-level connections in Beijing.

Branstad initially met Chinese President Xi Jinping in 1985 during Xi's first visit to the United States as a 31-year-old official from China's Hebei Province. Xi came to study American agriculture and stayed with a family in the small city of Muscatine. He stayed with Branstad in 2012 at the governor's mansion when he revisited Muscatine as Chinese vice-president in the lead-up to his installation as president in 2013.

Chinese foreign affairs ministry spokesman Lu Kang yesterday described Branstad as "an old friend of the Chinese people," adding, "we would welcome him playing a bigger role in promoting Sino-American relations." Branstad has energetically promoted the export of Iowa's agricultural produce, including pork and corn, to China and has visited China seven times, most recently on a trade mission last month.

At the same time, Branstad has close ties to Trump. He was a key Republican Party figure in backing Trump and campaigned for him in Iowa during the election. The governor's son Eric was Trump's campaign manager for Iowa. Trump signalled Branstad's appointment during a campaign rally in the state in early November, describing him as "our prime candidate to take care of China."

Trump's installation of Branstad continues a pattern of choosing close personal acquaintances and cronies for jobs in his administration. Trump transition spokesman Jason Miller effusively told the media yesterday that Branstad was someone with

"considerable public policy experience... [a] great grasp of trade issues, agricultural issues, [who] has a tremendous understanding of China and Chinese people."

In reality, Branstad is a long-running Iowa politician who has little foreign policy experience and whose knowledge of China stems from his efforts to leverage his acquaintance with top Chinese leaders to press for better trade deals for his state. On trade, he has been a vocal supporter of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which Trump has pledged to axe on his first day in office.

Branstad's difference with Trump over the TPP, as well as his lack of familiarity with key issues such North Korea, rising tensions over the South China Sea and the US military build-up throughout Asia against China, suggests he will not play a significant role in determining policy or strategy toward Beijing.

That conclusion is already being drawn in Beijing. Jie Dalei, an associate professor at Beijing University, told the *Washington Post* that Branstad's appointment could help communication, "but is unlikely [to] have too much impact at the decision-making level."

The Chinese government is paying far more attention to Trump's decision last Friday to take a phone call from Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen—the first conversation between top American and Taiwanese leaders since 1979. The contact called into question US adherence to its "One China" policy, which recognised Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all of China including Taiwan.

Trump has aggressively defended his breach of decades of diplomatic protocol, with tweets berating China as a currency manipulator and slamming its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea as constructing "a massive military complex." During the

campaign, he threatened to impose 45 percent tariffs on Chinese imports—a step that would provoke trade war between the world’s two largest economies.

Jie told the *Post*: “Compared to that, the appointment of an ambassador to China, though very thoughtful, is unlikely to fix the damage caused by the uncertainty of his tweets and Taiwan call.”

The Chinese government has responded to Trump’s phone conversation by calling on the United States not to allow Taiwan’s president to transit through New York in January on her way to visit Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador—all of which have full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The US State Department has ruled out blocking Tsai’s transit through the United States.

Taiwan’s *Liberty Times* has reported that Tsai’s delegation wanted to meet members of Trump’s team, including his chief of staff Reince Priebus, who has longstanding connections in Taiwan. Such a move would greatly exacerbate tensions between China and the incoming Trump administration.

Trump’s advisers have already signalled an intensification of the US confrontation with China that was initiated by the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”—which has included a massive military build-up and strengthening of alliances throughout the region in preparation for war with China.

Trump’s provocative phone call with Taiwan is just an indication of the aggressive methods that the new administration will use to try to extract concessions from Beijing and consolidate American hegemony in Asia. The president-elect has appointed Branstad to ensure he has a reliable communication channel to the top Chinese leadership as he proceeds with his reckless high-stakes gambles.



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