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The One China policy and Taiwan: Trump is playing with fire next to a powder keg

Will the Taiwan Issue once again become central to US–China relations once Donald Trump’s presidential term gets underway or is it just a storm in a teacup?

US President-elect Donald Trump indicated in a TV news interview in December 2016: “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”. The sentiment that China is playing by unfair rules is widely shared in the US, but the suggestion of using the One China policy as a bargaining chip was new. To make matters worse for China, the Taiwanese leader, Tsai Ing-wen, had a phone conversation with Mr Trump following the election. Whether these were just slip-ups caused by the inexperience of Mr Trump’s advisory team or signs that the “Taiwan Lobby” in Washington is gaining new momentum remains an open question.

The Taiwan Issue refers to the unresolved Chinese civil war, which in 1949 resulted in the Mainland being controlled by the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the island of Taiwan by the Republic of China (ROC). Both claim sovereignty over China as a whole, and neither recognize the other. The civil war has remained frozen for decades, and there are flourishing economic, trade and people-to-people contacts across both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The government of the ROC no longer nurtures ambitions to take over the Mainland, and has in practice resigned itself to being the “Republic of China on Taiwan”. With regard to the PRC, Taiwan is

still officially considered a province, although its factual independence is tolerated in practice. Internationally, Taiwan can be considered a sovereign nation in many aspects – the most significant exception being the lack of recognition by the majority of the world’s countries and international organizations like the UN.

The One China policy is central to the PRC’s diplomatic relations. It means that any country that recognizes the PRC must break official relations with the ROC. The US switched diplomatic recognition from the ROC to the PRC in 1979. The preceding Shanghai Communiqué from 1972 states that the US “acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China”. This does not explicitly mean that the US itself recognizes Taiwan as a part of China.

On the contrary, the US has stressed on various occasions that the future of Taiwan should be decided by the Taiwanese people. Furthermore, since 1979 the US has maintained a special relationship with Taiwan as defined by the Taiwan Relations Act. This authorizes the US to have de facto diplomatic relations with “the governing authorities” on Taiwan, and states that the US will provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character.

The EU similarly abides by the One China policy, meaning that it

recognizes the government of the PRC as the sole legal government of China. At the same time, according to the EEAS factsheet on EU–Taiwan relations, it insists that any arrangement between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait can only be achieved on a mutually acceptable basis, “with reference also to the wishes of the Taiwanese population”. This means that the EU, similarly to the US, does not unconditionally accept the PRC’s claim over Taiwan. The EU recognizes Taiwan as an economic and commercial entity, and maintains relations with Taiwan in various non-political areas.

For the PRC’s part, the One China policy is based on the One China principle, which means that Taiwan is to be considered an inalienable part of China and that reunification is the only acceptable outcome of the Taiwan Issue. Since 1979, the PRC has maintained that the goal is peaceful reunification under the “one country, two systems” principle. However, China has never rejected a military option if all else fails. *The Global Times*, a nationalist newspaper operated by Party organ *the People’s Daily*, suggested in December 2016 that it might be time for the PRC to make the use of force the main option.

In cross-strait relations, the One China principle has evolved into the so-called 1992 Consensus, which simply states that both sides agree that there is only one

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China. However, the “consensus” is shrouded in strategic ambiguity, which suits all parties. For the PRC, the consensus is as it stands above. For the ROC, the official view has been that while the consensus exists, both sides of the Taiwan Strait have their own interpretations in regard to “One China”. This view has been challenged by the current ruling party on Taiwan, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), whose supporters usually refuse to accept the existence of any consensus. The incumbent president of the ROC, Tsai Ing-wen, represents the DPP and has so far been vague in her statements on the issue, but from the PRC viewpoint, her unwillingness to state acceptance of the 1992 Consensus is as good as a rejection of it.

President Tsai’s position stems from the changing attitudes and even identities of the Taiwanese population. An increasing number no longer identify themselves as Chinese, or feel the need for the “motherland” to reunify. Taiwan is arguably on its way to statehood as “the Republic of Taiwan”. Seen against this background, it would be prudent for both the US and the EU to refrain from mixing their adherence to the One China policy with acceptance of the One China principle.

The bottom line, however, is that the One China principle is of vital interest to the PRC, and hence even the One China policy cannot be traded. The Communist Party has tied its legitimacy to reunification and is ultimately willing to go to war in order to prevent a permanent division into two Chinas. Toying with the idea of rejecting the One China policy is playing with fire, and might lead to Mr Trump getting more than he bargained for if the very foundations of US-PRC relations start to shake.