

Troubled Waters: Trump, Taiwan and Beijing

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Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

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There was much tittering in the US-China fraternity over the casual, yet infuriating engagement US President elect Donald Trump had with Taiwan's President, Tsai Ing-wen. A reading of the reactions suggested meltdown, a terrifying, imminent apocalypse. An outrageous booboo, or an typically uncharacteristic move hardly worth a mention?

There are no covering laws on this, though international relations theorists attempt, desperately, to push the illusion that there are such magical rules. Be careful of the hidden laws; do not violate the cast iron protocols. If breached, a storm will be unleashed. In some ways, the absence of such governing guidelines makes diplomacy tantalisingly innovative, at points, and dangerous, at others.

With the sediment of international relations suspended after Trump's victory, the fear about the brittleness in the US-China relationship is all too clear. This is a relationship of suspicion and wantonness, of acquisitiveness and desperation. Political ideologues have, for several generations, held sway in both Beijing and Washington. Suddenly, the ideological caravan has been ambushed, and currently lies in flames.

The People's Daily did not make any bones about the call, issuing a warning that "creating troubles for the China-US relationship is creating troubles for the US itself." Showing a nodding acquaintance with the Trump argot, the editorial argued that niggling China in this way "would greatly reduce the chance to achieve the goal of making America great again."

This lay in contrast to the more mild mannered reaction from Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who seemed to suggest that a degree of Taiwanese deviousness had been at play to "trick" the president-elect. That reaction did much to stoke the domestic fires on Chinese social media.

Trump's own response was conventionally issued through that modern organ of communication, Twitter: "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 US doesn't tax them) or to build a massive military complex in the middle of the South China Sea? I don't think so!"[1]

Experts seek the resurrection some fantasy status quo, despite a range of hypocritical assumptions. (One observation is reiterated: that the president elect does not know what he is doing, or has only a limited sense of it.) For one, Washington continues to conduct relations with China as if it were not a threat, while always treating it as one.

On the one hand, cooperation has been pursued along such policy lines as the Paris international climate accord, even if it has not been immune from the bite of competition. Economically, however, the Obama administration has been waging a cold war, attempting to push through the Trans-Pacific Partnership that would freeze China out of the Asia-Pacific

zone. The fact that the TPP is essentially a dead letter should provide some comfort for Beijing's economic minders.

The US Security establishment, through such think tanks as the RAND Corporation, continues its speculation about what conflict with China would look like, naturally insisting that it was merely thinking through the unthinkable. Beware, of course, what you think in that regard.

The approach of Trump seems to abandon most assumptions of propriety. Rather than resorting to sweetening tactics, as the Obama administration has done at stages, the gloves have come off early. "My guess on Trump/neocon China strategy," claimed Bill Hayton in a tweet, "systematically target 'core interests' until Beijing agrees deals on US 'core interests'." [2]

The Trump gesture has also terrified some allies, with some expressing the need for distancing. "There will be times when Australia," suggests Peter Hartcher, "will need to draw a bright red line in defence of its national interests in its dealing with China. Donald Trump's decision to confront China over Taiwan is not one of those times." [3] In such individual and "dangerous" ventures, Australia should have nothing of it.

Given that circumstances that have yet to happen can only ever provide poor analogies, Hartcher reminds readers about the ideological folly of President George W. Bush. The invasion of Iraq "was a dire error. It unleashed forces that continue to wreak bloody mayhem in the Middle East, Europe and the wider world to this day."

There is a fundamental difference between the calamitous approach of Bush and the president elect's telephone exchange. The former was ideological; the latter is yet another variant of the business comes first approach to politics. It tears away the mask of diplomatic assumption, embracing boardroom punting.

Trump shows that the bible-bashing, ideologue from the GOP covered in the flag is not necessarily going to be represented in White House circles consistently. But it also shows that the neo-conservative fever may not be far away to carry off its patient.

Wise heads in China will also realise that a revision of the book on dealing with Washington may also be in order. Keep the red mist on Taiwan out of it; focus on the mundane matters of the cheque book.

Chat, broadcast in Twitter snippets, will be the norm. It will be a Trump versus People's Daily show, with background activity essentially a matter to be unearthed in future archives - if we even get that far. The pundits and expert classes on US-China relations have been initially left behind, hoping that their bewilderingly changing field will not lead to a conflagration before it can be averted.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/world/asia/china-donald-trump-taiwan-twitter.html>

[2] https://twitter.com/bill_hayton/status/805148434802020352?lang=en

[3]

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/why-australia-must-steer-clear-of-donald-trumps-taiwan-folly-2016-1205-gt4115.html>

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