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Trump threatens to overturn One China policy

By Peter Symonds

12 December 2016

US President-elect Donald Trump upped the ante yesterday in his war of words with China. He declared that he did not feel bound by the “One China” policy, which has been the foundation of diplomacy between the two countries for more than 40 years. His comments follow his phone conversation with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen on December 2—the first direct contact between US and Taiwanese leaders since 1979.

Speaking on Fox News, Trump made clear he would abide by the One China policy, which recognises Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, only if the Chinese government caves in on other issues. “I don’t know why we have to be bound by a One China policy,” he declared, “unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade.”

Trump reiterated what amounts to hefty demands on China. “I mean, look,” he said, “we’re being hurt very badly by China with devaluation; with taxing us heavy at the borders when we don’t tax them; with building a massive fortress in the middle of the South China Sea, which they shouldn’t be doing; and frankly, with not helping at all with North Korea.”

Trump’s bluster is a crude threat to tear up the basis for US-China diplomatic relations unless Beijing offers major economic and trade concessions, ends its land reclamation in the South

China Sea and imposes crippling economic sanctions on its ally North Korea. He already threatened trade war measures during the election campaign, including branding China a currency manipulator and imposing 45 percent tariffs on Chinese goods.

The US rapprochement with China, sealed by President Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong in 1972, enshrined the One China principle in the Shanghai Communiqué. In 1979, a second communiqué laid the basis for establishing diplomatic relations. The US ended its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and withdrew troops from the island while, under the Taiwan Relations Act, opposing any forcible reunification with China and continuing to sell arms to Taiwan.

By placing a question mark over US-China relations, Trump is recklessly compounding the rising uncertainty in Asia and around the world. The One China policy has been the foundation for the diplomacy of most countries with China. Any upgrading of US ties with Taiwan, as suggested by Trump's phone call with the Taiwanese president, could rapidly lead to a confrontation with China. Beijing has declared that it will respond militarily to any attempt by Taiwan, which it regards as a renegade province, to proclaim formal independence.

In his remarks on Fox News, Trump denied that his phone call with President Tsai was lined up weeks in advance and insisted it was “a very short call” congratulating him on his election victory. “Why should some other nation be able to say I can't make a call?” Trump declared. “I think it actually would've been very disrespectful, to be honest with you, not taking it.”

Trump's claims are simply absurd. According to the *New York Times*, former Republican Senator Bob Dole, acting as a lobbyist for the Taiwanese government, worked behind the scenes for months to facilitate contact between Taiwanese officials and Trump's staff. This included involving Trump's aides in a United States delegation to Taiwan and facilitating a Taiwanese delegation to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July.

Moreover, Trump's transition team features several figures with close links with Taiwan, such as his chief of staff Reince Priebus. Following Trump's talk with Tsai, Taiwan's official Central News Agency claimed Edward Feulner, a member of the transition team, played a crucial role in bringing about the phone call. Feulner met with Tsai in Taiwan in October. Regardless of how it was precisely organised, the call had been lined up weeks, if not months, in advance and involved more than just congratulations.

Significantly, the Republican National Convention that nominated Trump also altered the party's official platform by incorporating what are known as the Six Assurances given by US President Ronald Reagan to Taiwan. These include not setting a cut-off date for the sale of US armaments to Taiwan.

Another of Trump's foreign policy advisers and transition team, Peter Navarro, set out the framework for a fundamental shift in US relations with China and Taiwan in a *National Interest* article published in July. Entitled “America can't dump Taiwan,” Navarro called for American leaders to “*never* acknowledge the ‘One China, Two Systems’ policy—nor even refer to the ‘One China’ policy again.” [emphasis in the original]

Navarro declared that “maintaining Taiwan as an independent pro-US ally is absolutely critical for strategically balancing against the rise of an increasingly militaristic China.” In reality, it is the Obama administration that has conducted a massive military build-up in the Asia Pacific, and ratcheted up tensions with China in flashpoints such as the South China Sea, as part of its “pivot to Asia” to maintain American supremacy.

Navarro, who criticises Barack Obama for not aggressively enough pursuing the “pivot,” called for greater military aid to Taiwan to upgrade its defensive capacities, including “a similar set of ‘anti-access, area denial’ capabilities” that China is now using to deter US sea and air power in Asia. He also advocated assisting Taiwan to develop a fleet of state-of-the art diesel electric submarines to threaten the Chinese navy and shipping.

The response of the Chinese government to Trump’s provocative actions has been relatively low key. However, an editorial in the *China Daily* last week set out in unmistakable terms that Beijing was not about to horse-trade on the One China policy or Taiwan.

“Trump may be a shrewd businessman, adroit in commercial deal-cutting. He might have taken a page from his business manual—make a rigorous opening bid, then settle for less. But make no mistake about it: Taiwan stands on top of China’s menu of core national interests, and is not negotiable,” it stated.

“If he has been misled by his advisers for whatever reason into believing that unnegotiables are negotiable, in this case the One China principle regarding Taiwan, the consequences could be serious.”

Even before he assumes office, Trump is showing that he intends to adopt a bellicose stance toward China that upends decades of diplomatic norms, and recklessly risk a confrontation with Beijing that could trigger war between two nuclear-armed powers.