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Trump Calls Taiwan President, Upsetting ‘Status Quo’

By Jason Ditz
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President-elect Donald Trump stepped on a land mine today, when he exposed the facade of America’s “One China Policy” during the course of his continued phone conversations with foreign leaders, he called Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen. It was the first US presidential call to his Taiwanese counterpart since 1979, despite the US military commitment to them. The call sparked a flurry of condemnation from diplomats who saw the call as upsetting the delicate

balance of diplomacy with China and military support for Taiwan against them, and had many warning China might “retaliate” in some way.

The reaction to the call reflects the paradoxical nature of US policy in the region, as there is major trade between the US and Taiwan, and the US is committed to provide for their unconditional military defense and selling large amounts of arms to them annually, but there is no “official” diplomatic relationship between the two, with President Jimmy Carter cutting diplomatic ties in 1979.

US relations, and ultimately lack thereof, with Taiwan are a long and complicated story, starting with the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty of 1955, in which the US government recognized the Taiwan-based “Republic of China” (ROC) as the rightful government of mainland China as well as Taiwan, and pledging continued support for them.

The ROC retained this status, and indeed China’s position at the UN Security Council, and the US had no ties with the Chinese government (PRC) until Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China. In 1978, China announced the “united front” policy with the US, which aligned them against the Soviet Union, supporting US operations in Afghanistan, and attacking Vietnam. Eager to reward the PRC for this move, President Carter cut ties with Taiwan’s ROC outright.

Since then, US-Taiwan relations have been very complicated, with no official diplomatic ties. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 which continued military support for Taiwan against China, paradoxically while the US continues to not actually recognize Taiwan as a government.

The US State Department established the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) in 1979, which attempted to circumvent the lack of diplomatic ties by running embassy and consular services through the AIT. The US treats the AIT director as an ambassador for all intents and purposes, and it’s staffed by State Department employees, while retaining the flimsy pretext of not being an embassy.

When US-China relations began growing and Taiwan relations were put in this weird state of limbo, the US did not stop or even slow arms shipments to them, and in 1982 President Reagan unveiled the “Six Assurances,” which vowed that the US would never recognize China’s sovereignty over Taiwan or alter the terms of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. The Six Assurances have been endorsed by every president since, with US officials repeatedly committing America to directly intervene militarily to keep China from taking over Taiwan.

Trump’s phone call is being presented as a huge threat to US-China relations because those continue to rest on this bizarre policy of recognizing the PRC and not ROC diplomatically, and supporting the ROC against the PRC militarily.

Indeed, the very idea of such a phone call was considered so controversial that analysts are questioning whether it was either an “accident” by Trump or a deliberate effort to totally upend US-China relations, with Sen. Chris Murphy (D – CT) warning of the phone call “that’s how wars start.”

The White House also warned Trump over the phone call, saying he should seek advice from the State Department before calling anyone else.