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Trump's Taiwan Phone Call Planned All Along

By Jason Ditz
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After Friday's "hysteria" about President-elect Donald Trump having "blundered" in having a phone call with Taiwan's president, officials with his incoming government are revealing that the plan was no accident, and had been planned for a long time.

Officials claimed "months of discussion" on the matter, with Trump intending the phone call, the first since President Jimmy Carter cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 1979, as a deliberately provocative move that sought to underscore his intention to break with tradition.

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.

While many feared a huge backlash from the move, with Sen. Chris Murphy (D – CT) saying of the phone call "that's how wars start," the Chinese reaction appears to be of little practical meaning. China's Foreign Ministry lodged a complaint, and urged the US to be more cautious in the future about Taiwan, but ultimately US-China relations don't look to change in any serious way over the call.