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Trump and China: a Note From Beijing

By Tom Clifford
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Beijing.

Lunchtime. A bitter wind is blowing from the north across Beijing making the temperature seems colder than minus 6 degrees Celsius. I am meeting a friend. “You must try the chili tofu and parsnip soup.”

Then before she puts down the menu, she asks me about Trump, and the phone call.

“He should not have taken the call,” she said as the waitress took our orders.

I have always enjoyed my colleague’s company. She is tolerant, knowledgeable and witty. She wants to live in America. But what she said next stung me. “There could be war over Taiwan. It is part of China. Chiang Kai-shek was president of China before he fled there in 1949. He didn’t flee to a foreign land. He retreated to part of China.”

On almost every other issue, the pace of economic growth, pollution, health and education investment, my colleague would disagree with Beijing. She is not a nationalist but on Taiwan she is marching to the same tune as President Xi Jinping.

Under the reign of the sixth man to rule the People's Republic of China, the country has adopted a strikingly more assertive and nationalistic tone. It has challenged Japan in the East China Sea and claimed much of the South China Sea by fortifying islands and building artificial ones. In response to the US pivot to Asia, China views the South China Sea as a strategic economic gateway that must be protected. The Taiwan issue, as it is often referred to in Beijing, was largely untouched by the inflamed passions. But there is no other more profound and deeply felt cause for many in China than the "reunification" of China. In short, Taiwan is the priority for Chinese nationalists. Anything, in their eyes, that threatens the status quo will be seen as a clear and present danger.

Trump does not understand China was the common refrain after the phone call but more pertinent may be the fact that China does not understand Trump.

The signs were evident but have been ignored or wished away. During his campaign, Trump accused China of raping the US economy. This to Beijing was a deeply troubling choice of words, apart from immensely insulting. Within living memory, China has, in 1937, experienced the mass rape of the residents of a major city by a foreign power. Accusing China of "raping" an economy with which it has close, and increasingly closer, ties is hurtful and touches a nerve that is still raw. Currency manipulator? Since the turn of the century, the renminbi has strengthened against the US dollar though it has bucked the trend recently as the dollar strengthened. Beijing stayed silent during the presidential campaign as it did not want to be seen as "interfering". Even after the phone call with the president on Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, as she is referred to in Beijing, China displayed a reticence markedly at odds with its usual stridency on Taiwan.

But Trump is playing to his supporters who feel comfortable in blaming China for America's ills. His nod to protectionism – and threats of high tariffs on Chinese goods – is seen by Beijing as endangering the prosperity of China.

The last time Taiwan was in the spotlight in Sino-US relations was in 1995-96 in a crisis sparked by then Taiwanese leader Lee Teng-hui visiting Cornell University.

China reacted by carrying out missile tests in the waters off its "rebel province". In response, the US, the biggest display of US military force in the region since the Vietnam war, sent aircraft-carriers to the waters around Taiwan.

The crisis de-escalated. But this is a different China. In 1995-96 there were doubts that Chinese fighter jets could operate at night. Since then, and especially in the last few years, it has invested hugely in its air force and navy and has also developed a new generation of "carrier-killer" missiles, that could target US aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait.

The US would no longer risk the show of force that it mounted in the waters around Taiwan, twenty years ago, many believe in Beijing. But after the phone call, they may no longer be so sure.