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## QUESTIONING THE 'ONE CHINA' PRINCIPLE?

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Taiwan remains a very sensitive national issue for China. It is at the heart of China's 'One country, two systems' policy for peaceful reunification of Taiwan. But the island is still a de facto independent state having full diplomatic relations with 21 sovereign states in 2016. In order to safeguard its strategic interests, Beijing is committed to a foreign policy of discouraging foreign powers from establishing direct diplomatic ties with Taipei. Moreover, Beijing is paying attention to engagements between Taiwan and any other state which officially upholds the one China principle. However, a series of events unfolding in the East Asia region have put a question mark on the one China principle.

Under the leadership of President Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan has signaled interest in strengthening ties with Washington causing displeasure to Beijing. After assuming her office on May 20, 2016 as the second president from Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the cross-

strait relations are experiencing some challenges. Since the election of President Chen Shui-bian in 2000, the DPP has consolidated its power on the island with a clear stand on a distinct identity of Taiwan. Compared to Kuomintang (KMT), Beijing finds the DPP as a tough party to deal with in order to strengthen relations across the Taiwan Strait. In fact, Taiwan's status continues to threaten China's 'One country, two systems' formula.

When China is dealing with the Tibetan issue, East Turkistan independence in Xinjiang and Taiwan's pro-independence movement, some sections of the people in Hong Kong raised banners of "Hong Kong self-determination" and "Hong Kong independence" sending shock waves to Beijing.<sup>1</sup> It forced Beijing to call for upholding the practice of 'one country, two systems' to consolidate unity and territorial integrity of China.<sup>2</sup> During Chinese President Xi Jinping's meeting with Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying in



December 2016, Xi extended firm support to contain the “Hong Kong independence” activities.<sup>3</sup> Coming to the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, Taipei has spoken against Beijing’s handling of the issue.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Singapore has become another target of China’s diplomatic attack following the seizure of nine Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) armoured vehicles by the Hong Kong customs authorities while the ship (that was carrying the vehicles) made a transit halt on the way back from Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> China has expressed its displeasure over the incident and urged Singapore to respect the ‘One China’ principle.<sup>6</sup> Under a military arrangement with Taiwan, Singapore has engaged in military training of its armed forces on the soil of Taiwan. The new development was preceded by China’s failed attempt to win Singapore over by offering Hainan Island as an alternative to host such military training bases.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen met with the US Republican representatives on January 9, 2017. China has condemned the new development. Questioning the intention of the stopover, Beijing stated that the meeting was held “under the pretext of transit” and Beijing called on the US to abide by the one China policy and handle the Taiwan issue prudently.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the stopover was read as a follow up of the phone call to the President-elect Donald Trump. Against this backdrop, the “unpredictability” of

the US President-elect has been linked to the fear of “an arms race and instability in East Asia.”<sup>9</sup> It is a potential threat to the already strained relationship between China and the US.

Deterioration in the US-China relations over the South China Sea issue and Beijing’s concerns in the wake of the US ‘Rebalancing strategy’ can have wider ramifications. The phone call from Taiwan President on December 2, 2016 was a signal from Taiwan to the US to explore more options to make the going tough for Beijing. The signal gained further importance due to China’s assertiveness in its territorial claims in the East and South China Sea areas. Nevertheless, the first such call in 40 years since 1979 matters a lot to China’s policy toward Taiwan. Furthermore, the fear of a “very nasty confrontation” between the US and China remains unresolved.<sup>10</sup> Though China has reiterated its stand on peaceful unification, Beijing’s refusal to “renounce the use of force” has put the issue as one of the hotspots in the world.

The joint communiqué of the US and China on the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 stated the significance of normalisation of the relationship for the “cause of peace in Asia and the world.”<sup>11</sup> The position that “there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China” as stated in the 1979 communiqué remains the key principle of the relationship. However, China’s behaviour in Asia-Pacific region, especially in

South China Sea, has caused strategic concerns in the region. As agreed upon in the 1979 communiqué, the two major powers in the world should avoid seeking hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region or in any other region of the world.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the US' maintenance of "cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan" sometimes crosses the acceptable limit of Beijing. In this context, China's demand for termination of the US' arms sales to Taiwan remains a core issue. In addition, Beijing has closely guarded against any contact between Washington and officials from Taipei over the years.

While the pro-independence sentiment on Taiwan is becoming solidified under the successive governments led by the DPP, China is making efforts to achieve the 'Two Centenary Goals' of building a "moderately well-off" (*Xiaokang*) society by 2021 and a "strong, democratic, civilised, harmonious and modern socialist" country by 2049. In the pursuit of these goals, the developments in South China Sea reflect China's behaviour as a major power that could ultimately threaten Taiwan's status. While the US maintains its "strategic ambiguity" since the signing of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, dealing with Beijing is becoming tougher. This calls for critical analysis of the US-China relations and the need for strategic realignment in the Indo-Pacific region.

For Taiwan, survival in the present international system with China as a major power is a challenging task. Though Taiwan President's phone call seems to be an indication of fishing in troubled waters, China's activities in the South China Sea also demand certain response from the US and other regional powers to restore normalcy and strategic balance in East Asia. The Taiwan Relations Act protects the island with the US' sales of defensive arms to Taiwan and provision to intervene against coercive designs that threaten to "jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan."<sup>13</sup> It is significant to note here that reunification of Taiwan has been stated to be "an inevitable trend in the course of national rejuvenation."<sup>14</sup>

In the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972, the US stated: "Countries should treat each other with mutual respect and be willing to compete peacefully, letting performance be the ultimate judge." In 2017, China has become the second largest economy in the world only next to the US and it has managed to build a robust military capability. The fear of seeing the end of the era of peaceful competition between the two major powers is fast engulfing the world. Though China considers Taiwan as its "internal affair", Taiwan under the rule of DPP has worked tirelessly for independence, and the US arms sales to Taiwan remains the core issue threatening the stability across the Taiwan Strait.

The US stands for “peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question”<sup>15</sup> and, at the same time, it has committed to resist any coercive design by Beijing to integrate Taiwan. In the communiqué of 1982, the US reiterated that “it has no intention of infringing on Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, or interfering in China’s internal affairs, or pursuing a policy of ‘two Chinas’ or ‘one China, one Taiwan.’”<sup>16</sup> Against this backdrop, China’s assertion in the western Pacific Ocean region through frequent military drills has its detrimental effects in the region. The imbalance in the power relations between Beijing and Taipei in the wake of rapid modernization of China’s military has put the issue of the US arms sale to Taiwan in the forefront again.<sup>17</sup> The final resolution of the arms sales has not come yet.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, China has worked consistently to “readily respond to and resolutely deter any provocative action” which undermines China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>19</sup>

For China, the US policy of selling arms to Taiwan is not acceptable but it has to patiently work with the US to bring a final resolution of the same. However, the US has not indicated interest in final resolution of the matter. Though China claims Taiwan as an internal affair, the US position on Taiwan does not reflect what Washington reiterated in the communiqué of 1982. Therefore, Taiwan’s future political status is still unresolved. The new strategic realignment in the Indo-Pacific region and China’s policy of

peaceful development will shape the future of Taiwan. Whether Beijing will take measures to reunify Taiwan with the mainland as part of its two centenary goals remains a key strategic question. By using the sensitive issue of one China policy, the US and some allies in the region are sending strong messages to Beijing to restrain its activities in the western Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Citizens rally to support union in Hong Kong,” *People’s Daily*, January 2, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0102/c90000-9161868.html>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Xi urges political advisors to offer more advice on state affairs,” *People’s Daily*, December 31, 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/1231/c90000-9161389.html>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “Xi meets Hong Kong SAR chief executive,” *Xinhuanet*, December 23, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/23/c\\_135928878.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/23/c_135928878.htm), accessed on January 11, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Nandini Krishnamoorthy, “Taiwan asks China to not interfere in Hong Kong’s pro-democracy fight,” *International Business Times*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/taiwan-asks-china-not-interfere-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-fight-1590625>, accessed on January 11, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> “Singapore armoured vehicles seized in HK moved indoors,” *People’s Daily*, January 4, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0104/c90000-9162366.html>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Singapore demands return of armored cars detained in HK, China responds,” *People’s Daily*, January 10, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0110/c90000-9165019.html>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Choi Chi-yuk, “Singapore’s refusal to halt military ties with Taiwan prompted Beijing response to seizure of



military vehicles," *South China Morning Post*, November 29, 2016, accessed on January 11, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> "US officials meeting with Tsai sends aggressive signals: analysts," *People's Daily*, January 10, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0110/c90000-9164714.html>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Guy Taylor, "Groundbreaking phone call with Donald Trump raises hopes, fears in Taiwan," *The Washington Times*, December 11, 2016, [http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/11/donald-trump-tsai-ing-wen-phone-call-raises-hopes-/,](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/11/donald-trump-tsai-ing-wen-phone-call-raises-hopes-/) accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter, *America's Coming War with China: A Collision Course over Taiwan*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2005, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Joint Communiqué of the USA and the People's Republic of China on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations, 1979, Council on Foreign Relations, January 1, 1979, <http://www.cfr.org/china/joint-communicue-usa-peoples-republic-china-establishment-diplomatic-relations-1979/p8452>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Taiwan Relations Act, January 1, 1979, <https://www.ait.org.tw/en/taiwan-relations-act.html>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> China's Military Strategy, May 2015, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content\\_4586805.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm), accessed on January 11, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, February 28, 1972, <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/communiqu01.htm>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, August 17, 1982, <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/communiqu03.htm>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Guy Taylor, "Groundbreaking phone call with Donald Trump raises hopes, fears in Taiwan," *The Washington Times*, December 11, 2016, [http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/11/donald-trump-tsai-ing-wen-phone-call-raises-hopes-/,](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/dec/11/donald-trump-tsai-ing-wen-phone-call-raises-hopes-/) accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> The "Six Assurances" to Taiwan, July 1982, <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/assurances.htm>, accessed on January 10, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces, April 16, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c\\_132312681.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm), accessed on January 11, 2017.