

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45:
On Trump's meeting with President Xi Jinping

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PARTICIPANTS:

Host:

ADRIANNA PITA

Contributor:

RICHARD C. BUSH
The Michael H. Armacost Chair and Chen-Fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in
Taiwan Studies
Director, Center for East Asia Policy Studies
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, John L. Thornton China Center
The Brookings Institution

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

(Music)

BUSH: Hello, this is Richard Bush. I'm a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. I want to talk today about the place of Taiwan in the upcoming summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping. When presidents of the United States and China meet, they usually discuss Taiwan. The Chinese president usually raises the issue, if only to put America on the defensive. The U.S. president responds, usually reiterating longstanding policy, which is based on the Taiwan Relations Act and respect for Taiwan's democracy. The meeting between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping will be no exception to this rule, but the treatment of Taiwan is likely to be different for three reasons.

The first reason is politics in Taiwan. In January 2016, Taiwan voters selected Ms. Tsai Ing-wen to be their president. Her election has agitated China because Beijing associates Tsai and her party, the Democratic Progressive Party, with the goal of full legal independence for Taiwan and separation from China. Chinese leaders are alert for signs that President Tsai is actually moving covertly and gradually towards the direction of Taiwan independence. China's goal is to gain the ultimate unification of Taiwan with China, so for China, Taiwan independence would negate that goal and be a fundamental challenge to its interests. There is a high probability that China would go to war to prevent Taiwan independence. Taiwan people understand that. They much prefer the current and ambiguous status quo.

The second reason why this summit will be different is the phone call that occurred between President Tsai and President-Elect Trump in December last year. That conversation was the first of its kind as far as anyone knows, and it was probably inconsistent with the U.S.'s One-China policy. According to the One-China policy, the United States government conducts relations with Taiwan and its government on an unofficial basis. It has diplomatic relations with China, it has unofficial relations with Taiwan. China feared that the phone call signaled that the Trump administration would find even more ways to change established practice, and so put it on the defensive.

The third reason why this summit may not be routine is that President-Elect Trump indicated in a TV interview late in December that he would abide by the One-China policy only if China were willing to accommodate him on other issues like North Korea and economics. But China rejects the idea that it must earn America's commitment to the One-China policy by making its own concessions. For China and for past American presidents, the policy is the foundation upon which all other issues are to be addressed. By the way, Taiwan wasn't so happy with Trump's threat either. Rather, the island's 23 million people and their political leadership don't have any desire to be a bargaining chip in some U.S.-China deal, and they shouldn't be.

If at the Mar-a-Lago meeting, President Xi challenges President Trump concerning Taiwan, Mr. Trump should concede in one way and push back in four ways. The concession is that Mr. Trump should reiterate with feeling what he told Xi Jinping in their phone call on February 9th, that he would honor the One-China policy. The U.S.'s One-China policy has been the foundation for U.S.-China and U.S.-Taiwan relations. One part of that policy is, as I've said before, the unofficial relations between the United

States and Taiwan. But within this unofficial relationship, it is very substantive and very productive. A lot happens behind the façade of unofficiality, including arms sales and interactions with the Taiwan military. China isn't happy with much of this, but it is willing to be tolerant as long as we keep it behind the façade. President Trump's adherence to the One-China policy and unofficiality with Taiwan gives him a better chance of getting China's cooperation on other issues.

What are the reasons for President Trump to push back? The first is the Taiwan Relations Act, or TRA. Congress passed this law after President Carter terminated diplomatic relations with Taiwan and terminated the defense treaty that pledged the United States to come to the island's defense if it were attacked. In the TRA, the Congress reiterated and reinforced a long standing principle of America's One-China policy. That is that the dispute between China and Taiwan should be resolved peacefully. It stated the policy that the United States should have the military capability to come to Taiwan's defense. In short, the TRA conveyed a strong political commitment that the United States would respond to a Chinese use of force against Taiwan. The TRA also authorized the continued sale of arms to Taiwan.

The second reason for President Trump to push back against Xi Jinping on Taiwan is something called the Six Assurances. The Reagan administration conveyed these to Taiwan in the summer of 1982, around the same time that Reagan was concluding an agreement with China that the United States would exercise restraint when selling arms to Taiwan. Some of the assurances were specific to that time, but others continue to be important parameters for U.S. policy. First, Washington will not discuss the specifics of Taiwan arms sales with Beijing. Second, the United States

hasn't changed its position on the unresolved issue of Taiwan's sovereignty. As far as the United States is concerned, that's for Taiwan and China to resolve, and peacefully. Third, the United States will not pressure Taiwan to negotiate with China, as much as Beijing would like us to do so. Fourth, the United States will not mediate the dispute between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. These were good principles in 1982, and they are good principles now, and the Trump administration has been correct to affirm them.

The third way in which President Trump should push back is that the Chinese narrative about Taiwan is wrong. China's narrative is that Tsai Ing-wen is moving in a very dangerous direction in her China policy, and that Tsai Ing-wen and her policies could undermine U.S.-China relations. The fact of the matter is that President Tsai really has no intention of moving towards full independence. Her agenda actually is to make domestic reforms that Taiwan badly needs. Both she and the Taiwan public understand why seriously challenging China is bad for Taiwan. If China, on the other hand, were to show flexibility toward Tsai Ing-wen rather than its rigid inflexibility, I think she could resolve its imagined fears very quickly. The United States certainly should neither agree to China's narrative nor help China by acting on it.

Finally, President Trump should highlight Taiwan's democratic system, which has been in place for over 20 years. If China wishes to advance its political goals concerning Taiwan, it sooner or later will have to convince the 23 million people of the island that its plan is a good one. President Clinton basically stated the same thing in March 2000. It's not that the United States stands in the way of Xi Jinping achieving his goal of unification. What stands in the way of that goal is Beijing's inability to make an attractive

case to the Taiwan people. The United States cannot deliver Taiwan to China. We certainly shouldn't use it as a bargaining chip. To do so would be immoral and contrarian to American values.

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