

INSIGHT

Time for an update

Syaru Shirley Lin says significant changes in China and Taiwan mean US policy is in need of an overhaul

On December 2, US president-elect Donald Trump accepted a phone call from President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan to congratulate him on his electoral victory. In his tweets after the call, Trump referred to Tsai as “the President of Taiwan” and wrote that he didn’t see why the US could sell arms to Taiwan but he should not accept a call from Taiwan’s president.

This sent ripples of alarm all over the world, especially among the policy experts in Washington, Beijing and even Taipei. The call threw into question whether long-standing American policy towards Taiwan will now be changed.

In 1979, the US established normal diplomatic relations with China and derecognised Taiwan. The US also “acknowledged the Chinese position” that Taiwan is part of China. That same year, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which allowed for unofficial relations with Taiwan to continue even under the new “One China” policy. Nonetheless, no American president had ever spoken to a Taiwanese president since.

From the start, these arrangements were not seen as a long-term strategy but as a way to preserve stability while encouraging the two sides to reach a resolution, presumably unification. The Shanghai Communiqué jointly issued by the US and China in 1972 during president Richard Nixon’s groundbreaking trip to China was based on the assumption that “Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China”.

However, since Taiwan’s democratisation nearly three decades ago, fewer and fewer Taiwanese accept this premise – only 3 per cent of Taiwanese polled in a widely recognised university survey believe they are exclusively “Chinese” and only 1.5 per cent support “unification as soon as possible”. The consolidation of a distinctive Taiwanese identity means that the prospect of peaceful unification on terms acceptable to both sides – America’s consistent policy goal – has been greatly reduced.

The Trump-Tsai phone call is a useful reminder that the gaps among the three sides are growing

No room for ‘harmony’ with HK independence supporters

Our delegation’s recent visit to Beijing and reception by the Chinese leadership was perhaps more attention-grabbing than it would have been because it happened in an otherwise news-starved period, but the visit did convey certain important messages. Was it from Beijing with love, or was it from Beijing with a warning? Neither is entirely accurate; a more apt description may be: from Beijing with a bugle call.

The highlight of our trip was the unexpected two-hour meeting with Zhang Dejiang (張德江), the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, as well as with other high-level officials.

What messages were conveyed? Topics such as “one country, two systems” and the lawful right of the NPC to interpret the Basic Law may be considered old hat by the media and, as a result, would not evoke much interest.

But there is one pressing

There’s nothing wrong with harmony, but a question must be asked: ‘harmony’ with whom?



Since 1979, Taiwan has become a vibrant democracy with a dynamic civil society. By contrast, Washington has continued with the same “dual deterrence” policy to dissuade both Beijing and Taipei from trying to change the status quo unilaterally. In many ways, China and Taiwan have substantially changed over the years, while Washington has maintained a policy first defined almost four decades ago, hoping that neither side rocks the boat.

Nonetheless, as young Taiwanese become ever more insistent on autonomy rather than unification and as Beijing becomes more authoritarian politically and assertive militarily, some Washington policy experts have started advocating a change in policy – either stepping up security and economic relations with Taiwan, or else abandoning Taiwan in exchange for concessions from China. Trump has not indicated which position he favours.

While the Trump-Tsai phone call was unwelcome to many, it is actually a useful reminder that the gaps among the three sides are growing and should be bridged in order to maintain stability in the

region and the world. However, pundits from all three sides have overreacted to the call, prematurely concluding that it presages a major policy change. Over the past three decades, there have been several instances where a move by one of the three actors has been interpreted as permanently changing the status quo. For instance, China fired ballistic missiles in the waters around the island in 1995-1996 after then Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui visited Cornell University. And some American presidents had called for increases in America’s diplomatic and military ties to Taiwan. But in the end, not much has changed.

Fortunately, unlike so many observers, Beijing has not overreacted to the phone call. Although Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) has called it a “shenanigan by the Taiwan side”, this was consistent with Beijing putting the blame on Taiwan when there is tension. The Chinese foreign ministry followed up by requesting that Washington adhere to the “One China” policy.

But rather than mending fences, on December 4 – two days after the call – Trump defended his action by

rebuking China in tweets for its currency manipulation, trade protectionism and military build-up.

Cheerleaders for Trump say that he is fully aware of the consequences of his action and the call was planned well in advance. They believe he wanted to show that the future leader of the free world can

Trump supporters believe he intended to show that he could stand up to Beijing

accept any call he wants. His senior advisers Ed Fielner and Peter Navarro and incoming chief of staff Reince Priebus are sympathetic to Taiwan. Other Republicans who want more support for Taiwan also approved of the call. Some of Trump’s top candidates for secretary of state, including Jon Hunts-

man, a former ambassador to China, are very familiar with the issue and would probably advocate an adjustment in US policy.

While keenly aware that Beijing would be irritated, many Trump supporters would argue that Taiwan is a democracy and an important member of the global political economy, and it deserves more respect. They believe Trump intended to show that he could stand up to Beijing by departing from past practice and accepting a call from an ally.

Trump’s detractors disagree. They have charged that Trump does not understand the complexity of foreign policy issues and has been having calls with foreign leaders around the world without consulting experts. They say he is a showman who makes statements without considering the consequences. They fear that what Trump has started will inevitably provoke China’s wrath and could escalate to a new cold war.

Rather than jumping to the conclusion that the call would be a trigger for conflict with China, we must watch to see whether it foreshadows a major change in Washington’s policy.

Having been excluded from many preferential trade agreements because of Beijing’s objection, Taiwan needs to become more economically competitive by joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership grouping or signing a bilateral trade and investment framework agreement with the US. But neither of these may be possible under Trump, given his scepticism about free trade agreements.

On security, Trump has indicated that American allies need to pay more for their own defence, which will put pressure on Taiwan, which has underinvested militarily for years. Nevertheless, during this year’s Republican National Convention, Trump’s advisers reassured Taiwan of continued arms sales, and some have indicated that the US should increase its naval deployments in the Western Pacific.

There may be more contradictory messages emerging from the Trump transition team that will keep both the Chinese and the Taiwanese guessing about American intentions. But, eventually, the Trump administration will have to develop a more coherent policy towards Taiwan, which has not been reviewed since the Clinton administration. That policy will have to adjust to the significant changes that have been occurring in Taiwan and China, while maintaining America’s long-standing interest in stability across the Taiwan Strait.

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China should try to understand ways of the weak

Jiang Xun says the smaller Southeast Asian countries squeezed between the two giants of China and Japan cannot afford the price of ‘loyalty’ to any one. To survive, they must be flexible

For as long as countries have existed, there have always been big and strong ones, and small and weak ones, and it has never been easy for a small country to survive.

In the China of 770BC or so, the declining royal family of the Eastern Zhou dynasty grew too weak to control its vassal states. It ushered in a period of intense power struggles now known as the Spring and Autumn period. To survive, the smaller states relied on their more powerful counterparts for protection, and learned to exploit the rivalries between the major powers to their own benefit. While the major powers battled for domination, the small and weak relied on a different playbook for survival.

In early November, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak visited China for seven days – an unusually long official visit for a head of state – and returned home with trade and other deals worth over 230 billion yuan (HK\$260 billion). In an opinion piece in *China Daily*, he pledged Malaysia’s commitment to a strong bilateral relationship and promised to make the most of President Xi Jinping’s (習近平) “One Belt, One Road” initiative. But, just when the Chinese were still basking in the achievements of the visit, they learned that Najib was heading to Japan, a mere 10 days after concluding his trip to China.

In Japan, Najib procured for Malaysia two large patrol vessels to enforce maritime security in the South China Sea, agreed with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to reinforce their countries’ strategic partnership, and spoke about the high-speed rail project linking Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. China and Japan are locked in a fierce battle for that high-value contract. In Japan, Najib denied rumours that the contract might go to China, and spoke highly of the safety and reliability of the Japanese Shinkansen system, saying Japan was in a very competitive position in the bidding process. No doubt Najib saw an opportunity to extract a more advantageous deal.

How smaller countries can survive – and thrive – in the shadow of China and Japan requires diplomatic finesse

China and Japan are undeniably the two giants in Asia, while the Southeast Asian countries are relatively weak. We could learn a lot from watching how these weaker nations engage with the two powers, such as their official visits to both countries.

Najib visited China between October 31 and November 6; Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was there from October 18-21; Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc from September 10-15; Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi from August 17-21; Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni from June 2-4; Thai Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn from April 5-7; and Singapore foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan from February 28-March 2.

Let’s look at their engagement with Japan. Najib was in Japan from November 15-17; Indonesia’s minister for maritime affairs Luhut Binsar Panjaitan was there from November 9-10; Suu Kyi from November 1-5; Duterte from October 25-27; Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong from September 26-29; Nguyen Xuan Phuc visited Japan in late May.

The Vietnamese premier went to Japan then China, Suu Kyi to China then Japan, Duterte also went to China then Japan... and so on. As should be clear by now, how these smaller and weaker countries can survive – and thrive, with their dignity intact – in the shadow of China and Japan requires diplomatic finesse. Such skill is not to be sniffed at.

A Vietnamese diplomat stationed in Hong Kong has often talked about how, to survive, his country has had to manoeuvre between China, France, the US, Russia and Japan. Vietnam knows it must make peace with its stronger neighbours, and learn to navigate the currents created by their rivalries – this is surely one reason for the country’s stability.

A country with a powerful neighbour must know how to keep a low profile, and be guided by pragmatism. One characteristic of Vietnam’s foreign policy is its flexibility in decision-making, based only on its own best interests.

If Beijing can understand this, it may be able to calm down amid all the noise and begin to understand the decisions of Southeast Asian countries.

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Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe meet in Tokyo. Photo: Reuters

Robert Chow Yung says the message from Beijing is clear: it is prepared to crush any independence movement, and Hongkongers should take it seriously, including our political and business elite

problem facing us which has the undivided attention of Hong Kong people. That is the emerging threat of the so-called Hong Kong independence movement.

The strong and clear message from Beijing is that the leadership is taking the emergence of the so-called independence movement very seriously. Some of Zhang’s comments on this subject are a matter of record with the Hong Kong media.

In Zhang’s own words, Hong Kong people must not underestimate, ignore or nourish the so-called independence movement, and must fight it openly, with flags waving.

He also said that the NPC’s interpretation of the Basic Law is a clear indication of the central government’s will and determination as well as its unwavering stance against the movement.

It is true that he did not lay down the role and duties of the Hong Kong special administrative region government in this “fight”, but this can be seen as conforming to the norm of Chinese official communication.

One can safely assume that the role of the chief executive and the

SAR government in this fight is paramount.

It is therefore surprising to note the glaring lack of enthusiasm on this subject by the declared or still undeclared candidates for the coming chief executive election.

It is intriguing, to say the least, that the key message uttered the most locally concerns “harmony”. There’s nothing wrong with harmony, but a question must be asked: “harmony” with whom? It surely cannot be harmony with the so-called Hong Kong independence camp.

But what about those who are nourishing and supporting the independence movement both in front of and behind the scenes? If we’re not seeking “harmony” with them, then whom?

If the aim is harmony among the people and harmony among those who are against, or have at least openly declared and demonstrated that they are not on the side of the pro-independence camp, that is fine and should be applauded. But beyond that?

There exists in Hong Kong a growing rumble that those who voice and propagate Hong Kong independence don’t really mean it. Those people are just stupid kids

and should not be taken seriously.

By extension of this logic, anyone showing compassion for, and backing, these “stupid kids” has nothing to do with supporting the so-called independence movement.

So, are we talking about harmony for the sake of it, regardless of the consequences? Does it not conjure up the image of Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s waving a piece of useless paper and declaring “peace for our time”?

When Beijing sounds the bugle, should one wonder who will be absent from the cavalry?

At the time, many people thought Chamberlain was right and hailed him a hero. Only hindsight proved otherwise.

For anyone who cares to listen, there is no lack of mumbling and questioning behind the scenes that the Chinese leadership is just overreacting to “a bunch of immature kids”. It should surprise no one that the loudest utterances have come from the pan-democratic camp.

But when the same sentiments

are heard being whispered behind the doors of top local businesses and in some political circles, it becomes intriguing.

Will it come to a point where certain business circles insist on playing the harmony card in the coming chief executive election with the pan-democrats, in defiance of the central government’s pronounced stance on separatism?

Any political observer would have thought it a foregone conclusion to expect potential chief executive candidates to take seriously this call for vigilance and action, especially when Hong Kong people are also up in arms against elected lawmakers who treated the swearing of allegiance to the People’s Republic of China and the Basic Law as a joke, and who are now suffering the consequences.

The best guesstimate at the moment is for the pan-democratic camp to grab 25 per cent of the all-important votes – 300 of the 1,200 Election Committee seats. Or will assistance come from unexpected corners to help carry the election? The mind boggles.

In a movie, when a bugle sounds, one can expect the cavalry to come charging in and save the day.

In real life, when Beijing sounds the bugle, should one wonder who will be absent from the cavalry or just conveniently linger at the back?

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