

Trump should set China straight

Written by Joseph Bosco

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US President Donald Trump prides himself on going where none of his predecessors dared to go, taking actions that he believes serve the US' national interests where other presidents' passivity failed.

Trump did it most dramatically when he ordered the elimination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, a serious security threat to the US. In doing so, he consciously weighed the risk of war with Iran, correctly assessing it as minimal, and outweighed by his strong message against Iranian terrorism and aggression.

After his election in 2016, Trump showed his proclivity for doing the unorthodox in foreign affairs when he accepted a congratulatory call from President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). Foreign policy experts in and out of government tut-tutted that he was offending Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) and disrupting carefully constructed US-China relations.

Trump said he could talk to anyone he chooses, but agreed to give Xi a heads up before the next conversation with Tsai. Now that Tsai has achieved a sweeping re-election victory in the face of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) influence operations against her, it is time for him to make those two calls.

There are those who would warn Trump against calling Tsai as US-China trade talks continue, but the US has always held the stronger hand in those negotiations, and that will not change as long as Trump remains firm in his basic demands for transparency and reciprocity.

Trump could simply take a page from Beijing's playbook by insisting that trade and Taiwan be kept separate. Beijing knows how to compartmentalize issues, as it regularly does when it talks of win-win on trade even as it militarizes the South China Sea.

For that matter, the only reason trade talks are still going on is that Beijing reneged on the original agreement that the parties reached several months ago, so Trump should have no qualms about doing the right thing on Taiwan — especially given the deterrent effect it would have on Xi's urge toward adventurism.

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Just as he displayed with Iran, Trump should demonstrate his same vision of US national interests with China. He could also suggest that Xi show some strategic vision of his own by starting to move China away from its unsustainable authoritarian trajectory. He could remind Xi that Taiwan has shown the way for Chinese society to accomplish a peaceful transition to democratic governance.

After 50 years of Japanese colonial rule and four decades of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime, Taiwan has conducted seven successful presidential elections. The nation has seen three peaceful transfers of power: from the reformed, but still China-oriented KMT, to the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party for two four-year terms; back to the KMT for another two terms; and now back again to the DPP with the re-election of the nation's first female leader. Throughout the changes, Taiwan has demonstrated democratic stability.

Beijing has expressed its displeasure during the run-up to each election that Taiwan presumes to choose its own national leader rather than accepting the rule of the CCP, which follows the teaching of Mao Zedong (毛泽东) that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

Taiwanese see it differently. They have dared to express their preference for a system that produces leaders chosen with the consent of the people. Resisting Chinese intimidation and extensive influence operations, they have demonstrated once again that a Confucian culture is as compatible with democratic governance as it would be in the US or in any European society. The CCP rightly fears that idea as subversive and views it as a threat to its cultish mind-controlling dictatorship.

The question is how Beijing will respond to the Taiwanese election results. Will the Chinese government finally accept the reality that Taiwanese are so committed to their own democratic identity that they are “permanently separated politically” from China, as former US president Richard Nixon belatedly observed two decades after his fateful opening to China? Or, will the CCP decide that it cannot tolerate another generation of a wayward Taiwan setting a bad example for the people of Hong Kong — or Tibet or the Xinjiang region?

Will Beijing invoke its 2005 “Anti-Secession” Law and conclude that “possibilities for a peaceful reunification [are now] completely exhausted [and] the state shall employ non-peaceful means” to bring Taiwan under its control?

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It would be highly useful and timely for Trump, with the enhancement of his credibility as commander in chief by his actions on Iran, to dissuade Xi from contemplating any use of force against Taiwan.

In her victory speech, Tsai held out an olive branch to Beijing, saying: "I want to emphasize that my commitment to peaceful, stable cross-strait relations remains unchanged, but both sides of the Taiwan Strait have a responsibility to ensure peaceful and stable cross-strait relations."

Tsai also assured the international community that she would continue to govern and manage cross-strait relations in a responsible manner.

"All countries should consider Taiwan a partner, not an issue... In the face of China's diplomatic pressure and military threats, we have maintained a non-provocative, non-adventurist attitude that has prevented serious conflict from breaking out in the Taiwan Strait," she said.

Trump should applaud and reinforce this peaceful message from another democratic president, and the US' critical security partner in the Indo-Pacific region, while providing a tough-love cautionary message for Xi.

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