

Pompeo leaves Biden a parting gift

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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In a statement that came as a shock to many, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Saturday announced the immediate annulment of all “self-imposed” guidelines on US executive relations with Taiwan, which he said Washington took “unilaterally, in an attempt to appease the Communist regime in Beijing.”

It could be the most sweeping advancement in Taiwan-US ties in decades. No longer would officials need to meet in “private meeting rooms or restaurants,” or avoid references to a Taiwanese country or government. High-level personnel could attend official events, including Double Ten National Day celebrations.

Coverage of the decision has been predictably alarmist, pre-empting a backlash from Beijing. Many commentators have reduced it to a parting blow by US President Donald Trump’s administration to “box in” US president-elect Joe Biden and his team, as they prepare to move into the White House on Wednesday next week.

Yet Pompeo’s move was not as unprecedented as it seems, nor is it a death knell for Biden’s China policy. While malicious intent is certainly possible, it does not preclude the good that could come of it. It was only the latest step on a long, unidirectional path to closer ties, with the past few years featuring the longest strides.

The decision was an extension of a directive already laid out in the Taiwan Assurance Act, passed late last year with bipartisan support, instructing the US Department of State to review and reissue its guidelines on Taiwan. Before that, the Taiwan Travel Act of 2018 called for high-level reciprocal visits. Even before Trump, US policy toward Taiwan had been trending in a singular direction with consecutive arms sales, the Taiwan Policy Act of 2013 and other moves.

US public opinion is also shifting. A Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey in October last year showed record support for US defense of Taiwan at 41 percent. This was alongside plummeting positive views toward China, with the council’s “feeling thermometer” hitting a low of 32 out of 100. A majority of Americans at 55 percent view the rise of China as a “critical threat” to the US.

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Caught by this rising tide, Biden and his team have intensified their rhetoric. After the Trump campaign earlier this year aired an ad saying that Biden “stands up for China,” the Biden campaign answered in kind, airing an ad featuring sound bites of Trump praising China that were “straight out of China’s propaganda playbook.” Biden has called Beijing’s actions in Xinjiang “genocide,” and has promised to lead a global effort to “pressure, isolate and punish China.”

The Biden administration will try to maintain a balance between staying strong on China and allowing room for cooperation “on issues where our interests converge,” such as climate change and global health security. As the leader of a party containing a large coalition of interests, Biden would have less latitude to make dramatic changes. With Pompeo’s team making the “strong” moves on their way out, the Biden administration could simply continue in that direction without having to take the first steps — or the blame that goes with it.

Faced with two options — continuing Trump-era policies and risk angering Beijing or rolling them back and appearing ineffective on a rare bipartisan issue — the choice is clear. China would continue to cry foul at every perceived slight, and has shown no intention of reversing its policies to reward a more amiable White House. The US can look to its own failed history of engagement, championed by former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, as advice against a soft touch.

If the administration rolls back Trump-era policies, it could also risk politicizing the issue, making it even harder to achieve the kind of nuanced approach Biden desires.

While sudden and seismic, the parting changes from Pompeo should be viewed as an opportunity to keep pushing toward the direction favored by the US government and people alike.

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