



18 January 2021

'CHINESE REACTIONS TO U.S. PRESIDENT TRUMP'S POLICIES ON TAIWAN'

by JAYADEVA RANADE

Recent US pronouncements regarding Taiwan have annoyed Beijing and the US' plans to send its Ambassador to the UN, Ms. Kelly Craft, to Taiwan provoked a sharp response. Hers would have been the first trip at this level since 1968. Though Craft's visit, which was scheduled to start on January 13 was abruptly cancelled at the last minute, she did later have a virtual meeting with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen. The Chinese government is now closely watching whether Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen or another Taiwanese politician is invited to attend President-elect Joe Biden's virtual inauguration on January 20.

2. Reacting earlier to U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo's announcement of January 9, easing restrictions on contacts with Taiwan, a hard-hitting Global Times (January 10) editorial captioned "Pompeo may have started the count-down of Taiwan's final days," stated that "Pompeo once again is frantically digging holes and placing mines for Sino-US relations and the Taiwan issue. This is a criminal, structural sabotage to cross-strait peace and the bottom-line stability of Sino-US relations. The extent of its severe consequences is unpredictable." The editorial asserted that "Beijing needs to send a strong signal that the United States must stop before it is too late. It must let the United States and Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party authorities know that if they dare to let Pompeo visit Taiwan before the end of his term, Beijing's response will be overwhelming." It warned: "The last few days of the current U.S. administration may also be the last few days of the existence of the Taiwan Democratic Progressive Party."

3. Giving an indication of Beijing's anger, the Straits Times (January 15) quoted an unnamed Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official as cautioning that "US support for Taiwan to re-join the UN is our red line". Other CCP insiders, it said on January 11, had warned that if the US was to simultaneously establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Beijing would sever ties with Washington and China would be in a "state of war" with Taiwan.

4. A CCP official, who retired from a Chinese government reform think-tank and is critical of Chinese President Xi Jinping, offered a different perspective. Separately writing under the pseudonym Liang Jing in the *Ziyou Yazhou Diantai (Radio Free Asia)* on January 12, 2021, he described the easing of restrictions on Taiwan as Trump's "most positive legacy". Saying that "Trump's four years in power has irreversibly normalised US-Taiwan relations", he said the Biden administration might well revert to restoring some of the earlier restrictions, but will do so in a low-key manner as otherwise it would not be politically wise for them. Observing that some people feel normalising ties with Taiwan is dangerous, including for the world as it raises the risk of a US-China war, he said what would be absolutely unacceptable however is a policy of "appeasement" that runs contrary to the wishes of the majority of Taiwanese. He added that at one time he

apprehended that Trump would use Taiwan as a bargaining chip to “make a big deal” with Xi Jinping.

5. Liang Jing said that many factors contribute to the freedom of a country and a small country like Taiwan could especially “end up with tragic results just like that currently of the Hong Kong people and the Tibetans and Uyghurs on the mainland”. Adding a note of caution, he said that while the Taiwanese people are optimistic about defending their freedom notwithstanding the huge differences in the strengths of Mainland China and Taiwan – “particularly as the world economy is highly dependent on China’s” --- he said this asymmetry actually increases Xi Jinping’s propensity to take risks.

6. At the same time, he assessed there had been a major shift in the entire international community’s perception and attitude towards the CCP’s regime due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this change, the international community suddenly realised in 2020 that defending the freedom of Taiwan is in their own interest and their own freedom.

7. He explained that “two technical factors” not directly related to Trump’s Taiwan policy have played a very positive role in the “historical development” of US-Taiwan relations. One technical factor is the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. Ltd. (TSMC)’s technological monopoly on high-end chips. Because of its key role in next-gen military and AI tech for the US and the free world, Taiwan’s freedom will directly affect the balance of power between the ‘democratic camp’, or the West, and the CCP.

8. The second technical factor is the new vaccine technology against COVID-19, which allows the US and developed countries to proactively combat the epidemic and has turned China’s current advantage into a disadvantage. The importance of this change will affect the future development of US-Taiwan relations. It, of course, also creates a valuable time window and room for tolerance for both sides. He argued that while Trump’s Taiwan policy may not be a positive legacy and could have been the fuse causing the conflict to spin out of control, nevertheless strong leaders pursue the politics of great risk.

9. The retired CCP official expressed the view that Trump’s Taiwan policy did not lead to catastrophic results, but was rather a positive legacy. At the same time, apparently hinting to the incoming US Administration to keep up the trend, he conceded that facing a complex world makes it difficult to take moral judgments and political choices especially for those unwilling to engage in “strongman politics”.

(The author is a retired Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is presently President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)