

Planting booby traps for Joe Biden in Taiwan

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Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the dying days of Donald Trump's presidency, announced on 9 January that all "contact guidelines" regulating when and how US officials could interact with their Taiwan counterparts were "null and void."

He did not go so far as to endorse official relations, but he described Taiwan as an "unofficial partner." This has greatly heightened the risk of retaliatory action by China that might even lead to conflict. That possibility again raises the question of which side Canberra would take.

Pompeo's statement slammed existing US policies as attempts to appease the Communist regime and promised that this annulment would do away with the "self-imposed restrictions of our permanent bureaucracy." In one sense, this is just the latest in a series of pro-Taiwan measures, following on record arms sales, visits by senior officials including the Secretary for Health and Human Services Alex Azar, and the enactment of the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative and the Taiwan Assurances Act that will force a review of the bilateral diplomatic relationship. The US Ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft, was due to travel to Taiwan on 13 January.

Taiwan officials have welcomed the latest moves, which they see as steps in the direction of normalizing relations. Foreign Minister Joseph Wu tweeted his support. Press opinion in Taiwan is however divided. The Pan Green Liberty Times in an editorial comment endorsed the latest move, saying it would stiffen Biden's resolve to "frame" Beijing, while the Pan Blue United Daily saw no benefits for Taiwan since the new US administration would surely conduct a thorough review of China policies.

In Hong Kong, the South China Morning Post, warned that Trump might take further action to anger Beijing such as sending military aircraft or ships to visit, but quoted unnamed Chinese observers warning Beijing to be alert but not alarmed.

Meanwhile, on 10 January, Foreign Minister Marise Payne joined her counterparts from Canada, the UK and the US in a joint statement on arrests of 55 suspects in Hong Kong under the terms of the new National Security Law. (All except one have subsequently been released.) This shows the sources of our China policies.

Beijing in fact has been quite restrained in its reaction to Pompeo's statement. Zhao Lijian, Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said, "We advise Mr Pompeo and his likes to recognise the historical trend, stop manipulating Taiwan-related issues, stop retrogressive acts and stop going further down the wrong and dangerous path, otherwise they will be harshly punished by history." Beijing does not want to prejudice relations with Biden and the incoming administration by precipitate action. If there are no unforeseen fireworks from either side, Biden is likely to stick to existing policies that are governed by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and the One China Policy.

What was it that drove Pompeo to let off this cracker, just days before his leaving office? So far, as far as diplomatic relations are concerned, the chess moves have been entirely predictable and only presage stalemate. It seems that the reasons for his statement may be found in Washington, not in the South China Sea.

The Falun Gong cult, which has evolved into a powerful political lobby with its own online media and press including the Epoch Times, has been a major donor and sponsor of Trump's campaign for re-election. Falun Gong banners were raised in last week's rally in Washington, according to the South China Morning Post and Falun Gong leaflets have been distributed at pro-Trump rallies in other states. The Taiwan independence lobby is also a powerful force in Washington. While the international press focussed on Trump's support from right wing Hispanic voters, the influence of the ethnic Chinese American community should not be overlooked. These people back Pompeo's statement.

It is said that Samson, when he pulled down the pillars of the Temple to Dagon, destroyed more Philistines when he died than when he was alive. So it might also be with Mike Pompeo. Perhaps he had been reading Milton's Samson Agonistes, "Boast not of what thou would'st have done, but do What then thou would'st."

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