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## The Brutal Taiwan Dilemma Trump Will Leave For Biden

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Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement that the United States was lifting all "self-imposed" limitations on U.S. official contacts with Taiwan's government may have created an immediate foreign policy crisis for the incoming Biden administration. Pompeo's statement was blunt and uncompromising:

Taiwan is a vibrant democracy and reliable partner of the United States, and yet for several decades the State Department has created complex internal restrictions to regulate our diplomats, service members, and other officials' interactions with their Taiwanese counterparts. The United States government took these actions unilaterally, in an attempt to appease the Communist regime in Beijing. No more. Today I am announcing that I am lifting all of these self-imposed restrictions. Executive branch agencies should consider all "contact guidelines" regarding relations with Taiwan previously issued by the Department of State under authorities delegated to the Secretary of State to be null and void.

Taiwan's cheerleaders in the United States hailed the move, but Beijing's angry reaction was swift and predictable. Chinese officials emphasized that they consider the Trump administration's latest move a brazen violation of the "one-China" policy that Washington has maintained since it switched diplomatic relations from the Republic of China (Taiwan's official name) to the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979.

As part of the one-China formula, successive U.S. administrations have confined government-to-government contacts with Taiwan to low-level officials only. And most of those contacts have involved economic and cultural, not security, issues. During the Trump administration, though, those restraints noticeably weakened, and with Pompeo's announcement, they appear to have vanished.

This development creates an acute dilemma for the Biden administration. No matter what move the new president makes, there will be major drawbacks. Washington has now substantially upgraded ties with one of East Asia's most vibrant democracies instead of keeping relations in the shadows. If Biden reverses that policy, it will appear to be appeasement of a brutal dictatorship that already is in the process of extinguishing liberty in Hong Kong. Biden will catch serious flak from Taiwan's supporters in Congress and conservative news media outlets. On the other hand, Taiwan is a hot-button issue for the PRC, and retaining the new policy toward Taipei would become a huge obstacle to Biden's efforts to improve the U.S.-PRC relationship that

became severely strained during the Trump years. Whether or not Trump intended to create such a nasty dilemma for his successor, it will be the inescapable result.

In reality, Pompeo's announcement was the capstone of a policy shift that has been taking place inexorably over the past four years. As the *Japan Times* notes: "As president-elect in December 2016, Trump took the rare step of receiving a congratulatory phone call from Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen. The call, the first contact between a leader of Taiwan and an incumbent or incoming U.S. president in nearly four decades, angered China and set the stage for a rapid deterioration of Sino-U.S. ties under Trump."

That incident was a sign of changes to come. The Trump administration provided the principal impetus for those policy changes, but Taiwan's supporters in Congress also pushed the envelope. One key measure was the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act in 2018, which not only authorized but encouraged high-level defense and foreign policy officials to interact with their Taiwanese counterparts. More recent congressional measures have sought to emphasize that the United States is firmly in Taiwan's camp. An especially troublesome aspect for Biden is that all of those measures passed with overwhelming, bipartisan majorities. Attempts to execute a policy reversal may encounter significant resistance even within his own party.

The Trump administration has taken several steps to emphasize Washington's political—and military—solidarity with Taiwan. After passage of the Taiwan Travel Act, it became clear that restrictions on high-level meetings were disappearing fast. The following year, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton met with David Lee, secretary general of Taiwan's National Security Council. Since then, there has been a veritable cascade of high-level interactions. During 2020, three Cabinet-level administration officials made trips to Taipei. This month, that trend reached its culmination with the announcement that U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft would travel to Taiwan. Tsai Ing-wen's government understandably was thrilled about the decision. That thrill may have faded a bit when the State Department announced a few days later that all foreign trips scheduled for the last week of President Trump's term would be canceled. Nevertheless, Washington's initial decision to authorize Craft's visit was a crucial gesture of support.

In addition to the high-profile visits from U.S. officials, new arms sales and other forms of military cooperation between Washington and Taipei have increased during the Trump administration to the point of constituting a de facto restoration of the bilateral military alliance that officially came to an end in 1979.

This is the situation that Joe Biden inherits. He likely would prefer to roll back the Trump administration's changes gradually and quietly as part of an overall strategy to improve relations with the PRC. But he will not have that luxury. The Trump innovations are now part of the new status quo, and Taiwan's friends in Congress and the media would focus hostile attention on any rollback attempt. Public opinion is likely to be with them. Beijing's actions with respect to Hong Kong and the coronavirus have already generated considerable anger and suspicion among the American people.

During the 2020 campaign, conservatives consistently sought to portray Biden himself as "soft" on China, if not in a corrupt relationship with the PRC. Any attempt to rescind the closer ties with Taiwan will leave him vulnerable to charges of appeasement—or worse. At the same time,

retaining those ties will exacerbate already serious tensions with Beijing. The new president faces a nasty dilemma with no clear or low-cost solution.

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