

Taipei's Name Game

It's Time to Let Taiwan Be Taiwan

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First the phone call, then the bombshell. On December 2, Donald Trump reversed 37 years of American foreign policy by taking a ten-minute congratulatory phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. Yesterday, he went further, announcing that he doesn't know "why we [the United States] have to be bound by a One China policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade."

Trump's official position is still unclear, but his comments indicate that on the issue of Taiwan, he may favor changing a status quo that has persisted for nearly four decades. The current version of the United States' One China policy, which holds that there is only one legitimate government of China, dates to 1979, when the United States recognized the communist government in Beijing while breaking off formal diplomatic ties with the nationalist government in Taipei.

At the time, Taiwan was still a repressive one-party state, but over the next 20 years it peacefully transformed itself into a vibrant liberal democracy. But despite this progress, there is still not an independent country named "Taiwan." The island Tsai governs still calls itself the Republic of China (ROC). Mainland China refers to it as Taiwan and officially considers it to be a renegade province, but in practice treats it like a foreign country. The World Trade Organization calls it the "Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)." The United States still uses the name Taiwan and is open about its desire to maintain strong, unofficial relations with the government in Taipei. Nevertheless, when a U.S. State Department spokesperson accidentally called Taiwan a country earlier this year, it was considered a major gaffe.

But what is Taiwan, then? Today, 70 years after the end of the Chinese civil war that separated the island from the mainland, it is time for the international community to settle this question. It is meaningless to perpetuate the myth that Taiwan is a province of China. Rather, it is time for Taiwan to become a normal country.

PUTTING AWAY CHILDISH THINGS

Of course, China may never accept Taiwan's attempt to behave as a country like any other, and would certainly veto Taiwanese membership in the United Nations. But Beijing must know that Taiwan is never coming back. Today's young Taiwanese have grown up in a free, open, and democratic society and are never going to vote to be governed from Beijing, especially after witnessing what has happened to Hong Kong. Their children and grandchildren will be even less likely to do so. Beijing waiting for Taiwan to peacefully join China would be like Pyongyang waiting for South Korea to peacefully join the North, and the mainland would not accept the costs of an attempted military solution.

By the same token, even if China never formally recognized Taiwan as a nation, it might begin to treat the island differently if Taiwan behaved more like a country. If Taiwan wants to be taken seriously, it must behave seriously. Renouncing its territorial claims in the South China Sea would be

a good place to start. Like Beijing, Taipei maintains a flimsy claim to sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, based on the premise that it is the rightful claimant of China's maritime territory.

Taiwan's South China Sea claims are based on the infamous nine-dash line, a rough sea boundary first drawn on Chinese maps in 1947. The line illustrated the expansive claims over the waters, islands, and seabed of the South China Sea made by the ROC, which at the time was in control of the mainland. When the communists won the Chinese civil war, they adopted the nine-dash line as the basis of their own claims, and today both China and Taiwan maintain that the entire South China Sea belongs to them—that is, to the real China.

Ironically, much of China's claim over the South China Sea is based on the fact that Taipei maintains extensive facilities on Taiping Island (also known as Itu Aba), a disputed feature more than 900 miles south of Taiwan. But on July 12, 2016, the UNCLOS Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that the island is a rock and therefore affords its holder minimal territorial rights. Even though Taiwan is not a party to UNCLOS, it should respect this ruling, withdraw from Taiping Island, and return the rock to its natural state. Doing so would earn it friends throughout the region, and China can't very well complain about a Taiwanese withdrawal.

Beijing may continue to press its claims in defiance of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but a Taiwan that is no longer pretending to be China should not be involved in this dispute. Instead, it should embrace the peaceful development of the South China Sea under the auspices of multilateral institutions. Most of all, Taiwan should make it abundantly clear that it is not a party to the many South China Sea disputes.

Taiwan should also stop playing the aid-for-recognition game. Taiwan may have given up its claims to govern the mainland in the early 1990s, but it still formally calls itself the Republic of China, and uses financial incentives to persuade 21 poor countries to maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan instead of China. Taiwan is a rich country that can help the poor anywhere in the world. Given its own inspiring transition from dictatorship to democracy, Taiwan could play a particularly important role in advising countries such as Mongolia and Ukraine on how to solidify their own democratic institutions. The money Taipei spends in exchange for diplomatic recognition, on the order of \$200 million per year, could be much better spent funding the spread of good governance in the world's many fragile democracies.

ONE CHINA

But the most important thing that must happen is for Taiwan to drop the fiction that it is the Republic of China—that is, drop the fiction that it has some claim, even if only a rhetorical one, over the mainland. Such a change would be politically fraught, but it would not necessarily require anything as dramatic as a formal declaration of independence. Even those few within Taiwan who want reunification now accept that any future united China would be run from Beijing and not from Taipei. The obvious solution is for the government to simply change the island's name from the Republic of China to Taiwan, without making any formal statement about the country's legal status. It would be a declaration of identity, not a declaration of independence.

Even given such a declaration, of course, Taiwan would remain what it is today—a de facto state that is not formally recognized as such. But for the rest of the world, the change could be profound. In recent decades, world leaders, (until now including presidents of the United States), have refused to deal directly with Taiwan because they only recognize one China. But they could learn to deal with a Taiwan that does not claim to be China. U.S. presidents, who talk to the leaders of non-state and

quasi-state entities such as the Palestinian Authority all the time, could talk to the president of Taiwan.

This development would not make China happy. But contrary to the alarmist rhetoric of many policy analysts outside the United States, China is not making preparations to invade Taiwan, and Trump's phone call will not start World War III. Consensus opinion about the Tsai-Trump call in the United States, which sensibly debates the merits of talking to Taiwan, is much more reasonable. And although China is adamantly opposed to formal Taiwanese sovereignty, it nonetheless deals with Taiwan, one of its closest neighbors and most important trading partners, in a generally pragmatic fashion.

WHO NEEDS CERTAINTY?

The United States has always had a One China policy. But that policy has always been ambiguous about the status of Taiwan in relation to that one China. Beijing claims that Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory. But it makes an identical claim in the South China Sea, where the rest of the world has shown that it will not accept all of China's many territorial claims. In this regard, China's claim to Taiwan should be no different.

Normalizing Taiwan's status as a de facto, rather than a de jure, state may chafe Taiwan hawks who advocate for the island's recognition as a sovereign nation. But it is better for behavioral change to precede political change, rather than the other way around. As long as the status quo continues, and Taiwan makes sovereignty claims on the basis of its self-proclaimed identity as the Republic of China, other countries will be justified in letting Beijing dictate the terms of their Taiwan policies. If Taiwan embraces a more modest identity of its own, the world may eventually come around to supporting it.