

Background to the China and Taiwan situation

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With the election of President Donald Trump and his acceptance of a congratulatory phone call from Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, the phrase "one-China policy" has dominated commentary about the region. This so-called "policy" is based on several historical falsehoods.

When Chiang Kai-shek took over Taiwan in 1945, he instituted a colonial dictatorship in which recent migrants from China systematically discriminated against native Taiwanese. Taiwanese had no political voice. Chiang asserted that Taiwan had always belonged to China, even though he had not claimed this before 1942. Mao Zedong, who also did not claim Taiwan as Chinese until 1942, likewise insisted that Taiwan belonged to China.

Mao persisted with this insistence when Western powers reached agreements to recognise the People's Republic of China in the early and late 1970s. The democratic powers at the time acknowledged that China believed this, but did not recognise this claim. Chiang and his son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, continued to agree with Mao on this question.

In considering the status of Taiwan, it is important to bear in mind several facts. First, Taiwan has democratised since the death of Chiang Ching-kuo in early 1988. Since popular election of the president began in 1996, Taiwan has had three peaceful changes of government. The current democratic regime in Taiwan allows all citizens the right to vote and participate in politics, to proclaim many different ideas without fear of imprisonment and to demonstrate, speak and write if they oppose government policy.

Today's government in Taiwan is vastly different from the dictatorship of the Chiangs.

Second, according to international law, Taiwan is a sovereign nation. It has a permanent population, a defined territory, government, and the ability to enter into relations with other states. Even though Taiwan has only 21 formal diplomatic partners, in fact it has what we could call "officially unofficial" diplomatic relations with all of the world's democratic states, including the US, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India, the various European powers and the EU as well.

On all sides these unofficial diplomatic missions are staffed by members of the foreign services, they have privileges of diplomatic "bags", and they have special tax privileges. None of these powers will publicly admit it, but these democratic states all have undeclared "one China, one Taiwan" policies.

Third, among the world's nations, Taiwan is a substantial middle power. It has a population about the same as Australia's, which is larger than three-fourths of the world's nations. Its territory is larger than that of two-fifths of the world's nations. Taiwan has an advanced economy, very high educational levels and a sizeable military.

Fourth, Taiwan is not Chinese. When the Dutch arrived in 1624, they were the first to unify the island, which had an aboriginal population with a language unrelated to Chinese. At this time there were no permanent Chinese communities in Taiwan. Like other outsiders, Chinese came to Taiwan temporarily to trade, fish and, in the case of pirates, to hide. Historical documents make crystal clear that Chinese did not live in Taiwan until the Dutch imported them for labour.

Migrants often change their identities. Thus, Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders no longer think of themselves as British. Over the centuries, many migrants came to Taiwan from southern China, and their identities too shifted from Chinese to Taiwanese. Surveys demonstrate that this shift to Taiwan identity includes even the descendants of those who came to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek when the communists took over China in 1949.

Fifth, no Han Chinese regime ever ruled Taiwan from a base in China until Chiang Kai-shek in 1945. After the Dutch, the Zheng family ruled Taiwan, but as outsiders with no base in China. The Zheng family was ousted in 1683 by the Manchus. The Manchus were not Chinese and built a huge empire in which China was a colony. Many Chinese scholars complained about the yoke of foreign Manchu rule, as did Sun Yat-sen, one of the leaders of the revolution of 1911.

Thus, when Chiang Kai-shek took over Taiwan in 1945, he was the first Chinese ruler of Taiwan based in China. The four years of the Chinese civil war from 1945 to 1949 were the worst in Taiwan's 6000 years of history. Chiang Kai-shek's troops systematically massacred a democratic Taiwanese movement, killing as many as 30,000 people across the island. The atrocities included stringing people together with wire through their cheeks, forcing the line to enter a river, and then shooting the person on the end of the wire, thus drowning everyone linked by the wire.

It is not difficult to understand why Taiwanese reject Chinese claims and why they have no trust in China's current violent dictatorship.

The willingness of President Trump to discuss these issues is welcome.

Unfortunately, he has also indicated that he might do a deal with China, suggesting that Taiwan might be part of that deal. As the above analysis shows, Taiwan should not — and cannot — be part of any deal with China. We in Australia would reject any attempt by another country to force us to sacrifice our freedom and democracy as part of a larger “deal”.

China continues to make claims, which lack any historical basis, for such territory as the South China Sea, the East China Sea and Taiwan. Historically, Southeast Asian and Muslim traders dominated the South China Sea, an area vital to trade routes in East Asia today. China has destroyed coral reefs to build artificial islands, which, despite promises, it has militarised.

The democratic powers will have to resist China's false claims and expansionism. Otherwise, resistance in the future will require many more resources and sacrifices.

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