

Trump's Asia Policy Takes Shape

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E-Notes

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Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and President Donald Trump walking along the West Colonnade. (Source: kantei.go.jp)

After challenging the “One China” policy—the bedrock of Sino-American relations—during his transition period, President Donald Trump accepted the long-standing position in a phone call with President Xi Jinping of China in early February. In December 2016, Trump became the first U.S. president-elect to contact directly the president of Taiwan, and in January 2017, he openly questioned the merits of the “[One China](#)” policy. Both of these things, taken together or separately, marked a potentially fundamental shift in U.S. policy toward both Taiwan and China. Before the phone call, it seemed that relations between the United States and China would backslide or turn hostile. For now, the world can breathe easier since by all accounts, the phone call between Trump and Xi was cordial and productive.

That phone call, a recent visit to South Korea and Japan by Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and a visit to the United States by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo of Japan show signs that the Trump administration is making progress towards formulating its Asia policy. The recent visits, conversations, and statements point to a much more mainstream policy. While goodwill among allies, friends, and competitors has been mostly preserved during the early days of the administration, threats and challenges are ahead.

U.S.–Japan Relations

During Mattis's visit to South Korea and Japan, the Defense Secretary [reiterated American commitments](#) to the two allies, and he unequivocally stated that Japanese control over the Senkaku Islands is protected under [Article 5 of the U.S.–Japan Defense Treaty](#). Mattis' statements are no different than the policies under the Obama administration. Just days after the trip, China, in direct response to Mattis' comments, [sailed three warships](#) 12 nautical miles off the coast of the Senkaku Islands. This move shows that even though the United States will protect Japanese interests in the region, China will continue to pressure Japan and assert its own interests. Mattis' trip served as an [important "first" Trump-era official visit](#) for the two vital allies and to show that the Trump administration views Asia as a key part of its policies.

Also, in mid-February, Trump hosted Abe at the White House and at Mar-a-Lago. It is the second time the two have met face-to-face since Trump's election, the most encounters with any foreign leader that Trump has had to date. This fact has gone understated in the media, but meeting with Abe twice in such a short period speaks to the level of importance that Japan has placed on its relationship with Trump. During a joint press conference, [Trump said](#), "This administration is committed to bringing those ties even closer. We are committed to the security of Japan and all areas under its administrative control and to further strengthening our very crucial alliance." He also noted that he and Abe have good chemistry, so it is entirely possible that U.S.-Japanese relations will strengthen during Trump's presidency. Good ties with the U.S. president are imperative for Japan, given the threat posed by China's assertion that the Senkaku Islands are not part of Japan, but a part of China, and Japan's interest in establishing [closer economic ties](#) with the U.S., especially in the aftermath of the U.S.'s rejection of the TPP. Expect the United States and Japan to grow closer during the next four years: out of necessity for Japan, and due to Trump's affinity for Abe for the United States.

U.S.-China Relations

["At the request of President Xi,"](#) Trump said that he will "honor" the "One China" policy. Though the White House has issued only a limited readout of the phone call and we do not know how much Xi pressed Trump or whether the request extended beyond honoring the policy, it is important that Trump has finally accepted the policy so that the United States and China can move on and cooperate on pressing issues—like [North Korea successfully testing another ballistic missile](#) or the "unsafe encounter" between U.S. Chinese military planes that flew within [300 meters of each other](#) over the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

The U.S. could not afford to isolate China because Trump questioned the "One China" policy. Trump's acceptance of the policy shows that he understands that the Chinese do not take such issues lightly. Before taking office, he may not have understood the ramifications of casually questioning the "One China" policy. However, since taking office, he seems to have gained a greater appreciation for the essentials of Sino-American relations. According to reports, newly confirmed [Secretary of State Rex Tillerson played a key role](#) in getting Trump to accept the policy so that both countries could move forward.

Tillerson's role also shows that he has backed down from statements that he made during his confirmation hearing. Then, he had stated that the U.S. would deny China access to its artificial islands in the South China Sea. In written answers [to follow-up questions by Senator Ben Cardin](#), Tillerson committed to only denying access if China acted aggressively towards one of its neighbors:

To expand on the discussion of U.S. policy options in the South China Sea, the United States seeks peaceful resolution of disputes and does not take a position on overlapping sovereignty claims, but the United States also does not recognize China's excessive claims to the waters and airspace of the South China Sea. China cannot be allowed to use its artificial islands to coerce its neighbors or limit freedom of navigation or overflight in the South China Sea. The United States will uphold freedom of

navigation and overflight by continuing to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows. If a contingency occurs, the United States and its allies and partners must be capable of limiting China's access to and use of its artificial islands to pose a threat to the United States or its allies and partners. The United States must be willing to accept risk if it is to deter further destabilizing actions and reassure allies and partners that the United States will stand with them in upholding international rules and norms. If confirmed, I would look forward to working with interagency partners to develop a whole-of-government approach to deter further Chinese coercion and land reclamation as well as challenges to freedom of navigation or overflight in the South China Sea.

His answer points to a slightly—not radically—different approach to China's claims in the South China Sea from the Obama administration. The change in policy would matter only if China acts more aggressively. The key question that remains now is what does “contingency” mean—is the policy limited to Chinese actions in the South China Sea or is it a general one to be used in the event of any aggressive action? Regardless, the administration had course-corrected its China policy rather quickly, stabilizing what could have been a rocky start to Trump's relationship with Xi and China.

As always, China's responses to questions about the phone call were short and to the point. During his daily press conference, [Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lu Kang](#) said of the phone call, “You must be aware that the one-China principle is the political foundation for China-US relations. To adhere to the one-China policy and the principles reflected in the three joint communiqués between China and the US is the obligation of the US administration. It is also China's consistent position. We commend President Trump's statement in the phone call that the US administration will honor the one-China policy.” It cannot be emphasized enough how much significance China places on the “One China” policy; refusing to accept it is a non-starter for the Chinese. There can be no conversations without it.

However, Trump's about-face on the issue after treating the long-held policy so casually may hurt him in the short or long term. Now, Trump cannot use his reluctance to accept the “One China” policy as a way to negotiate with Beijing. If not dropping U.S. commitment to the “One China” policy was a bargaining chip he intended to use at an important time, then he now no longer has it. If it actually wasn't a bargaining chip, then Trump roiled U.S.-China relations for nothing. And now, it can be perceived that Trump caved to Chinese pressure easily. The supposed master of the “art of the deal” has lost face in the eyes of the Chinese. Questioning the bedrock of Sino-American relations and quickly changing course when pressed by the leader of China does not bode well for future negotiations. In their minds, he has backed down once, so he will back down again when pressured even more. Trump should never had questioned this policy in the first place.

U.S.–Taiwan Relations

Trump's acceptance of the “One China” policy does not mean that he has abandoned Taiwan. The policy has been in place for decades during which the U.S. and Taiwan have maintained strong, if informal, ties. Taiwan would prefer to see stable relations between the U.S. and China because good relations between the two of them means that Taiwan has less to worry about. When relations between the U.S. and China are strained, Taiwan, not the United States, generally becomes the target.

In the same written responses where he clarified his remarks on the South China Sea, Tillerson did not stray from long-established policy towards Taiwan. He stated that if confirmed he would continue to uphold the [Six Assurances](#) while committing to the “One China” policy. Despite the Taiwan-related drama during the transition, the administration has changed its course and avoided cross-strait controversy since Trump was inaugurated. [Tillerson's comments](#) should please the Taiwanese since he tried to assuage one of their main concerns about Trump's potential treatment of Taiwan: “The people of Taiwan are friends of the United States and should not be treated as a bargaining chip. The U.S. commitment to Taiwan is both a legal commitment and a moral imperative. If

confirmed, I would work to ensure economic and military stability across the Strait.” Maintaining the status quo has been the general policy of the previous administration in Taiwan as well as the current one. The great fear that Trump would use Taiwan as a bargaining chip when negotiating with China has been quelled—at least for now. As long as the president listens to his Secretary of State, U.S.-Taiwan relations do not look like they will change much. There is still plenty of room for growth and greater cooperation, but for now, the American and Taiwanese public should be happy with the current path that the administration has set over the past month.

Establishing Policy towards Asia

Despite a controversial start during the transition period, the Trump administration’s Asia policy appears to be taking shape. It is not—as many hoped or dreaded—as extreme as expected. Commitments to South Korea and Japan have been reiterated, the “One China” policy has been accepted, and U.S. support for the status quo between China and Taiwan will continue. Granted, all of these policies and statements could change as quickly as a tweet can be written.

As the administration begins to formulate a comprehensive plan for the region, do not expect radical differences from previous U.S. administrations. Trump will try to pressure China where he can; he could increase the frequency of U.S. ships sailing near contested islands in the South and East China Seas to send a message. Due to the makeup of Trump’s Asia team, we can expect the administration to push for greater Taiwanese participation in international institutions and to work with Congress to sell more arms and other defensive equipment as allowed under the Taiwan Relations Act. Acceptance of the “One China” policy does not mean that Trump has abandoned Taiwan; it means that he is aware of its necessity to conduct relations with China, and that the United States needs China to help keep the region stable. As North Korea has shown with its recent missile test, it will remain a gadfly in Northeast Asia, and Trump must find a way to work with China and neighbors to curtail its aggressive actions.

The Trump administration should heed the Chinese saying that [President Xi quoted during his speech](#) at the 2017 World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos, Switzerland: “积力之所举，则无不胜也；众智之所为，则无不成也。” (Victory is assured when people pool their strength; success is secured when people put their heads together.)