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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Evan Medeiros**

Episode 78: Trump Will Honor “One China”  
Policy

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**Haenle:** Welcome to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. I’m here with former senior director for Asia on the National Security Council under the President Obama administration, Dr. Evan Medeiros, also a non-resident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, so a colleague of mine at the Carnegie Endowment. We’re here to discuss an important development in U.S.-China relations and in the new Trump administration policy towards China and that is the phone call that took place last night between President Trump and President Xi Jinping of China. According to a White House press release, they had a lengthy phone conversation on Thursday evening where they discussed numerous topics and President Trump agreed—according to the statement—that at the request of President Xi, the U.S. administration will honor the “One China” policy. Evan, let me just start out by asking you to explain to our listeners why is this significant and why is this important.

**Medeiros:** Thanks, Paul. It’s great to be here and congrats on running a great podcast series—I listen to every one of them. The developments overnight are particularly important because the “One China” issue is sort of the foundation of the U.S.-China relationship. It goes back to 1972 when Nixon first went to China and the Shanghai Communiqué that Kissinger negotiated with Zhou Enlai, and it’s fundamentally about the whole issue of the status of Taiwan. China has its “One China” principle, the United States has its “One China” policy, which is the Three Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act, and so from the Chinese perspective every administration needs to reaffirm the “One China” policy and its essential components of the Three Communiqués as a basis for the relationship. So, the Trump administration had put itself on a pathway toward a crisis in the U.S.-China relationship because President Trump had been very publicly critical of the “One China” policy.

**Haenle:** This was quite surprising, not just to the Chinese but to former government officials who worked on China policy. I think it caught people off guard.

**Medeiros:** Absolutely. And it caught leaders in Asia off guard. Most leaders in Asia actually don’t really have a problem with China’s approach—China’s “One China” principle—and they understand how important it is to the legitimacy of the leadership in Beijing.

**Haenle:** Is it your sense that Trump didn’t understand what the “One China” policy was? First of all, he did the phone call with Tsai Ing-wen, and then he came out with a series of tweets and interviews which he conducted, and at one point indicated that he wasn’t sure whether the U.S. administration would adhere to the “One China” policy. Why should he adhere to the “One China” policy when China’s not doing what it needs to do on trade and economics, and not doing enough on North Korea, and building massive fortresses in the South China Sea. So, it seemed to me as though he was looking initially as a businessman or negotiator would to try and find leverage and he thought maybe because this is so important to the Chinese that he could get leverage by using this issue. My point has been that this is not something that we do because China wants us to do it, the “One China” policy has been something over the years and I would I agree that it still is today in our interest to do so. Would you agree with that?

**Medeiros:** Absolutely. I think the Trump administration backed into this whole policy. When the phone call with Tsai Ing-wen was arranged, it was unclear that the president-elect at that time knew at that time the kind of strategic statement he was making and the kind of implications for

the U.S.-China relationship. Once it was explained to him, that resulted in the kind of debates you were talking about: why should we give the Chinese “One China” when we’ve got all sorts of disagreements with them and they seem to be pushing us in other areas, and that’s what resulted in Trump’s interview with the Wall Street Journal, his tweets, all that sort of stuff. But what’s interesting is how the administrations views on this “One China” issue have evolved, and I think that they—to their credit—have evolved in a direction that recognizes the point that you made, which is the “One China” policy is profoundly in the United States’ interest. It creates a foundation from which you can work with China on a whole variety of issues. It’s important to remember that the “One China” policy is in part of the Three Communiqués but also the Taiwan Relations Act, and I think that even the leaders, the policymakers in Taiwan were getting very concerned about the Trump approach because they were getting squeezed by the Chinese as Trump took this very non-traditional approach of questioning the “One China” policy.

**Haenle:** In fact, early on I think one of his tweets was “Look, I just took the call from Tsai Ing-wen”, sort of indicating that it would have been impolite to not have taken the call, not owning up to the call to a certain extent and that seemed to play right into the Chinese hands because they came out shortly after that blaming the call on President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan.

**Medeiros:** And of course, subsequently they increased pressure on Taiwan, the restrictions on Chinese tourists going to Taiwan increased, there was a lot more Chinese military activities, the new Chinese carrier famously sailed through the Taiwan Strait in a very obvious display of force, and I think what’s important is the Taiwan leadership was beginning to get more pressure from the mainland.

**Haenle:** So even though people in the Trump administration—or some people around the Trump administration—thought that this was the most respectful thing to do for Taiwan, it actually ended up making it worse for Taiwan.

**Medeiros:** Absolutely. And in particular, Trump’s tweets and his approach suggested that he wanted to use Taiwan as a bargaining chip. That’s the essential concern, because in fact the Chinese are happy to negotiate about Taiwan, they just didn’t want to have the negotiation like the one the Trump administration wanted. They don’t want to negotiate about Taiwan, but they’re happy to get into a negotiation with Trump about the United States pulling back from the Taiwan Relations Act and the informal relationship, in exchange potentially for the Chinese doing more on other issues. That’s the danger with going down this road with Taiwan as a bargaining chip because it’s a very slippery slope.

**Haenle:** Your point on Taiwan not being a bargaining chip I think is very very important and that I think was the concern. I saw—coming from at least President Trump’s statements—under President Obama where you spent six years, under President Bush where I spent 5 years, Taiwan was not a bargaining chip. It is an island of 23 million people that are friends of the United States and it’s a thriving democracy and a model for what we hope to see other countries in Asia do. How can you treat Taiwan as a bargaining chip? So, do you think that this phone call and Donald Trump’s acknowledgement that the United States will adhere to the “One China” policy—will this get us beyond this or do you expect to see more hiccups along the way on the issue of the “One China” policy and Taiwan? Do you think that this has been concluded? I saw your Financial

Times quote where you said that it signals to China that Trump is willing to learn. Do you think the U.S. administration has learned and will move beyond this or are we going to still see problems moving forward?

**Medeiros:** The way I see it is that reaffirming the “One China” policy is the predicate, as you said in the media, it’s sort of the table. It’s table stakes for the U.S.-China relationship. Does that mean that the Trump administration won’t have difficulties with Beijing over Taiwan? Absolutely not. We should expect there to be problems because the Chinese—since Tsai Ing-wen got elected—have been gradually putting more pressure, economic pressure, military pressure, on Taiwan because Tsai Ing-wen hasn’t reaffirmed in very explicit terms the 1992 consensus, which is the political framework that former President Ma and the Chinese put in place that sort of stabilized the relationship. So, the challenge the Trump administration faces, is now that the “One China” policy has been reaffirmed, what can be done within the context of the unofficial relationship. Under the Obama administration, one of the areas that I was particularly proud of as part of our Asia pivot is we used the stability in cross-strait relations to do more with Taiwan. The catchphrase we used to use was we “re-institutionalized and re-conceptualized” the relationship, did more on military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation.

**Haenle:** The “One China” policy—it’s important for listeners to understand—does not mean that we can’t do things to enhance our relationship with Taiwan, to increase our coordination with Taiwan and our cooperation as you did in the Obama administration. Would you argue it in fact that it allows us to do that from an even stronger position?

**Medeiros:** That’s right. It’s table stakes, because the “One China” policy is on the one hand the Three Communiqués on the other hand the Taiwan Relations Act, and so the question is: how much can you do under the framework of the Taiwan Relations Act? As you experienced during the Bush administration, if Cross-Strait relations are complicated, it makes Taiwan a challenge in the U.S.-China relationship and I think that the Trump administration will face that. Nonetheless, as you said that we have sort of both moral and diplomatic interests in the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. This issue will come up again but that’s normal and natural, that’s part of the bobbing and weaving of the U.S.-China relationship. I think an interesting question that I’d love to get your thoughts, Paul, is sort of more broadly, how do you think the rest of the Asia-Pacific is going to look at this issue of the phone call and the “One China” policy... we have Shinzo Abe arriving in Washington today.

**Haenle:** My own sense is that the region is not looking for more tension in this area. I think that they will see it as a positive development. We have to remember that the stability of having the “One China” policy, that stability that we have derived from that, has allowed us to do a number of things... the trade and economic side, and providing the stability to be able to do those things. The countries in the region of course have to live with China—it’s in their front yard—and they’re not looking—in my view—to choose sides between either the United States or China. They want the United States to remain engaged, they want the United States to be a counter force to overinfluence by China, but they’re not looking—I don’t think—for this new President Trump to pick a fight early on and cause tension that has spillover effects and ultimately would not be good for their own economy.

**Medeiros:** Paul, the point you made is a really essential point and it's sort of the core strategic point when you think about China in relation to overall Asia policy, because as you rightly said, nobody in Asia wants to choose sides between the United States and China, and the prospect of the Trump administration really getting into conflict with China over the "One China" policy, I think spooked many leaders in Asia. During a time when they're uncertain how engaged Trump's going to be in Asia, they're worried about protectionism for a bunch of economies they run on exports to the United States and other developed markets, so I think the phone call ultimately will be very reassuring. But I think as the Trump administration looks to future challenges in the U.S.-China relationship, I think it's important to keep in mind that there are regional dimensions to U.S.-China conflict and the rest of Asia is not going to want to be dragged into a fight with China. So, to put it more succinctly: you don't want to lose the rest of Asia as you win an argument with the Chinese, because that is to the United States' very substantial strategic disadvantage, and I think that the Trump administration is going to need to find that balance. Now that's something the Bush administration did very well, under Obama we had our own challenges, because leaders will come to you when the Chinese are putting a lot of pressure on them, like with the South China Sea, which is why we were much more engaged in the issue, but leaders will also come to you when they think that you're sort of upsetting regional stability by taking a too assertive approach to China.

**Haenle:** What's remarkable to me here is in the last ten minutes we've talked about this "One China" policy and why it's important. We've talked about it from the standpoint of U.S. national security interests and broader interests, Taiwan's interests, the interests of our partners and allies in the region, we not once have mentioned why this is important to China. I think it just drives home the point that the "One China" policy, it's the right thing to do because it is ultimately in the United States' interest. You made a very good point that in one of the quotes that I saw in the Financial Times, that this will allow us to get onto the work of some of the other issues that we need to address in the relationship, the trade and economic relationship, North Korea—how do we deal with that growing security threat? Is there a possibility that we can cooperate further with China to put pressure on North Korea?—and of course the issues related to the South China Sea and maritime issues, and I hope we can bring you back to think more broadly about what the Trump administration can do. You know, Donald Trump has talked about these as problems in the relationship, and what's interesting to me is I think regardless of who had been president—if Hillary Clinton had been elected—I think that she would agree that these are the three areas to really try to address and so I'd like to get you back at some point to talk about some concrete aspects of how we address those issues.

**Medeiros:** I look forward to it.

**Haenle:** Well thanks for spending time with us today and we look forward to having you back on the China in the World podcast.

**Medeiros:** Fantastic.