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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Chen Dingding**

Episode 75: U.S.-China Relations Leading Up to  
Trump's Inauguration, Part I

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**Haenle:** You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China's foreign policy, international role and China's relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, located here in Beijing, China.

Today, we're delighted to welcome Dr. Chen Dingding, professor of International Relations at Jinan University, and a non-resident fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin. I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Chen Dingding in January 2011 at a conference in Shanghai. At that time, he was teaching at the University of Macau. He has also recently founded a new independent think tank, called the Intellisla Institute, which is dedicated to international affairs and China. Previously, Dr. Chen Dingding served as a visiting instructor in the government department in Dartmouth College in the United States, and a China and the World Program fellow at Princeton University. He earned his Master's in the United States, and his PhD, both from the University of Chicago. Today, I'll be speaking to Dr. Chen Dingding about Trump's election, and the impact of his election on U.S.-China relations and broader regional stability in the Asia-Pacific.

Dr. Chen Dingding, it's great to see you again and thank you for taking time to join us today.

**Chen:** Thank you, thank you Paul for inviting me to be here. It's my pleasure to be here, to speak with you about some of the topics that both of us are very interested in.

**Haenle:** Let me just start, if I could. You know, the election of Donald Trump caught a lot of people by surprise. I think many people had predicted that Hillary Clinton would win, and that Donald Trump would not prevail. I was of the opinion that Hillary Clinton would probably win. I think I was persuaded by some of our media, and some of the polling in fact. But I did say, you know, I was concerned that some of our polling that was being done was not accurately reflecting the support that Donald Trump had during the campaign, and [I] did think that potentially the outcome could be different than we thought. Let me just start with your ability to predict the election of Donald Trump. But not only that, but you said he would win at least 286 electoral votes, you said that one Rust Belt blue state—which one was that?

**Chen:** I was thinking about Wisconsin or Michigan...

**Haenle:** ... would flip to red. You talked about the [fact that] African American turnout would drop, and you said Congress would stay largely Republican—both the Senate and the House. How did you come to that prediction?

**Chen:** Well. I guess it was a speculation, I mean, a hypothesis, so to speak, from my point of view before election day. I was actually following very closely the American media, like CNN, like New York Times, like the RealClearPolitics website. It has all the information that you need, you know, for [understanding] the election. So I guess I didn't have any secret information, or my own polling, or whatever. I guess I paid some attention to some of the analyses that probably were not, you know, followed very closely by some of the American analysts. For example, one of the articles I was very impressed by actually came from the CNN website back in August, talking about the "silent voter" phenomenon, particularly in the Midwest, because those areas were hit very hard before the 2008 financial crisis and after, especially. So that caught my attention [and]

that gave me, I think, some confidence that we could, you know, predict Donald Trump's victory, if the Midwest states flipped to red....

**Haenle:** ... You're talking about the areas affected by the hollowing out of industry, or losing manufacturing jobs.

**Chen:** Exactly, yes, and I have friends and professors who teach at University of Michigan who talked about all these anecdotes about how people there were very frustrated by the policies of the Democrats during the last eight years, so on and forth. So those things, [that] information, if you put them together, would give you some different views. And of course, you know, before the election—the week before the election—when you looked at the polls, not the national polls, but the state polls, in those Midwest states, the result was quite close. And if you, you know, take into account the “silent voters” phenomenon, you know, they could actually have a good chance of [flipping]—in Wisconsin, in Michigan, in Pennsylvania. And plus you know, President Obama, Michelle Obama, and Secretary Clinton, [didn't go] back to those states in the last three days. For what? To defend their positions. So that tells you something was wrong there, right? And you see the huge rallies for Donald Trump, people coming from all over the rural areas—that gives you a sense [that] things could happen.

**Haenle:** Among your peers in China, China-American experts, or political scientists that were watching the election, did you find you were among the minority? And how many of them thought that Trump could possibly pull off the election?

**Chen:** There were few others. Interestingly, they were normally what we call the “realist” scholars, actually, who thought Donald Trump actually had a good chance of winning. I didn't know what their exact reasoning would be, but I think they saw something, maybe that, you know, policies with a liberal mind would normally [be] dismissed because Donald Trump was talking very negatively about women, other politicians, so on and so forth. I think, you know in China people probably [see a] different context to the United States. We normally do not pay enough attention to those kinds of values issues. So we only saw his advantages, his abilities to mobilize the voters, so on and so forth. So there were a few others, but they were not very public about this, because of all sorts of concerns. They were afraid of being wrong. I know I could be wrong, but I told myself this is a hypothesis, right? From a research point of view, it doesn't really matter whether you're right or wrong. At least you know what went wrong, you know, [and] what was right. So you know the reasons behind the answer. So that for me, is the value [of] doing theoretical research.

**Haenle:** One trend that I noticed living here in China, interacting with China experts. I've talked about it and written about it, is that towards the early on, in the election, it seemed that while many Chinese experts felt that Hillary Clinton was perceived as being hostile to China and pushing a human rights agenda more than Chinese experts thought was necessary. Nevertheless, they thought Hillary Clinton would be better for [the] U.S.-China relationship because it's more predictable, she has a track record and there would be more continuity. As time went on, and we got closer to the election in November, I noticed that many Chinese experts came to the opinion that perhaps Donald Trump would be better for U.S.-China because he doesn't inject human rights into issues, because he was talking about America's overreach internationally, and this might

[mean] less strategic pressure for China at the end of the say. Is this also a phenomenon that you observed, and for those scholars that came out thinking that Donald Trump would be better for China, how have they since responded, since the election?

**Chen:** I think that has always been the case, I guess, after Donald Trump won the primaries. The opinion, at least the majority of opinions, was that Donald Trump could be better for U.S.-China relations, for the reasons you have mentioned exactly.

**Haenle:** Also, he's a businessman too, right?

**Chen:** Yes, he's [got] a businessman mentality, so on and so forth. And that has not changed until the phone call between Trump and Tsai Ing-wen. So after the phone call, it went to the opposite [direction]. Everybody suddenly became pessimistic, believing that, you know, he could be very bad for U.S.-China relations, I think.

**Haenle:** A Chinese phrase I heard after the phone call was this [idea] of 放弃幻想.

**Chen:** Right, 准备斗争, you know, "prepare for struggle."

**Haenle:** "Give up your illusions" right?

**Chen:** Yes, and instead "prepare for turbulence," "buckle up," you know, [this] kind of thinking, along those lines. So I think it's been a little bit too dramatic, in a sense. I think we shouldn't [have been] that optimistic before he won, because we, I think, as scholars, it's my view of course, that we need to pay more attention to domestic debates within the United States regarding U.S.-China relations. If you paid adequate attention to those debates, you would soon realize that, like I said earlier, there was a consensus within the United States that the Obama administration probably was a bit too weak, right? Toward China. So either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump—no matter who wins the election—[the U.S. stance] would be tougher on China.

Actually, this is the view expressed by one of the professors at the University of Pennsylvania Avery Goldstein, when he was attending a conference back in May, in Beijing. We had a brief chat about this and his prediction was that no matter who wins, U.S. policy approach towards China would be tougher, not, you know, softer. So I think, you know, if you read U.S. analyses closely, that shouldn't be a surprise. Then again, after the phone call, I think people sort of overreacted a little bit and went to the other extreme, believing that [a Trump presidency] would be very bad for U.S.-China. I think, if you look at the domestic analysis in the United States, it would tell a different story because, you know, all the mainstream scholars, they have come out criticizing that gambit and thinking [the] One China policy is actually a good policy for the United States to maintain stability in Asia. So I don't think, you know—well, I understand why people are worried about this phone call, but my point is we need to take a closer look at the U.S. domestic debates in terms of policy and discourse, so on and so forth, because they will make policies—they're the policy-makers. I think in that sense, we need [to do] a better job, we need to [put] a better effort to adequately understand U.S. thinking.

**Haenle:** So, in your sense, now we've had the phone call with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, we had some subsequent tweets by Donald Trump which were critical of China's currency policies, critical of China's behavior in the South China Sea, critical on trade... and we've had some recent tweets again, basically saying, you know, why should he abide by the One China policy when China is... he again raised the currency issue, the trade issue, the South China Sea issue, and North Korea—China not doing enough on North Korea. How then now, given this, our Chinese experts and the insights you can give on Chinese leaders, Chinese government, thinking about what a Donald Trump presidency will mean for China-U.S. relations?

**Chen:** I think there is [an] emerging consensus within China, which I would agree on, which is that Donald Trump would be either very good for U.S.-China relations, or he would be very bad. So he's not, you know, the conventional type of leader who would've followed the conventions closely, you know. He's going to, you know, break some of those conventions. So we don't know what policies he would make, we don't know what steps he would make, but I think we know his priorities. We know his principles, which is to make the America great again. It's not about picking a fight with China, or creating instability in Asia unless, you know, he believes strongly that those types of scenarios would make America great again. That is, from my point of view, hard to understand—if instability would benefit the United States greatly. So, I'm not sure what he would do, but I think if he would stick to his campaign rhetoric, I think the Taiwan issue would not be a big problem. We have seen from his tweets that it could be a bargaining proposal, it could be some kind of a negotiation tactic—it's not about Taiwan as the democratic friend of the United States. It's not about values, it's not about democracy. Maybe some of his advisers, you know, take that view, but certainly not the president-elect himself. So I think that's the difference. From China's point of view, we should be very rational. We should separate his personal views from his advisers' views and understand [that] his own views are not necessarily about, you know, challenging the One China policy. As long as we maintain that view, I think we can handle that issue in a calm way.

**Haenle:** So I agree with you, you know, during our discussion today at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, in our event, I talked about the fact that, you know, he's president-elect, he's not president of the United States. We have a president, his name is Barack Obama and he has a cabinet, and they're carrying out the policy that they put together and they will do so until January 20, and I believe that. And Donald Trump is now putting his cabinet together and he'll have to get confirmed through the Senate. They'll come in, and they'll do their own policy reviews, and they'll put together their own policies.

But, given what he has talked about, or tweeted to date, and talked about, in some interviews on China, it may give us some indications about what he's thinking about doing. Talk to me about this notion that Donald Trump seems to want to hold the One China policy as a bargaining chip in dealing with China to get a better trade relationship, to get better behavior in South China Sea, to get China to stop manipulating its currency, and to get greater cooperation on North Korea. How is something like this—that he's tweeted—perceived, do you think, in China? Is there some, you know, viability to this strategy? Where does it take the United States and China?

**Chen:** I think people here are worried. They're worried not in the sense that he would actually do something that radical. They're worried that he would create some sort of noise, some sort of wrong signals, that could lead to instability. I think people are, in general, confident, that [the One

China policy] will not change. I think even in the United States, policy advisers, you know, who want to upgrade US-Taiwan relations, do not want to go that far either. So that's a consensus. So I think that both sides understand that clearly. But the worry is, you know by sending out this noise he could create confusion, you know, drive people away from the real issues that we should care about, and waste our energy, so on and so forth. And that's not effective, that's not productive. So I think that's the worry. They don't want to spend waste energy, time, on this issue. But if you continue to do that, that's of course not good for U.S.-China relations. Not because we're really going to see some dramatic changes in cross-strait relations or in U.S.-Taiwan relations, I don't think that's happening.

**Haenle:** ... and that tends to suck the oxygen out of the air, leading to diverted attention.

**Chen:** Exactly.

**Haenle:** Well, there's a lot in store for 2017 for the U.S.-China relationship. I want to thank you for coming today to the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center to an event that we held on this issue, and also for joining the podcast. Given we have so much in store for 2017, Professor Chen Dingding, we hope you'll come back.

**Chen:** Thank you Paul, thank you very much for this wonderful discussion, and I do hope to come back for another discussion after January.