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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Episode 76: U.S.-China Relations Leading Up to
Trump's Inauguration, Part II

January 24, 2017

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

Today we are glad to invite Dr. Chen Dingding, professor of International Relations at Jinan University, and 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 Macao. He has also recently founded a new independent think tank called the Intellisias Institute, which is dedicated to international affairs in China. Previously, Dr. Chen Dingding served as a visiting instructor in the Government Department at Dartmouth College in the United States, and a China and the World Fellow Program fellow at Princeton University. He earned his master in the United States and PhD both from the University of Chicago. Today, I will be speaking to Dr. Chen Dingding about Trump’s administration 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. Let me just start if I could, [with] the pressuring issue. One of course, which we all know, [is] North Korea. This situation has become increasingly worse over the Obama administration. I think it is clearly in a worse place than it was when President Obama came into office. North Korea had a new leader, King Jong-Un. [A new] leader, I think, [that] has been in office, I guess, five years now. But nevertheless, he has carried out a very aggressive and fast-paced approach to improve [North Korea’s] missile technology and nuclear capabilities. And I think this is clearly becoming one of the highest priority [among] national security issues in the Asia-Pacific. Donald Trump has said a couple of things. One, that China is not doing enough, that China needs to do more. He said also that he would be willing to meet with King Jong-Un and eat a hamburger with him or something to that a fact. What about this notion to China hasn’t done enough? Is this, you know, if Donald Trump continue with this rhetoric, getting China to do more; where might this take the United States and China with regards to the North Korea problem?

Chen: I think China has agreed with latest round of sanctions to North Korea, right, which is a positive step, I think, toward resolving [the] issue. I think the notion [that] ‘China has not done enough’ could be half true half wrong. Half true in a sense that yes, China could do more, right, to sanction North Korea and all that. But the problem is if you put too much sanction on North Korea, that could potentially lead to the collapse of North Korea, which is bad for everybody, including the United States. So in that sense, yes everybody could do more, but do you really want to push [the regime] to the limits and make it collapse? I think that’s not a good option.

It’s wrong, in a sense, that there may be some misperception on Trump’s side that China could easily persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear ambition. I don’t think any country has that kind of capability. North Korea is determined to do that at whatever cost, unless its internal [demise], right? They have tried the tactics in the 1990s, by agreeing to the framework, and the [North Korean regime] somehow, you know, continued their projects without being punished accordingly. I think they have seen the fate of Saddam Hussein, they have seen the fate of Gaddafi, they have seen the fate of Iran. So I think in their mind, you know, nuclear weapon, of course in a very wrong view, is the only way they can protect their regime and country, which is wrong in my view, because that would only increase the threat in the eyes of the United States and other allies, because non-nuclear North Korea, to be honest, is not a threat to United States—it’s far, far away from the United States.

Haenle: You mentioned these latest sanctions. I think it is roughly 60 percent of North Korea's coal exports [that] will be denied by China. How serious is that? And is this important to let this play out to see how they affect the equation?

Chen: I think the question is whether North Korea could survive without these coal exports or imports, and my own hunch is they can. [I am not saying] that they will not suffer from these sanctions—they will; but still the [important thing] is they could survive, maybe at minimum, right, for many more years. So it's not really, again... I don't think all these sanctions can really work in [terms] of making them understand 'OK, it's time to give up nuclear weapons' It has to be some sort of coordination—maybe six party talks, maybe three party talks, maybe some other form of dialogues—it has to be multilateral; North Korea has to be confident about its safety; it has to be confident about its relations with, first the United States, and then South Korea, then Japan. I think, again, some multilateral effort. Neither the United States or China, or any other country, has the capability to do that. So that is one area [where] I hope, in the future, the United States and China can work on.

Haenle: Let's talk about South China Sea, because this has been a major issue of contention between the United States and China over the course of the Obama administration since the tribunal ruling which was announced this past summer, and Philippines new President Duterte being elected. We've seen things cool down in the South China Sea. Many say that was because the G20 was held here in China and Chinese leaders wanted to make sure that that went off without a lot of friction; they wanted to make sure that the U.S. President and other heads of states came. And now things remain cool because China's seeing how this new relationship with the Philippine President will affect things going forward. But just recently, we saw news that China had conducted [the] building [of] military facilities on seven of these reclaimed islands, and also the Chinese navy picked up a U.S. unmanned underwater vehicle, which the Chinese government said they will give back to the United States. Are we beginning to see now more tension going forward in the South China Sea and was there some signaling being done on China? Is this a response to Donald Trump's tweets and comments on the One China Policy and injecting some turbulence on the China-U.S. relationship?

Chen: Well, I can't be 100 percent confident, but I do not see that as a message targeting Donald Trump's previous comments on Taiwan. I think it could be a random event—decision made by people around there, based on whatever information they have.

Haenle: The PLA navy, basically right, picked it up?

Chen: Right. And so in that sense we should not look too much into that, because it is random, right? It's not a pattern. But regarding South China Sea, I don't think the tension would either go up too much or come down too much, because first of all, the Trump administration is going to demonstrate strength, because that's one of their slogans—to make America great again—in what sense we have to strengthen to be great. So you're going to demonstrate strength; that means you're going to demonstrate strength in South China Sea. I think, again, South China Sea is not one of the top priorities for the new administration, so the tension will more or less stay the same, not going either direction too much, I mean, dramatically. I could foresee some kind of tensions, you know,

random events like this one in the next year or so, but I don't think that would push two countries to the brink of major confrontation.

Haenle: Do you expect to see more reclamation activities by China going forward and...

Chen: ... I don't think so, because they have already done a lot and are just going to consolidate. They don't want to make unnecessary provocation to the United States because that would give the United States more reasons to come back and make things more...

Haenle: How about the announcement of the air defense identification zone in the South China Sea?

Chen: I don't think that would happen. It's unnecessary. What's the benefit? I think we have to think about the benefit and the cost. Unless something major happens.

Haenle: Sure. The other big issue in 2017 and in addition to Donald Trump becoming president of the United States in January, of course, is the 19th Party Congress in China in the Fall of 2017. Can you talk a little bit about how you think the political transition that will take place throughout the year of 2017 will impact U.S.-China relations and the issue of Donald Trump becoming President of the United States—how does it play in all of that?

Chen: I think that's probably the most important event this year for China, and in that sense it is good news, because on the China side we don't want any instability or even chaos. So that would make U.S.-China relations, I guess, more stable this year, because from China perspective we don't want to fight with United States. We have more urgent....

Haenle: ... China is not looking to pick a fight. The question is Donald Trump is looking to pick a fight. And what happens in that particular scenario?

Chen: Right. That would give China a headache. How to respond to that? I think China would respond in a very firm way, basically telling the other side 'if you do try to make some trouble, we do have the ways to counter-attack,' so to speak; 'if you do make such provocations and troubles, we will stay all away, OK, we don't want to make troubles first.'

Haenle: What do Chinese experts see the sort of top three things that Chinese side has with the respect leverage over the United States? I mean, a lot of people talk about the economic relationship, of course Boeing Aircraft, 106 Boeing aircrafts are sold to China

Chen: I guess that depends on what does the United States want most. Something you want the most is your vulnerable point. Then the other side can push the bottoms. I think that trade of course is one issue, and China has some cards to play, I guess. You mentioned Boeing. Yes, Boeing employs like less than 180,000 new employees based on China's orders. If China moves all those orders to Europe, I can image there will be some major job losses in that area. Something like that I think we can see more and more. And agricultural products from the mid-West [are] particularly important for Donald Trump to maintain his stability and maybe even for the second term—if China can punish those states, particularly in terms of agricultural exports, that's a weak

point of Donald Trump. What else? China can refuse to cooperate on North Korea, on the Iran issue, and even on the Middle East issue—fighting ISIS for example. [In] those areas I think China can either cooperate or not cooperate, and that would depend on how important those issues are to Donald Trump. If he thinks those are important, I think we can come to some sort of cooperation; if he thinks not that important, then China won't have that much leverage.

Haenle: Well, there is a lot in store for 2017 for [the] U.S.-China relationship. And I want to thank you for coming today to the Carnegie–Tsinghua today to an event we held on this issue and also for joining in the podcast. And given we have so much in store for 2017, Professor Chen Dingding, we hope you will come back.

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

Haenle: Great. Thank you very much. That's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center's China in the World podcast. I encourage you to explore our website, see the work of all our scholars at Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.