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Trump's Move

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Less than three weeks into his post-election glow, President-elect Trump sparked a firestorm by accepting a congratulatory phone call from Taiwan's President, Tsai Ing-wen. Trump's critics saw the occasion as further proof of his ignorance. Supporters, called it a "brilliant move," setting a new, sterner tone in US-Sino relations ahead of his presidency. China, for its part, tried to downplay the situation, suggesting that Mrs. Tsai had played a "small trick" on an unwitting Trump.

It turns out that the actual turn of events was none of the above. An American law firm, led by former senator Bob Dole and acting in the interest of an entity that is not entirely clear, had been lobbying Trump's staff to take the call for months in advance. In other words, it seems Trump's first move on China was more of a whisper in his ear than an actual strategy.

Assuming Trump is taking suggestions from the crowd then, here are a few more tips for the road on how to play chess with China.

First, the Chinese version, weiqi, is not the same as Western chess and the strategic differences are substantial. In the words of Henry Kissinger, "Chess produces single-mindedness; weiqi generates strategic flexibility." Whereas Americans see their foreign policy challenges as issues, theaters, and chapters, Chinese counterparts see each encounter as part of one overarching and dynamic interaction.

Second, while chess gravitates towards the center of the board, weiqi is equally concerned with matters in the periphery. It should come to no surprise then, that rather than attempting to meet the United States head-on in either Taiwan or Japan, China has instead positioned its strategic resources into interlocking chains in the opposite direction. The 1-Belt-1-Road initiative, jutting out into the South Pacific and Central Asia, is a classic attempt at engaging neglected space rather than risking confrontation in contested arenas.

Third, whereas chess gets progressively simpler as a game progresses and pieces are removed from the board, weiqi becomes increasingly more convoluted with every move. As complexity increases, so do the risks of miscalculated aggression. In this respect, Trump's brash disregard for protocol regarding Taiwan may have been a relatively low-risk jab last month, but similar gambles will become increasingly more precarious the moment Trump moves into the Oval Office and with each passing day until he leaves it.

Fourth, the China-bashing realists advising Trump talk in terms of zero-sum games. The political economy playing field, however, operates under absolute gains and is therefore conceptually boundless. Appropriately, weiqi lacks concrete rules about the size of the board or the amount of resources that can be employed. Most professionals play on a 19x19 board with 361 stones, but others use a 9x9 or 13x13. These are just conventions, not limits. Similarly, China's losses are not necessarily our gains, or vice versa.

Fifth, weiqi accepts that some problems lack solutions. In chess, by contrast, stalemate is an unfortunate outcome that ends a game and yields no winner. The weiqi equivalent, shuanghuo, which translates into "mutual life", carries no such consequences. Instead, shuanghuo is a natural phenomenon that leaves certain areas in temporary limbo allowing players to concentrate their energies elsewhere. Such is the Chinese position on Taiwan and in other frozen contests.

Sixth, despite these different perspectives, China has, for nearly four decades now, been playing by, not upsetting or supplanting, rules that were initially set up by the United States. Consider China's recent investment in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), or its efforts to establish a regional free trade pact in the Pacific. In both cases, China is doing little more than replicating institutions modeled on American architecture.

What about an even harder example, the South China Sea? When China rejected the UN tribunal's ruling on its maritime claims last summer, it did so publically but not legally. Indeed, China remains a signatory to UNCLOS which means that it implicitly accepts the ruling and in so doing has signaled its commitment to that institution, despite its livid, public disagreement with the outcome.

When Trump mocks China's stodgy demand for adherence to the One-China Principle, or when his pick for Secretary of State suggests that we should revoke Chinese rights under UNCLOS to navigate the seas, such patterns of behavior become unsustainable. This is not to say that the US should not take a hard line on China. But if President Trump is intent on doing so, he should be prepared to play a much more complicated and consequential game, where relying on whispers from the crowd and making impulse judgments can quickly get you into a tough spot.

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