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40 Years of the “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan” — A Game Changer for the Taiwan Question?

Tobias Adam

Summary

In 2019 the Chinese leadership is preparing to celebrate a number of anniversaries: a hundred years of the May Fourth Movement, 40 years of reform and opening-up, the 40th anniversary of the Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty, and, not to be forgotten, the 70th birthday of the People’s Republic of China. Among these, the 1979 “Message to Compatriots across the Taiwan Strait” seems to be a rather minor jubilee. Nevertheless, the Message is part of the unresolved Taiwan issue that stands between China and the completion — as it states in the constitution — of its “sacred duty to reunite the motherland.” In this context, President Xi Jinping delivered a highly anticipated speech to mark the 40th anniversary of this Message on January 2, 2019. Against this background, this article will first illustrate the historical foundations of the Message — with a special focus on the prologue that eventually led to a policy shift in early 1979. On this basis, I will analyze currently occurring events. In doing so, Xi’s speech from January 2, 2019 serves as a useful starting point. I will then summarize and contextualize reactions from Taiwan. Last but not least, this occasion will be used to evaluate the Taiwan issue at large.

Keywords: China, Taiwan, United States, Xi Jinping, Tsai Ing-wen, cross-strait relations

Tobias Adam is a PhD student at the Institute of East Asian Studies of the University of Cologne. His research and teaching priorities are Chinese foreign policy analysis and theories of international relations.