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Taiwan: The Origins of the U.S. One-China Policy

On January 1, 1979, the U.S. government recognized the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) as the "sole legal Government of China," and severed official diplomatic relations with the Taiwan-based Republic of China (ROC), which the United States had previously recognized as the sole legal government of China. In negotiations leading to that switch and in follow-up negotiations in 1982, the U.S. and PRC governments reached understandings with each other related to self-governed Taiwan, over which the PRC claims sovereignty. The U.S. government also offered commitments and assurances to Taiwan. The undertakings from that era underpin the U.S. "one-China" policy and experts widely credit them with maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait.

Today, the uneasy status quo over Taiwan is under strain. The Soviet Union, the common foe that provided the strategic rationale for U.S.-PRC rapprochement in the 1970s, is long gone. After decades of fast-paced economic growth, the PRC is a global power whose leaders have reportedly given China's military a deadline of 2027 to develop the capability to take Taiwan by force. Taiwan has transformed itself from an authoritarian regime into a democracy that seeks a bigger role in the global community. Meanwhile, U.S.-PRC distrust is growing, with frictions over the two governments' implementation of their Taiwan-related commitments from the earlier era being a major contributor to tensions. In considering Taiwan policy, U.S. policymakers, including Members of Congress, face the challenge of how to balance U.S.-PRC historical commitments, obligations under U.S. law, the desire to support a democracy, concern about PRC coercion, and U.S. interest in forestalling conflict in the Taiwan Strait. The following is an overview of the commitments that guide the U.S. one-China policy, and the contexts that shaped them.

Taiwan's History Before 1971

Austronesian peoples first settled Taiwan about 6,000 years ago. Dutch and Spanish settlers arrived in the 1600s. The Dutch drove out the Spanish, and an exile from the Qing Empire—the predecessor polity to modern China—expelled the Dutch. The Qing took control of Taiwan in 1683, made it a Qing province in 1885, and ceded it to Japan a decade later. Revolutionaries toppled the Qing Empire in 1911, and established a republic on mainland China, the Republic of China (ROC), in 1912. Taiwan remained a colony of Japan.

In 1943, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and the ROC's leader, Chiang Kai-shek, declared in the Cairo Declaration that "all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese," including Taiwan (referred to as "Formosa") and the nearby Penghu archipelago ("the Pescadores"), "shall be restored to the

Republic of China." In October 1945, the ROC accepted the surrender of Japanese troops in Taiwan on behalf of the World War II allies, and assumed control of Taiwan.

China then plunged into four years of civil war. The forces of the Communist Party of China emerged victorious and, on October 1, 1949, established the PRC. The ROC's ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT), retreated to Taiwan and brought the ROC government with them. Between 1946 and 1949, approximately 2.2 million KMT forces and supporters arrived in Taiwan from mainland China, joining an existing Taiwan population that in 1945 numbered nearly 6 million. The KMT imposed martial law on Taiwan in 1949 and kept it in place until 1987, when the party yielded to popular pressure to democratize.

The United States continued to recognize the anti-communist ROC government as the legal government of all China. Yet in January 1950, U.S. President Harry S. Truman indicated that the United States would not stand in the PRC's way if it sought to take Taiwan. Truman said the United States would "not pursue a course which will lead to involvement in the civil conflict in China."

The outbreak of the Korean War six months later stoked fears of further communist expansion in Asia and prompted Truman to reverse course. He ordered the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet "to prevent any attack on Taiwan." More U.S. military support for Taiwan followed. In 1951, the United States established a Military Assistance and Advisory Group on Taiwan. In 1954, following PRC shelling of ROC-controlled islands next to the PRC coast, the United States signed a mutual defense treaty with the ROC, intended as much to restrain the ROC from assaults on the mainland as to deter a PRC attack. In 1955, the 84th Congress passed the Formosa Resolution (H.J.Res 159; P.L. 84-4), authorizing the President to employ U.S. armed forces to protect Taiwan and Penghu. (The 93rd Congress repealed the Formosa Resolution in 1974's P.L. 93-475.)

New Understandings 1971-1982

President Richard M. Nixon took office in 1969 and charted a new course for U.S. policy by pursuing rapprochement with the PRC based on common enmity for the Soviet Union. In 1971, Nixon's National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger made two secret visits to Beijing to lay the groundwork for a presidential visit the next year.

In October 1971, U.N. General Assembly Resolution 2758 (XXVI) recognized the PRC's representatives as "the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations," and expelled "the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek." The United States, represented by its then-permanent representative to the U.N., George H.W. Bush, voted

against the resolution, but did not rally sufficient opposition to defeat it. PRC representatives replaced ROC representatives in both the General Assembly and the Security Council, as the PRC assumed the rights and obligations of China as a U.N. member state.

The 1972 and 1978 U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqués

President's Nixon's groundbreaking 1972 trip to China yielded the Shanghai Communiqué, the first of three U.S.-PRC joint communiqués that the United States views as an element of its one-China policy, and the PRC views as the basis for U.S.-PRC ties today. In the document, the U.S. government "acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and Taiwan is a part of China," and states that the U.S. government "does not challenge that position." The U.S. side also "reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves," and "affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan."

The 1978 U.S.-PRC Normalization Communiqué states the terms under which the two countries agreed to establish diplomatic relations on January 1, 1979. In it, the U.S. government recognizes the PRC government as the "sole legal Government of China" and states that within that context, "the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan." The U.S. government also "acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China," without endorsing that position as its own. In an accompanying statement, the Jimmy Carter Administration announced that it would terminate the U.S.-ROC defense treaty, effective January 1, 1980, and withdraw its remaining military personnel from Taiwan within four months.

The Taiwan Relations Act (1979)

On January 26, 1979, after the United States broke official ties with the ROC, the Carter Administration transmitted to Congress a bill to establish a framework for unofficial relations with Taiwan. Some Members saw the Administration's bill text as doing too little to ensure the wellbeing of Taiwan's people. As enacted, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. §§3301 et seq.) includes multiple provisions that were absent from the Administration's draft, including the security-related provisions for which the TRA is now best known. The TRA states that "the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability." The TRA also states that it is U.S. policy "to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan." As the Administration requested, the TRA directs that unofficial U.S. relations with Taiwan be carried out through a nonprofit corporation, the American Institute in Taiwan.

1982 U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqué/Six Assurances

As they negotiated establishment of diplomatic relations, the U.S. and PRC governments agreed to set aside the

contentious issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. They took up that issue in the 1982 August 17 Communiqué, in which the PRC states "a fundamental policy of striving for peaceful reunification" with Taiwan, and the U.S. government states it "understands and appreciates" that policy. The U.S. government states in the 1982 communiqué that with those statements "in mind," "it does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan," and "intends gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading, over a period of time, to a final resolution." The U.S. government also declares "no intention" of "pursuing a policy of 'two Chinas,'" meaning the PRC and the ROC, "or 'one China, one Taiwan.'"

While negotiating the 1982 communiqué, President Ronald Reagan authorized U.S. officials to convey to Taiwan what have become known as the Six Assurances, statements of what the United States did not agree to in its negotiations with the PRC. Those statements include that the United States did not agree to a date for ending arms sales, or to consult with the PRC on arms sales, or to take any position regarding Taiwan's sovereignty. (See CRS In Focus IF11665, *President Reagan's Six Assurances to Taiwan*.)

U.S. and PRC Policies Today

The Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Administration describes itself as upholding a longstanding U.S. "one-China" policy, guided by the TRA, the three U.S.-PRC joint communiqués, and the Six Assurances. U.S.-Taiwan relations remain unofficial. U.S. government policy states that the United States does not support Taiwan independence, opposes unilateral changes to the cross-Strait status quo, is committed to meeting its TRA obligations to support Taiwan's self-defense, and has an abiding interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. U.S. policy, rarely stated publicly, is to treat Taiwan's political status as unresolved. The U.S. government attributes frictions over Taiwan to increasingly coercive PRC military and other activities around Taiwan. The U.S. government views such activities as challenging what Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken describes as the "foundational" understanding in the three joint communiqués: that "any differences regarding Taiwan will be resolved peacefully."

In 2022, PRC leader Xi Jinping stated that China would pursue "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan "with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort," but added, "we will never promise to renounce the use of force." The PRC rejects the TRA and the Six Assurances as "unilaterally concocted" and insists that U.S.-China relations must be built on the "common understandings" of the three joint communiqués. The PRC frequently alleges that the United States is violating the understanding in those communiqués, that the United States maintain only unofficial relations with Taiwan. The PRC charges that such alleged violations encourage "'Taiwan independence' separatist forces."

Taiwan still refers to itself officially as the ROC. Its president, Tsai Ing-wen, criticizes PRC efforts "to erase the sovereignty" of the ROC and has stated that the ROC and the PRC "should not be subordinate to each other." She has called for Taiwan to "embrace our global role."

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