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The U.S. “One-China” Policy and Taiwan

Introduction

Since establishing diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1979, the U.S. government has recognized the PRC as “the sole legal Government of China” and maintained relations with Taiwan on an unofficial basis. This approach forms the core of the U.S. “one-China” policy and underpins U.S.-PRC relations. The U.S. “one-China” policy is distinct from the PRC’s “one-China principle,” which holds that “there is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory, and the Government of the [PRC] is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.”

In stating their commitment to the U.S. “one-China” policy, successive U.S. Administrations have described the policy as being “guided” by U.S. law and executive branch commitments. In the second Trump Administration, a U.S. Department of State spokesperson stated from the podium on July 29, 2025, that “[T]he United States remains committed to our longstanding ‘one-China’ policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances.” She added that, “The United States is committed to preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.” The historical context that produced the U.S. “one-China” policy and the disparate elements that guide and thus expand it are discussed below.

Historical Context

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 encouraged large-scale migration from what is today mainland China. 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.

At the height of World War II, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and the ROC’s leader, Chiang Kai-shek, issued the 1943 Cairo Declaration. It states that “all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese,” including Taiwan (referred to as “Formosa”) and nearby Penghu (“the Pescadores”), “shall be restored to the Republic of China.” The 1945 Potsdam Declaration reaffirmed that stance. 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 civil war. The forces of the Communist Party of China emerged victorious and, in 1949, established the PRC. In defeat, the ROC government retreated to Taiwan. Although the ROC no longer controlled territory on mainland China, the U.S.

government continued to recognize the ROC as the sole legal government of China for another 29 years.

Initially, 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. He reversed course after the outbreak of the Korean War stoked fears of further communist expansion in Asia. In June 1950, he ordered the U.S. Navy’s Seventh Fleet “to prevent any attack on Formosa [Taiwan].” More U.S. military support followed. In 1954, the United States signed a mutual defense treaty with the ROC. In 1955, the 84th Congress passed the Formosa Resolution (P.L. 84-4), authorizing the President to employ U.S. armed forces to protect Taiwan and Penghu. The authorization remained in place for nearly two decades, until the 93rd Congress repealed it in 1974’s P.L. 93-475.

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, UN 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 ROC’s then-president. The United States voted against the resolution, but did not rally sufficient opposition to defeat it. PRC representatives replaced those of the ROC in both the General Assembly and the Security Council, as the PRC assumed the rights and obligations of “China” as a UN member state.

The 1972 and 1978 Joint Communiqués

President’s Nixon’s 1972 trip to China yielded the **Shanghai Communiqué**, the first of the U.S.-PRC “Three Joint Communiqués” that serve, in part, to guide the U.S. “one-China” policy. The communiqué includes the following statements:

- “The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position,” and
- The United States “reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves,”—a reference to the populations on either side of the Taiwan Strait—and “affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan.”

The U.S.-PRC **Normalization Communiqué**, issued on December 15, 1978, states the terms under which the two countries agreed to establish diplomatic relations on January 1, 1979. Key statements include:

- The U.S. government “recognizes the Government of the [PRC] as the sole legal Government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan,” and
- The U.S. government “acknowledges”—but does not endorse—“the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.”

In an accompanying statement, the Jimmy Carter Administration announced that it would terminate diplomatic relations with the ROC on January 1, 1979; terminate the 1954 U.S.-ROC defense treaty, effective January 1, 1980; and withdraw remaining U.S. military personnel from Taiwan within four months.

The Taiwan Relations Act (1979)

After breaking official ties with the ROC, the Carter Administration transmitted to Congress a bill to establish a framework for unofficial relations with Taiwan. Concerned about Taiwan’s future security, Congress added multiple provisions to what became the *Taiwan Relations Act* (P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. §§3301 et seq.), including those below:

- “[T]he 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” (Sec. 3(a));
- It is U.S. policy “to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States” (Sec. 2(4)); and
- 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” (Sec. 2(6)).

The *Taiwan Relations Act* states that U.S.-Taiwan relations shall be conducted through a nonprofit corporation, the American Institute in Taiwan (Sec. 6(a)).

1982 Joint Communiqué/Six Assurances

In their 1978 negotiations, the U.S. and PRC governments agreed to set aside the contentious issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. The PRC and the Ronald Reagan Administration took up that issue in the 1982 **August 17 Communiqué**. In that document, the PRC states “a fundamental policy of striving for peaceful reunification” with Taiwan. The U.S. government states that it “understands and appreciates the Chinese policy of striving for a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question.” With such statements “in mind,” the U.S. government states that:

[The United States] does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms, the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, and that it intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution.

Before publicly announcing the August 17 Communiqué, President 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 over the communiqué. Several official texts for the assurances exist, with slight differences in wording among them. As first relayed to Taiwan’s president in July 1982, they are that the United States had 1) “not agreed to set a date certain for ending arms sales to Taiwan”; 2) “not agreed to prior consultations [with the PRC] on arms sales” to Taiwan; 3) “not agreed to any mediation role for the U.S.” between Taipei and Beijing; 4) “not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act”; and 5) “not agreed to take any position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan”; and that the United States 6) “will never” pressure Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC. (See CRS In Focus IF11665, *President Reagan’s Six Assurances to Taiwan*.)

Related Legislation

The PRC asserts that all countries that have established diplomatic relations with China have done so on the basis of its “one-China principle,” and that its principle “is a universal consensus of the international community.” Congress has sought to push back against that characterization, including in a sense of Congress statement in P.L. 118-159 urging the United States and European countries to “publicly and repeatedly emphasize the differences between their respective ‘One China’ policies and the PRC’s ‘One China’ principle.”

In the 119th Congress, H.Res. 148 and S.Res. 86 would each include a “resolved” clause stating that their respective chamber “reaffirms” that the U.S. “one-China” policy “does not affirmatively recognize the [PRC’s] claim to control over Taiwan and its outlying islands, but rather ‘acknowledges’ this position, reaffirms the interest of the United States in a peaceful resolution of cross-Straits issues, ‘has not agreed to take any position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan,’ and ‘will not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC.’” Each resolution would also “reaffirm” that the U.S. “one-China” policy and similar policies of U.S. partners “are not equivalent” to the PRC’s “one-China principle.”

H.Con.Res. 8 would state in a “resolved” clause the sense of Congress that “the President should abandon the antiquated ‘One China Policy’ in favor of a policy that recognizes the objective reality that Taiwan is an independent country not governed by or included within the territory of the People’s Republic of China.”

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