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President Reagan’s Six Assurances to Taiwan

Introduction

Under the U.S. “one-China” policy, the U.S. government has, since 1979, maintained official relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) and unofficial relations with self-governed Taiwan, over which the PRC claims sovereignty. Like the Trump Administration before it, the Biden Administration refers to the U.S. one-China policy as guided by three sets of documents: the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. §§3301 et seq.); three U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqués concluded in 1972, 1978, and 1982; and Six Assurances communicated to Taiwan’s government in 1982. Since 2017, Congress and the President have enacted five laws referring to the TRA and the Six Assurances as either “the foundation for” or “cornerstones of” U.S.-Taiwan relations. The most recent law to reference the Six Assurances refers to the U.S. one-China policy as “the foundation for” U.S.-Taiwan ties.

Historical Context

In the 1978 Joint Communiqué, the United States and the PRC announced that they had agreed to establish diplomatic relations on January 1, 1979. In an accompanying statement, the U.S. government said it would terminate diplomatic relations with Taiwan on the same date. With some Members portraying the moves as a betrayal of Taiwan, Congress passed the TRA, enacted on April 10, 1979. Among the TRA’s provisions is that the United States “will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services” as necessary for Taiwan’s self-defense. In 1982, with continued U.S. arms sales to Taiwan pursuant to the TRA a major irritant in the U.S.-PRC relationship, the Ronald Reagan Administration sought to address the issue through negotiation of a third U.S.-PRC joint communiqué.

In that communiqué, known as the August 17th Communiqué for the day in 1982 on which it was released, the PRC affirmed “a fundamental policy of striving for a peaceful reunification” with Taiwan. The United States stated that it “understands and appreciates the Chinese policy of striving for a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question.” With those statements “in mind,” the United States stated “that it 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 [since 1979], and that it intends gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time, to a final resolution.”

The Reagan Administration knew the communiqué would be viewed with alarm in Taiwan. On July 10, 1982, five weeks before its release, then-Under Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger sent a cable to James Lilley, director of the unofficial U.S. representative office in Taiwan, the

American Institute in Taiwan, instructing him to seek a meeting with Taiwan President Chiang Ching-kuo.

Table 1. The Language of the Six Assurances

CRS has bolded the verb tenses

Eagleburger cable: for President Chiang (7/10/82)	Shultz cable: for Taiwan to make public (8/17/1982)	Holdridge testimony before Senate (8/17/1982)
“We have not agreed to set a date certain for ending arms sales to Taiwan.”	The U.S. “ has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan.”	“[W]e did not agree to set a date certain for ending arms sales to Taiwan.”
“We have not agreed to prior consultation on arms sales.”	The U.S. “ has not agreed to consult with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan.”	“[The 1982 Joint Communiqué] should not be read to imply that we have agreed to engage in prior consultations with Beijing on arms sales to Taiwan.”
“We have not agreed to any mediation role for the U.S.”	The U.S. “ will not play any mediation role between Taipei and Beijing.”	“[W]e see no mediation role for the United States.”
“We have not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act.”	The U.S. “ has not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act.”	“We have no plans to seek any such revisions [to the TRA].”
“We have not agreed to take any position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan.”	The U.S. “ has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan.”	“[T]here has been no change in our longstanding position on the issue of sovereignty over Taiwan.”
“The PRC has at no time urged us to put pressure on Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC; however, we can assure you that we will never do so.”	The U.S. “ will not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC.”	“[N]or will we attempt to exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC.”

Source: “Declassified Cables,” American Institute in Taiwan; U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Policy Toward China and Taiwan*, 97th Cong., 2nd sess., August 17, 1982.

Eagleburger sent Lilley talking points authorized by President Reagan. They included a set of statements detailing what the United States had *not* agreed to in its ongoing negotiations with the PRC over the communiqué.

Lilley first delivered the assurances to President Chiang on July 14, 1982. Taiwan’s government then requested U.S. permission to make them public. In a cable sent the day of the communiqué’s release, then-Secretary of State George Shultz provided Lilley with a reworded version of the Six Assurances for Taiwan’s government to release. The same day and the day after, in Washington, DC, then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs John H. Holdridge testified before Congress about the just-released communiqué. He wove the Six Assurances into his testimony, but did not label them as such or disclose that President Reagan had offered them to Taiwan’s president the previous month. The three U.S. government-released versions of the Six Assurances are presented in **Table 1**.

Differing U.S. Government Texts

For nearly 38 years, the sole publicly-released U.S. government text for the Six Assurances was that woven into Holdridge’s 1982 testimony. The Eagleburger and Shultz cables remained classified. In the absence of authoritative stand-alone text, some sources asserted that the Six Assurances stated that “the United States would not formally recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.” House Concurrent Resolutions introduced in seven congresses cited that purported assurance: H.Con.Res. 69 (109th Congress), H.Con.Res. 73 (110th), H.Con.Res. 18 (111th), H.Con.Res. 122 (112th), H.Con.Res. 29 (113th), H.Con.Res. 124 (115th), and H.Con.Res. 117 (116th).

The 114th Congress approved resolutions (H.Con.Res. 88 and S.Con.Res. 38) that quoted from the assurances woven into Holdridge’s 1982 testimony. Both urged “the President and Department of State to affirm the Six Assurances publicly, proactively, and consistently as a cornerstone of United States-Taiwan relations.” The Trump Administration declassified the Eagleburger and Shultz cables in 2020, entering into the public record two more authoritative, but slightly different, U.S. texts for the Six Assurances. Areas of difference are discussed below.

Taiwan’s sovereignty: The declassified Eagleburger cable includes an assurance that in negotiations with the PRC over the August 17 Communiqué, “We have not agreed to take any position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan.” The declassified Shultz cable is more ambiguous, stating that the U.S. side “has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan,” without stating the U.S. position. The Shultz cable includes the parenthetical statement, “FYI: If asked why we have modified the statement on sovereignty, you should explain that we have consistently used this terminology in our public statements.” The Holdridge testimony is similarly ambiguous.

Taking no position on Taiwan’s sovereignty has been long-standing U.S. policy. In Senate testimony on September 17, 2020, then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David R. Stilwell stated that the United States “will not take a position on [Taiwan’s] sovereignty.” He said, “the question of sovereignty was decided to be left undecided and to be worked out between the two parties,” a reference to Taiwan and the PRC.

Mediation Between Taipei and Beijing. The Eagleburger cable states, “We have not agreed to any mediation role for the U.S.” The Shultz cable and the Holdridge testimony are forward-looking, stating that the U.S. side “will not play any mediation role between Taipei and Beijing” and “we see no mediation role for the United States.”

Not revising the TRA. The Eagleburger and Shultz cables state that the United States “have not”/“has not” “agreed to revise” the TRA. The Holdridge testimony is forward-looking, stating, “We have no plans to seek any such revisions [to the TRA].”

Legislative Implications

In referencing the Six Assurances in law, successive Congresses appear to have intended for all six assurances to guide future U.S. policy. Some bills introduced since the 115th Congress appear to be at odds with a fully future-focused orientation, however. Examples include bills with provisions seeking to amend the TRA (such as the 118th Congress’ H.R. 5072 and S. 1997) or implicitly or explicitly seeking to take a position on Taiwan’s sovereignty (such as the 118th Congress’ H.R. 2511 and H.Con.Res. 10).

Since 2017, Congress has passed nine laws with provisions referencing the Six Assurances, seven of them National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAAs). The other laws are the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-409) and the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260).

- The NDAA for FY2024 (P.L. 118-31) alone states the sense of Congress that “the United States’ one China policy, as guided by” the TRA, the three U.S.-PRC Communiqués, and the Six Assurances, “is the foundation for” U.S.-Taiwan relations.
- The NDAAs for FY2021, FY2022, and FY2023 (P.L. 116-283, P.L. 117-81, and P.L. 117-263) state the sense of Congress that the TRA and the Six Assurances “are the foundation for” U.S.-Taiwan relations. The NDAAs for FY2019 and FY2020 (P.L. 115-232 and P.L. 116-92) state the sense of Congress that the TRA and the Six Assurances “are both cornerstones of” U.S.-Taiwan ties.
- The NDAAs for FY2022 through FY2024 also state the sense of Congress that the United States should strengthen the U.S. partnership with Taiwan “consistent with the Three Communiqués,” the TRA, and the Six Assurances.
- The NDAAs for FY2021 through FY2024 and P.L. 115-409 attach a July 1982 date to the Six Assurances, appearing to elevate the Reagan-authorized Eagleburger cable text over the two texts issued in August 1982.

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