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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. The Biden Administration presents today’s 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.-China joint communiqués concluded in 1972, 1978, and 1982; and “Six Assurances” that President Ronald Reagan communicated to Taiwan’s government in 1982. Since 2017, Congress has affirmed its support for the Six Assurances in law eight times, without specifying whether all or only some of the assurances should guide future U.S. policy.

Historical Context

In the 1978 U.S.-PRC joint communiqué, the two countries 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.-China 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 understood that the communiqué would be viewed with alarm in Taiwan. On July 10, 1982, a month 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. Eagleburger provided Lilley with

talking points authorized by President Reagan. The talking points included a set of statements on what the United States had *not* agreed to in the negotiations with the PRC over the communiqué. Those statements later came to be known as the Six Assurances. Lilley first delivered them to President Chiang on July 14, 1982. Taiwan’s government subsequently requested U.S. permission to make the Six Assurances 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 references to the Six Assurances into his testimony, but did not label them as the Six Assurances or disclose that President Reagan had offered the assurances to Taiwan’s president the previous month. The three U.S. government versions of the Six Assurances are presented in **Table 1**.

Differing Texts

For nearly 38 years, the sole publicly-released U.S. government version of the Six Assurances was the language in Holdridge’s 1982 testimony before Congress. The Eagleburger and Shultz cables remained classified. In the absence of authoritative stand-alone text for the assurances, some sources asserted that they included an assurance 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).

In 2016, the 114th Congress for the first time united behind a definitive text when the House passed H.Con.Res. 88 and the Senate passed S.Con.Res. 38. Both resolutions included in “whereas” clauses relevant quotes from Holdridge’s 1982 testimony. Both resolutions affirmed “that the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances are both cornerstones of United States relations with Taiwan,” and urged “the President and Department of State to affirm the Six Assurances publicly, proactively, and consistently as a cornerstone of United States-Taiwan relations.” Then, in 2020, the Trump Administration declassified the Eagleburger and Shultz cables, making public for the first time authoritative U.S. texts for two more versions of the Six Assurances. Three U.S. government-released versions of the Six Assurances that now exist in the public record, with their language differing in some key respects.

Taiwan's sovereignty: The declassified Eagleburger cable includes the statement 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 what the U.S. position is. 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, however, been longstanding 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,” Taiwan and the PRC.

Mediation Between Taipei and Beijing. The Eagleburger cable uses past tense in stating, “We *have not* agreed to any mediation role for the U.S.” The Shultz cable and the Holdridge testimony use prospective language, 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.” (Italics here and below are by CRS.)

Not revising the TRA. The Eagleburger and Shultz cables both 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

The implication of Congress’ efforts to affirm the Six Assurances appears to be that they should guide future U.S. policy, verb tenses notwithstanding. Some bills introduced since the 114th Congress appear to be at odds with such a prospective orientation, however. Examples include bills with provisions seeking to amend the TRA (such as the 117th Congress’ S. 4428) 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). Congress could consider whether to clarify the continued applicability of all of the Six Assurances.

Since 2017, Congress has passed eight laws affirming the Six Assurances. P.L. 117-263 and P.L. 117-81 both call for “strengthening the United States partnership with Taiwan, consistent with the Three Communiques, the [TRA], and the Six Assurances.” P.L. 116-283 states that it is U.S. policy “that the [TRA] and the Six Assurances provided by the United States to Taiwan in July 1982 are the foundation for United States-Taiwan relations.” P.L. 116-260 finds that, “It is the policy of the United States to reinforce its commitments to Taiwan under the [TRA] in a manner consistent with the ‘Six Assurances’ and in accordance with the United States ‘One China’ policy.” P.L. 116-92 and P.L. 115-232 state that it is the sense of Congress that, “the [TRA] and the ‘Six Assurances’ are both cornerstones of United States relations with Taiwan.” P.L. 115-409 states

that it is the policy of the United States “to faithfully enforce all existing United States Government commitments to Taiwan, consistent with the [TRA], the 3 joint communiques, and the Six Assurances agreed to by President Ronald Reagan in July 1982.” P.L. 115-91 states, “It is the policy of the United States to reinforce its commitments to Taiwan under the [TRA] and consistent with the ‘Six Assurances.’”

Table 1. The Language of the Six Assurances
CRS has bolded the verb tenses

Eagleburger cable: language 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.

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