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REVISITING THE THREE COMMUNIQUES The 'Taiwan' question in U.S.-China relations

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February 28, 2021 marked 48 years of the first Sino-U.S. Joint Communiqué's, also known as Shanghai Communiqué, existence. The 1972 agreement, symbolised in the famous Nixon-Mao handshake, signalled the end of 23 years of diplomatic estrangement between Washington and Beijing and laid the foundation for "peaceful and prosperous Asia."¹ Although the areas of agreement, as reflected in the Communiqué, were narrow and lacked clarity—by signing a joint communiqué which addressed those issues which have been historic roadblocks (especially Taiwan)—both countries sent the message that they were committed to improving relations. It established the principles which have guided relations since, which have been distilled in the course of the long history of interactions between the two countries but now are under deep scrutiny.

Despite the communiqué's addressing the "Taiwan" question, it is clear that Taiwan still remains the "lightning rod"² in U.S.-China relations. With China's mounting military, economic and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan, many analysts predict that it may emerge as hotspot in bilateral relations. Escalating tensions in recent years have triggered a downward spiral in U.S.-China relations and brought bilateral relations to one of their lowest points since normalisation, which makes it crucial to revisit these fundamental principles and assess their relevance, almost 50 years later.

What were the Three Communiqués?

The three communiqués are a set of formal statements jointly issued by the United States and the People's Republic of China in 1972, 1979 and 1982 respectively. Unlike most diplomatic notes which focus on areas of agreement, these were unified statement that allowed each side to make separate statements and acknowledged the "essential differences" and disagreements between the two sides. The first communiqué acknowledged that the "Taiwan question" is the "crucial question" obstructing the normalisation of relations. The Chinese side firmly held that "Taiwan is a province of China.... the liberation of Taiwan us China's internal affair..." The Americans accommodated such a position by "acknowledging" that "all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China." Washington even agreed to "progressively reducing forces and military installations on Taiwan" but reiterated its interest in "peaceful settlement" of the "Taiwan question." With these words, it was clear that the Nixon administration acknowledged that there was "One China" but the issue of territory i.e. whether the geographic entity of Taiwan is a part of state called China was left unaddressed.

This ambiguity was compounded by the 1978 communiqué on establishment of diplomatic relations which read that the U.S. government "**acknowledges** the Chinese position that there is but One China and Taiwan is a part of China." By using these words, America shifted away from its earlier

stance that this was the voice of “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait” and left space for its own position which was not articulated in the Communique. However, the Chinese text of the Communique replaced the word *renshi dao* (acknowledge) with the verb *chengren* which connotes recognition and assent.³

The ascendancy of Ronald Reagan reopened re-opened the Taiwan issue, revealing that despite “normalisation” this main irritant was never adequately addressed. Reagan had been one of the most fervent supporters of Taiwan in American politics and had even opposed the normalisation of relations and during his tenure as President he attempted to restore some officiality to American ties with Taipei. The 1982 Communique signed by his administration reiterated the English text version of the 1978 communique, where Washington refused to take a position on Taiwan’s sovereignty on grounds that it was China’s “internal matter.” Reagan also assured Taipei that U.S. would not cut off arms supply, neither would Washington consult with Beijing about what arms to provide to Taiwan.

The “creative ambiguity”⁴ in framing U.S. and Chinese position on Taiwan issue in the Joint Communiques may have pushed relations away from mutual hostility immediately, but it proved to be only temporary. In the words of Xi Jinping, Taiwan continues to remain the “most important, most sensitive core issue in China-U.S. relations, and concerns the political basis of the China-U.S. relationship.”⁵ It is clear that the Taiwan question was not adequately addressed in this foundational document. However, the communiques were never designed as a solution to all the problems plaguing Sino-U.S. relations. They simply reflected the reality of the domestic and international reality of the time which pushed the two countries to come closer together. The signing of the communiques cannot be understood, isolated from the Sino-U.S.-Soviet triangular politics which determined Sino-U.S. relations towards the latter half of the Cold War. As rapprochement played out within the context of this strategic triangle, Washington sought to “improve the possibilities of accommodations with each as we increase our options toward both.”⁶ Playing out against the backdrop of peak bipolar rivalry, the international context in which the negotiations leading up to the Shanghai Communique played out becomes relevant. Nixon’s discourse of reconciliation was justified on grounds of being conducted in pursuit of peace, couched in language of “creative diplomacy” and “co-existence” and “accommodation”⁷ with adversaries, thereby keeping at bay allegations that he was going “soft” on China. Richard Nixon felt that China was a country with enormous potential and a long-term cooperative relationship with Beijing would prove to be mutually beneficial. With the benefit of hindsight, one can say that these expectations proved wrong and short sighted.

“Taiwan” question amidst worsening U.S.-China tensions

Both U.S. and China have hardened their respective positions on the status of Taiwan. Under Xi Jinping, China has signalled its resolve towards reunification by suspending all diplomatic contact with Taipei and urging other countries to follow suit. Amidst escalating tensions with China, President Donald Trump went beyond his predecessors in supporting Taiwan by removing the complex restrictions in place to regulate U.S.-Taiwan high level visits⁸, elevating Taiwan’s status in its Indo-Pacific policy⁹, putting in place laws which require increased U.S. support for Taiwan internationally¹⁰ and encouraging allies to upgrade ties. Donald Trump’s rhetorical support for abandoning the “One China” policy has raised anxieties in Beijing that Washington may use Taiwan to gain leverage in other areas.¹¹ Nevertheless, Donald Trump seemed to enjoy popular support in Taiwan as a poll conducted by YouGov prior to the U.S. presidential elections revealed that Taiwan was the only Asian country surveyed where respondents supported Trump’s re-election.¹²

Given the importance of U.S.-China relations, a unilateral abrogation of a long-held policy which constitutes one of the foundational principles can have disastrous consequences. On the other hand, Washington’s relationship with Taiwan under the rubric of Taiwan Relations Act has evolved into a broad ranging and deep military relationship. Although the legislation does not provide for stationing of American troops on Taiwan’s soil nor talks about military co-ordination, in March 1996 Washington deployed a large naval force to deter China from disrupting Taiwan’s election.¹³ Since then Washington has boosted Taiwan's military capabilities through large-scale weapons purchases, which are bolstered by frequent contacts between the two defence establishments.

This security relationship will be tested under the Biden administration as it assesses its policy posture to face an increasingly aggressive China, which Joe Biden described would be a “special challenge.” Although Biden has vocally been critical of almost all of his predecessor’s policy, one can expect a continuity in Trump’s foreign policy approach towards Taiwan under the new administration. The strongest signals of this come from the statements from those serving senior roles in the Biden administration. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin “underscored their support for Taiwan during their confirmation hearings.”¹⁴ President Biden also invited Taiwan’s representative in the United States, Hsiao Bi-khim to his presidential inauguration, making him the first president to do so since the signing of the 1979 Communique.¹⁵ The strongest statement of Biden’s support for Taiwan came in the official statements issued by the State department after China flew fighter jets into Taiwan’s air defence identification zone just days after Biden’s election. It read “the United States notes with concern the pattern of ongoing PRC attempts to intimidate its neighbours, including Taiwan.....deepening our ties with democratic Taiwan. The

United States will continue to support a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues..."¹⁶ Such a posture reaffirms Washington's commitment to Taiwan, without compromising the principles set out in the joint communiques. As for Taiwan, in an interview to the Diplomat, Hsiao Bi-khim set out Taipei's priorities in establishing a "good working relationship" with the new administration, with focus on "general defence and security area," followed by "economic relationship" and thirdly "international participation."¹⁷ Given the centrality of Indo-Pacific in America's strategic thinking and Biden administration's focus on a "summit of democracies," Taiwan's strategic location and symbolic importance as a vibrant democratic country makes it likely that the administration will strengthen the existing relationship. In view of the growing bipartisan support in Washington over support for Taipei, one can expect more continuities than discontinuity from Trump's Taiwan policy. However, such support might not be as abrasive and Biden may refrain from the more proactive steps taken by President Donald Trump and nurture the relationship "away from the public eye." The more serious question the administration has to face concerns the growing voices in America regarding the "utility of the communiques drafted during the Cold War"¹⁸ which many see as no longer representing the changed strategic reality.

Notes

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⁶ Speech written for Nelson Rockefeller, July 1968, quoted in Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979), 165

⁷ As quoted in Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: from 'Red Menace' to 'Tacit Ally'* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009).

⁸ Reuters, "Pompeo Lifts Restrictions on US-Taiwan Relationship as Clock Runs out on Trump Administration," India Today (India Today, January 10, 2021), <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pompeo-lifts-restrictions-on-us-taiwan-relationship-as-clock-runs-out-on-trump-administration-1757553-2021-01-10>.

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¹¹ Caren Bohan and David Brunnstrom, "Trump Says U.S. Not Necessarily Bound by 'One China' Policy," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, December 11, 2016), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-china-idUSKBN1400TY>.

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¹³ Steven M. Goldstein and Randall Schriver, "An Uncertain Relationship: The United States, Taiwan and the Taiwan Relations Act," *The China Quarterly* 165 (March 2001): p. 147.

¹⁴ David Sacks, "Biden Administration Sends Important Signals for the Future of U.S.-Taiwan Ties," Council on Foreign Relations, January 28, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/biden-administration-sends-important-signals-future-us-taiwan-ties>.

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¹⁷ Shannon Tiezzi, "What to Expect From US-Taiwan Relations in 2021 (and Beyond)," *The Diplomat*, February 11, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/what-to-expect-from-us-taiwan-relations-in-2021-and-beyond/>.

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