



The U.S. “One China” Policy: Time for a Change?

By Alan D. Romberg

The U.S. “one China” policy is under challenge. Some say the U.S. should support the independence of democratic Taiwan; others argue the U.S. should support, not just peaceful *resolution* of cross-Strait issues, but peaceful reunification. But this is not time for a change; not only does the policy work, there is no better alternative.

What is the “one China” policy – and what is it not?

- It is commitment not to challenge the claim that there is “one China” of which Taiwan is a part, and to act consistent with that proposition to the extent possible, but it is not an active embracing of that position. That means no support for “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan.” It means maintaining only unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan, but includes robust, wide-ranging interaction, including even the sale of carefully selected defensive weapons and equipment and other exchanges relating to Taiwan’s security.
- It is recognition of the government of the People’s Republic of China as the “sole legal government of China,” but not acceptance that that government represents or speaks for the people of Taiwan.
- It is acceptance that it is up to the two sides to determine their relationship and entails a U.S. willingness to go along with their decisions, now and ultimately. But because of the vital U.S. national interest in maintaining peace and stability, it insists that the process for reaching such arrangements, and managing cross-Strait relations in the meantime, should be nonprovocative, uncoerced, and peaceful. Thus neither side should unilaterally seek to change the status quo of peace and stability in the Strait or impose its own definition of the status quo on the other side or on the international community. (The PRC’s definition is that there is “one China” of which Taiwan is an integral and indivisible part; Taiwan says the ROC, or Taiwan, is a sovereign, independent country that does not come under Beijing.)

What is the alternative? Should we favor unification, even peaceful unification? Are Americans to tell the people of Taiwan that they are consigned by our decision to a future as part of a country they have not chosen to be part of? Should we preemptively oppose Taiwan independence if the two sides could agree on it?

On the other hand, are we to tell the people of Taiwan – or of the mainland – that some mutually agreed form of reunification is unacceptable?

We might have concerns about any outcome, but fundamentally the U.S. believes it does not have the right to

determine this issue. At the end of the day, this is “their” issue, not ours, and it should be decided by the people on both sides of the Strait, not by the United States. At the same time, it is important to underscore that the U.S. insists that any resolution be peaceful and noncoercive, and Washington opposes any step by either side that could upset peace and stability.

This policy accords not only with U.S. interests but with the fundamental interests of both sides of the Strait, fostering the peaceful and stable environment the PRC needs for economic development as well as contributing to Taiwan’s prosperity and security and its robust international role.

Some criticize the U.S. stance against the proposed referendum to apply to the UN “in the name of ‘Taiwan’” as a betrayal of U.S. values and its commitment to democracy. Moreover, they say, Washington’s *realpolitik* approach to relations with the PRC gives Beijing the whip hand not only on Taiwan matters but also on other pressing international issues. They argue further that U.S. policy will not maintain the status quo. If Taiwan does not act now, not to immediately change the constitution but at least to gain international acceptance as a “state” separate from the PRC and to deepen the sense of “Taiwanese identity” on the island, over time Taiwan will lack the strength to resist the PRC’s intimidation and inducement, if not the outright use of force; the evolving “correlation of forces” will tilt the table toward inevitable unification.

The United States has long pressed Taiwan to act urgently to bolster self-defense capabilities. Still, Taiwan’s greatest strength against unwanted takeover is its political and economic vitality and viability, not its military strength. But pressing on the issue of Taiwan’s “status” is not the path to more meaningful democracy and security; it is a provocative course that increases the possibility the PRC will opt for nonpeaceful means while simultaneously eroding the sympathy of the international community and its potential willingness to help resist.

The proposed referendum raises such dangers as it seeks to impose Taiwan’s definition of the status quo on the world. To Beijing, this is one more step in a consistent push toward “Taiwan independence,” but one of special importance because it would be the first time the people of Taiwan would formally express themselves on a question related to Taiwan’s status, potentially establishing not only a political but a legal foundation for pressing ahead toward formal independence.

Beijing will not likely attack Taiwan if the referendum passes, but a great deal of thinking – and planning – is going on in the mainland about how to impose a cost significant enough to deter further steps toward independence but restrained enough not to trigger U.S. intervention and an all-out war.

Some charge this is PRC bluster to scare Taiwan into abandoning – or rejecting – the referendum, and to pressure the United States into imposing “pragmatic” limits on Taiwan’s democracy. But U.S. objections to the referendum spring from Washington’s own assessment of the dangers, not from any PRC demands or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, collaboration with Beijing. Part of that assessment is that, like it or not, if the PRC feels so provoked that it decides it must act, the likelihood of things getting out of control are not insignificant. Thus, in a crescendo of statements, Washington has made known that, while the United States does not oppose referenda in principle, it does oppose this one because of the provocative use of the name “Taiwan.”

It is not persuasive to argue, as the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian do, that this proposal is simply like many other instances in which Taiwan does not use its formal name to participate in the international community. This is not “Chinese Taipei” in the Olympics or a “customs territory” in the WTO. Even Chen has argued that using “Taiwan” in the UN context exemplifies “rectification of Taiwan’s name” and that it is explicitly designed to persuade the international community to accept “Taiwan” as a separate, sovereign state. While that is not the same as formalizing independent status through constitutional amendment, it is an effort to change the status quo.

Recently, President Chen said the referendum’s passage could force the United States to support Taiwan’s UN bid, and even to review its “one China” policy. It is truly worrisome if he so misreads the situation as to believe that Americans’ natural instinct toward universal representation in international organizations will translate into acceptance of a “one China, one Taiwan” policy – and that he pushes the referendum on that assumption.

Again, the U.S. would regard the use of force by Beijing as unacceptable, but provoking it would also lay responsibility for the results on Chen.

Taiwan is a vibrant democracy where people not only demand the right to express themselves but have a responsibility to do so. And the United States should – and does – support it. But democracy is not an excuse for irresponsibility, and all political leaders of Taiwan have a responsibility to look out for the security and well-being of the 23 million people they lead. Still, some feel they can tweak the dragon’s tail as long as they don’t poke him in the eye, that it’s all right to openly seek quasi-formal independent identity as long as the constitutional name remains “Republic of China,” not “Taiwan.” At a minimum this tempts fate; at worst, it could spark tragedy.

Beijing is clearly not spoiling for a fight, but if it concludes that Taiwan is irrevocably closing the door to unification, it will act – whatever the cost, and even if it is not assured of military victory.

Some have described the U.S. “one China” policy as “kicking the can down the road,” putting off any denouement over ultimate resolution of cross-Strait relations. That will be one element, at least as long as the alternative could be war.

Normalization with Beijing put the ROC’s diplomatic status into limbo, but it contributed in vital ways to shoring up the security and well-being of the people of Taiwan in a democratic and prosperous society that functions quite well in the international community. Even given all of Taiwan’s frustrations, inconveniences, and affronts to their dignity, it is hard to understand why anyone would put this at risk, especially when prospects for success on the UN issue are zero.

The policy could change. Beijing and Taipei both could take such irresponsible steps that alter the entire policy framework. Should Taiwan’s inability to rein in its own worst instincts lead to war, the U.S. reaction cannot be predicted. Similarly, should the PRC resort to force, U.S. tolerance should not be taken for granted. Arguments would certainly emerge to change the “one China” policy, most likely not in the favor of the troublemaker.

Even short of that, some people have advocated greater U.S. activism because of the inherent instability of the current situation. They argue the United States should stimulate or at least facilitate cross-Strait negotiations that would exchange a Taiwan pledge not to push independence for a PRC pledge not to use force.

Although complicated, if doable such an agreement would be good. But the appropriate U.S. role is not so clear. If both sides request U.S. involvement, we should seriously consider it. Otherwise, an American effort to shape the process would be fraught with danger.

Still, we could make more explicit that, indeed, the United States *will* go along with any arrangements worked out peacefully and noncoercively by the two sides. That includes not only ultimate resolution of their relationship, but interim measures to end the state of hostilities or develop confidence-building measures.

So, it is not time to change the U.S. “one China” policy. But it does need to be better understood – including by senior policymakers charged with carrying it out. And it must be implemented in ways that are respectful of the fundamental interests on both sides, just as both sides also need to be respectful of U.S. strategic national interests.

After next May we may witness an upturn in cross-Strait relations, whoever is elected, but that won’t be automatic; it will take vision and strong leadership on all sides. If that happens, the contributions of the U.S. “one China” policy will once again become self-evident and doubts about it will fade. In the meantime, the policy should remain in place, as it will continue to contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability, to a constructive U.S.-PRC relationship, and to the well-being and security of the people of Taiwan.

Alan D. Romberg (aromberg@earthlink.net) is Senior Associate and Director, East Asia Program at The Henry L. Stimson Center. This article is based on the 16th Annual Charles Neuhauser Memorial Lecture at the John K. Fairbank Center of Harvard University on Oct. 24, 2007. The full text is at <http://www.stimson.org/pub.cfm?id=473>.