

Trump right to doubt 'one China'

Written by Joseph Bosco
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Since then-US president Richard Nixon traveled to China and began Washington's abandonment of official diplomatic and military relations with Taiwan, several shorthand policy phrases have defined the fraught Taiwan-US-China relationship.

The three main notions are: "one China," cross-strait stability or the "status quo," and strategic ambiguity.

"One China": The 1972 US-China Shanghai Communique has been called the "original sin" of the trilateral relationship. It laid out the two sides' understandings on the existence, or not, of a single Chinese polity encompassing both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Beijing stated its position that, as a matter of historical, cultural and juridical fact, China and Taiwan are part of one legal entity called the People's Republic of China — period. That is known as the communist government's "one China" principle.

Washington, on the other hand, simply acknowledged that "all Chinese" on both sides of the Strait — the communist dictatorship under Mao Zedong (毛泽东) in Beijing and the anti-communist dictatorship under Chiang Kai-shek (蒋介石) in Taipei — shared that view, differing only on who should rule the merged territories.

The US position stated the "expectation" that the issue would be resolved "peacefully." That is the US' "one China" policy.

Almost immediately, China began posturing as if the two governments held identical positions and relentlessly advanced that false narrative over the next 45 years until it became absorbed into the general public consciousness.

Prominent journalists, as well as active and former public officials, either because they were simply careless or too accommodating to China, often state as established historical fact that Washington and Beijing have long agreed that Taiwan is part of China.

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Former US national security adviser Henry Kissinger, who helped draft the communique, knows better, but has continued to accept that the US and Chinese interpretations inevitably would merge and Taiwan would be under combined pressure from the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to accept Beijing's rule.

That is why he could self-confidently warn Taipei in 2007 that "China will not wait forever" — a message Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) was only too glad to echo shortly after assuming power when he said the Taiwan question "cannot be passed on from generation to generation."

So, whenever minority US officials or commentators have tried to set the record straight on what "one China" means in Washington's view, the PRC and its sympathetic US academic audience have accused them of undermining the foundation of the US-China relationship.

That explains the shock among international foreign policy establishments when US President Donald Trump explicitly questioned the sanctity of the policy even under the US perspective.

They assumed Washington was on the verge of contravening the linchpin of US-China relations — that Taiwan is part of China. It was the premise of the first question a CNN interviewer once put to me; yet, even after I — and others — corrected the error on air, two CNN hosts repeated it in subsequent programs, as has the BBC and other media.

Cross-strait stability or the "status quo": The Shanghai Communique, in both the US and Chinese position statements, envisions "peace and stability" across the Taiwan Strait as conceptually equivalent to the preservation of the "status quo." Washington has repeatedly called on both sides to avoid actions that would upset that undefined stasis, and create tension and instability.

The inherent problem is that there is a static "status quo" and a dynamic "status quo."

The former, if taken literally, would mean that everything in social and political life on Taiwan

was frozen in place as of Feb. 28, 1972, the date of the communique, or at least as of Jan. 1, 1979, the date that Washington shifted official recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

Both are physical impossibilities, in demographic terms alone, since the populations of China and Taiwan are constantly changing. People in both places who believe they recall a time when Taiwan was an integral part of Greater China, or should be, are dying off; people are being born who have no such mindset, and on Taiwan the younger generations know it as their only homeland and national identity.

A dynamic "status quo" is also at work in the policies of both governments across the Strait. The self-governing and freedom-loving citizens of Taiwan want to keep the democratic system for which they, or their parents and grandparents, struggled, suffered and sometimes died.

At the same time, they aspire to be treated like citizens of the world, and recognized for their admirable economic and political achievements, and for their scientific and humanitarian contributions to the international community.

Taiwan's dynamic "status quo," in other words, constitutes a state of de facto independence and a desire to enjoy at least some of the dignity and benefits of normal de jure independence.

What the Taiwanese seek for themselves is the mirror image of the dynamic "status quo" sought by Beijing for Taiwan — an evolving economic, cultural and political closeness that eventually leads to unification and Taiwan's absorption by China, if not peacefully, then by force.

Subjugation of Taiwan is the first of Beijing's ever-lengthening "core interests" and "red lines."

Beijing defines it not only in terms of actions Taiwan might take, but also by what it fails to do. The 2005 "Anti-Secession" Law includes a declaration of independence, or other official moves by Taipei toward independence, as a basis to attack Taiwan. However, it also presumes a "right" to use force if Taiwan takes too long to submit to Chinese rule.

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Strategic ambiguity: What has been Washington's response to China's decades-long threats of aggression against Taiwan, beginning with the Shanghai Communiqué itself?

Chinese military officials asked that question of their US counterparts during the 1995 to 1996 Taiwan Strait missile crisis.

The US answer was the quintessential expression of Washington's doctrine of strategic ambiguity regarding the defense of Taiwan: "We don't know and you don't know. It would depend on the circumstances."

Beijing's strategic military planners have been preparing ever since to create the circumstances that would keep the US from intervening in a cross-strait conflict to defend Taiwan. China's anti-access/area denial strategy makes use of an arsenal of anti-ship ballistic missiles and a fleet of attack submarines to keep the US Seventh Fleet out of the fight.

If Washington instead had told Chinese military officials an attack on Taiwan would mean war with the US, how differently the ensuing decades might have unfolded. Without a US red line against the use of force, Beijing would have been far less inclined to pass the "Anti-Secession" Law.

The hour is late for Washington to deter war in the Taiwan Strait — but not too late, especially for the Trump administration, which has credibly used the threat of US force to deter war on the Korean Peninsula.

Joseph Bosco served as China country director in the office of the US secretary of defense and taught a graduate seminar on US-China-Taiwan relations at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He is a fellow at the Institute for Taiwan-American Studies. This article originally appeared in the Hill on June 28.

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