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President Reagan's Six Assurances to Taiwan

Introduction

In July 1982, as his government negotiated with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over a joint communiqué on Taiwan arms sales, President Ronald Reagan offered Taiwan assurances about what the United States had not agreed to in those negotiations. These statements have come to be known as the Six Assurances. (See **Table 1** below.) A senior Reagan Administration official wove language from the assurances through his testimony before Congress on August 17, 1982, the day of the communiqué's release, but successive administrations kept the precise text of the assurances classified, creating lingering uncertainties about their content. With its declassification of an internal 1982 presidential memorandum (in 2019) and two 1982 State Department cables (in 2020), the Trump Administration has made public definitive language for the Six Assurances, as well as new information about the context in which they were offered.

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David R. Stilwell has portrayed the declassification decisions as part of an effort to bolster Taiwan and "prevent and reverse [the] PRC's squeezing of ... Taiwan's international space." Declassification has also served to refocus attention on the 1982 U.S.-PRC joint communiqué on Taiwan arms sales and to affirm a long-standing U.S. policy of taking no position on Taiwan's sovereignty.

The 1982 U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqué and Its Legacy

Between 1972 and 1982, the United States and the PRC agreed to three joint communiqués, each of which included significant language related to Taiwan. The PRC views the communiqués as the political foundation for the U.S.-PRC relationship. The United States views them as an element of its one-China policy, under which the United States since 1979 has recognized the PRC as the sole legal government of China while maintaining unofficial relations with Taiwan. (A second major element of the U.S. one-China policy is the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. 3301 et seq.), enacted on April 10, 1979.)

The third U.S.-PRC joint communiqué, released on August 17, 1982, sought to settle differences between the United States and the PRC over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. In it, the PRC affirmed "a fundamental policy of striving for a peaceful reunification" with Taiwan, over which the PRC claims sovereignty. 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 joint communiqué angered Taiwan. After its release, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement accusing the U.S. government of having "mistaken the fallacious 'peaceful intention' of the Chinese communists as sincere and meaningful," and expressing "profound regret." The joint communiqué later became a point of contention in U.S.-PRC relations, too. The PRC accuses the United States of violating the communiqué by not reducing its arms sales to Taiwan.

The U.S. government presents arms sales to Taiwan as consistent with the TRA, which states that the United States "will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability." The United States also argues that its commitments in the 1982 joint communiqué were predicated on the PRC's continued commitment to peaceful resolution of its sovereignty dispute with Taiwan, and that PRC military intimidation of Taiwan since has called the PRC's peaceful intentions into question. To emphasize the linkage, the Trump Administration in 2019 declassified an internal presidential memorandum Reagan issued on the day of the third communiqué's release. Reagan wrote, "the U.S. willingness to reduce its arms sales to Taiwan is conditioned absolutely upon the continued commitment of China to the peaceful solution of the Taiwan-PRC differences." He added that, "it is essential that the quantity and quality of the arms provided Taiwan be conditioned entirely on the threat posed by the PRC."

The Six Assurances

More than a month before the 1982 joint communiqué's release, the United States sought to ease Taiwan anxieties about its possible provisions. In a newly declassified July 10, 1982, cable, then-Under Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger instructed James Lilley, Director of the American Institute in Taiwan, the unofficial U.S. representative office in Taiwan, to seek a meeting with Taiwan President Chiang Ching-kuo. The cable provided Lilley with talking points authorized by President Reagan, including what later came to be known as the Six Assurances. Lilley delivered them on July 14, 1982.

Taiwan subsequently requested U.S. permission to make the Six Assurances public. In a newly declassified cable sent on August 17, 1982—the day the third communiqué was issued—then-Secretary of State George Schultz provided Lilley with a version of the Six Assurances for

Taiwan to release publicly, with the proviso that in Taiwan's statement, "there should of course be no linkage to President Reagan." The Taiwan Foreign Ministry statement included a version of the Six Assurances, noting that the U.S. side had made them known to Taiwan "through appropriate channels." Also on August 17, 1982, then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs John H. Holdridge testified before the Senate about the communiqué. The Six Assurances as rendered in the two cables and in Holdridge's Senate testimony are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The Language of the Six Assurances

CRS has bolded the verb tenses

As authorized to be conveyed to Taiwan (7/10/82)	As authorized for Taiwan to make public (8/17/1982)	As conveyed in congressional testimony (8/17/1982)
"We have not agreed to set a date certain for ending arms sales to Taiwan."	The U.S. side " 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. side " 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. side " 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. side " 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. side " 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. side " 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.

Taiwan's Sovereignty and Verb Tenses

While the text of the original Six Assurances remained classified, the sovereignty assurance was subject to debate. Since 2005, in every Congress except the 114th, Members have introduced House Concurrent Resolutions calling for the resumption of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. (See H.Con.Res. 69, H.Con.Res. 73, H.Con.Res. 18, H.Con.Res. 122, H.Con.Res. 29, H.Con.Res. 124, and H.Con.Res. 117.) All cite the Six Assurances as including an assurance that "[t]he United States would not formally recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan." The declassified July 10, 1982, cable shows that President Reagan's Six Assurances never included such an assurance. Instead, Reagan assured Taiwan that the United States had "not agreed to take any position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan."

Not taking a position is long-standing U.S. policy. In Senate testimony in September 2020, Assistant Secretary Stilwell again stated that the United States "will not take a position on sovereignty." He said the issue was "decided to be left undecided and to be worked out between" Taiwan and the PRC. That stance riles the PRC, which insists that Taiwan is part of China. It also irks Taiwan, which officially calls itself the Republic of China (ROC) and describes itself as a sovereign, independent country, without specifying where the ROC's borders lie. In October 2020, Taiwan's legislature called on Taiwan's government to seek to reestablish U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic relations. Reaffirmation of the U.S. position that Taiwan's sovereignty remains unresolved would appear to discourage such efforts.

The verb tenses for the Six Assurances have also been subject to debate. In the July 10, 1982, cable, five assurances are in past tense and one is in future tense. In the August 17, 1982, cable, four are in past tense and two in future tense. In Holdridge's testimony, three are in past tense and three are prospective. In August 2020 remarks, Stilwell stated that the Six Assurances "endure today."

The Six Assurances in U.S. Legislation

Congress has passed four laws and several resolutions referencing the Six Assurances. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2020 (P.L. 116-92) and The John S. McCain NDAA for FY2019 (P.L. 115-232) each state that it is the sense of Congress that the TRA and the Six Assurances "are both cornerstones" of U.S.-Taiwan relations. The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-409) states that it is U.S. policy to enforce existing U.S. government commitments to Taiwan, "consistent with the [TRA], the 3 joint communiqués, and the Six Assurances." The NDAA for FY2018 (P.L. 115-91) states that it is U.S. policy "to reinforce its commitments to Taiwan under the [TRA] and consistent with the 'Six Assurances.'"

The House-passed NDAA for FY2021 (H.R. 6395) would state that it is the sense of Congress that the TRA and the Six Assurances "are both cornerstones" of U.S.-Taiwan relations. The Senate-passed NDAA for FY2021 (S. 4049)

would state that it is U.S. policy that the TRA and the Six Assurances “are the foundation for” U.S.-Taiwan relations.

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