

Turning Away: The Clinton Administration's Taiwan Policy

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U.S. President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China initiated a series of changes in relationship between the United States, China and Taiwan. By 1979, the United States had completed a policy shift that transferred U.S. diplomatic recognition from Taiwan, a traditional American ally, to China, a communist nation useful in containing the Soviet Union. Presidents Nixon and Carter justified this move by arguing that Taiwan's authoritarian government was not particularly attractive to the United States and that America, even without recognizing Taiwan, could provide adequate security guarantees to the island.^[1]

By 1993 however, the situation had changed. China's leaders, in the years following Operation Desert Storm, began an era of rapid military expansion and modernization, and U.S. defense experts began to speculate whether or not the United States was giving Taiwan adequate diplomatic and military support.^[2] Taiwan's government, in an extended process of liberalization, further complicated the issue for U.S. policy makers. By 1996, Taiwan had produced a full-fledged democracy, confusing American foreign policy priorities and making past U.S. policies more difficult to employ.^[3] Despite these developments, U.S. President Bill Clinton, recognizing America's long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity^[4] toward Taiwan, emphasized peaceful relations between mainland China and Taiwan and chose not to deal with Taiwan's growing diplomatic and military problems. Such a stance implied an endorsement of the Chinese position. Most importantly, in the aftermath of the dramatic 1996 showdown between China and the United States in the Taiwan strait, the Clinton administration appeared prepared to provide diplomatic cover for the Chinese position on the Taiwan question and therefore marginalized Taiwan's

democracy. By the end of the Clinton administration, protection of that democratic regime had become less important than keeping the leaders of mainland China satisfied that the United States would not offer overt support to the Taiwanese government.

In 1993, the Clinton administration was faced with a decision: would it maintain the status quo's strategic ambiguity and pretend to have no opinion on any of the developments between Taiwan and China, or would it begin to express some preference for the emerging democracy on the island trying to escape the long shadow of the mainland? Adhering strictly to a principle of peaceful resolution, the Clinton administration began its eight years in office hoping to continue the stable status quo enjoyed by the previous two presidents. By the end of Clinton's first term, however, it was clear that China and Taiwan no longer fit into the old policy framework.

Clinton's Foreign Policy Grand Strategy

Taipei might have been inspired by the rhetoric that initially came from the Clinton foreign policy team. In September 1993, Clinton and his assistant for national security affairs Anthony Lake used two separate speeches to outline the new president's foreign policy strategy. The new speeches were particularly important because they outlined the foreign policy priorities of the first administration to be in office entirely outside of the Cold War. President Clinton, recognizing this fact when he addressed the United Nations General Assembly on September 27, pledged to the world that America would not cease to be a force for democratic change in the post-Cold War environment.

In a new era of peril and opportunity, our overriding concern must be to expand and strengthen the world's community of market-based democracies. During the Cold War, we sought to contain a threat to survival of free institutions. Now we seek to enlarge the circle of nations that live under those free institutions, for our dream is of a day when the opinions and energies of every person in the world will be given full expression in a world of thriving democracies that cooperate with each other and live in peace. [5]

Six days earlier, Lake had outlined the foundation of Clinton's foreign policy strategy in an address to the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Lake discussed changing American foreign policy strategy from one that contained threats to democratic governments to one that enlarged the world's community of democratic regimes. Lake offered four specific components to this strategy.

First, we should strengthen the community of major market democracies – including our own – which constitutes the core from which enlargement is proceeding. Second, we should help foster and consolidate new democracies and market economies, where possible, especially in states of special significance and opportunity. Third, we must counter the aggression – and support the liberalization – of states hostile to democracy and markets. Fourth, we need to pursue our humanitarian agenda not only by providing aid but also by working to help democracy and market economies take root in regions of greatest humanitarian concern.^[6]

Together, the statements by Clinton and Lake indicated an American willingness to affirm democracy from one corner of the globe to another.

These ambitious statements from Clinton and Lake came in contrast to a small foreign policy budget which suggested that the United States was preparing to pull itself back from the front of the world stage. According to some analysts, such a retreat entailed “defending fewer countries, doling out less foreign assistance and focusing more on consolidating national power than on shaping the international environment.”^[7] In short, Taiwan, unable to rely on speeches and soundbites, would have to wait for concrete signs of support from the Clinton administration.

Early Clinton Policies

During the presidential campaign, Clinton had taken a strong stand against mainland China – another encouraging sign for Taipei. Despite Bush’s 1992 sale of F-16 fighters to Taiwan, then Governor Clinton criticized Bush for “coddling” China, especially in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident, and pledged to hold Beijing to a higher standard in his administration. However, Clinton administration officials quickly concluded, as had earlier Bush administration officials, that engaging China was preferable to a policy of isolation. Consequently, in May of 1994, Clinton delinked human rights from Most Favored Nations trading status with China, bringing his own policy in line with the previous administration’s heavily criticized Chinese policy. This continued engagement pleased China but did little to solve specific problems, including the Taiwan issue. Indeed, the Clinton administration quickly adopted the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations with regard to Taiwan, but the changing situation across the strait made those same policies much more difficult to maintain.^[8] Congress, on the other hand, did not allow the Taiwan issue to be subordinated to other Sino-American concerns. Many members of Congress and the general public believed that U.S. policy was long out of date.^[9]

The Taiwan Policy Review

In 1994, in an effort to update American policy toward Taiwan, Congress mandated that the administration conduct what became known as the Taiwan Policy Review. Winston Lord, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, explained the results of this process to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Lord testified that the United States needed a balanced relationship with both China and Taiwan and argued for continuity in a policy pursued by several successive administrations. Lord outlined the changes in U.S. policy that resulted in the Review, which included the ability “to send high level officials from U.S. economic and technical agencies to visit Taiwan,” and the establishment of an economic dialogue with Taiwan. The name of Taiwan’s office in Washington DC was also changed as a result of the review.^[10]

But, while Lord contended that the changes were significant, few observers thought the Review made any fundamental changes in American policy. China characteristically protested the move as a U.S. step toward Taiwan, but did so in a notably quiet fashion. For its part, Taiwan voiced disappointment that the changes did not go far enough to address what it viewed as problems in the relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan.^[11] Business leaders in the United States who recognized the economic potential of Taiwan’s economy in East Asia were displeased with the policy review, as were a collection of lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Democratic Senator Paul Simon, an ally of Taiwan, decried Clinton’s policy conclusions, saying that the administration had missed an important opportunity to revise long out-dated policies.^[12] James Lilley, former U.S. Ambassador to China, effectively voiced his displeasure in a statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when he said:

Unfortunately for Taiwan – a country that has made significant progress in its democratization and economic development within the world community – U.S. policy has not changed under President Clinton, whereas under President Carter, Reagan and Bush, significant progress was made. In my opinion, the recent U.S. policy adjustments toward Taiwan do not change our relations except for a minor name change. In fact, I would even say that, in some respects, it is a step backwards – indicating that some people, as far as democracy is concerned, are more equal than others, to paraphrase George Orwell.^[13]

In short, the Clinton administration chose not to establish a new policy framework that reflected the new realities of Taiwanese democracy and Chinese hegemony across the Taiwan strait. In fairness to Clinton’s policymakers, Taiwan had not yet completed its democratic transition and the

full extent of China's military expansion and the resulting security implications for Taiwan were not yet readily apparent.

However, there were indications that the Clinton administration was changing Taiwan policy outside the scope of the policy review, and these changes appeared to have a negative long-term impact on the interests of Taiwan. Clinton was reportedly prepared to engage in negotiations with Beijing prior to arms sales to Taiwan, especially the pending sale of F-16s. He apparently also personally informed Chinese President Jiang that the U.S. was committed to a unified China, marking the first time the United States had departed from its "peaceful resolution" strategy and specified an outcome to the ongoing process of resolving the issue.^[14]

Most significant, however, was a brief statement given by State Department spokesman Mike McCurry at a press conference immediately following the release of the results of the Taiwan Policy Review in September of 1994. When asked if the administration considered Taiwan a part of China, McCurry responded, "[a]bsolutely. It's -- that's been a consistent feature of our one-China policy, consistent with the three China communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act."^[15] McCurry's statement clearly contradicted the texts of the three Chinese communiqués which indicated that since the Nixon administration, the United States had only "acknowledged" that the government in Beijing believed Taiwan was a part of China. Though White House officials quickly moved to clarify McCurry's statement^[16], reports indicated that his remarks had been designed to soothe Beijing after Taiwan's President Lee visited Cornell University – an event discussed in great detail below.^[17]

In Clinton's defense, the situation across the Taiwan strait in the early 1990s was much more stable than it is at the dawn of the 21st century. Beginning in 1993, officials from China and Taiwan engaged in their first ever high-level talks. Leaders of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits, a Chinese organization, and the Straits Exchange Foundation, a Taiwanese organization, discussed several non-political bilateral issues and established a framework for future cross-strait discussions. While the talks did not resolve any of the issues regarding Taiwan's political status, the dialogue was historic and gave the appearance of a new era of reduced tension across the strait.^[18] In this light, the Clinton administration may have been hesitant to make any

major adjustments in U.S. policy in the congressionally mandated Taiwan Policy Review. Nevertheless, the trends of Taiwanese democratization and Chinese militarization suggested that the situation required continued attention from the United States. Even if the Clinton administration felt that the Taiwan Policy Review was not the appropriate vehicle for a policy shift, any assumption that China and Taiwan were headed for a truly peaceful and less contentious relationship was short-sighted.^[19]

The 1996 Crisis in the Strait

Clinton's failure to reassess the triangular relationship between the United States, China and Taiwan resulted in four major controversies over the course of the last five years of his administration. The first and most dramatic of those controversies began in early 1995 and culminated with the widely-publicized 1996 Chinese missile tests.

In May of 1994, coinciding with the delinking of MFN trading status with human rights, the Clinton administration denied Taiwanese President Lee a transit visa that would have allowed him to get off of his plane and spend an evening in a Hawaii hotel while en route to Central America. Supporters of Taiwan were outraged when Lee had to spend the night on his plane and subsequent pressure applied to the Clinton administration by Congress forced the adjustments that appeared in the Taiwan Policy Review.

Chinese officials interpreted that review as the result of an emerging anti-China containment policy from the United States. In truth, the Clinton administration had raised objections to even small upgrades in Taiwanese relations but was forced into accepting Congressional demands because of the domestic political climate. Fearing Chinese wrath, the administration sent Deputy Secretary of State Peter Tarnoff to Beijing to explain that the review had not changed fundamental U.S. policy. China remained unconvinced.^[20]

Congress – disappointed by the limited nature of the policy review, but emboldened by its successful influence on Clinton's foreign policy strategy – had a strong reaction when in the Clinton administration initially denied Lee another visa in early 1995. Lee had been invited to speak at commencement exercises at his alma mater, Cornell University. Building on past

successes in influencing Clinton's policy toward China and Taiwan, on May 2, 1995 the U.S. House of Representatives voted 396-0 to give Lee a visa. Twenty days later, the Clinton administration capitulated, reversed course, and gave Lee the visa he had requested. The Chinese believed that decision contravened State Department statements that top leaders from Taiwan would not be allowed to visit the United States. The mainland was infuriated.^[21]

The Clinton administration quietly undertook several steps to cool mainland anger. First, the United States did not immediately react to China's July 1995 missile tests in the waters north of Taiwan. The Chinese believed that U.S. silence was an indication that America would not be likely to intervene in a cross-strait conflict. Second, in high level talks in August, Secretary of State Warren Christopher explained to his Chinese counterpart that the Lee visit had been a "special situation and a courtesy." Third, in a letter not yet public in the United States, Clinton wrote Chinese President Jiang that "the U.S. government is against Taiwan independence and does not support Taiwan's admission to the United Nations." Both of these pronouncements represented new ground in U.S.-Taiwan policy. Additionally, Clinton did not mention the U.S. commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, even after the recent missile tests.^[22]

Thus, the Clinton administration, forced to make concessions to the U.S. Congress on Taiwan policy, went out of its way to appease China in the aftermath of the Taiwan Policy Review and the decision to allow President Lee into the U.S. The Chinese, sensing that the United States was not willing to take military action in the Taiwan strait, prepared for a new round of missile tests to coincide with Taiwan's historic 1996 presidential election. In January 1996, China warned the Clinton administration that it had plans to attack Taiwan, but Clinton administration officials brushed aside the Chinese warnings as mere rhetoric designed to scare Taiwan's people before they went to the polls for the election. One unnamed official reportedly said there was "no independent confirmation or even credible evidence" of a possible attack by the Chinese on Taiwan.^[23] Nevertheless, prior to the March 23 vote, China fired several missiles into the waters around the island of Taiwan, illustrating its opposition to the process of democracy and the possibility of a Taiwanese declaration of independence. The U.S. responded by dispatching two U.S. carrier groups to the region as an illustration of its displeasure with China's attempt at intimidation. The administration recognized that while it did not wish to risk a full scale conflict, it had to

demonstrate a continuing U.S. presence in Asia.^[24] In retrospect, this show of force seems even more important in light of later reports that China was very close to launching a full-scale invasion of Taiwan that was prevented by only the highest echelons of the Chinese military establishment.^[25]

Both China and the United States eventually backed down from the crisis. Taiwan went forward with its democratic elections, China ceased firing missiles and the U.S. withdrew its two carriers from the area. President Clinton, speaking on the USS Independence as it withdrew from the Taiwan area, praised the American forces for their work and spoke of their ability to keep the peace. Notably, Clinton did not discuss a successful defense of the Taiwanese democracy.^[26] Clinton appeared more concerned with the prevention of military hostilities in the region and did not herald the symbolic support of democracy in the region.

In fact, though the world admired the U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security, reports later surfaced that showed at the height of the crisis, the United States was counselling Taiwan to back off from its independence rhetoric. "On March 11, 1996, [deputy National Security Advisor Sandy] Berger and Undersecretary of State Peter Tarnoff summoned Taiwan's national security advisor, Ting Mou Shih, to a New York hotel. They told Ting to cool Taiwan's independence drive because U.S. military support was not going to be a blank check."^[27]

Policy Implications of the 1996 Crisis

Prior to the missile tests in 1996, American officials had been skeptical that China would even come close to using force as a means to intimidate Taiwan's electorate. After 1996, the threat to Taiwan's democracy, even if thought to be remote, became tangible. Analysts have concluded that time will eventually tip the military balance between China and Taiwan toward the mainland. In the meantime, China is likely to maximize its diplomatic and political leverage over the situation so that Taiwan does not slip from its grasp. An American policy focused primarily on a peaceful resolution facilitates Chinese objectives. Since Taiwan is unable to bring force to bear against the mainland, without a strong American deterrent, the only sure way to avoid conflict in the region is for Taiwan to capitulate in the face of pressure from Beijing.

Despite this strategic reality, an analysis of the Sino-American relationship during the final nine months of 1996 indicates a surprisingly quick warming of Sino-American relations after the dramatic military showdown in the strait. Immediately following the election crisis, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake began having regular lunches with independent Chinese scholars, seeking to better understand Chinese foreign policies, and signaling a new interest in closely managing China policy from the White House.^[28] In fact, after losing the battle with Congress over President Lee's visa, and miscalculating the potential for aggressive mainland behavior at the time of the elections, by mid-1996, the Clinton administration was desperately seeking a measure of credibility for its China policy.^[29] That credibility emerged after Lake made use of a new diplomatic channel with his counterpart in Beijing, a channel that "became the primary vehicle for reshaping the relationship," and brought a "big picture" focus back to U.S. China policy.^[30] That big picture focus included a meetings between Clinton and Chinese President Jiang in November at the annual APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) gathering and between Clinton and China's State Council Foreign Affairs Office Director, in which the president related his desire for a Sino-American "partnership."^[31]

A flurry of activity in December appeared to be the beginning of that new partnership. Secretary of State Warren Christopher went to China with new human rights proposals in November of 1996. Though those proposals were not well received^[32], a series of events evidenced the new emphasis on Sino-American cooperation. On December 10, the head of the U.S. Small Business Administration, Philip Lader, headed to Taiwan to express the administration's wishes for the resumption of cross-strait dialogue.^[33] Three days later, an article in The Christian Science Monitor called the visit of General Chi Haotian, China's top military commander, to Washington DC "the best example yet of President Clinton's shift to smoother ties with Asia's emerging giant."^[34]

Yet this visit from General Chi had its share of controversy. On December 10, the same day that the administration encouraged a new cross-strait dialogue, and days before the Clinton foreign policy team heralded the new Sino-American military cooperation, General Chi told members of Congress that "not a single person lost his life in Tiananmen Square." Considering that

Chi was chief of the general staff during the 1989 massacre, and therefore directly responsible for the deaths of scores of student demonstrators, the fabrication was appalling.^[35] Such a statement, however, was not allowed to derail the general's visit or the new era of friendly relations.

The Chinese were pleased with the new, less confrontational tone of their American relationship. Foreign ministry spokesman Shen Guofang noted on December 19 that "Sino-US relations have experienced quite large improvements and developments."^[36] Government officials across the strait in Taipei did not share this optimistic appraisal. By the end of December, newly elected President Lee had lost much of the optimism he had held at the beginning of the year, as Taiwan became concerned that improving Sino-American ties would ultimately hurt the island.^[37]

Studies indicated that the Taiwanese fears were not unfounded. Taiwan's democratic success had not come without a price. One scholar concluded that

[d]espite democratization, Taiwan may become the victim of its own success by engendering a domestic American backlash against its alleged purchase of American support; that China's rapidly growing power will increasingly give pause to American buttressing of Taiwan except under conditions increasingly narrowly defined; that Washington can no longer afford to be Taipei's lone security guarantor; and that the American interest – while certainly supportive of democracy on and free trade with the island – is to get beyond the Taiwan problem and thus to persuade Taipei to make whatever viable settlement it can with Beijing sooner rather than later.^[38]

Taiwan's leaders saw the writing on the wall. While it would be unfair to suggest that Sino-American relations did not undergo various difficult phases over the remainder of Clinton's administration – several issues ranging from trade to human rights, and particularly nuclear secrets all caused major headaches for Clinton's foreign policy team – the rapprochement at the end of 1996 indicated that Clinton's support for Taiwan had reached a zenith in March that would never again be reached. "The 'bottom line' was that Washington and Beijing would no longer allow Taiwan to interfere unduly in the joint effort to resolve their differences and develop a new relationship. And Taiwan would find its panoply of tools, hitherto so successful in configuring American policy, to be little if any use."^[39]

Articulating the Three No's

After 1996, there would be no more military exercises to intimidate the people of Taiwan, but the debate over Taiwan's status would continue. The second major controversy to erupt on Clinton's watch came as a result of the extensive contacts between the governments of China and the United States during Clinton's second term. Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the United States in 1997 and Clinton made a reciprocal visit to mainland China in 1998. The two summits covered a lot of diplomatic territory, and statements about Taiwan were inevitable. Jiang's visit to the United States was a concrete signal of a new era of Sino-American cooperation on the Taiwan question.

After Jiang's departure, U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin, publicly articulated the so-called "three-no's" of the Sino-American relationship – echoing President Clinton's 1995 letter to President Jiang cited above. The United States, according to Rubin, did not "support a two-China policy, we don't support Taiwan independence, and we don't support membership in organizations that require you to be a member state."^[40] These same assurances had been communicated privately by Henry Kissinger, among others, as far back as 1972. However, Rubin's news conference marked the first time a U.S. official had reiterated these promises publicly, elevating their status to the level of actual U.S. policy, rather than just underlying assumptions.

Taiwan's perception of the United States security commitment was already deteriorating. Even before Bill Clinton reciprocated President Jiang's November 1997 visit in the summer of 1998, reports were giving insight into the worried thoughts of Taiwan's officials. One of these reports, for example, said:

Some officials in Taiwan worry that the Clinton administration is being pushed to narrow Taiwan's options. They fear that proposals now coming from China specialists, and some former Clinton administration officials, call for the U.S. to formally agree that Taiwan should not be independent – something which the U.S. has avoided in the past. . . While there are those in Taipei who are resigned to such strategies, others see them as a real and present danger. "So many China experts are impatient about the situation between Beijing and Taipei," says national security specialist Lin Cheng-yi at the Academia Sinica. "I'm concerned that there is a creeping U.S. policy to endorse China's unification as the only option for the future of Taiwan."^[41]

Taiwan's increasing fears of a drift in U.S. policy were surely not assuaged by developments a few months later. While Rubin's statements regarding the three no's did not

receive much publicity, President Clinton's trip to China the following year would receive a lot of attention around the world. Clinton repeated Rubin's lines as he spoke with a group of Chinese students about his meetings with Chinese President Jiang Zemin. "I had a chance to reiterate our Taiwan policy," he said, "which is that we don't support independence for Taiwan or 'two Chinas' or 'one Taiwan, one China.' And we don't believe that Taiwan should be a member in any organization for which statehood is a requirement."^[42] Clinton thus became the first president to ever articulate the three no's of U.S. Taiwan policy out loud – and he did so on Chinese soil.

American supporters of Taiwan were dumfounded. Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (MS), said that Clinton had damaged U.S. policy and argued that the time had come for Congress to step in and make adjustments.^[43] Harvey Feldman, former alternate U.N. Ambassador, wrote in The Washington Post that "Clinton essentially offers Taiwan a choice between continued status as an international pariah or amalgamation in one form or other with China."^[44] In short, the groundwork quietly laid by James Rubin in 1997 had allowed Clinton to characterize American policy toward Taiwan in an historically unprecedented fashion. No president had ever dared to articulate publically what Clinton said in front of the world in Shanghai in 1998.

Clinton administration officials, particularly in light of such strong reaction to the president's statements, were quick to defend the articulation of the three no's. Richard Bush, leader of the American Institute on Taiwan (AIT) for President Clinton, in seeking to prove that Clinton did not change U.S. policy when he articulated the three no's, gave a three part defense of Clinton's statement at a conference on Taiwan in December of 1998.

Bush first argued that Clinton's comments were "by no means new. These statements are in fact corollaries of our one-China policy, and have been operative for years, the first two since 1971."^[45] In the strictest sense, this is an accurate assertion. The United States has never advocated two Chinas, one Taiwan/one China, Taiwanese independence, or Taiwanese membership in organizations that require statehood since Nixon and Carter changed U.S. policy in the region. Nevertheless, any statement of a specific policy destroys the ambiguity supposedly central to keeping the peace. While the U.S. might prefer that Taiwan were free and independent, it avoids

making those statements to prevent a confrontation with the PRC. By openly declaring that the U.S. does not want an independent Taiwan, Clinton brought Washington in line with Beijing. Clinton may have perfectly articulated the reality of U.S. policy, but in so doing, undermined the theoretical framework on which that reality was to be based. Once Clinton eliminated the possibility of two China's or one China/one Taiwan, he, by process of elimination, said that the U.S. version of "one-China" was Beijing's version, and subordinated Taiwan's interests to that end. [46]

Additionally, as Los Angeles Times reporter Jim Mann pointed out, Clinton's statement was not the same policy that Nixon had developed in 1972. Nixon found it necessary to keep the United States silent on Taiwan's status because Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong claimed they ruled both the mainland and the island. Put simply, in the 1970s, Taiwan had as much of a "one-China" policy as mainland China did. By the time of the Clinton administration, however, Taiwan had relinquished its claim on all of China, meaning that Clinton's words, stronger than anything said by Nixon, pushed Taiwan toward an outcome that they no longer desired. [47]

Secondly, the leader of the AIT contended that there was more to U.S. policy than just the three no's. "Together," Bush remarked, "[the three no's] are one of several elements of our Taiwan policy; among the others are the Taiwan Relations Act, the insistence on peaceful resolution, and so on." [48] Bush is correct in listing the aspects of U.S. policy that support the island of Taiwan, but in so doing, further highlights President Clinton's failure to articulate America's stance correctly. Clinton's statement repeated, almost verbatim, the Chinese position on the Taiwan question. If Clinton had proceeded to discuss America's commitment to the Taiwan Relations Act while on Chinese soil, he would have given a balanced impression to his Chinese hosts – the essence of strategic ambiguity. Instead, Clinton failed to say why the United States remains a neutral player, and strongly implied American support for the Chinese position.

Third, Bush took issue with the concept of a zero-sum game in the Taiwan strait saying, "the Clinton Administration, like its predecessors, does not believe that our relations with Taipei and Beijing are a zero-sum game. The historical record suggests that when U.S.-PRC relations are good, cross-Strait relations and U.S. ties with Taiwan are good as well." [49] Bush's third argument

contends not only that Clinton did not change policy toward Taiwan, but comes close to implying that Clinton's statement of the three no's was actually good for Taiwan. Taiwan might disagree with Bush's third point for three reasons.

First, Bush said that since Taiwan has great confidence in the United States, its government trusts the U.S. to negotiate with mainland China without turning its back on Taiwan. However, Taiwan trusts the U.S. only because it is dependent on the United States for its security. [50] Unless Congress specifically repeals the Taiwan Relations Act, Taipei has little choice but to place confidence in the United States because the U.S. provides the only long term security guarantee for Taiwan. Instead, it is more likely that a cool U.S. attitude toward Taiwan would compel the Taiwanese government to negotiate with Beijing from a subordinate position since it would no longer be able to defy the mainland's wishes with any degree of credibility. [51] Further, Taiwan was so worried that American support might diminish during Clinton's visit to China that they set up a special situation room to monitor any developments during Clinton's tour of the mainland. Hours before Clinton articulated the three no's, the Taiwanese were reassured by a statement from President Clinton that there would be no change in American policy toward Taiwan during his trip. [52] At least in this instance, Clinton undermined the very trust that Richard Bush spoke of when he defended Clinton's actions.

Second, Bush's negation of the zero-sum game concept relies on an incomplete reading of the historical record. History suggests the times at which the Sino-American relationship were at their worst are precisely the same times the U.S. relationship with Taiwan flourished. Both in 1989, during the Tiananmen Square massacre, and in 1996, when China was firing missiles toward Taiwan, the Sino-American relationship was in tatters, yet American support for Taiwan could hardly have been more pronounced. Conflicts between the U.S. and the mainland do not mean the island will suffer and warmer Sino-American relations do not necessarily bode well for the island's future. One Taiwanese official told author Dennis Van Vranken Hickey about Taiwan's hopes for the U.S.-Chinese relationship by saying, "From our point of view, we hope that the U.S. and the PRC relations will be stable. Stable, but not necessarily good. Good relations will hurt us too – we will be sacrificed again. But stable relations, within a range without big vibrations, would serve our interests." Though Taiwanese authorities do not have any desire to exacerbate other strains in

the Sino-American relationship, they clearly do not believe that an America that is on good terms with the Chinese, particularly on the Taiwan question, will be beneficial to Taiwan.^[53]

Third, history has proven that Taiwan did lose diplomatic ground after Clinton's articulation of the three no's, invalidating Bush's idea that there is no zero-sum element in the triangular relationship between the United States, China and Taiwan. The U.S. did not support Taiwanese President Lee Teng-Hui in the summer of 1999, when he came close to declaring that Taiwan was a state just like China (discussed in greater detail below) and the U.S. gave only tentative support to arms sales to Taiwan under President Clinton. These examples suggest that Taiwan cannot realistically expect concrete American support if Clinton's policy is to be extended into the future precisely because of a closer alignment between China and the United States on the Taiwan question.

Clearly, there are ways for the United States to improve its ties with the mainland without sacrificing the island. However, Bush's defense of Clinton's statement mis-characterized the issue. Since China and Taiwan hold opposite and mutually exclusive views of the future of the island, there is currently no way that the U.S. can improve its relationship with Beijing *on the specific subject of Taiwan* without also diminishing its relationship with Taipei.

In any case, despite media reports that President Clinton's articulation of the three no's in 1998 was a new development, comments by Mike McCurry in 1995 and James Rubin in 1997 suggest that Clinton's statement should not have been a surprise. Instead, Clinton's words in Shanghai were the culmination of several intermediate steps to make the three no's an integral part of American policy toward Taiwan – a change in the nature of strategic ambiguity, despite the protestations of Clinton apologists.

A State to State Relationship?

The third controversy over U.S. policy on the Taiwan question during the Clinton administration came in the summer of 1999 and started in Taipei. This controversy was not initiated by Clinton administration officials and those officials could not have prevented it, yet their

reaction provides evidence American diplomatic policy on the Taiwan question has tilted toward mainland China.

Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui decided that negotiations between the mainland and Taiwan over Taiwan's status could no longer be conducted under the framework of "one-China." President Lee contended that the regime in Beijing was using the concept of one-China to put Taiwan in a diplomatic box. The only alternative, he said, was to conduct negotiations on a special "state-to-state" basis. Only in that framework, Lee contended, could the interests of the people of Taiwan survive in the face of the powerful Chinese negotiators. Predictably, Beijing interpreted this move as a big step toward a declaration of independence.^[54] Days later, the United States loudly voiced its displeasure with President Lee's statement. State Department spokesman Rubin once again reviewed the three no's of U.S. policy, and stressed that U.S. policy on the Taiwan question remained unchanged, despite Lee's new rhetoric. The United States flatly refused to take any step toward what it perceived as a two-China policy. Further, Rubin criticized the rhetoric from Taiwan because it made it more difficult for the two sides to sit down and discuss their differences.^[55]

Though there was no pending Taiwanese election, China again – although less dramatically than in 1996 – used its military to send a political message to Taiwan. As large scale military exercises were getting underway, President Clinton called Chinese President Jiang Zemin to express continued American commitment to the concept of "one-China." Clinton reportedly told Jiang that "you should have full confidence in the statements I have made to you in our previous meetings." Jiang was much less conciliatory, reminding Clinton that China would not abandon the use of force as an option to resolve the issue.^[56] Again, the United States adopted a diplomatic position that cooperated with the only party that could realistically initiate force across the Taiwan strait. The United States did not acknowledge Taiwan's precarious diplomatic position and did not ask that Beijing concede any diplomatic ground in its negotiations with Taipei.

Taiwanese sympathizers in the U.S. were angered by the Clinton administration's actions. Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, almost immediately voiced his displeasure with the Clinton administration's unambiguous rebuke of President Lee.

Helms referred to the Clinton administration's statements as appeasement toward Beijing and publicly called for an end to the U.S. one-China policy.^[57]

The Taiwan Security Enhancement Act

In an effort to circumvent the Clinton administration's moves toward mainland China, Taiwan's supporters on Capitol Hill drafted a bill known as the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act (TSEA), which formed the fourth and final controversy over Taiwan policy of the Clinton administration. The legislation was designed to increase the military ties between the United States and Taiwan, authorizing the sale of theater missile defense equipment, satellite early warning data, air-to-air missiles, advanced fighters, and other military equipment.^[58]

Congress and the Clinton administration had divergent views on the TSEA. State Department spokesman Rubin referred to the set of communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act as adequate expressions of U.S. policy that did not require reinforcement in the form of additional Congressional legislation.^[59] By contrast, House International Relations Committee Chairman Benjamin Gilman (R-NY) said that the U.S. House was not intimidated by Beijing and that, "a failure to meet Taiwan's legitimate military needs will make China's military domination of the Taiwan straits a reality." Administration officials countered that the legislation would destabilize the region. An unnamed State Department official told The Washington Post that the TSEA would "prompt a strong reaction from Beijing and throw all positive opportunities down the drain." The official went on to say that the legislation would threaten the opportunity for cross-strait negotiations in the future.^[60] Though the U.S. House passed the TSEA in February of 2000 by a wide margin, the U.S. Senate did not act on the legislation because support was not strong enough to override a presidential veto.

The contrast between the executive and legislative branches is striking. Congress intended to take concrete steps to assist Taiwan in maintaining its security. The administration contended (albeit in diplomatic rhetoric) that Congress was making a mistake and that the effect of such steps to protect Taiwan would be to anger Beijing and should therefore not be taken lightly. Such a contention from the administration tended to minimize the extent of the differences between the Chinese and the Taiwanese views of the reunification issue. While the administration

contended that each side could sit down and negotiate the fate of Taiwan, it did not publicly acknowledge that China and Taiwan hold diametrically opposed positions. The United States has traditionally held to an ambiguous position on the Taiwan question, but the Clinton administration failed to recognize the clarity with which China has articulated its own strategy. The PRC appears to believe that unless Taiwan is willing to reunify with the mainland on terms that are more or less favorable to China, time will eventually require a use of force to bring about reunification. Taiwan, for its part, refuses to take any steps that would sacrifice the gains made by its democracy in the last two decades. The Clinton administration hoped to smooth over the rough edges of the debate across the strait, but in so doing, failed to address the reality of the situation: peaceful resolution currently appears likely to occur on Chinese terms, making reunification a disaster for Taiwan.^[61]

Conclusions

The Clinton administration started with every intention of being tough on mainland China, but quickly recognized that the United States needed a close relationship with China. Efforts to avoid angering China resulted in a benign review of American Taiwan policy. Just as the Clinton administration was moving toward an endorsement of China's position on the Taiwan question, the strait nearly exploded in a storm of Chinese missiles. After a strong U.S. military response, China learned that until it could bring more military pressure to bear on Taiwan, it had to resort to diplomatic pressure – both on Taiwan and on the United States – to keep Taiwan from slipping away.

But, the Clinton administration appeared more than happy to yield to that diplomatic pressure in the years following the 1996 crisis. Sino-American relations improved with surprising speed after the 1996 standoff. The Clinton administration's controversial statements about the one-China policy in 1998 and its negative reaction to President Lee's state-to-state comments in 1999 both suggested that China was welcome to reunify with Taiwan on its own terms, as long as force was not involved. This suggestion was further confirmed by the administration's strong opposition to the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act. The Clinton administration's strategy preached the values of peaceful resolution, left little room for Taiwan's voice in the discussion of potential

settlements, and ultimately subordinated the Taiwan issue to other priorities in the Sino-American relationship.

Considering the rapidity with which China is currently modernizing its military forces, the Clinton administration's failure to refashion the nature of strategic ambiguity amounts to a tilt in diplomatic posture toward the Chinese communists. Two analysts, James Przystup and Robert Manning, writing in National Review, succinctly evaluated the American position on Taiwan following Clinton's various policy pronouncements:

So, where does this leave the United States? If there is a lesson, it is that no matter how hard the Clintonites try to force events into it, the old policy framework under which all three sides of the triangle have prospered for a generation is no longer adequate. It requires adjustment to account for the views of Taiwan's 22 million citizens, most of whom support Lee. Otherwise, the Clinton administration – which claims that the enlargement of democracy is a pillar of its national security strategy – will be in the odd position of attempting to contain the results of democracy out of excessive deference to the decidedly undemocratic government in Beijing.^[62]

Unfortunately for Taiwan, Przystup and Manning were quite accurate. The Clinton administration concluded with, at best, a diplomatic stalemate across the Taiwan strait, and at worst, an ever deteriorating state of diplomatic affairs for officials in Taipei. Clearly, Taiwan's democracy could not afford the latter. Only China could afford the former.

Notes

- [1] This paper is an adaptation of the author's unpublished 2001 thesis at Eureka College. Chapter One of that document discusses the shift in U.S. policy toward China in detail. For further analysis, see also, for example, James Mann's *About Face* (New York: Vintage, 2000).
- [2] Chapter Three of the author's thesis discusses the military modernization effort in great detail. For further information, both on the modernization effort, and the revolution in Chinese military doctrine, see, for example, Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis in *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000).
- [3] Chapter Two of the author's thesis evaluates Taiwan's transition to democracy using standards developed by Robert Dahl in *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). Taiwan's democratic transition is described in detail by Shelley Rigger in *Voting for democracy* (New York: Routledge, 1999). The completion of that transition is best

described by Hung-Mao Tien and Yun-han Chu in “Building Democracy in Taiwan,” *The China Quarterly* (December 1996) 1141-1170.

- [4] Strategic ambiguity is a term that describes the policy employed by the United States for the last two decades. Under strategic ambiguity, the United States does not officially endorse the Chinese view that Taiwan is a part of China, but also does not support Taiwanese independence. American military commitments are also ambiguous. While the United States reserves the right to intervene if force were used in the Taiwan strait, it is not obligated by any treaty or legal statute to undertake such action.
- [5] Bill Clinton, “Confronting the Challenges Of a Broader World,” *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, (27 September 1993): 650.
- [6] Anthony Lake, “From Containment to Enlargement,” *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, (21 September 1993), 660. For a broader treatment of early Clinton administration foreign policy speeches, see Martin Lasater’s *The Changing of the Guard: President Clinton and the Security of Taiwan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 17-35.
- [7] Alan Tonelson, “Superpower Without a Sword,” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993): 166.
- [8] Martin Lasater, *The Changing of the Guard: President Clinton and the Security of Taiwan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 69-71 and 128-129.
- [9] John W. Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan’s Democratization* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 37-39.
- [10] Winston Lord, “Taiwan Policy Review. Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington DC, September 27, 1994,” *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, (17 October 1994): 705-706.
- [11] Jim Mann, “U.S. Slightly Elevates Ties with Taiwan,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 1994.
- [12] Dick Kirschten, “The Other China,” *The National Journal*, 8 October 1994.
- [13] James Lilley, “Prepared Testimony of Ambassador James R. Lilley,” *Federal News Service*, 27 September 1994.
- [14] Lasater, *The Changing of the Guard*, 149-151.
- [15] Mike McCurry, “State Department Regular Briefing,” *Federal News Service*, 8 September 1994.
- [16] Dennis Van Vranken Hickey, *Taiwan’s Security in the Changing International System*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 144.

- [17] Paul F. Horvitz, "U.S. Restates 'One-China' Policy to Placate Beijing," *International Herald Tribune*, 14 July 1995.
- [18] Lasater, *The Changing of the Guard*, 104-105.
- [19] This analysis is bolstered by the comments of Dennis Van Vranken Hickey in his 1997 book *Taiwan's Security in the Changing International System* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, ???), 9-10. Even then, Hickey warned that the impact of the cross-strait dialogue and the resulting cultural exchanges should not be exaggerated.
- [20] Garver, *Face Off*, 37-41.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 67-69.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 74-81
- [23] Patrick E. Tyler, "As China Threatens Taiwan, It Makes Sure U.S. Listens," *New York Times*, 24 Jan 1996.
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- [27] Barton Gellman, "Reappraisal Led to New China Policy; Skeptics Abound, but U.S. 'Strategic Partnership' Yielding Results," *Washington Post*, 22 June 1998.
- [28] Steve Erlanger and David E. Sanger, "On World Stage, Many Lessons for Clinton," *New York Times*, 28 July 1996.
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- [30] Barton Gellman, "Reappraisal led to New China Policy; Skeptics Abound, but U.S. 'Strategic Partnership' Yielding Results," *Washington Post*, 22 June 1998.
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- [32] Gellman, "Reappraisal," *Washington Post*, 22 June 1998.

- [33] “Clinton asks Taiwan and China to resume talks: US official,” *Agence France Presse*, 10 December 1996.
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- [37] Todd Crowell and Laurie Underwood, “In the Eye of the Storm,” *Asiaweek*, 3 January 1997.
- [38] Thomas W. Robinson, “America in Taiwan’s Post Cold-War Foreign Relations,” *The China Quarterly* (December 1996), 1342. See also David Lampton’s “China and Clinton’s America: Have They Learned Anything?” in *Asian Survey* (December 1997): 1105.
- [39] Robinson, *America*, 1358-1359.
- [40] James Rubin, “Statements by Secretary of State Madeline Albright and Secretary of Defense William Cohen and State Department Regular Briefing,” *Federal News Service*, 31 October 1998.
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- [46] Robert A. Manning and James Przystup, “Straits Jacket,” *New Republic*, 27 September 1999, 13-14.
- [47] Jim Mann, “Clinton 1st to OK China, Taiwan ‘3 No’s,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 Jul 1998.
- [48] Bush, “United States,” 39.
- [49] *Ibid.*
- [50] Hickey, *Taiwan’s Security*, 171, 178-179.

- [51] See for example, Baum, "Strait Talking," 28-29; and, Ross Munro, "Taiwan: What China Really Wants," *National Review*, 11 October 1999, 49.
- [52] Nicholas D. Kristof, "Taipei Is on Alert for Sign of Betrayal," *New York Times*, 29 June 1998.
- [53] Hickey, *Taiwan's Security*, 72.
- [54] Gus Constantine, "Taiwan abandons one-China doctrine; Beijing says the island is 'playing with fire'," *Washington Times*, 13 July 1999.
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- [61] John Pomfret, "Beijing Firm On Conditions for Taiwan Talks; U.S. Said to Soft-Pedal China's Stance," *Washington Post*, 7 April 2000.
- [62] Manning and Przystup, "Straits Jacket," 14.