

America's Problem with the One China Policy

Richard C. Kagan, Ph.D.

Professor of History

East Asian Studies

Hamline University

rkagan@gw.hamline.edu

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Shanghai. 1972. President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger agree with Chairman Mao Tse-tung and Foreign Minister Zhou En-lai to recognize that there is One China, and that Taiwan is part of China. This becomes known as the Shanghai Declaration. More than a generation later this policy is strongly maintained. And it is today out of date at best, and the potential cause of war at worst.

Some historical perspective is necessary:

In terms of International Diplomacy, Declarations are not Law. They are statements made by leaders to establish a working policy for international relationships. Although they provide order for a limited period of time, they usually outlive their purpose. Take the Monroe Doctrine, the Roosevelt Corollary or the Reagan counter-insurgency programs that gave America the authority to keep out foreign powers, and legitimized military intervention in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere. These policies were extra-legal and were almost impossible to change or modify. Their consequences in many cases were tragic.

The One China Policy was declared in China. The people of Taiwan had no say in the matter whatsoever. The policy was created to keep China out of the Vietnam War, to counterbalance the Soviet Union with China, and to open markets for America. The Chinese wanted control of Taiwan because it was seen as an imperialist controlled bridge to Asia. It had been used in the Korean War to provide resources to American troops, and in the Vietnam War to provide human and material assistance to Saigon.

Since 1972, the Beijing authorities have created a muscular myth about Taiwan's identity and China's rights to it. Beijing has even retained the right to use force against a Taiwan that would claim independence or that would put off the decision of re-uniting with China too long. This full-scale propaganda is not unlike the Nazi claim to be an extension of the Holy Roman Empire, or the Islamic fundamentalist claim to reunite the Middle East and Asia. China even displays maps of the period of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. –200 A.D.) which shows Taiwan and its major cities across the Taiwan Straits. Would maps of ancient Rome show "Little Italy" in New York or advertise the Sopranos?

Why "One China" is Harmful.

1. First of all, the policy limits our range of options in East Asia. We are blackmailed by our own policy. Any statement that recognizes Taiwan's right to be a member of international organizations, or to receive international aid (such as from the Red Cross or World Health Organization) is immediately attacked for undermining the One China Policy.

2. Secondly, the claim for One China is a recent manifestation of China's nationalism and socialism. Before 1900, there was little mention of "One China." In fact the term "Middle Kingdom" to refer to China was not extensively used until the 19th century. The term was made current by the Imperialists who wanted to call China by a name other than the flowery names or dynastic names that were in vogue. Our policy perpetuates a myth that is used to justify the subjugation and control of an Island that has never been under the authority of the Beijing government.
3. Thirdly, Taiwan is a democratic country of 22 million citizens. The President, Chen Shui-bian, has stirred up the American and Chinese diplomatic community by suggesting that the Island should be called "Taiwan" and not the Republic of China. And that there might be a referendum on independence. President Chen claims that "The People of Taiwan firmly believe that there is one country on each side of the straits—One China and one Taiwan." To allow Beijing's intimidations of Taiwan to hamper an authentic expression of the people's on the basis of a myth is contrary to all of our principles of democracy and freedom.
4. It is important for the U.S. leadership to show Beijing why an Independent Taiwan is healthy for them, and subduing Taiwan is unhealthy.
 - a. Taiwan could be an excellent off shore base for independent and unfettered technological and industrialized development. Taiwan as a business development Center could accelerate China's economic development. Taiwan's democracy could become a model for China's own political modernization. The sharing of economic, intellectual, cultural, and political ideas would be expedited by a free and equal Taiwan.
 - b. The undermining of Taiwan's political system, or the outright attack on Taiwan would force China into a post-colonial relationship with the population. This relationship would drain the resources of China, contribute to tremendous ill feeling, and result finally in the hollowing out of Taiwan. Both Taiwan and China would become losers.
 - c. Rather than continue with a status quo that is destructive of the morale of the Taiwanese people, and feeds the militancy of China, the United States should seek for a regional arrangement to protect Taiwan, and to utilize Taiwan's resources for the development of China.

New thinking is required to change our policies. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in a dead end that is more costly, and less free for all concerned.