Clinton's "Three No's" Policy
A Critical Assessment

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For the past two decades, since the normalization of U. S. - China relations in 1979, Washington's policy toward the two sides of the Taiwan Strait has been built on two important cornerstones: the three official Communiqués signed between the U. S. and the People's Republic of China (P. R. C.) in 1972, 1978, and 1982, respectively; and the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P. L. 96-8) adopted by U. S. Congress and signed into law by President in April 1979.

By "acknowledging" China's position of "one China" and accepting Beijing's "three conditions" with regard to the existing U. S. ties with Taiwan (breaking off diplomatic relations, terminating the Mutual Security Treaty, and ending American military presence), Washington has been able to engage China, politically as well as economically, and, in recent years, even develop a "constructive strategic partnership" with Beijing. On the other hand, the TRA has enabled Washington to continue to maintain "unofficial" ties with Taiwan and provide security support for the island through arms sales and other security commitments against external political coercion and military threat.

The carefully crafted wording of these key documents reveals well the sophisticated nuance and sensitivity to the trilateral relationship among the U. S., China and Taiwan. In the famous Shanghai Communiqué of 1972:

The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United states Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms
its interest in a **peaceful settlement** of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves [emphasis added].

The TRA declared with exceptional deliberateness and explicity:

It is the policy of the United States [among other things]:
- to make clear that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means;
- to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States;
- to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and
- to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.

**Clinton's Enunciation of the "Three No's"**

During his triumphant nine-day state visit to China in June - July 1998, President Clinton met with a group of intellectuals at the Shanghai Library on June 30. In a deliberate manner, President Clinton articulated his new Taiwan position for the first time in public before his Chinese audience:

I had a chance to reiterate our Taiwan policy, 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 of any organization for which statehood is a requirement.
The statement immediately caused commotion among political leaders and the press of the three capitals concerned. It is widely known that these "three No's" had long been Beijing's position, a position that Washington had resisted to endorse, especially in the form of a new policy package.

The White House and the State Department were quick to emphasize that the President was merely restating the existing policy of the past two decades and that nothing had changed in the Administration's Taiwan policy. Administration officials were also quick to point out the low-key context in which the President's statement was made: It was not made in the capital Beijing, nor was it made in any official communiqué or statement. It was made only in response to a question from the audience. Therefore, Administration officials insisted that the political significance of the statement should not be exaggerated.

The real explanation of the "Three No's" policy, as revealed by Clinton aides in fact rests on two key policy rationales. First, after the missile face-off of 1995-96, the Clinton Administration seems to have come to share the Chinese argument and concern that as Taiwan continues to move down the road of independence, China will have to take military action. Hence, there is a need to warn Taipei that it should not push its cause of Taiwan independence too far, lest it would run the risk of losing U. S. support when China attacks. The U. S. will not want to get involved in a war provoked by Taiwan. Second, the Clinton Administration seems to calculate that some concessions to Beijing on the Taiwan issue may in return gain Beijing's support for other issues of U. S. interest. Besides, the small issue of Taiwan should not always be an impediment blocking the progress of the big vision of building "strategic partnership" with China.
Questionable Strategic Assumptions

Implicit in Clinton's "Three No's" policy are the assumptions, as suggested above, that Taiwan's pursuit of independence is the root of all troubles and that the Taiwan issue can be used as a bargaining chip for moderating Beijing's policy stance. Ample evidence, however, suggests otherwise.

In fact, a consensus on the status of Taiwan has emerged on the island between the ruling and major opposition parties in recent years. It is now argued that the ROC on Taiwan has been a sovereign state ever since 1912 and that there is no need for Taiwan to declare independence. Under the National Unification Guideline officially proclaimed by the government, Taiwan is formally committed to ultimate unification when conditions are ripe. A constant, substantial majority of the people on Taiwan (about 70% in public opinion polls) take the position in favor of maintaining the status quo for the time being, as the political and economic systems of the two sides are still too far apart. Therefore, the critical issue facing the two sides now is not the matter of choosing between unification and independence, as Beijing claimed, rather, it is the problem of working out an appropriate mechanism, process and pace of peaceful interactions acceptable to both sides.

Recent history of tension and conflict across the strait has made it amply clear that the real gut of the trouble lies indeed in China's stubborn insistence to use force or the threat of force against Taiwan. In the past two decades, Taipei has taken several major actions unilaterally (e.g., adopting the "National Unification Guidelines" and terminating "the Temporary Provisions Governing the Suppression of the Communist Rebellion") to induce Beijing's reciprocation, in kind, for peaceful coexistence and evolution. Yet, Beijing never budged, continuing to cling to its "sovereign right" to use force against Taiwan, if necessary, under specified conditions. Likewise, despite nearly thirty years of efforts by Washington to improve relations with China by making major concessions (e.g., accepting Beijing's "three conditions" on Taiwan for normalization and agreeing to reduce U. S.
arms sales to Taiwan), China never changed its "one China" doctrine or its position on the use of force against Taiwan. At times, Beijing is willing to state that peaceful unification is its "fundamental policy," but it would never renounce its right to use force, when and if necessary.

Beijing's Increasing Assertiveness

There is no question that the remarkable economic success and substantial military modernization in China over the past decade are turning China into a formidable economic and military power. Beijing, too, is quite aware of its own growing strength and is determined to claim its new place in the world, commensurate to its expanded strength. Moreover, China also demonstrates its willingness to mobilize its resources (e.g., the vast market and voluminous trade) for the pursuit of its political objectives.

Within this new political and nationalistic atmosphere, Beijing is likely to take Washington's willingness to be flexible and make compromise as a sign of weakness to be exploited, rather than as a gesture of goodwill that commands respect. They seem to be convinced (rightly or wrongly) that a president beleaguered by strenuous personal and political problems is bound to be a weak president. Thus, political pressure skillfully applied from Beijing ought to be able to work in its favor.

Many analysts argue that the escalation of the missile threat of 1995 to the missile crisis of 1996 serves as a case in point, showing the logic of Chinese political calculus. Washington's silence and inaction during the missile firing of 1995 apparently led Beijing to believe that China could afford to further escalate military pressure on Taiwan without running the risk of U. S. intervention. China miscalculated the U. S. response to the 1996 crisis, yet, the U. S. also had to pay a high price for having neglected to deter China's reckless military threat a year earlier.
It would be very unfortunate if Beijing were to perceive Clinton's "Three No's" as a sign of weakness on the part of Washington and become tempted, once more, to exploit it for its own benefit. One wonders why China is again busily stepping up its missile deployment along the coast of the Taiwan Strait. What has motivated China to do that at this time? What is the logic behind its strategic calculus? And how does Beijing factor Clinton's "Three No's" into its on-going missile deployment strategy? These are some serious questions that deserve to be thought through.

Indeed, Clinton's "Three No's" policy poses serious implications on other broader issues as well. Regionally, what role, if any, will Clinton's "Three No's" play in Beijing's thinking and strategy for the South China Sea disputes? How will Clinton's new policy stand on Taiwan affect China's attitude toward such global problems as missile technology control and human rights? So long as Beijing continues to maintain a high wall of non-transparency in its political process and policy formation, we will probably never know China's true intention and strategic calculas. What we should know, for sure, however, is that considering Beijing's propensity to take goodwill and compromise as signs of weakness and appeasement, special cares must be taken not to send any ambiguous signals that may mislead Beijing's reasoning process and thereby compound the danger of its miscalculation.

Taiwan's Agony and Frustration

Before the U. S. - P. R. C. normalization of 1979, Taiwan had always served as the most faithful ally of the U. S. Even after the "betrayal" of 1979, Taiwan has remained the most cooperative " unofficial" friend of America. For the past five decades, Taiwan's foreign and security policy has basically been one of "compliance" to U. S. policy and leadership.
After fifty years of American tutelage and protection, Taiwan has succeeded in building a vibrant free economy and functioning democracy that was created essentially in the image of the U. S. It now fully shares the American values of political democracy, human rights, social pluralism, and free enterprise. Taiwan is probably the best success story of U. S. foreign policy of the post-World War II era.

Against the background of these unique historical ties between the U. S. and Taiwan, it is not hard to understand why Clinton's "Three No's" sent a shock wave through every corner of the island state last year. Clinton's enunciation inevitably raised the soul-searching question of why the President, despite his professed commitment to the fundamental values of human rights and democracy, would have no hesitation in sending signals to Beijing that the U. S. does not particularly care about the human rights and political democracy that the twenty-one million people now enjoy on Taiwan. The case was made even more agonizing for the people on Taiwan in that the U. S. law of the land (the TRA) in fact explicitly requires the President to preserve and enhance Taiwan's human rights and international participation. In the words of the TRA:

- Nothing contained in this Act shall contravene the interest of the United States in human rights especially with respect to the human rights of all the approximately 18 million inhabitants of Taiwan. The preservation and enhancement of the human rights of all the people on Taiwan are hereby reaffirmed as objectives of the United States.

- Nothing in this Act may be construed as a basis for supporting the exclusion or expulsion of Taiwan from continued membership in any international financial institution or any other international organization.

The profound moral question is why Clinton would choose to "coddle with the dictators of Beijing" and forsake the legitimate rights and interests of the 21 million people on Taiwan. It is ironic to point
out, however, that the moral agony of Taiwan was fully shared by the members of American Congress. Expressing their strong disagreement with the President, the Congress adopted a series of Congressional resolutions immediately after the Clinton trip to China, reminding the President the importance of restoring an even-handed policy on Taiwan. It should be noted that all resolutions of both Houses were passed practically by unanimous consent (e.g., Senate Resolution 107, July 10, 1998, by a vote of 92-0; House Resolution 301, July 20, 1998, by a vote of 390-1). The resolutions place special emphasis on the following points:

- the Congress affirms its long-standing commitment to Taiwan in accordance with Taiwan Relations Act
- the Congress affirms its expectation that the future status of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means, that the people of both sides of the Taiwan Strait should determine their own future, and that it considers any effort to determine or influence Taiwan's future status by other than peaceful means a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific region and of grave concern to the US
- the Congress affirms its commitment to make available to Taiwan such defense articles and services, including appropriate ballistic missile defense, as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability
- the Congress affirms that only the President and Congress shall determine the nature and quantity of defense articles and services needed by Taiwan
- the Congress affirms its strong support of appropriate membership for Taiwan in international financial institutions and other international organizations.

Urges the President to seek a public renunciation by the PRC of any use of force, or threat to use force, against the free people of Taiwan.
Major media also published critical editorials on Clinton's questionable policy shift on Taiwan (e.g., "Siding with the Dictators," Washington Post, July 2, 1998; "Bill's Kowtow," Wall Street Journal, July 2, 1998.)

Obviously, in the eyes of the Congress and the media President Clinton's "Three No's" constitutes an unwise and dangerous tilt toward China at the expense of Taiwan's political and security interests. The tilt is not only particularly unfair and unprincipled to Taiwan, it could even inadvertently lead to destabilize the already fragile peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait. The Congressional effort was clearly aimed at restoring U. S. Taiwan policy to an even keel, so that Beijing will not be misled by the varied interpretations of the "Three No's" and indulge in further misperception and miscalculation.

Conclusion

As Washington's Taiwan policy evolved over the last twenty-five years, through six presidents of both parties, a general consensus on the basic policy goals and strategy is discernible.

First, sustaining the existing peace and stability along the Taiwan Strait based on the status quo, (to allow time for both sides to work out, through peaceful means, a mutually acceptable solution) should be the primary objective of the U. S. The main concern of the U. S. should be the process of peaceful resolution of the conflict and not the ultimate outcome of unification or independence. To that objective the U. S. should oppose and deter any attempt to use force or threat of force in the Taiwan Strait.

Second, advancing and protecting human rights and democracy are fundamental American values deeply ingrained in U. S. foreign policy. Being keenly cognizant of the historical and moral obligations to the flourishing democracy and free economy on Taiwan, the U. S. cannot and
should not permit the island's security and well-being to be jeopardized by force or coercion.

Third, the policy of comprehensive engagement and building strategic partnership with China should be based on mutual respect and reciprocal interest, and not on political expedience or unilateral concession. China should be encouraged to move forward by further liberalizing its political system and making its political process more transparent. Thereby China can be integrated into the world community as a constructive and responsible member.

Finally, as the sole superpower of the world, the U. S. should maintain its strength, commitment and vision in such a manner that can inspire trust, credibility, and strategic leadership among both friends and foes in the Asia-Pacific region.

If these four key policy objectives are applied to evaluate Clinton's "Three No's," Clinton's policy clearly does not measure up. It will fail, because it can neither protect the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait, nor can it inspire moral and strategic leadership in the region. Worst of all, the unilateral concession made to China at Taiwan's expense is not even likely to entice Beijing to become a more cooperative and responsible "strategic partner." In this respect, the Congressional expressions of dismay and its attempts to redress the course of Taiwan policy are clearly timely and justifiable.