The Costs of Ambiguity: U.S. Diplomacy Toward Taiwan, 1978-1996

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Introduction

In 1979, the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and derecognized Taiwan, known as the Republic of China. Since then, the U.S. has maintained one of the most paradoxical diplomatic relationships in modern history: a deep, enduring partnership with Taiwan in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition. There were no embassies, ambassadors or bilateral agreements, but the U.S.-Taiwan relationship functioned in every other sense like an alliance, characterized by arms sales and deep economic cooperation, blended with deliberate legal and diplomatic ambiguity.

At the heart of this arrangement was the One China Policy that the U.S. adopted after normalizing diplomatic relations with mainland China. This policy stated that the U.S. formally recognized the PRC as the sole legal government of China but only acknowledged, without endorsing, Beijing's claim over Taiwan. This policy allowed Washington to maintain informal relationships with longstanding ally Taiwan and postponing any definitive resolution of Taiwan's status. While this approach provided flexibility at the geopolitical level, it created significant problems regarding implementation the policy in practice. U.S. diplomats were required to manage an unofficial relationship that functioned, in every sense, like an alliance, yet without the legal and institutional support typically associated with formal diplomacy.

This thesis examines how Taiwan policy was implemented and how frontline U.S. diplomats navigated this diplomacy without recognition. Their experiences illuminate both the strengths and inherent contradictions of the One China Policy as a long-term solution.

The History of U.S. foreign policy has often been written as a story of negotiations, treaties and strategic alignments. Existing scholarship on U.S. policy toward Taiwan has understandably emphasized the actions and decisions of presidents, secretaries of state and senior advisors, who negotiated normalization with the PRC and crafted the official policy language. Part of this can be explained by the fact that lot politicians provided memoirs for historians to study.[1] But this focus on high politics and policy creation overlooks a crucial part: how foreign policy was implemented and the operational challenges encountered daily. Foreign policy does not stop at the level of presidential decisions and communiqués, but is continually interpreted, adjusted and executed by diplomats.

[1] Henry Kissinger, *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top Secret Talks With Beijing and Moscow* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1998); James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995).

The implementation and daily experiences of U.S. diplomats is specifically interesting to study in the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, because there was no official diplomatic relationship. Everything that was put on paper was kept specifically ambiguous, to not antagonize mainland China. This meant that diplomats had to handle sensitive political issues and continually improvise to manage a difficult relationship. The creation of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), a private nonprofit but embassy in all but name exemplifies the type of institutional improvisation that became routine. Taiwan policy also became heavily politicized in the U.S., which meant that diplomats working at the AIT or at the State Department's Taiwan and China desks, were forced to keep not only both sides of the Taiwan Strait happy, but also domestic political actors.

To capture this underexplored dimension of U.S. foreign policy, this study draws on oral history interviews from the Frontline Diplomacy Project by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST).[2] These interviews contain reflective and candid accounts from retired U.S. foreign service officers who served at AIT in Taiwan, or within the State Department during the period after 1979. These sources reveal how personal decisions, dilemmas and institutional improvisation shaped the relationship, which are often invisible in official policy documents.

The paradox of diplomacy without recognition, combined with the limited scholarly attention to the implementation and daily experiences of U.S. diplomats working in Taiwan, raises the central question of this thesis: How did the One China Policy complicate U.S. diplomatic engagement with Taiwan after 1979, as experienced by frontline diplomats?

This thesis argues that U.S.-PRC normalization was a strategically sound consideration and long overdue and produced a workable framework for stability in the short term. However, the way it came about, the rushed and secretive way the Carter administration negotiated the normalization agreement, created structural weaknesses in the long-term. The combination of intentional ambiguities and vague commitments inserted contradictions into U.S.-Taiwan relationship that were difficult to manage for U.S. diplomats on the ground. The dual development of China's rise in power and growing assertiveness and Taiwan's remarkable political and economic transformation, the tensions that were woven into the One China Policy became harder to manage.

[2] 'Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training – Capturing, Preserving, and Sharing the Experiences of America's Diplomats', accessed 18 February 2025, https://adst.org/what-is-adst/.

This research will limit itself to the years 1978-1996. This period has been chosen as it captures three distinct phases: the construction of ambiguity during normalization and its direct aftermath, the stabilization of the new relationship during the 1980s, and finally the mounting strains that emerged during the 1990s. Taiwan's rapid evolution from authoritarianism to democracy exposed the disconnect between the U.S.'s One China Policy and its increasingly complex political, strategic, and moral commitments to Taiwan.

The analytical framework for this thesis centers on two key policies of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Firstly, the official One China Policy. Secondly, the implicit but deliberate policy of strategic ambiguity that came because of the legal and diplomatic framework the One China Policy offered.

The One China Policy was the official position the U.S. adopted in 1979, in which it *acknowledged* the PRC's One China Principle, that there was only one China and Taiwan was part of China, but did not *endorse* it and made no further statements of its own. This allowed the U.S. to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC, while also continuing a deep, but unofficial relationship with Taiwan. The policy was legally grounded within the three joint communiqués with China (1972 Shanghai Communiqué, 1978 Normalization agreement and 1982 communiqué arms sales). The Taiwan Relations Act (1979) and Six Assurances to Taiwan (1982) acted as a counterbalance, providing assurances to Taiwan.

The inherent ambiguity of the One China Policy led to confusion. Alan Romberg found out that almost all senior U.S. officials after 1979 have gone beyond the position of acknowledgement of Beijing's position and at one time or another stated that the U.S. accepted or based its policies on the One China Principle. For the U.S. this mostly meant that it simply did not support Taiwan independence, but for Romberg, this is a "sloppy and sweeping misstatement of policy that is open to mischievous misuse in either Taiwan or the Mainland."[3]

Strategic ambiguity did not originate in 1978. Its origins can be traced back to the early 1950s. Dean P. Chen argued that the policy originated in the decision by Truman to neither to acknowledge the PRC nor abandon the ROC in 1950.[4] Subsequently, most administrations kept its statements regarding the Taiwan Strait vague. Eisenhower for example characterized his policy as "keeping the enemy guessing".[5] In 1972, Kissinger put it more bluntly. When pushed

[3] Alan D. Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink of Precipice: American Policy Toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations* (Washington/D.C: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003), 226.
[4] Dean P. Chen, *US Taiwan Strait Policy: The Origins of Strategic Ambiguity* (Boulder ; London: FirstForumPress, 2012).
[5] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis* (New York ; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2008), 190.

by Zhou Enlai to incorporate more straightforward language in the Shanghai Communiqué, he stated that "The trouble is that we disagree, not that we don't understand each other. We understand each other very well. The Prime Minister seeks clarity, and I am trying to achieve ambiguity."[6] This remark encapsulated the logic of ambiguity that would come to define U.S. policy toward Taiwan.

While the two policies are closely related and interchangeably used, they are distinctly different. Put simply, the One China Policy created the legal-diplomatic architecture through with the unofficial policy of strategic ambiguity was enacted. This distinction is crucial for understanding how strategic ambiguity was not something embedded in a fixed doctrine, but interpreted and adjusted in practice, among others by the diplomats charged with managing the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. It was not a compromise, born out of out of indecision, but served as a form of dual deterrence, to preserve the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. It deterred Beijing from pursuing reunification by force, and Taipei from formally declaring independence. By keeping its commitments opaque, the U.S. pursued flexibility and reduce the risk of open conflict.[7]

The concept of strategic ambiguity itself has been subject of debate. The question has been raised what exactly should be ambiguous: the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan or the conditions of intervention. In the 1990s, considering the democratization of Taiwan and China's rise in military power, conservative lawmakers began pushing for strategic clarity. In other words, an open pledge to defend Taiwan. The U.S. officially held onto ambiguity beyond 1996, but this debate showcases how ambiguity as a policy was continually debated and reassessed.[8]

While the flexibility the One China Policy offered made a diplomatic breakthrough possible between former adversaries, it introduced significant operational problems for those responsible for translating policy into practice, that remain present until this day.[9] U.S. diplomats had to maintain political, economic, and security ties with Taiwan without violating the formal constraints of unofficiality. This required continuous vigilance, for example on how

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[6] 'Memorandum of Conversation, October 26, 1971(10:12 Am-11:00 Am)', in *Negotiating U.S.-Chinese Rapprochement: New American and Chinese Documentation Leading Up to Nixon's 1972 Trip*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 70, 1971, 10, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB70/.

[7] Steven M. Goldstein, 'In Defense of Strategic Ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait', *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)* (blog), 15 October 2021, https://www.nbr.org/publication/in-defense-of-strategic-ambiguity-in-the-taiwan-strait/; Tucker, *Dangerous Strait*, 164.

[8] Brandon Willadsen, 'From China Lobby Activists to Blue Team Neoconservatives: The Evolution of the GOP's Views on Taiwan Since 1949', *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 31, no. 2 (14 June 2024): 156–94; S. Philip Hsu, 'Reappraising the Debate and Practice of US Strategic Ambiguity/Clarity in Cross-Strait Relations', *The Pacific Review* 23, no. 2 (12 May 2010): 139–62.

[9] Adam P. Liff and Dalton Lin, 'The "One China" Framework at 50 (1972–2022): The Myth of "Consensus" and Its Evolving Policy Significance', *The China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 977–1000.

to organize meetings, refer to Taiwan's leadership and approval of arms sales. In practice, the One China Policy became not only a geopolitical balancing act but also a daily exercise in institutional improvisation for the diplomats charged with executing it.

This thesis applies the concepts of the One China Policy and strategic ambiguity analytical tools to interpret how U.S. diplomats navigated the complexities of unofficial diplomacy. The focus is not whether ambiguity worked as a policy, but rather on revealing how it functioned in practice, for diplomats managing the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, how it evolved over time, and how it required continual adjustment.

The scholarly literature on U.S.-Taiwan relations has produced a rich and evolving debate over how to assess the U.S.-Taiwan policy from the 1970s onward. It has followed the same lines as the debate on U.S. foreign policy. Three different schools can be distinguished: the traditionalist, revisionist, and post-revisionist interpretations.

Traditionalist historians dominated much of the early literature on U.S.-Taiwan-China relations. These accounts emphasized that establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC was a strategically necessary move within the context of the Cold War. Nixon and Kissinger's opening to China was often celebrated as a diplomatic masterstroke and subsequent normalization with the PRC a logical next step. A great example of the traditionalist school is John Lewis Gaddis' *Strategies of Containment*, in which he contends that Nixon's China policy was strategically coherent and necessary to contain the Soviet Union and stabilize the situation in East Asia.[10] The costs of those decisions were generally minimized in these accounts and seen as necessary and calculated moves in service of geopolitical goals.

Revisionist scholars offer a more critical reassessment of U.S. foreign policy, stressing its moral failings and U.S. imperialism.[11] In the context of the U.S.-Taiwan-China triangle, revisionists stressed the moral costs of normalization. In *Taiwan Expendable? Nixon and Kissinger Go to China*, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker argued that President Nixon and his advisor Kissinger were so eager for rapprochement with China that they treated Taiwan as a pawn to be sacrificed. According to Tucker, this was not only morally debatable, but also sowed the seeds of instability in the region and distrust in Beijing when the U.S. eventually continued its support of Taiwan after normalization.[12]

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[10] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York [etc: Oxford University Press, 1982).
[11] William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, Rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Dell, 1962).
[12] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis With China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, 'Taiwan Expendable? Nixon and Kissinger Go to China', *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (2005): 109–35.

Brian Paul Hilton offered a direct critique of Tuckers claims. As a post-revisionist, he emphasized a more nuanced reading of U.S-Taiwan policy and stressing the complexities and weighed the pros and cons of strategic logic. In his article *Taiwan expendable reconsidered.* Revisiting Nixon-era archives, he argued that the administration gave much consideration to the future of Taiwan and was reluctant to abandon it, trying to delay derecognition and balance relations with both China and Taiwan.[13] This interpretation does not entirely exonerate the U.S., but suggests an array of factors that influenced the decision to open to China.

Similarly to Paul Hilton, Alan Romberg, in *Rein in at the Brink of the Precipice* presents a balanced take on how through strategic ambiguity U.S. policymakers maintained a delicate balance of dual deterrence and flexibility. Sympathetic to the dilemmas they faced, Romberg does also acknowledge how ambiguity became problematic over time.[14]

Other post-revisionist accounts, such as James Mann's *About Face* continue to critique how successive U.S. administrations prioritized ties with the PRC at the expense of democratic values. Mann argues that U.S. policy was short-sighted and morally compromised.[15]

My research situates itself broadly within this post-revisionist tradition. I share the view of Mann that the U.S. pursued short-term gains with little regard to Taiwan's long-term stability, but at the same time are aware and in agreement with Romberg's interpretation of the difficulties U.S. policymakers faced.

Where this thesis differs from other post-revisionist accounts, is my focus: Much of the existing literature, across all three schools, remains heavily focused on high-level policy formulation. In contrast, my focus is on how policy ambiguity was experienced by the diplomats working at the American Institute in Taiwan, at the State Department's Taiwan desk, or negotiating delicate arrangements with Taipei.

Nancy Bernkopf Tucker did use the same oral history material from ADST as I did in *China Confidential*, illustrating the experiences of U.S. diplomats. But her focus is on China, and the purpose of *China Confidential* is to provide context to the official documents that shaped the policy.[16] I will do the opposite, focusing on Taiwan. Rather than passing judgement on whether strategic ambiguity was wise or misguided, the goal is to explore how strategic

[13] Brian Paul Hilton, "'Taiwan Expendable?' Reconsidered"', *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 25, no. 3 (3 September 2018): 296–322.
[14] Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink*.
[15] James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship With China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).
[16] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, ed., *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945-1996* (Columbia University Press, 2001), 8.

ambiguity translated into daily diplomatic experiences. In doing so, it contributes a middle-range view that bridges grand strategy and lived diplomatic practice.

The primary source for this thesis is the oral history project called *Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST).* The ADST was founded in 1986 as a non-profit organization. Its mission: "Capturing, preserving, and sharing the experiences of America's diplomats".[17] Since the 1980s, the ADST has conducted thousands of interviews with retired U.S. foreign service officers and senior administration officials, producing one of the richest archival bodies of first-hand accounts of U.S. foreign policy. The transcripts of these interviews are accessible through the website of the ADST, and present a window into the personal, institutional and operational experiences of U.S. diplomats across the globe during the 20th and early 21st century.

As first step of building my source base, I utilized the China Country reader compiled by the ADST.[18] This thematic reader combined interviews with diplomats who served at posts in the People's Republic of China or were otherwise involved with U.S. foreign policy towards China. There was no separate country reader for Taiwan, so I used this reader as a starting point to identify those individuals who had also served in Taiwan, many career diplomats who served in China, also served in other places across East Asia and the pacific. The first selection of interviews included diplomats who held posts in Taipei, at the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) headquarters in Washington D.C., at the State Department's China Desk or Taiwan Desk, or in more senior positions within the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau (EAP) such as Assistant Secretaries of State.

After this initial selection I expanded the scope to ensure that no significant individuals who worked on Taiwan policy were overlooked. First, I conducted a close reading of the interviews, cross-checking the mentioned individuals with my own selection and the ADST database. After getting comfortable with the material, I performed additional searches beyond the country readers, designed to capture interviewees whose Taiwan-related accounts may not have been immediately obvious from their titles or posting, but became apparent through their narrative accounts. This approach allowed me to extract the maximum amount of material from the ADST corpus for all the time periods discussed, minimizing the risk of losing significant voices.

[17] 'Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training – Capturing, Preserving, and Sharing the Experiences of America's Diplomats'.
[18] Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, 'China Country Reader', PDF-file, China Country Reader, n.d., https://adst.org/Readers/China.pdf.

The final corpus consists of 27 interviews with diplomats and government officials whose careers intersected with U.S.-Taiwan relations between 1970 and 1996. While modest in number, it is significant in scope. Most of the selected interviews are hundreds of pages long, offering a rich account of the ambiguous relationship. The final selection is not limited strictly to those stationed in Taipei or exclusively assigned to Taiwan policy. Taiwan featured prominently in the negotiations the U.S. undertook with the PRC, so it is essential to include these individuals who were present or otherwise involved. Many officials who served on the China desk or East Asia bureau played meaningful roles in shaping and implementing U.S. Taiwan policy, given the overlapping complexities of the One China framework.

The oral history interviews offer several strengths that make them well-suited for analyzing how strategic ambiguity functioned in practice. First, they captured perspectives rarely found in official policy documents: how diplomats handled the operational constraints of unofficial diplomacy. Many interviewees offered frank assessments of internal debates within the State Department, tensions between different agencies and branches of government, and the challenges of interacting with both Beijing and Taipei under the constraints of the One China Policy.

Second, these interviews reveal how organizational routines developed to manage ambiguity over time. The interviews illuminate how policies that appeared stable or static from the outside, were in fact subject to constant changes and adaptation on the lower level, whether over arms sales, interpretations of unofficiality or political support.

At the same time, these sources also have limitations. First, these interviews are subjected to concerns associated with retrospective narratives: selective recollection, rationalization in hindsight, personal biases and accentuation of one's own role. Second, they primarily reflect the American perspective of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, lacking perspectives from Taiwanese and Chinese diplomats.

Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish their analytical value for the purposes of this study. It does not seek to provide a comprehensive diplomatic history of U.S.-Taiwan relations, nor does it attempt to judge competing narratives. Instead, the focus is on how ambiguity functioned from within the U.S. diplomatic system, as revealed through the voices of those directly tasked with implementing foreign policy.

The analytical approach towards the source material is qualitative and interpretive. Close reading of the interview transcripts made me able to extract how strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan was lived, negotiated, and adjusted over time. The interviews were not seen as a retelling of events, but how diplomats navigated their role in managing complex policies and

relationships. The analytical lens of the One China Policy and strategic ambiguity is applied consistently across the different chapters. Rather than treating these as fixed background conditions, I examined what their importance was in different contexts and how it evolved over time. The interviewees reveal both the structural constraints imposed by these frameworks and how diplomats engaged in institutional improvisation, navigated interagency disagreements, and confronted tensions between official policy formulations and the realities in Taipei.

This thesis has a chronological structure. The three chapters reflect three distinct phases of the American diplomatic engagement with Taiwan between 1978 and 1996. In each chapter diplomats faced different diplomatic challenges. The policy of strategic ambiguity and the One China framework were the constant factors, but the practical meaning of ambiguity for American diplomats in Taiwan changed over time.

The first chapter takes place in 1978-1979 and deals with the derecognition of Taiwan, establishment of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the PRC, and the crafting the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) to preserve official ties with Taiwan. Normalization was characterized by secret and rushed negotiations between the U.S. and the PRC. The analytical focus of this chapter is on how and why ambiguity was created and how U.S. diplomats managed the abrupt transition from formal to unofficial diplomatic relations with Taiwan. They had to improvise to manage the immediate fallout of this sudden policy change.

The second chapter focuses on the 1980s. This period represented a phase of institutional stabilization. The U.S.-Taiwan relationship was rebuilt along unofficial lines, but continually tested and evolved because of conflicts over arms sales, expanding economic ties and a Taiwan that transformed to ensure American support. The chapter explores how diplomats navigated this period and institutionalized strategic ambiguity. They rebuilt trust with the leadership in Taipei and preserved the fragile balance of unofficial diplomacy within the One China framework.

The third chapter examines the period between 1989 and 1996. The end of the Cold War, Taiwan's turn towards democratization, and the fallout from the Tiananmen Square Massacre fundamentally challenged the strategic context of the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle. Congressional and public support for Taiwan made it harder for the U.S. to maintain neutrality. This chapter highlights how U.S. diplomats struggled to reconcile evolving political realities with the enduring constraints of the One China Policy. The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis was the ultimate test of strategic ambiguity and is the endpoint in time for this thesis.

Together, these chapters demonstrate how strategic ambiguity was not simply a stable framework imposed from above, but fluid and subject to continuous adaptation by those

responsible for its implementation: frontline diplomats. We begin in 1978, when the United States finalized normalization with the PRC and U.S. diplomats in Taiwan faced the immediate task of breaking diplomatic ties with a longstanding ally, to create a new unofficial relationship.

Chapter 1: Normalization with China and the Taiwan Relations Act

On December 15, 1978, U.S. President Carter announced that the United States would normalize diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and formally recognize Beijing as the sole legal government of China, severing diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan), effective January 1, 1979. Though normalization had long been anticipated, the announcement was sudden and shocked both the American as well as the Taiwanese public. It marked a pivotal shift in the U.S.'s position in East Asia and laid the groundwork for many of the tensions that would later emerge in the triangular relationship between the U.S., China, and Taiwan.

This chapter addresses the following sub question: How did the secretive and hasty process of U.S.-China normalization complicate the establishment of a stable unofficial relationship with Taiwan? To answer this, it focuses on the experiences of American diplomats responsible for carrying out U.S. policy under rapidly changing and ambiguous conditions.

Three aspects will be considered. First, I will discuss the process leading to normalization. This period was characterized by internal feuds within the executive branch and the hasty negotiations with Beijing, all covered in a veil of secrecy. These decisions revealed not only shifting strategic priorities, but also the sidelining of institutional expertise. Secondly, how political backlash in U.S. Congress over the sudden break in relations with Taiwan led to a push for congressional oversight in the form of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). Lastly, we will look at the establishment of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), a non-profit but government-backed organization, which functioned as the de facto U.S. embassy. It was founded with little preparation or guidance. Together, these developments show how U.S.-China normalization was marred by improvisation, political friction and a failure to plan for the long-term challenges of maintaining an unofficial U.S-Taiwan relationship.

Normalization of Sino-U.S. relations

The relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China up until 1978 was marked by initial hostility and gradual rapprochement. At the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, the U.S. recognized the Republic of China in Taiwan, not the PRC, as the legitimate regime. This resulted in more than two decades of isolation from the PRC. By the late 1960s, however, American policymakers increasingly realized this position was untenable, as the prospect of Taiwan to retake the mainland was ludicrous. Many Americans, including China

specialists, would have loved the idea of recognizing both the PRC and ROC, but since both Taipei and Beijing demanded exclusive recognition, this was not a feasible option.[19]

A strategic breakthrough came in 1972 with the Kissinger and Nixon trips to mainland China. The visit culminated in the Shanghai Communiqué, in which both sides pledged to work toward normalization. For the U.S. the primary motive was geopolitical: Kissinger wanted to engage China to strengthen its position against the Soviet Union. Yet the Communiqué also set a problematic precedent. In it, the U.S. acknowledged the Chinese position that "there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China." The language was intentionally ambiguous, but it would haunt future administrations, constraining diplomatic options and open the door to diverging interpretations and misunderstandings between the U.S. and China.

Progress on normalization stalled under President Ford. He wanted to push on with normalization, to gain a foreign policy victory which he could use as a foreign policy victory in the 1976 election, but he faced two obstacles. Domestically, Ford encountered strong opposition during the Republican primaries, with conservative voices accusing him of abandoning Taiwan. Internationally, China believed its negotiating position had improved as relations between China and the Soviet Union had cooled off, while tensions between the U.S. and Soviets had increased.[20] As a result, the Nixon-Kissinger opening remained largely symbolic through the mid-1970s.

When president Carter entered office in 1977, normalization with the PRC was again on the table. There was consensus within the administration that this was the direction to go, but not on how to get there. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance represented two opposing camps.[21] Brzezinski, with his Cold War mindset and Polish roots, saw normalization as a strategic play against the Soviet Union and believed it had to be completed quickly, with little regard for Taiwan. Vance, on the other hand, was more cautious and wanted to move only with clear objectives and reassurances toward Taiwan in place. Brzezinski eventually came out on top. After Vance's trip to Beijing in 1977 proved fruitless, Brzezinski took over negotiations, and formal talks with the Chinese began in early July 1978.[22]

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[19] Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink*, 12.
[20] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 72.
[21] David Tawei Lee, *The Making of the Taiwan Relations Act: Twenty Years in Retrospect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8–10.
[22] Harvey Feldman, Oral History, interview by Edward Dillery, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 11 March 1999, 78.

Those negotiations quickly revealed Beijing's priorities. Making common cause against the Soviets was not enough. What was also required, was resolution of the issue that had divided the two countries since 1949: the status of Taiwan.[23] China had three main conditions: that the U.S. formally shift recognition from Taipei to Beijing, withdraw all military personnel from Taiwan, and end all weapons sales to Taiwan by terminating the Mutual Defense Treaty. Carter's team agreed to the first two but resisted the third. The Mutual Defense Treaty would be terminated with a cooldown of one year, but the American position on arms sales afterwards was kept deliberately vague.

President Carter announced normalization in a televised speech on December 15, 1978. The date was deliberately chosen as Congress was in recess and would not reconvene until after Christmas. Carter's goal was to avoid immediate political resistance and allow official diplomatic relations with the PRC to begin smoothly on January 1, 1979. The Joint Communiqué formally recognized the PRC as the sole government of China and pledged to withdraw military personnel from Taiwan. Most notably, it stated that the United States "acknowledged the Chinese position that there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China." According to Harvey Feldman, who was part of the U.S. negotiating team, this wording was deliberately vague. The U.S. recognized China's view, but did not adopt it. Still, the Chinese translation rendered "acknowledged" as "accepted," and that seemingly minor difference would become a lasting source of diplomatic confusion.[24]

On the ground in Taipei, the announcement was both a shock and long expected. Ambassador Leonard Unger had been waiting for normalization to happen since he was sent to Taipei in 1974 with the message that he would probably be the last in his position. The shock was the suddenness of the announcement. Instead of the requested two weeks' notice to prepare the Taiwanese for what was to come, they were given just a few hours. When ambassador Unger informed Taiwanese president Chiang Ching-Kuo, the reaction was restrained but unmistakenly bitter. Chiang told Unger that the U.S. would come to regret their decision.[25] Taiwan leaders had understood the inevitability of derecognition by the mid-1970s. They had launched covert operations to intimidate and even use violence against American supporters of better relations with Beijing, but these amounted to nothing more than delaying the inevitable.[26]

[23] Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink*, 9.
[24] Feldman, Oral History, 69.
[25] Mark S. Pratt, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 21 October 1999, 146.
[26] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 77–90.

The broader reaction in Taiwan was far less restrained. Riots erupted up and down the island, aimed at everything American. Protests at the American embassy was described as a "siege". Rocks were thrown, windows shattered, and cars damaged. The public reaction was amplified by the decision of the KMT government to cancel the upcoming local elections, a first step in the fragile process of democratization of Taiwan.[27]

While the fallout in Taiwan was immediate and highly visible, dysfunction within the U.S. government was unfolding more quietly, but not less important. Brzezinski had conducted the talks in strict secrecy, following the Nixon-Kissinger precedent of bypassing the bureaucracy and Congress. But this time, secrecy came at a much higher cost. Expertise was sidelined in favor of speed. The embassy in Taipei was not involved in the negotiations on normalization, so their input and pleas that Taiwan would not accept reunification fell on deaf ears.[28] The White House even chose to exclude senior "China Hands" in the State Department, those with the most experience dealing with Beijing and Taipei. No meaningful consultation among government agencies took place. The result was that a lot of the preparations for an orderly derecognition and retreat from Taiwan were not taken, such as alternative arrangements for trade treaties and the transfer of U.S. military property on the island.[29] By sidelining expertise, the administration limited its ability to foresee and mitigate the practical and political fallout of normalization.

The political context was also different. Carter was working in an era of increasing congressional assertiveness and expanding foreign policy staffing on Capitol Hill. Brzezinski feared that State Department officials and congressional allies of Taiwan would try to derail the agreement, thus he avoided political consultation.[30] But these choices had long-term consequences. In trying to prevent interference, the administration created a fragile framework of strategic ambiguity, without the benefit of expert insight and approval from Congress. It deepened the growing distrust between the executive and legislative branch as well as between and political appointees and career diplomats, a pattern that would continue to define U.S.-Taiwan policy in the decades to follow.[31]

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[27] William A. Brown, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 3 November 1998, 168; Pratt, Oral History, 158.
[28] Pratt, Oral History, 154–55.
[29] Lee, *The Making of the Taiwan Relations Act*, 14.
[30] Brown, Oral History, 3 November 1998, 178.
[31] Brown, 164–66; Donald M. Anderson, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 8 July 1992, 39; Pratt, Oral History, 157.

That said, the secrecy had its limits. Many within the State Department and in Congress suspected something was coming, even if they didn't know the exact terms or timeline. A particularly telling example was when William Brown was sent to Taipei to become the new Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in the summer of 1978. He wasn't given any concrete instructions about the nature of his assignment, but as he later recalled, the message was clear: "The obvious implication was that if we broke relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan, my job would be to close the embassy, pack the Ambassador off, take charge of the office, and do what was necessary." In other words, the people closest to the issue were preparing for normalization, even as they were left in the dark about its exact shape.[32]

Nancy Bernkopf Tucker has argued that the secrecy surrounding normalization was ultimately unnecessary. The main argument for secrecy, that Taiwan's allies in Congress would derail the effort, was not convincing, as showcased by the absence of such efforts in the last days of 1978.[33] This idea was echoed by some in the executive branch. As Harry Thayer, then Director of Chinese Affairs at the State Department, put it:

> *In fact, we had told them virtually everything in substance, but we hadn't said, "And we plan to do this so-and-so at such-and-such a time, and we are negotiating these things right at this very time." But to any reader of the newspapers, it was obvious that there was a lot going on in the relationship, a lot of signs of progress in the relationship.*[34]

What this suggests is that the secrecy was more performative than functional. Everyone knew something was about to happen. The administration's desire to control the timeline came at the cost of excluding expert voices and undermining the legitimacy of the final arrangement.

Warren Christopher's visit to Taipei in the final days of 1978 illustrated just how precarious the situation had become. Sent by Carter to negotiate the terms of the new informal relationship, Christopher's mission was less a negotiation and more a directive on how Taiwan should prepare for the new informal relationship. However, upon arrival his motorcade was swarmed by an angry mob who rocked vehicles, smashed windshields with crowbars and showered the delegation with broken glass. Many U.S. officials believed the demonstration had been staged by the KMT as a show of their anger. But the violence had unintended

[32] Brown, Oral History, 3 November 1998, 162–63.
[33] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 100.
[34] Harry E. Thayer, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 19 November 1990, 50–51.

consequences. It embarrassed Chiang Ching-Kuo and undercut sympathy for Taiwan in Washington. In fact, it helped ease Christopher's task. The confrontation shifted Taiwan's approach from resistance to adaptation. Rather than trying to undo the break-off, representatives turned their focus toward influencing the upcoming legislation in Congress, especially regarding arms sales and security commitments. This shift would soon intersect with the growing discontent in Congress, setting the stage for the drafting of the Taiwan Relations act.[35]

The Taiwan Relations Act

Carter's effort to present Congress with a fait accompli quickly backfired. The announcement of normalization and first draft of the Taiwan Relations Act was met with outrage on Capitol Hill. administration had severely underestimated Taiwan's support in Congress. After the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Taiwan's supporters could mainly be found among the conservative members of Congress, the staunch anti-communists. Over the following decades the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans had slowly made way for a bipartisan consensus in favor of a more cooperative relationship with Beijing.[36] However, the sudden break with a friendly nation angered even liberal Democrats, traditionally critical of Taiwan's authoritarian regime. The fact that Republicans and Carters own Democrats were critical of normalization was not a good omen.[37]

Two additional factors explain the fierce congressional reaction. The first had to do with the issue which branch of government lead on foreign policy. Most often the president shaped foreign policy, but in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate, Congress had grown increasingly assertive, expanding its staff and thereby reducing its dependence on the executive for information and analysis.[38] It rediscovered its role in foreign policy. This trend manifested clearly in August 1978, when Congress passed the bipartisan Dole-Stone amendment which explicitly called for prior consultation with Congress on any alterations in the status of U.S.-ROC relations. Even though he had signed it himself, Carter ignored this entirely. Lawmakers viewed his actions as an affront, fueling critical opposition to his normalization agreement.[39]
The second factor was the broader congressional frustration over the administration's lack of clarity about the future of U.S. security commitments to Taiwan. When Carter administration's

[35] Brown, Oral History, 3 November 1998, 168–71; Pratt, Oral History, 150–51.
[36] Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China Since 1972* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1992), 326.
[37] James R. Lilley, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 21 May 1998, 76; Feldman, Oral History, 70.
[38] Lee, *The Making of the Taiwan Relations Act*, 33.
[39] Lee, 39–41.

omnibus bill landed on the house floor on January 29, 1979, it was firmly rejected. Lawmakers criticized the proposal as deliberately vague, particularly regarding ongoing arms sales and future security assurances to Taiwan. The ambiguity, intended by Carter to preserve flexibility with Beijing, instead incited congressional opposition.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee and Senate Foreign Affairs Committee simultaneously began hearings on the bill, rapidly crafting a much more robust piece of legislation called the Taiwan Relations Act. Among the witnesses were administration officials, China hands, academics and legal department advisors. One central issue dominated: arms sales and Taiwan's security. The Mutual Defense Treaty, which guaranteed weapons sales to Taiwan, was terminated on January 1, 1979, with a one-year grace period. The Carter administration had deliberately omitted any mention of arms sales and security commitments in its draft. Brzezinski and his supporters expected Taiwan to gradually be incorporated into mainland China in the following years and thus did not want to include any language to hinder that possible future. Also, the administration felt that the one-year grace period bought them time to devise a strategy on arms deals. A third reason, offered by Mark Pratt, who headed the political section at the U.S. embassy in Taipei during normalization, was that the secrecy of the negotiations prevented the executive branch to get the Defense Department as thoroughly involved in studying this matter.[40]

Congress however wanted to formalize certain assurances towards Taiwan. Republican senator Barry Goldwater and others even challenged Carters decision to terminate the defense treaty by taking their case to the supreme court.[41] This went without success, but the bipartisan consensus was that arms sales should continue and the TRA should include explicit security guarantees.

The bipartisan amendments that made the final bill reflected these congressional priorities. It explicitly stated that any effort to determine Taiwan's future other by peaceful means were a threat to the security of the Western Pacific and of "grave concern" to the United States. The language remained ambiguous, but it deterred China from aggressive actions. The act also committed the U.S. to "provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character".[42] Crucially, the bill also included the following amendment:

[40] Pratt, Oral History, 157.
[41] Chas W. Jr. Freeman, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 14 April 1995, 98–99.
[42] Clement J. Rep. Zablocki, 'H.R.2479 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Taiwan Relations Act' (1979), https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479.

> *[sec 3] (b) The President and the Congress shall determine the nature and quantity of such defense articles and services based solely upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan, in accordance with procedures established by law. Such determination of Taiwan's defense needs shall include review by United States military authorities in connection with recommendations to the President and the Congress.*[43]

This amendment insured that Beijing could not hijack negotiations about what might or might not be sold to Taiwan.

The TRA was passed quickly and decisively considering its delicate topic. This had three main reasons. First, normalization had already taken place, so the reversal was impossible, it was now damage control. Second, after the administration realized Congress was united in its opposition, it worked hard to iron out any major disagreements with Congress and adjusted its efforts to avoid the most troublesome amendments from being inserted in the act, like any reference to the "Republic of China".[44] Third, a sense of urgency to start with the new unofficial relation. With the embassy officially closed on February 28, 1979, Congress wanted to swiftly establish a new framework to avoid the relationship staying in limbo.[45]

The bill was ultimately passed with overwhelming majority. The few opponents of the bill believed the strengthened language was still too weak.[46] President Carter complained loudly and threatened with a veto, but eventually signed the bill on April 10, 1979. Without the usual ceremonial event, probably as a last show of dissatisfaction. By passing the TRA, Congress reclaimed its authority over Taiwan policy and set a lasting precedent of ambiguity and tension for the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. In doing so, Congress not only codified a framework for unofficial engagement, but also established the kind of strategic ambiguity that would define and complicate U.S. diplomatic efforts in the years to come.

The American Institute in Taiwan

Even before formal negotiations with Beijing began, the Carter administration anticipated the need to preserve unofficial relations with Taiwan and quietly began planning a workaround.
In 1977 Harvey Feldman, then at the China Desk at State Department, was instructed to devise a structure to conduct unofficial relations between the U.S. and Taiwan in case the U.S. went

[43] Rep. Zablocki.
[44] Thayer, Oral History, 52–53.
[45] Lee, *The Making of the Taiwan Relations Act*, 171.
[46] Lee, 168–71.

through on normalization with the PRC. Feldman recalled receiving very little guidance and very little time and was further told not to consult anyone at all.[47] Feldman modeled his plan on Japan, which had created the "Japan Interchange Association on Taiwan" when they normalized relations with China in 1972. The goal was to emulate all functions of embassy, but without official diplomatic recognition. The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) was chosen as the name. It was designed as a non-profit organization based in the U.S. with a board of directors, appointed by the Secretary of State and funded as a line item in the State Department budget. It would be staffed by government employees who for the period of service in this new entity would nominally be on leave-of-absence.

Feldman's structure was included in the first draft of the TRA, but a lot of the finer details were insufficiently covered, particularly how trade agreements, defense contracts and intergovernmental communication would be managed, as these were responsibilities embassies normally were not involved in. So, while the main issue for Congress were the assurances towards Taiwan, most of the questions were on how the unofficial relationship would take form.[48]

The responsibility for turning this abstract idea into reality fell primarily on David Dean, former Deputy Chief of Mission in Beijing. Dean volunteered to establish and lead AIT, officially retiring from the State Department in January 1979 to take on the new role. Yet AIT's initial months in Washington D.C. were hectic. There were a lot of political, personnel and other issues to figure out. Since the Taiwan Relations Act had not yet been signed into law, Dean initially had no funding and had to use his own money to register AIT as a non-profit organization.[49]

Meanwhile in Taipei, DCM William Brown faced even greater turmoil. Ambassador Leonard Unger left in January 1979, so Brown became the senior official tasked with closing the embassy and making all preparation to reopen as AIT Taipei. But detailed instructions from Washington were almost non-existent, and even contacting the State Department was challenging. The challenges of setting up the Taipei branch were however profound. As symbolism was very important in the eyes of the Chinese, AIT could not occupy the old embassy building. The embassy staff had until March 1 (the day the U.S. embassy in Beijing was to open) to vacate the building and were put on administrative leave. Because there was

[47] Feldman, Oral History, 60–61.
[48] Charles T. Cross, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 19 November 1999, 79.
[49] David Dean, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 21 July 1998, 69–71.

still no funding, a small team had to work from home while preparing the opening of AIT. Brown said in his interview with ADST that for months he was still signing checks dated February 27, 1979, to sidestep budgetary constraints. Brown was eventually able to make a deal with the KMT to rent a vacant office in downtown Taipei for just $5000. These examples illustrated the improvisation and desperation of the first few months.[50]

The passage of the TRA in April finally provided funding and clearer guidance. Structurally, AIT was designed as two interconnected offices. The AIT branch in Taipei retained embassy-like functions, despite its unofficial status. The director of AIT, the unofficial ambassador, was chosen by the State Department with clearance from the White House. Symbolism and semantics again played a role. Sections and staff roles were subtly renamed to downplay the diplomatic nature of the relationship: the "political section" became "general affairs," and the consular office was rebranded as a "travel service station." Technicians from the U.S. Navy installed secure communication lines, underscoring that despite official appearances, the U.S. government was firmly behind AIT's operations.[51] A delegation from Washington informed the former embassy staff in Taipei that to serve at AIT, they had to resign from the Foreign Service. Assurances that their careers would not suffer, and payment and benefits would remain the same were met with suspicion. Several people opted for transferring back to D.C., which led to a significant brain drain for AIT.[52]

The second branch, on paper the official American Institute in Taiwan Headquarters (AIT DC) was in Rosslyn, Virginia, just across the river from D.C. It was headed by a board of directors, almost without exception retired foreign service officers. The chairman was the official head of AIT, although in practice the director out in Taipei answered directly to the State Department.

The D.C. headquarters had three main functions. First, it served as the administrative office. The money AIT received annually from the State Department was dispersed to the Taipei branch. It was all smoke and mirrors, but it presented HQ with a lot of administrative work to make sure their employees kept the same benefits and payment as if they were still employed by the U.S. government.[53] Second, it was a go-between for the State Department. AIT was not established to originate policy; it was to carry out the policies that were devised at State. On top

[50] Brown, Oral History, 3 November 1998, 175; Dean, Oral History, 75.
[51] Pratt, Oral History, 165; Dean, Oral History, 75.
[52] G. Eugene Martin, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 21 September 1999, 65; Pratt, Oral History, 159.
[53] Clarke N. Ellis, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 26 January 1998, 31.

of that, AIT DC was the designated organization to conduct public affairs for the relationship with Taiwan, which most notably meant going up to the Capitol Hill to speak with members of Congress.[54]

Third, AIT DC was to function as liaison with the Taiwan representative in the U.S. Taiwan had to set up a similar organization as AIT on their side because their embassy had to close as well, which became the Coordination Council for North American Affairs (CCNAA). Because the U.S. and Taiwan did not have a country-to-country relationship, as provisioned in the Taiwan Relations Act, all agreements or contact between the U.S. and Taiwan had to be funneled through AIT.[55] This usually meant that AIT DC would chair meetings between different American and Taiwanese branches of government who could not meet on a formal basis.[56]

The first four months of 1979 and the establishment of the American Institute in Taiwan were marked by improvisation, uncertainty, clashes with the U.S. military over its withdrawal and persistent funding problems. These struggles reflected the earlier normalization process, which had similarly been defined by inadequate preparation and prioritization of geopolitical goals over practical implementation. It was the diplomats on the ground, especially those in Taipei, who paid the price. This confusion was not only operational but structural, reflecting the uncertain mandate created by the new framework of strategic ambiguity. Although AIT Taipei officially opened its doors in April 1979, it would take years to overcome the confusion and distrust born in these first chaotic months. Much of this institutional confusion could have been avoided with better planning and coordination. But it also reflected a deeper reality: that strategic ambiguity, while effective at the level of grand policy, left those tasked with implementation to navigate a daily environment of improvisation, uncertainty, and institutional strain.

Conclusion

The 1978 normalization was a key shift in U.S. foreign policy. The Carter administration prioritized Cold War alignment with China over a detailed planning and solution for Taiwan. Combined with the haste and secrecy involved in the negotiations, the normalization agreement

[54] Natale H. Bellocchi, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 21 March 1995, 62–65; Dean, Oral History, 71.
[55] Rep. Zablocki, H.R.2479 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Taiwan Relations Act.
[56] Pratt, Oral History, 160.

led to public outrage in the U.S. and Taiwan, congressional backlash and chaos within the U.S. operations to set up a new framework for conducting a new unofficial relationship with Taiwan.

More significantly, these events set some lasting precedents for the U.S.-Taiwan relationship in the following decades. Firstly, the tension between the legislative and executive branch over Taiwan policy. Congress responded to a flawed normalization agreement by asserting its role in foreign policy and partially reclaiming control over Taiwan policy from the executive branch. By passing the Taiwan Relations act, it codified ambiguous but significant security assurances towards Taiwan, that had remained absent from the original normalization agreement the Carter administration signed. At the same time, the secrecy and hastiness of the negotiations illustrated the dangers of top-down policy that was not prepared well. The initial confusion and improvisation that characterized AIT in its first months highlighted the gap between strategy and implementation of policy on the ground.

Normalization of relations with the PRC gave the U.S. an edge in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. It satisfied short-term strategic needs, but at the same time created new problems for how Taiwan policy was to be conducted. The consequences of secrecy, exclusion of expertise and tension between the executive and legislative branch were established, which would continue to be felt in the following decades. The pattern of short-term gain versus long term tensions proved to be a defining feature of U.S. Taiwan policy.

Chapter 2: Stabilization of the ambiguous relationship

Introduction

By mid-1979, the dust of normalization had begun to settle. The American Institute in Taiwan had opened its doors in April and the Taiwan Relations Act provided a legal framework for an unofficial relationship within the One China Policy framework. On paper, a new relationship had begun. But in practice, this was not a simple rebranding exercise. Normalization had ruptured a long-standing alliance, and restoring trust would take far more than a change of names and the removal of official seals.

For U.S. diplomats working in and around Taiwan, the 1980s proved to be a decade of constant recalibration. Their mission was clear yet fundamentally ambiguous: to maintain "unofficial" relations that closely resembled formal diplomacy in practice. This chapter addresses the following sub question: how did U.S. diplomats at AIT adapt to the unofficial U.S.-Taiwan relationship in the 1980s, and what challenges did the One China Policy pose to their efforts?

Three core themes structure the analysis. First, the chapter examines how U.S. diplomats operationalized the new arrangement, and how difficult it proved to restore practical relations with the KMT under symbolic constraints. Second, it explores the unresolved issue of arms sales. China had reserved the right to bring this up. Negotiations were held over the course of 1982 and resulted in a halfhearted U.S. pledge to slowly reduce its arms sales to Taiwan. The U.S. handling of this issue has been criticized as another betrayal of Taiwan, and was plagued by secrecy, internal ideological factionalism and simple misunderstandings. Most of all, it showed the U.S. lacked a cohesive strategy after normalization. Third, it turns to Taiwan's response: how, after multiple disappointments, the KMT adapted to preserve American support by launching a charm offensive, initiating cautious democratization, and deepening economic ties. Taken together, this chapter reveals how the unofficial relationship evolved not through strategy, but through improvisation.

Rebuilding and Improvising the Unofficial U.S.-Taiwan Relationship

AIT's objectives in the first years were threefold. First, to rebuild the damaged relationship with Taiwan and where possible expand trade, cultural and other relations. Secondly, to avoid letting the unofficial arrangement with Taiwan obstruct the U.S.-PRC relationship, while also preserving the confidence of Taiwan's leadership in the future. Lastly, to keep an eye on

developments in Taiwan, particularly those that might affect continued stability and security of Taiwan.[57] This section examines how U.S. diplomats at AIT navigated these first years.

From the start, AIT personnel had to avoid the appearance of official diplomatic relations. This meant that diplomatic creativity and semantic games became a daily routine. U.S. officials avoided words like "government" or "country" in reference to Taiwan, instead rather speaking of "the authorities on Taiwan" or the "people on Taiwan".[58] Formal meetings with senior Taiwanese officials were replaced with informal meals and higher-ranking U.S. officials could not travel to Taiwan. Even the smallest details such as meeting locations and titles used were subject to strict symbolic protocols, to avoid provoking Beijing.[59]

While these symbolic rules were essential, they created frustrations on both sides of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. A lack of trust between the U.S. and Taiwan had accumulated over time. Normalization once again proved to the Taiwanese that the U.S. could not be trusted. Because it was an unequal relationship, the smaller and weaker Taiwan absorbed most of the shocks.[60] In Taipei, AIT officers faced a resentful leadership within the Kuomintang (KMT). Many older mainlander officials in the KMT saw in normalization yet another American betrayal, which they had already experienced in 1949 and during the Korean War. Some KMT leaders remained convinced that the U.S. could not be trusted to uphold Taiwan's long-term security.[61] At the same time, most of the Taiwanese distinguished between AIT employees with whom they saw as friends and allies, and pro-PRC elements at the State Department who gave the orders.[62]

Taiwan's leadership attempted to push the boundaries of unofficiality wherever possible. As David Reuther, chief of the AIT political section in these first years noted, Taiwanese authorities constantly sought to inject an element of officiality into their interactions with AIT.[63] The Taiwanese wanted to address the first AIT director Charles Cross as "Mr Ambassador", a title which Cross politely declined.[64] Another example was the attempt to locate Taiwan's CCNAA offices, the Taiwanese counterpart to AIT, in the same government

[57] Charles T. Cross, *Born a Foreigner: A Memoir of the American Presence in Asia* (Boulder [etc: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 256.
[58] Ellis, Oral History, 32.
[59] Thayer, Oral History, 66; Joan M. Plaisted, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 30 July 2001, 67–68.
[60] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 274.
[61] Dean, Oral History, 83; Stan Ifshin, Oral History, interview by David Reuther, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 22 March 2001, 80.
[62] Cross, *Born a Foreigner*, 261.
[63] Pratt, Oral History, 203.
[64] Cross, Oral History, 80.

buildings as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was meant to blur the line between official and unofficial status. The U.S. repeatedly resisted such moves, to avoid angering Beijing.[65]

Back in Washington, AIT DC played a parallel role, coordinating with other U.S. agencies and acting as a buffer between Taiwan's representatives and the U.S. government. This ensured that contacts with Taiwanese officials were funneled through unofficial channels to adhere to the One China Policy. This system allowed U.S. agencies to continue cooperation with Taiwan, but also produced friction because the new arrangement was ambiguous.[66]

Despite these operational complexities, U.S. diplomats were able to restore a functional relationship with Taiwan over the first years after normalization. Agreements on trade, aviation, fisheries, and technical cooperation were negotiated under AIT supervision. Dean stated that he signed at least thirty separate agreements between the AIT and the CCNAA. The absence of the usual interagency finetuning meant that AIT could conclude agreements more quickly than conventional diplomatic channels.[67]

Yet even as operational mechanisms stabilized, deeper emotional and political tensions remained unresolved. For many in Taiwan's government, the abrupt shift in U.S. policy served as a constant reminder of their strategic vulnerability and uncertain status. Meanwhile, guilt also played a part in the minds of American diplomats who had served during the pre-normalization era. As David Dean, who had set up AIT and served as its chairman in DC, admitted, many U.S. officials still felt they had abandoned a long-standing ally, a sentiment that quietly influenced the mood of post-normalization diplomacy.[68]

This underlying fragility left the U.S.-Taiwan relationship vulnerable to new crises. Normalization had instilled a sense of abandonment within the Taiwanese, and any escalation regarding security guarantees had the potential to reopen unresolved fears. It was within this setting of strategic ambiguity and mutual distrust that the arms sales crisis of 1981–1982 erupted, exposing the limitations of the post-normalization arrangement and a test of the U.S. One China Policy.

[65] David E. Reuther, Oral History, interview by Raymond C. Ewing, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 29 August 1996, 52.
[66] J. Richard Bock, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 15 May 2002, 102–3.
[67] Dean, Oral History, 73.
[68] Dean, 76–77.

The 1982 Arms Sales Crisis

Upon assuming office in January 1981, Ronald Reagan's administration was faced with a difficult situation. During his campaign, Reagan had voiced strong support for Taiwan and even floated the idea of reestablishing official relations with Taiwan.[69] These statements sparked optimism in Taipei, where many in the Kuomintang (KMT) leadership saw Reagan's election as an opportunity to improve its position in the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle. As Dean recalled, Reagan's victory initially raised Taiwanese hopes that the ambiguity of the One China Policy might be revisited in their favor.[70]

This optimism was short-lived. Reagan eventually released a statement that he would not reverse normalization. The new Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, envisioning himself a grand strategist, viewed Beijing as a crucial Cold War partner. He wanted to appease Beijing, to also be able to improve relations with Taipei. This balancing act proved to be unsustainable.[71]

Beneath the surface, the Reagan administration was far from united. Different factions competed for influence. The State Department, led by Al Haig and supported by Chas Freeman and Bill Rope at the China desk, were seen as favoring closer ties with Beijing. The Department of Defense, and those on the National Security Council on the other hand were more sympathetic to Taiwan's security needs. Officials like AIT director Jim Lilley were openly critical of the 'Beijing lobby' within the State Department, even sometimes suggesting they took direct orders from Beijing.[72] The widespread distrust and competition within the executive made Washington vulnerable.

Beijing moved swiftly to capitalize on Washington's internal uncertainty.[73] In late 1981, Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua presented Haig with a series of demands: the U.S. should strictly limit the quantity and quality of future sales, set a definitive end date for arms sales to Taiwan and suspend any new sales in the interim.[74] To Beijing, the case was simple: As one PRC official told Mark Mohr, then head of Taiwan Desk at State: "Taiwan is part of China. We don't sell arms to Mississippi, so you shouldn't sell arms to Taiwan."[75]

These demands went directly counter to the security clause of the Taiwan Relations Act and transformed the conflict into a full-blown diplomatic crisis. Beijing's growing assertiveness

[69] Mann, *About Face*, 116–17.
[70] Dean, Oral History, 78.
[71] Freeman, Oral History, 128–29.
[72] Pratt, Oral History, 192–93.
[73] Lilley, Oral History, 89.
[74] Mann, *About Face*, 123–25.
[75] Mark E. Mohr, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 22 October 2009, 35–36.

was interpreted by many in Washington as a deliberate test of the Reagan administration's resolve. The Chinese hinted at downgrading diplomatic relations, just as they did to the Netherlands in 1980 after its submarine sale to Taiwan.

Many in the U.S. government feared that failing to accommodate Beijing could jeopardize fragile Cold War cooperation.[76] On the other hand, there were people who felt downgrading of relations was a small price to pay to continue selling arms to Taiwan.[77] Thus, the Chinese demands quickly intersected with growing bureaucratic divisions inside Washington. Within the administration, Al Haig prioritized concessions to Beijing, arguing that the broader strategic partnership with China justified reducing arms sales to Taiwan. Other factions, particularly within the Defense Department, and many in Congress resisted any steps that would weaken American commitments to Taiwan's security.[78] In Washington, the arms sales debate exposed sharp ideological tensions that extended beyond policy. Conservative commentators even accused career diplomats of subverting Reagan's pro-Taiwan campaign promises by entering negotiations with the PRC.[79]

This division created severe complications for U.S. diplomats working both in Taipei and in Washington. Officials at the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) were prohibited from engaging directly with Taiwanese officials on arms sales matters, as negotiations were conducted back in Washington. Taiwan's leadership grew increasingly nervous and confrontational as they were also kept outside the loop. Charles Cross, then AIT director, sent policy papers to the State Department suggesting to first give Taiwan some assurances before moving forward.[80]

At its core, the Reagan administration's early struggle over arms sales highlighted a shortcoming of the normalization process: the absence of a long-term strategy. Diplomats scrambled to interpret shifting instructions, while external Chinese pressures and internal factions in the U.S. government complicated maintaining a balance in U.S.-Taiwan relations.

The pressure from the PRC came mainly because of Taiwan's longstanding request for a new and advanced fighter jet, the so-called FX-Fighter. They were mainly interested in a new fighter for symbolic reasons. They knew that their air force could never match the PRC but wanted to test the U.S. resolve towards their security.[81]

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[76] Lilley, Oral History, 86.
[77] Mohr, Oral History, 36.
[78] Lilley, Oral History, 83.
[79] William Frederick Rope, Oral History, interview by David Reuther, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 9 March 2016, 180–81.
[80] Cross, Oral History, 81.
[81] Cross, 79.

As the request for the FX-Fighter landed on Reagan's desk in early 1982, the administration found itself caught. President Reagan had assured Taiwanese president Chiang Ching-Kuo that Taiwan would receive a new generation fighter plane. Honoring the security clause of the TRA, while preserving the recently established U.S.-PRC relation seemed impossible. In January 1982 the U.S. through the State Department came back on their promise and rejected Taiwan's request.[82] The argument that prevailed inside the administration was not that Taiwan's defense needs were irrelevant, but that they were not urgent enough to justify destabilizing relations with Beijing.[83] Mark Pratt, at that time working at AIT Taipei, later stated that there were reports from the State Department where the view was posited that reunification between Taiwan and the PRC was expected to happen soon. This reflected a clear lack of communication between the State Department and AIT, as those involved with Taiwan knew full well, they were far more resilient.[84]

Beijing was encouraged by this decision and doubled down. In the months that followed, Beijing pushed for a broader, more permanent agreement on arms sales. Haig entered negotiations with the PRC, which would ultimately be the most serious diplomatic test of the Reagan administration's Taiwan policy.

Beijing's negotiating strategy was deliberately aggressive. Washington's initial position sought to preserve flexibility. Inside the administration, debate again raged over how far to concede. Haig pressed for language that would signal the intention to gradually reduce arms sales, hoping to secure Cold War cooperation. Critics within Defense, Congress, and the Taiwan lobby warned that such language could be interpreted by Beijing as an eventual commitment to terminate arms sales altogether, undermining the Taiwan Relations Act and emboldening the PRC.[85] Richard Bush has criticized the U.S. negotiation tactics, stating that the he U.S. made major concessions to China, and only afterwards tried to get Beijing to yield some points in return. Which according to him, was not a strong way of doing business.[86]

After months of difficult negotiations, the August 17 Communiqué was signed. Crucially for the content of the communiqué was the fact that Al Haig had been replaced in July. This decision was on paper unrelated but gave proponents of continued arms sales to Taiwan the upper hand. AIT director Jim Lilley stood in direct contact with Reagan and

[82] Cross, *Born a Foreigner*, 268–69.
[83] Rope, Oral History, 211.
[84] Pratt, Oral History, 193.
[85] Mann, *About Face*, 118.
[86] Richard C. Bush, *At Cross Purposes: U.S.-Taiwan Relations Since 1942*, Taiwan in the Modern World 107687100 (Armonk, NY [etc.]: Sharpe, 2004), 176.

implored him not to go through with stating a fixed end date. The final text remained deliberately ambiguous, stating the U.S. would not increase the "quantity and quality" and did not pursue a long-term policy of arms sales. At the same time, it dropped all references to a final termination date and crucially, directly linked the termination of arms sales to peaceful efforts to reunification by the PRC.[87]

The signing of the August 17 Communiqué resulted in cries of horror from the Republican establishment, with concerns that the U.S. was dangerously close to abandoning its commitments to Taiwan's security. Members of Congress argued that the administration was undermining the Taiwan Relations Act without congressional consultation, accusing Reagan of capitulating to Beijing's pressure tactics.[88]

At the same time, anxiety about its future increased in Taiwan. For KMT leaders, the Communiqué was another step and confirmation that the U.S. was incrementally abandoning its security commitments. For AIT diplomats working on the ground, these sentiments further complicated their efforts to establish a trusted relationship with their Taiwanese counterparts.

Richard Bush offered another critique of the August communiqué. The exact text of the bilateral agreement was phrased favorably for the Chinese because the usage of the words *issue* and *final question* could not only point to a resolution of arms sales, but the fate of Taiwan as a whole.[89] I don't agree with this statement, as any type of vagueness in these statements gave the U.S. plausible deniability.

Reagan had not really been involved in the negotiations, thinking the Chinese had accepted that there would be no use of force. When he realized the opposition he faced, he moved to quietly reassure Taipei without provoking Beijing in the form of the Six Assurances, quietly handed to president Chiang Ching-Kuo through AIT director Lilley.[90] They included that the U.S. had not agreed to a set date for ending arms sales, the PRC would not be included in consultations on arms sales to Taiwan, there would be no revision of the TRA, the U.S. had not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan and would not play any mediation role, neither would it pressure Taiwan to enter negotiations with the PRC.[91]

The Six Assurances proved some damage control. The criticism in Congress in 1982 was at the start similar to that in 1978, but criticism dissipated over time, as the Reagan

[87] Lilley, Oral History, 87; Peter Tomsen, Oral History, interview by Mark Tauber, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 20 April 2016, 17; Rope, Oral History, 212.
[88] Dean, Oral History, 79.
[89] Bush, *At Cross Purposes*, 160–82.
[90] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 147.
[91] Bush, *At Cross Purposes*, 174.

administration clarified that the communique was merely a statement of intent, and compatible with the TRA, as the U.S. would merely reduce weapons sales as the mainland threat reduced.[92] Thus, China had won significant concessions regarding U.S. support for Taiwan, but the effect of the August Communiqué over time diminished, by creative interpretations as to what constituted arms sales, as well as the private pledge by Reagan that linked U.S. commitments in the communiqué directly to Chinese actions in the Strait.[93]

For AIT diplomats, the Six Assurances proved invaluable in stabilizing its relationship with their Taiwanese counterparts. The assurances allowed AIT officers to provide credible reassurance to increasingly skeptical Taiwanese counterparts that American support remained intact despite the ambiguous language of the Communiqué. They also gave AIT an explanation to counter any Chinese objections to subsequent arms sales.

Yet the assurances did not resolve the fundamental ambiguity of U.S. policy. Instead, they represented another improvised adjustment layered onto an already unstable diplomatic structure. The One China Policy continued to force U.S. diplomats into a permanent balancing act. Significant damage had also been done to the U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship, not just because of the tensions before the August 17 Communiqué, because of the mutual distrust that remained after the entire affair.[94]

In the aftermath of the 1982 Communiqué, a reshuffle took place at the State Department, signaling a new approach to U.S.-China-Taiwan relations. Al Haig was replaced by George Shultz as Secretary of State, and Paul Wolfowitz took over from John Holdridge as Assistant Secretary for East Asia. Shultz thought that Haig, Carter and even Kissinger focused too much on the nature of the relationship, instead of the substance. He argued that by proactively tackling problems and taking advantage of opportunities, the U.S.-China relationship would improve.[95] The new team adopted a more structured and measured approach to China and Taiwan, one that acknowledged congressional constraints and Reagan's preferences.[96] Jim Lilley, then AIT director, described the change as a turning point. It did not signal a pro-Taiwan pivot, but rather a more coordinated and realistic engagement with both sides of the Strait. As the dust of the arms crisis settled, a new modus operandi emerged:

[92] Harding, *A Fragile Relationship*, 117–18.
[93] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 152.
[94] Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink*, 221.
[95] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 152.
[96] Pratt, Oral History, 188–89.

institutionalized ambiguity, managed less through confrontation and more through calibrated signaling and bureaucratic consensus.[97]

Taiwan's Strategic Turn

For Taiwan, the 1982 Communique on arms sales was another in a long line of disappointments. Taiwan increasingly recognized that U.S. security guarantees in the new era of strategic ambiguity were brittle. It compelled the KMT government in Taipei to adopt a more proactive strategy and launch a charm offensive.[98] This section explores how U.S. diplomats witnessed and navigated Taiwan's strategic efforts to shore up more support in the U.S. It did so by extensive lobbying efforts through the "China Lobby", cautious democratization and deepening the economic ties with the U.S. These strategies offered Taiwan leverage, but also complicated the AIT's task of managing an already delicate ambiguous relationship.

The Taiwanese lobby in Washington D.C. was known as the best in the business. Ironically it was known as the "China Lobby", because their lobbying efforts dated back to the 1940s, when Madame Chiang Kai-Shek made headlines when she spoke to Congress. In the decades that followed, the China Lobby wielded significant influence, especially in the early period of the Cold War. A telling example of its power came with the suppression of a critical account of their endeavors. *The China Lobby in American Politics* by Ross Y. Koen was written and scheduled to be released in 1960 but was suppressed in the U.S. for over a decade by threatened legal action and technical issues. It was only widely released in 1974.[99]

The Taiwanese lobbying strategy was notable for its professionalism, patience and long-term planning and grooming of up-and-coming politicians. They had spent decades investing a lot of time and money into cultivating friendship with the U.S. Congress and learning about the political system. Many Taiwanese studied at American universities or adopted Americanized names for themselves, making it easier for Americans to relate to them.[100] Unlike more confrontational lobbies, Taiwan avoided threats and ultimatums, instead cultivating long-term personal relationships with members of Congress as well as staffers, governors and businesspeople.[101] Compared to the Taiwan lobby, Chinese lobbying efforts were blunt and confrontational. Their efforts consisted of complaining loudly when things did not go their way,

[97] Lilley, Oral History, 88–90.
[98] Lilley, 86.
[99] Stanley David Bachrack, *The Committee of One Million: 'China Lobby' Politics, 1953-1971* (New York ; Columbia University Press, 1976), 276–77.
[100] Howard H. Lange, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 20 June 2000, 100.
[101] Freeman, Oral History, 97; 124.

borne out of a misunderstanding of the political system in the U.S. whereby the executive branch did not wield supreme power.[102]

Taiwan expanded their lobbying efforts during the 1980s. In the absence of official diplomatic relations, they had to adapt. Stan Ifshin, who worked as a commercial officer at AIT in the early eighties, noted that Taiwan promoted all sorts of sister relationships, whether between Taiwanese and American cities, universities or sports clubs.[103] It also worked on creating a bipartisan network of support, shielding them from party politics and creating a critical source of leverage.

At the core of this strategy was the systematic grooming of emerging American political figures.[104] Taiwanese organizations routinely organized exchange programs, targeting future U.S. leaders, even those who were acting on state-level politics. Bill Clinton, as a young governor of Arkansas, visited Taiwan multiple times, long before he became a national figure. These personal friendships created a dense web which Taiwan could activate when its interests were threatened.[105] The role of AIT in this process was that they were responsible for welcoming congressional visits and briefing them on the dos and don'ts that were so important for conducting the unofficial relationship.[106]

During the 1980s, Taiwan broadened its congressional support base. Growing democratization on the island and efforts to improve human-rights situations allowed Taiwan to appeal to liberal democrats who were traditionally opponents of the KMT regime. This bipartisan outreach diversified Taiwan's backing and complicated Beijing's efforts to isolate the island diplomatically.[107] For U.S. diplomats at AIT, the Taiwan lobby served as both an asset and a complication. Strong congressional interest in Taiwan gave AIT political cover when managing sensitive matters. On the other, it constrained Washington's policy flexibility, forcing diplomats to manage not only U.S.-Taiwan relationship, but also keep an eye on Washington's own domestic political sensitivities.

While Taiwan worked to secure its position in Washington, a parallel transformation of gradual democratization unfolded domestically. Chiang Ching-kuo, leader of the authoritarian Kuomintang government slowly opened Taiwan's political system. This internal shift would

[102] Martin, Oral History, 101.
[103] Ifshin, Oral History, 71.
[104] David G. Brown, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 28 January 2003, 76–77.
[105] Daryl Norman Johnson, Oral History, interview by David Reuther, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 26 March 2006, 194–95.
[106] Plaisted, Oral History, 68.
[107] Ifshin, Oral History, 79; Pratt, Oral History, 196.

profoundly shape Taiwan's relationship with the United States and complicate the diplomatic work of American officials tasked with managing unofficial ties.

The move toward democratization was driven by both internal and external factors. Reformers within the KMT and the growing strength of opposition movement, called the Dangwai, placed pressure to relax authoritarian controls. Internationally, democratization was seen to appeal to the American people and strengthening its position within U.S. domestic politics. It enabled a shift in its image from an authoritarian regime into one with democratic values.[108]

AIT officials emphasized Taiwan's political progress in conversations with Congress and State, reinforcing arguments for continuing arms sales and economic cooperation. On the other hand, democratization also raised new diplomatic sensitivities. AIT officers had to be careful when contacting opposition figures, avoiding actions that might be interpreted by the KMT or Beijing as interference in Taiwan's internal politics.[109]

The KMT did not transform overnight from an authoritarian regime to a blossoming democracy. There were setbacks. A painful example was the Kaohsiung Incident that occurred in December 1979. Opposition figures held a demonstration, promoting human rights and democracy. As Taiwan was still a one-party-state back then, the KMT cracked down on this peaceful demonstration and arrested opposition activists in large numbers. Another setback were the frequent political murders perpetrated by the KMT security services, including that of Henry Liu in California. These incidents created strains in U.S.-Taiwan relations and complicated the balancing acts of AIT personnel in defending the process of Taiwanese democratization.[110]

Nevertheless, by the late 1980s, Major reforms were underway, although elections were still far. Following Chiang's death in 1988, Lee Teng-hui, a personal confidant and native Taiwanese, was elevated to the presidency. This marked a symbolic break from the KMT's mainlander dominance and enhanced Taiwan's political identity as distinct from that of the PRC.[111] The One China framework persisted, but Taiwan's growing democratic credentials strengthened moral support in U.S. politics and complicated future efforts to accommodate Beijing's reunification demands.

[108] Bush, *At Cross Purposes*, 218.
[109] Martin, Oral History, 103; Bush, *At Cross Purposes*, 80.
[110] Thayer, Oral History, 72; Lilley, Oral History, 78.
[111] Johnson, Oral History, 193; Pratt, Oral History, 153.

Economic interdependence with the U.S. was the third element of Taiwan's adaptive approach. Throughout the 1980s, U.S.-Taiwan trade quadrupled. This deepening economic relationship not only diversified bilateral ties but provided Taiwan with additional leverage in its unofficial engagement with the US.[112]

Economic cooperation was a sector where American diplomats at AIT really felt they could make a difference and to which they dedicated significant energy. The staff in Taipei helped American business interests in Taiwan and facilitated agreements between AIT and its Taiwanese counterpart, the CCNAA. These commercial ties allowed diplomats to demonstrate the concrete benefits of continued U.S.-Taiwan engagement, both to policymakers in Washington and to skeptical members of Congress concerned with the ambiguous nature of the relationship.[113]

Taiwan's economic growth also created new frictions. It evolved from labor-intensive industries into higher-value sectors such as semiconductors, consumer electronics, and advanced manufacturing. In the second half of the 1980s, the focus of U.S.-Taiwan relations had shifted significantly from arms sales towards resolving trade disputes, addressing intellectual property concerns and reducing the Taiwanese trade surplus with the U.S. The Treasury Department and Congress pressured Taiwan to revalue its currency and open its markets, with AIT serving as mediator. In 1987, after sustained U.S. pressure, Taiwan agreed to appreciate its currency, reducing the competitiveness of its exports and easing political tensions with the US.[114]

Economic success strengthened Taiwan's hand to secure continued U.S. involvement. For U.S. diplomats, growing economic interdependence offered a way to improve relations with the Taiwanese government. At the same time, the increasing trade ties meant that AIT could get the message across to Washington that unofficial engagement was fruitful and should continue.

Conclusion

The 1980s highlighted the limits of the One China Policy as a functional framework for the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. It allowed for unofficial ties to continue, but there was a lack of a long-term strategy. Diplomats at AIT had to translate Strategic Ambiguity into action, finding ad-hoc solutions without clear directions. The new relation was not a stable new order, but a layered system of workarounds.

[112] Dean, Oral History, 86.
[113] Dean, 83; Ellis, Oral History, 44.
[114] Plaisted, Oral History, 64; Dean, Oral History, 89.

Rebuilding relations with Taiwan through AIT was difficult and required constant negotiation of symbols, language, and protocol. There was a genuine effort to rebuild the relationship, marked by performative efforts to show Beijing that there was no official relationship with Taiwan. Treaties on all sorts of topics had to be renegotiated, all interdepartmental contact had to be funneled through AIT and agreements had to be signed by both AIT and CCNAA.

The FX-Fighter crisis and the 1982 Communiqué exposed how fragile that arrangement really was. Pressured into negotiations by Beijing, the division within the U.S. government obstructed effective interdepartmental communication and resulted in a heavily criticized communiqué. Diplomats in Taipei lacked the authority to reassure their Taiwanese counterparts. The Six Assurances offered relief, but the damage had already been done.

At the same time, Taiwan was changing. Repeated disappointment in American decisions led the KMT to adopt a more proactive and pragmatic approach in their relationship with the U.S. Through democratization, targeted lobbying, and economic integration, Taiwan tried to intensify its relationship with the U.S. and shore up support. AIT officials were now dealing with a more pluralistic society, broader congressional engagement, and growing trade dependencies that touched on sensitive cross-Strait issues.

In short, the post-1979 relationship was subject to continual reinterpretation. Maintaining the balance in the relationship fell largely on the shoulders of diplomats at AIT and the State Department, who were tasked with implementation but not included in policy matters. At the end of the 1980s the U.S.-Taiwan-China triangle seemed stable, but only because of the institutionalized adaptation. The 1990s introduced new tensions to this relationship, as Taiwanese democratization efforts accelerated, and the end of the Cold War redefined American interests.

Chapter 3: the Seesaw of Ambiguity

Introduction

At the start of 1989, tensions between the United States and China over Taiwan were relatively low. The U.S.-China relationship had improved significantly during the 1980s, and China appeared confident that the U.S. would remain committed to the One China Policy. Simultaneously, the unofficial U.S.-Taiwan relationship had stabilized. The AIT had been operating for a decade, arms sales continued, and ideas of near-term reunification had disappeared from the minds of U.S. policymakers.[115] Strategic ambiguity seemed effective. It preserved stability in the Taiwan Strait by reassuring both Beijing and Taipei, without committing too much to one side.

This balance proved short-lived. Three major developments disrupted the equilibrium. First, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and collapse of the Soviet Union removed the main rationale for the U.S.-PRC rapprochement. Secondly, the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 shattered hopes for Chinese political liberalization and spurred congressional and public criticism. Third, Taiwan's rapid democratization, marked by the lifting of martial law and the first free presidential election, elevated its international standing and increased expectations for U.S. support.

These changes, especially Taiwan's political transformation, produced a paradox for U.S. diplomacy. Officials welcomed democratization in principle but struggled to remain neutral between a communist and a democratic state. As Taiwan pushed for more recognition, Beijing responded with suspicion. Diplomats at AIT and in Washington were caught in the middle.[116]

This chapter addresses how Taiwan's democratization complicated the daily work of U.S. diplomats at AIT and how they managed to uphold the One China Policy. It begins with a further explanation on the shift in U.S.-China relations, followed by Taiwan's internal democratization and growing U.S. support and politicization of Taiwan policy in the U.S. Next, the chapter explores the 1994 Taiwan Policy Review, the politicization of AIT and finally the climactic 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis. Together, these episodes show that while strategic ambiguity was formally maintained by adherence to the One China Policy, in practice it was challenged, which posed challenges for diplomats who had to maintain this policy.

[115] Harding, *A Fragile Relationship*, 160–62.
[116] Lange, Oral History, 97.

The Crumbling U.S.-PRC relationship

For two decades, the U.S.-China relationship had been based on a shared strategic goal: countering the Soviet Union. This alignment allowed both countries to set aside their deeper agreements, whether ideological, on human rights, and particularly Taiwan. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, that strategic glue dissolved. Without the shared goal of containing the influence of the Soviet Union, underlying tensions resurfaced.

Several issues complicated the U.S.-China relationship during the late 80s and early 90s. Chinese arms sales to Middle Eastern countries such as Pakistan and Iran, though repeatedly denied by China, angered Washington, and suggested deliberate deception. Chinese continued nuclear buildup further strained the relationship, as did China's support for the Khmer Rouge.[117] These factors all contributed to the erosion of goodwill, but the events of June 1989 dealt the most profound blow to the U.S.-China relationship.

The Tiananmen Square Massacre shocked both the American public and government. Throughout the 1980s, many U.S. policymakers had believed that China's experiment with market-oriented reforms under Deng Xiaoping would inevitably lead to political liberalization. This idea was based on the deepest principle of American political philosophy, that people aspire to be free. The crackdown on the student protests shattered that hope overnight.[118] The images of Chinese tanks crushing student protests on live television horrified the American public and exposed the brutal authoritarian core of the Chinese Communist Party.

For Taiwan, the crackdown was further confirmation of the PRC's repressive nature. David Dean, then stationed in Taiwan, observed that the Taiwanese were dismayed but not surprised. In Washington, the sense of betrayal ran deep ill what Americans had projected as their inevitable political destiny.[119] A bipartisan consensus emerged that human rights violations should take on a more prominent role in U.S.-China policy. Taiwan, by contrast, appeared as an increasingly attractive partner for lawmakers who were eager to champion democratic values abroad. The hope of friendliness with the Chinese was gone, with Taiwan it continued.[120]

Beijing viewed the shift in U.S. attitudes as sign of unreliability of the Americans. Growing ties between the U.S. and Taiwan were seen as an existential threat to the One China

[117] Harding, *A Fragile Relationship*, 174–89.
[118] Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley, CA. [etc: University of California Press, 1995), 1–27.
[119] Dean, Oral History, 93.
[120] Mann, *About Face*, 193.

principle. This growing divergence in expectations set the stage for the mounting tensions that would define the US-Taiwan-China triangle throughout the 1990s.[121] As the ideological gap between China and Taiwan widened, so too did the strategic expectations among all three parties. As Madsen has argued, the U.S. approach to China revealed an idealistic vision of democracy promotion, shaped as much by self-perception as by realpolitik.[122]

In short, the end of the Cold War and the Tiananmen aftermath eroded the strategic and emotional reasons for the U.S.-China alignment. It also shattered the last bit of hope of peaceful reunification between China and Taiwan. The cracks in the triangular relationship were fully exposed.

Taiwan's Democratization

The democratization of Taiwan during the late 1980s and early 1990s was a defining moment in the island's modern history. Taiwan transformed from a one-party authoritarian state into a multi-party democracy. This development was welcomed in principle by the U.S. government, as it viewed itself as the main champion of democratic values. In practice, it created deep diplomatic tensions. Supporting Taiwanese democracy risked provoking Beijing. If Taiwan were to declare independence for example, it would call into question the obligations the U.S. had towards them. At the same time, appeasing China clashed with American rhetoric and congressional pressures.[123]

Taiwan's political liberalization accelerated after President Chiang-Ching Kuo abolished martial law in 1987 and promised to reform the legislative by allowing opposition to form. According to David Dean, CCK realized that he had to move towards a democratic form of government because almost 90 percent of the population were native born Taiwanese, who increasingly wanted their voices to be heard in government.[124]

President Lee-Teng Hui, CCK's native-born successor, deepened reforms. The aging legislators, many of whom had held onto their seats since 1949, were retired and elections were held on all levels.[125] The internal dynamic of Taiwan's society changed drastically during these years. Natale Bellocchi, who became chairman of AIT in 1990, noted that the atmosphere in Taiwan was like a breath of fresh air. People wanted to oppose the leadership and talk about

[121] Ellis, Oral History, 45.
[122] Madsen, *China and the American Dream*.
[123] Bock, Oral History, 85.
[124] Dean, Oral History, 81.
[125] Dean, 80.

independence, just because they now could.[126] The rise of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), founded by former dissidents and political exiles, signaled a broader opening of political discourse. Calls for Taiwanese independence, once taboo, now entered mainstream debate.[127]

Taiwanese Democratization had profound implications for U.S. Taiwan policy and the One China Policy. It became harder for the U.S. to make decisions on Taiwan's fate without regard to the views of its citizens, as was the case in earlier episodes like 1978.[128] According to Nat Bellocchi, AIT chairman at the time, it was no longer feasible for the U.S. to tell Taiwan to "just keep quiet and not make any trouble". Public opinion now mattered, voters had a voice, and politicians had to respond to them. The Taiwanese were very conscious of their own lack of diplomatic status.[129] The DPP began to demand international recognition and enhanced security guarantees. The U.S. was reluctant to endorse such positions but could no longer fully ignore them. The DPP was still marginal and the KMT maintained support for reunification in the future, but these signals alarmed both Washington and Beijing.

Democratization also led to internal division and especially a rift between generations. Bellocchi recalled that he had to speak to groups of Taiwanese American communities separately, because they would not mix anymore. Older Taiwanese Americans felt alienated by the new political direction.[130] Younger Taiwanese Americans were energized by the democratic awakening of the island and the fact that the U.S. government paid attention to it. They had long felt abandoned, and democratization gave them new hope for increased U.S. support.[131] The views in the Taiwanese American communities mirrored the tensions on the island itself, where opponents of President Lee Teng-Hui argued that his whole objective was to cut all ties with the mainland, declaring independence and dropping the name "Republic of China".[132]

For China, the political reforms in Taiwan were a dangerous development. It was not simply a domestic issue, but a direct challenge to their One China principle. In recent years, cross-Strait tensions had eased through the so-called track-two diplomacy. These were informal contacts, centered on family visits, strengthening trade relations and academic or political exchanges of views.[133] It led to a boom in trade, with the mainland in a few years becoming

[126] Bellocchi, Oral History, 69–70.
[127] Lilley, Oral History, 96.
[128] Bush, *At Cross Purposes*, 7.
[129] Bellocchi, Oral History, 67.
[130] Bellocchi, 69.
[131] Bellocchi, 70–71.
[132] Johnson, Oral History, 193.
[133] Ralph N. Clough, *Reaching Across the Taiwan Strait: People-to-People Diplomacy* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1993), 167.

Taiwan's number one trade partner, surpassing the U.S.[134] But the rise of multiparty politics threatened this détente. Beijing could no longer deal exclusively with the KMT, facing the prospect of a popular mandate rejecting unification altogether. It legitimized the idea that Taiwan was a separate political entity and introduced new uncertainties into the relationship.

In retrospect, Taiwan's political transformation during the early 1990s was a political and moral triumph, but a major factor for instability in the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle. For U.S. diplomats, the core dilemma became harder to navigate: how to support democratic development in Taiwan without undermining the One China Policy. Political actors in the U.S. and Taiwan started to push against the boundaries of ambiguity, while China began to view every adjustment in the U.S.-Taiwan relationship as a threat to the status quo.

U.S.-Taiwan Relations: Arms, Congress and trade

Taiwan's democratization coincided with a fundamental shift in the nature of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Previously, Taiwan policy had been the domain of the executive branch. But in the early 1990s, Taiwan policy became increasingly politicized and contested. Nowhere was this more evident than in the debate over arms sales and the controversial decision to sell F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan.

The decision marked a clear break from the 1982 communiqué, in which the U.S. pledged not to increase its arms sales in quality or quantity. For nearly a decade, this arrangement had kept tensions dormant. But in 1992 the military balance of power in the Strait was shifting. Taiwan was using fast ageing jets, while the PRC was modernizing with Soviet fighter planes. Beijing unsurprisingly denounced the sale as a clear violation of the 1982 communiqué, while the U.S. justified it by arguing that the spirit of the communiqué was keeping the balance in the Taiwan Strait. For Taiwan, it was an important political win, showcasing how the U.S. would not curry favor with China as they had done during the Cold War.[135]

Domestic U.S. politics also played a crucial role. The General Dynamics plant in Texas that produced F-16 jets was under threat of foreclosure, risking the jobs of 5000 workers. The decision by Bush came in the middle of his 1992 reelection campaign. Administration officials have later always argued that these pressures merely influenced the timing of the decision. It

[134] Johnson, Oral History, 203; Dean, Oral History, 97.
[135] Lange, Oral History, 111.

became clear that arms sales to Taiwan was no longer just a foreign policy tool, but also became intertwined with domestic politics.[136]

The F-16 episode also reflected broader institutional shifts. Congress had previously only played a limited corrective role in Taiwan policy. Democratization raised Taiwan's public visibility and moral appeal. As the contrast between the repressive PRC and democratic Taiwan grew, members of Congress became more vocal and involved. Not so much in numbers, as Taiwan already had broad support in the 1980s, but in the fact that representatives and senators made Taiwan a priority and spoke out more. For liberal senators as Joe Lieberman from Connecticut and Paul Simon in California, democracy and improvements in human rights were important reasons to voice their support for Taiwan.[137] Support for Taiwan was no longer just about strategy, but also identity.

The booming economic ties reinforced this shift. By 1990, U.S.-Taiwan trade amounted to $34.3 billion, with investments by US firms totaling another $3.6 billion. More than double of US investment in mainland China.[138] Taiwan became a major player in hardware and the semiconductor industry. Their critical role in the industries of the future created new stakeholders within the U.S. business community that favored continued engagement and support for Taiwan. In this context, the line between economic interest, strategic calculation, and political loyalty blurred.[139]

These trends taken together signaled a new phase in the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. Strategic ambiguity and quiet and unofficial diplomacy still were the official policy, but Taiwan also became popularized and politicized. The State Department and AIT found themselves under increasing pressure to adapt their policy. Taiwan was not just a security partner anymore, but a democratic ally, deserving of stronger ties. This momentum would lead to the 1994 Taiwan Policy Review, which was a modest attempt by the new Clinton administration to recalibrate an increasingly outdated approach of Taiwan Policy.

The 1994 Taiwan Policy Review

The F-16 decision produced uncertainty within the U.S. State Department on the direction of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. William Clark Jr, who was appointed AS for East Asian Affairs in the waning days of the Bush administration, concluded that a reexamination of Taiwan policy

[136] Mann, *About Face*, 255–73.
[137] Bellocchi, Oral History, 71.
[138] Harding, *A Fragile Relationship*, 346–47.
[139] Johnson, Oral History, 201.

should be undertaken, to make sure everyone was on the same page.[140] Winston Lord, the new Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs under Clinton, spearheaded the effort that would eventually result in the 1994 Taiwan Policy Review (TPR). According to Lord, the goal was to strengthen ties with Taiwan, without significantly hurting the China relationship. [141] He never had any feeling that it was going to be a revolutionary revision of Taiwan policy, but the problem was that U.S. Congress and Taiwanese government officials expected just that.[142]

Many anomalies had grown into the relationship after the passing of the TRA in 1979. The goal was to point out those anomalies where possible simplify relations. Some examples of the problems the review tackled were the restrictions on where government officials could meet, clarify some of the ambiguous names and titles that ruled the relationship and caused confusion, and assess where the U.S. could increase its support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations.

The TPR wasn't a review of policy so much as a review of how we implement policy. The results were modest but symbolically important. First, The Taiwanese counterpart of AIT changed its name from CCNAA into TECRO (Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office). Second, it became easier for representatives to meet. Taiwan's representatives could visit U.S. officials in their offices, apart from State and the White House, while cabinet-level officials in economic and functional agencies were permitted to visit Taipei. Third, low-profile transit stops in the U.S. for higher-level Taiwanese officials would be allowed. Lastly, the U.S. would support Taiwan in international organizations were statehood was not a prerequisite, such as the WTO, APEC, and the Olympics.[143]

The outcome of the TPR fell far short of what Congress and Taipei had hoped for, which was a real change in policy by means of a stronger endorsement of Taiwan's diplomatic legitimacy. Ex-AIT director Jim Lilley also blasted the TPR, stating that it was a deterioration that political figures such as the Taiwanese Vice-President could not, as in the past, travel to the U.S. anymore. He also argued that insisting on the name TECRO instead of Taipei Representative Office was a preemptive concession.[144] Beijing also viewed the review as a provocation, as they saw every policy adjustment as a sign of U.S. untrustworthiness.

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[140] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 192.
[141] Winston Lord, Oral History, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 28 April 1998, 591.
[142] Lange, Oral History, 99.
[143] Bush, *At Cross Purposes*, 226–27; Lord, Oral History, 592.
[144] Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 205.

The question is then, why the major events of the early 1990s did not culminate in a major shift in the One China Policy. As Lord stated in his interview, the U.S. was very hesitant to change their policy, viewing the long-term stability in the Taiwan Strait as something to cherish. At the same time, The U.S. recognized the economic potential that the Chinese market could offer. China had increased the speed of opening their economy in, with a staggering growth rate as a result: from 4 percent in 1990 to 12 percent in 1992. Under Clinton, commerce became the dominant motivating force behind the U.S.' China policy. The reduced strategic importance made up for it in its economic importance. Clinton wanted to use the threat of withdrawal of Most Favored Nation status (MFN) to goad China into easing its repressive policies. At the same time, the upsurge in foreign investment gave China greater commercial power and leverage than it had previously wielded.[145]

The TPR showed how strategic ambiguity was becoming even more fragile. For Beijing, the modest adjustment was a provocation. For Taipei, it was insufficient. The TPR helped AIT to conduct its unofficial relations better, but at the same time, it was only small adjustments. In short, the TPR did not resolve tensions, but exposed them.

The AIT & the Jim Woods Affair

In 1995, the internal fragility of U.S. Taiwan policy was exposed by the so-called "Jim Woods Affair". This sensitive political appointment revealed how vulnerable AIT had become to politicization, despite being designed as a non-partisan and professional channel for unofficial diplomacy.

The AIT chairmen were traditionally retired foreign service officers with long experience in East Asia. Though the position was primarily administrative and ceremonial, while the AIT director in Taipei functioned as the de factor ambassador, on paper the chairman was the most senior official. The understanding was that it remains strictly apolitical. This precedent was shattered when Jim Woods, an Arkansas attorney with no foreign policy background, was appointed as chairman in by the Clinton administration in 1995. Although he denied being a "Friend of Bill", his political connections raised immediate concerns among Taiwan specialists at AIT.[146]

When it became clear that Woods' appointment would go through, the other three directors on the advisory board resigned in protests, arguing the appointment was a dangerous move toward politicization of AIT and undermined the institute's credibility. Their concerns

[145] Mann, *About Face*, 284–88; 371.
[146] Lange, Oral History, 108.

were soon confirmed. Woods made a political case that the chairman should be a Democrat, as the previous one had been a Republican. He also made accusations of financial mismanagement, filed lawsuits against the State Department, and tried to steer Taiwanese business to a private consulting firm with which he was associated. To top it all, he reportedly even attempted to raise funds from Taiwanese sources for the Democratic National Committee.[147]

These acts were seen as crossing a fundamental ethical line. Woods was subsequently fired after less than a year in office. According to Howard Lange, then at the Taiwan Desk over at the State Department, Woods "tried to create difficulties" and disrupted the workings of the organization. For David Dean, one of the directors on the board who quit in protest to Woods appointment, the episode demonstrated why the position should be filled by an expert, who could keep political distance and work with the State Department. "It was entirely a self-inflicted wound", he remarked.[148]

The episode not only damaged morale but exposed the fragility of the bureaucracy. A single appointment threatened the unique and corporate structure of AIT. Bill Brown, trustee at AIT, emphasized that AIT might have a small staff, but was crucial for maintaining the politically sensitive relationship with Taiwan.[149] In hindsight, the incident foreshadowed the broader instability that would erupt during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, showing how strategic ambiguity was not only a matter of policy, but required disciplined execution and separation from partisan politics.

Lee-Teng Hui and his High-Visibility Foreign Policy

In the wake of the limited Taiwan Policy Review and perceived lack of attention from the Clinton administration, President Lee Teng-hui launched what he called a policy of "pragmatic diplomacy". The goal was to raise Taiwan's international position and reaffirm its status as a sovereign democracy. Domestically, Lee aimed to satisfy a new and politically awakened population, with general elections scheduled for 1996.[150]

This policy of high visibility had four principal objectives. First, to accelerate strengthening of relations with which Taiwan lacked diplomatic relations, including playing golf with heads of state. Second, to push for inclusion in international organizations. Third, he developed relations with communist regimes around the world. Fourth, he challenged the

[147] Lange, 110.
[148] Dean, Oral History, 97.
[149] Brown, Oral History, 3 November 1998, 580.
[150] Dean, Oral History, 94.

diplomatic dominance of Beijing in countries where the PRC held official recognition.[151] These efforts were highly visible, and that visibility itself became the point.

In 1994, Lee tested Washington's flexibility by requesting a stopover on Hawaii on route to South America. The request was denied under the guidelines of the Taiwan Policy Review, and AIT and the State Department knew how sensitive Beijing was to this issue.[152] Fred Chien, the Taiwanese foreign minister, pushed back hard on this decision. Chien told Assistant Secretary Winston Lord that "[he] had no idea what a bunch of spineless jellyfish you [Americans] were". Lord worked out a compromise that Lee could touch down, but not spend overnight outside of the Air Base.[153]

AIT's chairman Nat Bellocchi flew out to Hawaii to receive Lee-Teng Hui and ease tensions, but the Taiwanese president remained on the plane as a way of protest. The Taiwanese spun the incident as if the Americans had not allowed him to set foot on U.S. soil. U.S. officials such as Winston Lord viewed this spin as disingenuous, but Congress were critical and reinforced Lee's narrative.[154]

In May 1995, Lee-Teng Hui escalated again by accepting an invitation by Cornell University, his alma mater, to deliver a speech and receive an honorary degree. Whereas stopovers were one thing, an actual visit was going to be seen as a real change in policy and a real threat to the policy of strategic ambiguity.[155] Whereas the State Department was strongly opposed to the visit, Taiwanese lobbying efforts and a unanimous Congressional resolution convinced the White House to sign off on the visa request. President Clinton was frustrated by the lack of Chinese cooperation on trade problems, and so was open to the idea. His approval meant a significant break in precedent.[156] AIT was sidelined in the decision-making process. Richard Bock, then deputy manager of AIT/DC thought that if the U.S. had remained steadfast during the earlier Hawaii incident, this next visit could have been avoided.[157]

In his speech, Lee made repeated references to the "Republic of China on Taiwan" and emphasized Taiwan's democratic development. To Beijing, this was a clear provocation. The PRC immediately recalled its ambassador to the U.S., froze cross-Strait talks, and began planning a series of military exercises.[158]

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[151] Clough, *Reaching across the Taiwan Strait*, 104.
[152] Bock, Oral History, 106.
[153] Mann, *About Face*, 315–17.
[154] Lord, Oral History, 595.
[155] Bock, Oral History, 106–7.
[156] Mann, *About Face*, 321–23.
[157] Bock, Oral History, 107.
[158] Dean, Oral History, 95.

According to Winston Lord, the content of the speech was a direct breach of understanding. The State Department had signed off on the visa request in the assumption that Lee would refrain from any controversial statements, as he traveled to Cornell as a private citizen. The speech deeply harmed the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, as intergovernmental contact with Taiwan strained in the following months.[159] James Mann has argued that the U.S. position was inherently untenable and hypocritical. The Clinton administration tried to have it both ways, by posing Lee as a private citizen, but censoring the speech of a private citizen. Also, Beijing's objection was to the visit itself. According to Mann, Beijing would have reacted similarly no matter the contents of the speech.[160]

Lee's high-profile diplomacy and his speech at Cornell were a direct blow to the policy of strategic ambiguity. For Taipei, democratization meant that their elected leaders had the right to promote its identity on the global stage. Congress agreed that Taiwan's status as a democracy justified greater access and recognition. For Beijing, even symbolic gestures toward independence, or the appearance of U.S. support, were unacceptable violations of the One China Policy. Lastly, for Washington any attempt to stay neutral looked like capitulation to one side or betrayal of the other. The norms that had sustained unofficial U.S.-Taiwan ties for over a decade were strained by a new political reality. The stage was set for confrontation.

The 1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis

The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis was a decisive moment in U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship. It was the ultimate test for the U.S. government and required them to show what strategic ambiguity really meant. The crisis forced diplomats at AIT to manage the unofficial relationship under totally different circumstances. There was a shift from quiet and informal facilitation to emergency coordination, for which AIT was not well equipped.

Beijing interpreted Lee Teng-Hui's speech at Cornell as a direct challenge to the One China Policy and started conducting live missile tests in the Taiwan Strait. U.S. intelligence quickly assessed it was about sending a sign, as the PRC lacked the capacity for a full-on invasion of Taiwan.[161] Still, the Clinton administration felt compelled to respond through strength. Americas credibility was being challenged. The U.S. directed two aircraft carrier groups to navigate through the Taiwan Strait, which they did in December 1995. According to Winston Lord, the show of force had different goals. It served as a reminder to Beijing that the

[159] Lord, Oral History, 599.
[160] Mann, *About Face*, 327.
[161] Lord, Oral History, 607.

U.S. was still the military superpower and reassured allies and friends in East Asia that it was still a reliable policing force. On the domestic front, the intervention also satisfied any Congressional concerns about Taiwan.[162]

Beijing initially backed down, but the crisis was not fully averted. In the two months leading up to the Taiwanese general election on March 23, 1996, the PRC amassed 100.000 troops on their east coast and again fired multiple missiles into the waters surrounding Taiwan. Why Beijing repeated their intimidation efforts in the spring of 1996 is up for debate. Mann argued that the Chinese leadership thought the Clinton administration might back down in the face of a full-scale confrontation. In 1993 China had called the U.S.' bluff on threats regarding the revocation of MFN trade status if human rights did not improve.[163] There might have also been a misunderstanding within the Chinese leadership of the definition of ambiguity. They might have thought it was the same as ambivalence, meaning the U.S. would not be so determined to come to Taiwan's defense.[164]

The Chinese intimidation efforts failed as Lee-Teng Hui was elected with overwhelming support and other countries in the region grew wary of China's resort to military means. Domestically, the efforts were a success. Chinese President Jiang Zemin consolidated his leadership position, by showing to his supporters that he was not scared to confront the U.S.[165]

While successful in averting armed conflict in the Strait, the crisis revealed a critical vulnerability. There was a lack of knowledge of Taiwan's defensive capabilities, as well as their political intentions going forward. This reflected the structural constraints of unofficial diplomacy. Military observers had to visit as private individuals and Defense Department officials were relabeled as "consultants". These restrictions slowed communication, undermined intelligence-sharing, and complicated planning. Darryl Johnson, AIT director in 1996, said that in the future the U.S. needed to avoid any surprises. The events of 1996 pointed out that closer cooperation was needed to avoid any confusion.[166]

While in the aftermath of the crisis cooperation on security matters between the U.S. and Taiwan intensified, there was still a lot of bad blood. The U.S government blamed Lee-Teng Hui for the crisis, citing his provocative foreign policy. The moment could be seen as a turning point for improvement in the U.S.-China relationship instead.[167] Critical voices who

[162] Ben Alperstein, 'The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis: A Retrospective Study in American Ambivalence', *International History Review*, 2024, 12; Lord, Oral History, 608.
[163] Mann, *About Face*, 284–311.
[164] Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink*, 173–74.
[165] Lord, Oral History, 610.
[166] Johnson, Oral History, 211.
[167] Dean, Oral History, 95–96.

accused Clinton of shifting Taiwan policy in later years have missed this notion, according to Ben Alperstein: showing resolve to work towards a peaceful resolution, but also critical of Taiwan's actions, seen as unnecessary provocation. The three "three no's" of 1998, no support for Taiwanese independence, no two-China policy, and no one-China, one-Taiwan solution, were consistent with the handling of the 1996 crisis. Strategic ambiguity was upheld.[168]

Conclusion

Between 1989 and 1996, the dynamic of the triangular relationship between the United States, Taiwan, and China changed drastically. What had become a relatively stable arrangement under the One China Policy was increasingly strained. The end of the Cold War and disillusionment after Tiananmen removed the foundation for cooperation between the U.S. and China.

At the same time, Taiwan's political transformation made it an attractive partner for the U.S. Taiwan's democratic shift was embraced by Congress and the American public, but for the executive, it meant more challenges for remaining a neutral position in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan policy became increasingly politicized. This made it harder for U.S. diplomats at AIT to maintain the unofficial relationship, as now each issue they handled carried domestic political weight. AIT itself was also pulled in the political arena, which complicated its efforts at flexible diplomacy.

The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis marked a turning point. Strategic ambiguity, designed to deter conflict, ironically now required an unambiguous show of force, by deploying military forces to the Strait. The realization landed that the U.S. needed to better communicate to both Beijing and Taipei what the limits of ambiguity were. The information gaps and lack of coordination required modest adjustments. The crisis moment did not overturn the One China Policy, but it did show that ambiguity also had real costs and required action.

The legacy of this period is clear: ambiguity bought the U.S. time, but not trust. It delayed hard choices but could not prevent crises. Managing a democratic Taiwan within the One China framework required more than ambiguity. Clarity, communication and coordination were needed.

[168] Alperstein, 'The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis', 15–16.

Conclusions: The Three Misses of Ambiguity

The goal of this thesis was to understand the role the One China Policy played in U.S.-Taiwan relations after 1978, as experienced by the frontline diplomats and other U.S. officials working on the Taiwan relationship. By studying the interviews in the Frontline Diplomacy Oral History Project I have shown that maintaining the U.S.-Taiwan relationship was a constant balancing act. The One China Policy and subsequent unofficial policy of strategic ambiguity were designed to for maximum flexibility to maintain relations with both China and Taiwan. This worked in the short-term, but it produced new long-term challenges and growing tensions, which were mostly felt by the U.S. diplomats at the AIT, who constantly had to improvise and adapt.

Across the three chapters, the pattern emerged that these challenges for U.S. diplomats in maintaining the ambiguous relationship were not situational, but systemic. I have grouped the recurring failures into three categories: miscalculation, miscommunication and mismanagement. Together, these three "misses" reveal the costs of strategic ambiguity, for those who were responsible for implementing it.

Miscalculation refers to the repeated failures of U.S. policymakers to correctly assess the intentions or likely responses of Beijing and Taipei, and even other actors in the U.S. government. The most striking example were the events that led to the 1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis. The U.S. underestimated how Beijing would react to Lee-Teng Hui's speech at Cornell, viewing it as symbolic while China saw it as clear provocation. In. Earlier, in 1982, the Reagan Administration at the State Department thought that appeasing Beijing would reduce tensions, miscalculating that for the Chinese, the initial downturn of the FX-fighter to Taiwan was an invitation to come back for more and force the U.S. to end arms sales altogether, only fueling tensions and eventually damaging the already brittle U.S.-Taiwan trust.

This misreading of Taiwanese intentions was characteristic of the post-normalization period. Brzezinski and others in the Carter Administration expected Taiwan to agree to gradual reunification with the mainland and thus kept language on arms sales deliberately vague. This assumption shaped the language of the 1982 Communiqué, which committed the U.S. to a gradual reduction of arms sales. U.S. policymakers underestimated Taiwan's determination to remain autonomous, which was showcased by the island's democratic and economic transformation during the 1980s and 1990s.

These examples were not isolated miscalculations, but had to do with the fact that Taiwan did not play a major role in the minds of U.S. policymakers. Inadvertently, they projected this view on China and Taiwan as well, even though Beijing's negotiators told them as much during the normalization negotiations in 1978, and U.S. diplomats working in Taipei argued that Taiwan would not be pressured into reunification.

Miscommunication describes how ambiguity produced inconsistent messaging, both externally, between the U.S., China and Taiwan, and internally, across U.S. agencies. The ambiguity that was embedded in the relationship inevitably led to inconsistent and often contradictory messages. It was meant to deter both sides of the Strait, but in practice mostly worked to arouse suspicion about U.S. intentions and put diplomats in the position of having to clarify what officially could not be said.

The problem with the Three Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act was that their ambiguous language was open to interpretation. The U.S. agreed to the One China Policy, but subsequently passed the Taiwan Relations Act in which it pledged to continue arms sales to Taiwan. This led to a sense of betrayal in Beijing. Taiwan felt as much betrayed when the U.S. signed the 1982 Communiqué, which was perceived by them as a direct breach of the TRA.

The ambiguous language in these U.S. statements also led to frequent confusion within the U.S. government. Diplomats at AIT, for example, received little guidance from the State Department on how to manage delicate moments, such as the direct aftermath of normalization in 1979 or the fallout from Lee Teng-Hui's high-profile diplomatic efforts in the early 1990s. They had to constantly adapt to maintain the relationship.

Another striking example of miscommunication was the 1994 Taiwan Policy Review. It was intended to resolve anomalies but confused more than it solved. The lack of clear signaling about the aims of the review gave rise to high expectations in advance, and disappointment afterwards, both for U.S. politicians who wanted to expand support for Taiwan, as well as the leadership in Taipei who faced another letdown.

While intended to deter, ambiguity became a persistent source of miscommunication. U.S. diplomats at AIT or elsewhere had to do the hard work of clarifying or reinterpreting this ambiguity, without really being allowed to.

Mismanagement refers to the flawed handling of the policy process itself, which was marked by bureaucratic conflict, ad-hoc decision making, and the absence of a unified U.S. position and long-term strategy.

This pattern began with the normalization process in 1978, which was rushed and secretive. The inclusion of China Hands in preparations could have solved misunderstandings with the Chinese, as well as preventing practical challenges of implementing a new Taiwan-policy. The chaotic setup of AIT during the first months of 1979 was emblematic of this problem. With no funding or clear mandate, diplomats had to improvise under the constraints of the sudden One China framework.

This pattern of exclusionary negotiations continued into the 1980s and 1990s and often led to conflict within the U.S. executive branch. During the 1982 arms sales crisis, in the absence of a clearly formulated goal, ideological infighting took place within the U.S. government, with different branches pushing conflicting agendas. The State Department (Haig) still pushed for gradual reduction of arms to Taiwan, expecting reunification, while the Department of Defense and AIT signaled this was not in the cards, and the White House was adamant to continue arms sales because of Reagans earlier promises. It was not only that they were all saying different things, but they did not even agree who should be in the room, or what the objective was. This internal division made it easier for Beijing to gain concessions on arms sales. U.S. diplomats in Taipei had to reassure the KMT leadership, while operating on outdated and limited details and facing problems in communicating Taiwan's concerns to the State Department.

The 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis again revealed the mismanagement of the Taiwan relationship. Diplomats at AIT admitted they had no real intelligence on Taiwan's defensive capabilities and whether they had any contingency plans. The U.S. reconfirmed its commitment to Taiwanese safety by sending an aircraft carrier into the Strait, but the response constituted more improvisation than preparedness. The lack of a system and strategy for information-sharing and planning turned ambiguity, designed to deter, into vulnerability.

The American Institute in Taiwan itself also began to show cracks during the 1990s, exemplified by the Jim Woods affair. While the AIT was set up as a creative workaround to manage the U.S.-Taiwan relationship after normalization, it became a liability, vulnerable to politicization and mismanagement.

Discussions on the One China Policy and strategic ambiguity have often focused on how effective it was as a doctrine for maintaining balance in the Taiwan Strait. This thesis has shown that ambiguity was not just a strategy for high-level political decisions. For U.S. diplomats working in Taiwan, ambiguity was less a smart strategy, and more a working condition. It shaped their daily efforts at maintaining and growing the U.S.-Taiwan relationship after normalization, marked by navigating the fine line of unofficiality, and arguments with other branches of U.S. government.

Taiwan policy has been characterized by episodes of miscalculation, miscommunication and mismanagement, which put tensions on the work of U.S. diplomats. The security issue was the dominant factor influencing U.S.-Taiwan relations after 1978. On top of that, the development of Taiwan from authoritarian regime to democratic society put further strain on the feasibility of ambiguity. While strategic ambiguity offered short-term flexibility for conducting relations with both the PRC and Taiwan, it also left it exposed when challenged to clarify its position. This vulnerability was compounded by the absence of a long-term strategy. Despite these challenges, the U.S.-Taiwan relationship endured after normalization. This endurance owed less to the stability or flexibility that strategic ambiguity provided, than to the creativity, persistence and quiet diplomacy of the men and women at the American Institute in Taiwan.

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