

Nothing Has Changed With Taiwan

by George Friedman - September 1, 2020

On Aug. 17, 1982, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz sent a memo via an American diplomat to the Taiwanese government. On Monday, just over 38 years later, the memo was declassified. Its contents were “secret” in that they were not publicly available, but the gist has been well known for some time; these points had to be part of U.S. relations with Taiwan and China because without them, U.S. policy toward Taiwan and China made no sense.

The decision to make public a document after nearly 40 years comes at a time of rising tensions, military drills and Chinese threats in the Taiwan Strait, and is meant to stave off more escalation by clarifying its position. The memo outlines the following:

- That the U.S. had not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan
- That the U.S. had not agreed to consult with China on arms sales to Taiwan
- That the U.S. would not play a mediation role between Taipei and Beijing
- That the U.S. had not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act
- That the U.S. had not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan
- That the U.S. would not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the People’s Republic of China

In other words, the United States was not prepared in any substantial way to abandon Taiwan, and by releasing the memo, Washington confirmed that the position it has held since 1982 has remained in place, and that China should understand as much.

The original context for the memo had to do with Richard Nixon’s visit to China, a groundbreaking trip born of mutual concern. Russian-Chinese relations were bad after the bloody conflict on the Ussuri River. China was afraid that the Soviets could defeat it. Meanwhile, the U.S., emerging bloodied from Vietnam, had weakened its position in Western Europe and feared the Soviets might take advantage of this opening. By restoring ties with the Chinese, the United States balanced this threat and opened a new threat against the Soviets if both attacked simultaneously.

It made no ideological sense but perfect geopolitical sense. Yet, it left open the status of Taiwan. The Chinese insisted that Taiwan was part of China, and Nixon agreed with them in principle so long as it was understood that it meant nothing in practice. The Soviet Union was the central issue.

By the 1980s, the Soviets were weakening a bit, the Chinese were increasing their power, and the Taiwan issue became more important. Ronald Reagan, of course, wouldn't budge, so the memo – which was and remains the U.S. policy on China – slammed shut the door on modifying its Taiwan policy. It may not have explicitly said that the U.S. would intervene if China invaded Taiwan, but it left little to the imagination.

U.S.-Chinese relations have since deteriorated, and China has raised the possibility of invasion in various ways. Releasing this memo at this time does not surprise China, but does affirm that any Chinese move must take into account a U.S. intervention. Unlike many China watchers, the Chinese themselves know that an amphibious assault on Taiwan – armed as it is with U.S. aircraft, submarines and missile defense batteries – would likely fail, and that failure would vastly weaken their pretense of being a power on par with the United States.

The memo itself didn't deter a Chinese invasion at the time; the U.S. alliance structure was such that that would have been a bad idea anyway. Beijing may see the reclamation of Taiwan as inevitable, but the inescapable reality of war is that you can lose, which is a nonstarter for China. The U.S. may have taken a defensive posture on Taiwan, but it's an inflexible defensive posture. Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia and the rest of Southeast Asia may have reason to doubt U.S. commitments in the future, but for now the alliance remains very much intact. By releasing the memo, Washington is making it clear that nothing has changed.

Author: George Friedman

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