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Peaceful Means, Resort to Force, and Coercion in the U.S. “One China Policy”

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Introduction

Following the inauguration of the Trump administration, the U.S. Department of State (DOS) updated its fact sheet on “U.S.-Taiwan Relations,” drawing attention to the removal of the phrase “we do not support Taiwan independence.”¹ In addition, revisions were made to clarify the positions articulated in the U.S. “One China Policy.”² A particularly notable revision was the addition of the phrase “free from coercion” to the long-standing statement: “We expect cross-Straits differences to be resolved by peaceful means.”³ “Coercion” generally refers to the use of pressure or threats to compel or deter another party from taking a specific action. This amendment can be interpreted as a clearer articulation of the U.S. position that “peaceful means” exclude not only “resort to force” but also “coercion.”

This paper aims to analyze how the U.S. “One China Policy” conceptualizes “peaceful means,” “resort to force,” and “coercion,” and to clarify the corresponding policy principles that have shaped the U.S. stance on security in the Taiwan Strait.

Defining the U.S. “One China Policy”

First, it is important to clarify what the U.S. “One China Policy” entails. It is often described in terms aligned with the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s “One-China Principle,”⁴ but this can be misleading. According to the Chinese government, the principle comprises three elements: (1) There is only one China in the world; (2) Taiwan is a part of China; and (3) the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.⁵ While the U.S. “recognizes” (3) the Government of the PRC as the sole legal Government of China in the 1979 Joint Communiqué, it merely “acknowledges” the Chinese position on (1) and (2) and does not endorse them.⁶ While this forms a core element of the current U.S. “One China Policy,” it represents only part of the broader framework.

The U.S. government has consistently stated that its “One China Policy” is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances.⁷ In many cases, in addition to referencing these, official statements often reaffirm the U.S.’s fundamental position, including opposition to “any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side,” and the expectation that “cross-Straits differences to be resolved by peaceful means.” Furthermore, core

policy principles outlined in the TRA are often emphasized, including providing “defense articles and services as necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability,” and maintaining “the [U.S.] capacity to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security or the societal and economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”⁸

PRC’s “One-China Principle”	U.S. “One China Policy”
(1) There is only one China in the world; (2) Taiwan is a part of China; (3) The government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taiwan Relations Act • Three Joint Communiques <i>The U.S. “acknowledges” the Chinese position on (1) and (2) and “recognizes” the Government of the PRC as the sole legal Government of China on (3).</i> • Six Assurances

Table 1: Created by the author.

Resolution through “Peaceful Means” as a Foundational Expectation

Although resolution through “peaceful means” is a fundamental stance of U.S. policy regarding the Taiwan question, the three Joint Communiques between the U.S. and the PRC merely reaffirm the U.S.’s interest in a peaceful resolution and express understanding and appreciation for PRC’s pursuit of it. For example, the 1972 Shanghai Communique states that “It [U.S.] reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.”⁹ The 1982 Communique also notes, “The United States Government understands and appreciates the Chinese policy of striving for a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question...”¹⁰

In contrast, the TRA, enacted in 1979 as U.S. domestic law, codifies a more explicit expectation of resolution through “peaceful means. Section 2(b)(3) states that “...the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means,”¹¹ indicating that the expectation for peaceful resolution served as a foundation for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC. Section 2(b)(4) goes further, declaring that “...any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means...” is considered “a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.”¹² In short, “other than peaceful means” is recognized as a threat to the region and grave concern to the U.S.

Scope of “Peaceful Means”

What does “peaceful means” entail, and what kinds of actions are considered to fall outside its scope? The policy frameworks forming the basis of the U.S. “One China Policy,” such as the TRA, the three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances, do not explicitly define “peaceful means.” However, closer examination reveals that both “resort to force” and “other forms of

coercion”—including boycotts and embargoes—fall outside the scope of “peaceful means.”

For instance, Section 2(b)(6) of the TRA requires the U.S. “to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”¹³ This suggests that both “resort to force” and “other forms of coercion” are excluded from the scope of “peaceful means.” This interpretation is reinforced by the 2025 revision of the DOS fact sheet, which added the phrase “free from coercion” after “peaceful means.”¹⁴

Additionally, Section 2(b)(4) specifies that “...any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes,”¹⁵ clearly shows that boycotts and embargoes fall outside of the scope of “peaceful means.” This implies that “other forms of coercion” are understood to include boycotts and embargoes.

“peaceful means”	“other than peaceful means”	
	“resort to force”	“other forms of coercion” boycotts, embargoes, etc.

Table 2: Created by the author.

Policy Principles on “Resort to Force” and “Other Forms of Coercion”

The TRA outlines two major security-related policy principles. Section 2(b)(5) states “to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character.” Section 2(b)(6) articulates “to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion.”¹⁶ What is noteworthy is that Section 2(b)(6) clearly demonstrates that the U.S. is to maintain the capacity to resist not only “resort to force” but also “other forms of coercion.”

The inclusion of “coercion” in this framework was a deliberate decision by U.S. lawmakers. For example, Senator Jacob Javits (at the time), a key figure in the revision and drafting of the law, emphasized, “...we would not only resist any resort to force...but other forms of coercion which would jeopardize the security, or the social, or economic system of the people on Taiwan. Now, that is the guts of it.”¹⁷

Emphasis on “Coercion”

In recent years, as PRC has intensified its pressure on Taiwan, the U.S. government has increasingly emphasized its recognition and its policy principle regarding “coercion.” First, the recognition that “other forms of coercion” are not included within “peaceful means” has become more clearly articulated. The 2025 revision of the DOS fact sheet, which added the expression “free from coercion” after “peaceful means,” reflects this development in clarifying such recognition.¹⁸ Furthermore, the policy to maintain the capacity to resist “other forms of coercion” has been reiterated more frequently. This policy was explicitly stated in the DOS fact sheet only after the Biden administration took office.¹⁹

Second, the policy principle that the U.S. maintains the capacity to resist “other forms of coercion” has also been more explicitly addressed. For example, when China conducted successive military exercises following Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in 2022, Kurt Campbell, Senior Director for Asia at the National Security Council (at the time), described China’s actions as “an intensified pressure campaign to Taiwan” and criticized China for attempting “to change the status quo, jeopardizing peace and stability across strait and its broader region.” He stated that “the purpose of this pressure is clear: to intimidate, coerce, and weaken Taiwan’s resilience.” and emphasized that the U.S. would continuously uphold its commitments under the TRA, including “maintaining our ability to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that threaten Taiwan’s security, economy, and society.”²⁰

Conclusion and Policy Implications

To sum up, the U.S. “One China Policy” is constituted by the domestic law of the TRA, the three Joint Communiques with China, and the Six Assurances to Taiwan. In particular, the TRA explicitly shows the expectation for the resolution by “peaceful means” as the foundation for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC. Moreover, any efforts to determine the future by “other than peaceful means” are considered a threat to the region and grave concern to the U.S. Furthermore, both “resort to force” and “other forms of coercion” are regarded as outside the scope of “peaceful means.” In addition to providing “Taiwan with arms of defensive character,” maintaining “the capacity of the United States to resist both “resort to force” and “other forms of coercion” is a fundamental policy principle. The recognition that “coercion” is outside the scope of “peaceful means” and the policy principle to maintain the U.S. capacity to resist “other forms of coercion” have become more explicitly stated, particularly in recent years.

However, maintaining this capacity does not equate to a legal obligation to act. This ambiguity leaves open the possibility for continued debate on U.S. policies regarding security in the Taiwan Strait. For example, while the capacity to resist “resort to force” is maintained, it is not specified whether the U.S. is obligated to exercise it. During his presidency, President Biden publicly hinted at least five times that the U.S. would defend Taiwan in the event of Chinese “resort to force” against Taiwan,²¹ such as in the case of “anyone were to invade or take action,”²² if China attacks,²³ if “there was an unprecedented attack,”²⁴ or “if China unilaterally tries to change the status.”²⁵ He also emphasized that “We support the One China policy,” but “it does not mean that China has the jurisdiction to go in and use force to take over Taiwan.”²⁶ Additionally, he mentioned, “Nor will we, in fact, not defend Taiwan if China unilaterally tries to change the status.”²⁷ These statements can be interpreted as reflecting the TRA, which clearly states that the expectation of resolving the Taiwan question through “peaceful means” is the foundation for the establishment of diplomatic relations, and that any attempt “other than peaceful means” is not only a threat to the region but also grave concern for the U.S.

U.S. responses to “other forms of coercion” remain less defined. Ongoing debates question

whether it is in the U.S.'s national security interest to defend Taiwan if the PRC were to seize Taiwan without resorting to military aggression.²⁸ As China's pressure on Taiwan intensifies across diplomatic, military, economic, informational, and societal domains, further policy discussions are necessary regarding the U.S.'s capacity and its potential exercise of that capacity to resist "other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan."

¹ However, the wording regarding opposition to changes in the status quo from either side, whether China or Taiwan, remains unchanged. U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>; See the following media reports: Nectar Gan, "Change to State Department Website Sparks Fiery Rebuke from Beijing over Taiwanese Independence," *CNN*, February 17, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/17/china/china-rebuke-us-state-department-taiwan-intl-hnk/index.html>; Kelly Ng, "China Anger as US Amends Wording on Taiwan Independence," *BBC*, February 17, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/17/china/china-rebuke-us-state-department-taiwan-intl-hnk/index.html>; Bloomberg News, "Taiwan Praises the US for Change on Independence Phrasing," *Bloomberg*, February 17, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-02-17/taiwan-praises-us-state-department-change-on-independence-phrase/>.

² The White House and the DOS generally use "One/one China Policy/policy" and "'One/one China' policy." This paper uses the term "One China Policy."

³ U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, February 13, 2025; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, May 28, 2022, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>.

⁴ The PRC uses "One/one-China Principle." For example, PRC, Taiwan Affairs Office and Information Office of the State Council, "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," February 2000, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/taiwan/7956.htm>; PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wang Yi: One-China Principle Advocates Should Support China's Peaceful Reunification," February 18, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332781.html.

⁵ 中华人民共和国国务院台湾事务办公室, 《一个中国的原则与台湾问题》, 2000 年 2 月, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/dnzt_674981/qtzt/twwt/twwtbps/202206/t20220606_10699030.html; Taiwan Affairs Office and Information Office of the State Council, PRC, "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," February 2000.

⁶ Office of the Historian, U.S. DOS, "Joint Statement Following Discussions With Leaders of the People's Republic of China," February 27, 1972, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>; Office of the Historian, U.S. DOS, "Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China," January 1, 1979, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d104>.

⁷ U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, February 13, 2025; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, May 28, 2022; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, August 31, 2018, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Taiwan," *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, September 13, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35855.htm>.

⁸ *Ibid.* The expression is based on the 2025 revision of the DOS fact sheet.

⁹ Office of the Historian, U.S. DOS, "Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China," February 27, 1972.

¹⁰ The White House, "United States-China Joint Communiqué on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan," August 17, 1982, preserved by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/united-states-china-joint-communicue-united-states-arms-sales-taiwan>.

¹¹ U.S. Congress, Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96–8, 96th Congress, April 10, 1979, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-93/pdf/STATUTE-93-Pg14.pdf>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, February 13, 2025; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, May 28, 2022.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96–8, 96th Congress, April 10, 1979.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Taiwan Enabling Act*, March 8, 1979, declassified October 27, 2008, CIA Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85-00003r000100050010-1>.

¹⁸ U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, February 13, 2025; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, May 28, 2022.

¹⁹ In the fact sheets during the Obama administration and the first term of the Trump administration, while “peaceful resolution” is mentioned, there is no explicit reference to “other forms of coercion.” U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, May 28, 2022; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, August 31, 2018; U.S. DOS, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” *Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*, September 13, 2016. Of course, “other forms of coercion” have been frequently addressed when outlining the fundamental principles. For example, James A. Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. DOS, “Overview of U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan,” *Testimony at a hearing on Taiwan, House International Relations Committee*, April 21, 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2004/31649.htm>.

²⁰ The White House, “On-the-Record Press Call by Kurt Campbell, Deputy Assistant to the President and Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific,” August 12, 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/08/12/on-the-record-press-call-by-kurt-campbell-deputy-assistant-to-the-president-and-coordinator-for-the-indo-pacific/>.

²¹ “Full Transcript of ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos’ Interview With President Joe Biden,” *ABC News*, August 19, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/full-transcript-abc-news-george-stephanopoulos-interview-president/story?id=79535643>; The White House, “Remarks by President Biden in a CNN Town Hall With Anderson Cooper,” October 22, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/10/22/remarks-by-president-biden-in-a-cnn-town-hall-with-anderson-cooper-2/>; The White House, “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference,” May 23, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/05/23/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-fumio-kishida-of-japan-in-joint-press-conference/>; CBS News, “President Biden on Taiwan | 60 Minutes,” *YouTube video*, September 18, 2022, <https://youtu.be/EddUGD8jcr4>; TIME Staff, “Read the Full Transcript of President Joe Biden’s Interview With TIME,” *TIME*, June 4, 2024, <https://time.com/6984968/joe-biden-transcript-2024-interview/>.

²² “Full Transcript of ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos’ Interview With President Joe Biden,” *ABC News*, August 19, 2021.

²³ The White House, “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference,” May 23, 2022.

²⁴ CBS News, “President Biden on Taiwan | 60 Minutes,” *YouTube video*, September 18, 2022.

²⁵ TIME Staff, “Read the Full Transcript of President Joe Biden’s Interview With TIME,” *TIME*, June 4, 2024.

²⁶ The White House, “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference,” May 23, 2022.

²⁷ TIME Staff, “Read the Full Transcript of President Joe Biden’s Interview With TIME,” *TIME*, June 4, 2024.

²⁸ Representative Michael McCaul (then Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee) stated, “The question would be for the American people. Is it our national security interest to come to the defense of Taiwan, if they did not provoke an invasion, and they were peaceful, but yet, invaded by Communist China.” This “peaceful” in Representative McCaul’s statement likely refers to not using military force. NBC News, “U.S. Policy on Taiwan Won’t Change Even If Trump Returns to WH, Says Top Foreign Affairs Lawmaker,” *Meet the Press*, May 28, 2024, [timestamp: 4:23–4:52], <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/u-s-policy-on-taiwan-won-t-change-even-if-trump-returns-to-wh-says-top-foreign-affairs-lawmaker-211710533803>.