



Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice

AMERICAN POLICY TOWARD TAIWAN AND U.S.-PRC RELATIONS

Alan D. Romberg

Second Printing
Copyright © 2003
The Henry L. Stimson Center

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means without prior permission in writing from the Henry L. Stimson Center.

Cover design by Design Army .

ISBN 0-9747255-4-4

The Henry L. Stimson Center
11 Dupont Circle, NW Ninth Floor Washington, DC 20036
phone 202.223.5956 fax 202.238.9604
www.stimson.org

This study is dedicated to the memory of William H. Gleysteen, Jr.

To whom we all owe a debt.

Table of Contents

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Explanatory Note: “Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice”	xi
1. Introduction	1
Attaining Normalization	
2. The Road to the Summit	19
3. “One China”—Squaring the Circle	49
4. Normalization.....	76
Implementing Normalization	
5. One China, Respective Interpretations	105
6. Arming Taiwan	118
7. Politics in Command.....	155
8. Bush Takes Office: A Changing Relationship in a Changing World	194
9. Conclusion	217
Appendix	
Shanghai Communiqué (February 27, 1972)	233
Joint Communiqué (February 22, 1973)	235
Joint Communiqué (November 14, 1973)	236
Normalization Communiqué (December 15, 1978).....	238
Taiwan Relations Act (April 10, 1979).....	239
August 17 Communiqué (August 17, 1982)	242
Joint U.S.-China Statement (October 29, 1997)	245
About the Author.....	247

Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I present *Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice*, the latest monograph in the Henry L. Stimson Center's regional security series. This study was undertaken out of concern that, in recent decades, too many U.S. leaders have been either inattentive to—or unaware of—the commitments undertaken with the People's Republic of China regarding Taiwan, and have therefore made occasionally unwise decisions. This study provides rich insight into the diplomacy and domestic deliberations that shaped a dramatic phase of U.S.-China relations. The story is an unusually dramatic case of changing geopolitical imperatives and, at the same time, a potent reminder of the enduring importance of notions of sovereignty and identity in Asia, which remain strong despite changing views elsewhere in an age of increasing globalization.

Senior Associate Alan D. Romberg, a former senior State Department official, was a participant in and an observer of many of these events, and draws on his extensive knowledge and direct access to many of the other players in weaving this fascinating tale. This study recounts how normalization was delayed and nearly derailed before a delicate balance was reached with Beijing over the Taiwan issue. It also serves as a sober warning to current and future policymakers that history does matter and that new presidents cannot make Taiwan policy in a vacuum. Too much is resting on the peaceful evolution of U.S.-China relations: the stability of China, the well-being of the people of Taiwan, as well as broader U.S. interests in East Asia.

The Stimson Center is committed to innovative thinking on ways to achieve regional stability and reduce security threats to the United States. This study, with generous support from the Smith Richardson Foundation, will be a lasting contribution to improving understanding of—and policy toward—China, and hopefully will help readers in the PRC, Taiwan and elsewhere gain greater appreciation of the complex and occasionally confounding ways the U.S. makes policy.

Ellen Laipson
President and CEO
The Henry L. Stimson Center

Acknowledgements

Countless debts of gratitude have accrued over the many months of research that have culminated in this study. I was tremendously fortunate to have friends, colleagues and so many others who were willing to share liberally of their time, recollections, experience and insight.

In particular, a number of former (and current) government officials involved in U.S. China policy over the years since Nixon were willing to dig deep into their memories and share their knowledge. Some are still serving in relevant government positions and probably should not be named. Among those who can be, I am especially grateful to Richard V. Allen, Donald M. Anderson, Samuel R. Berger, David Dean, Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., Alexander M. Haig, Scott S. Hallford, Herbert J. Hansell, Charles Hill, James R. Lilley, Winston Lord, Mark E. Mohr, Davis R. Robinson, William F. Rope, Stanley O. Roth, J. Stapleton Roy, Robert L. Suettinger, Roger W. Sullivan and Harry E. T. Thayer, who responded to various persistent inquiries with good humor and wisdom. Special appreciation goes to Steven M. Goldstein, who slogged through two versions of this and provided extensive invaluable comments.

As will be obvious from a quick glance through the study, much of the archival content would not have been possible without the tenacity of the National Security Archive and especially Dr. William Burr and his colleagues. Thanks are also due to Patrick Tyler, James Mann, the staff of the National Archive and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, the historians and staff of the Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace and the Jimmy Carter Library, and the staff of the FOIA office at the State Department—all of whom generously shared documents. Appreciation, too, goes to K. Lorraine Graham and Zhen Sun, and especially to Kim Dorazio, all of whom helped with numerous research tasks. Most of all, deep thanks are owed to Adam J. Hantman, without whose able, creative and multifaceted partnership, completion of this project would simply not have been possible.

Finally, my appreciation goes both to the Smith Richardson Foundation and the leadership of the Henry L. Stimson Center, for whose support and patience I am most grateful.

The responsibility for what I have done with all that this army of supporters has provided is, of course, mine alone.

**Explanatory Note:
“Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice”**

Following his brilliant flanking move in the Inchon Landing of mid-September 1950 and the recapture of Seoul ten days later, General Douglas MacArthur drove the North Korean army back across the 38th Parallel, captured Pyongyang in late October, and continued to press the UN counterattack up toward the Yalu River and the border with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). China sought to signal to the United States that further advances toward China would precipitate its intervention. It did so in part by sending a message to Washington through a diplomatic intermediary to “rein in at the brink of the precipice.” The United States ignored the warning and, on November 25th, China entered the fray in massive numbers, greatly altering the course of the conflict and of history.

Ever since then, China watchers have carefully scoured PRC statements at times of crisis in an effort to detect similarly serious warnings. During the Vietnam War, in particular, while the United States was careful not to take actions that would seem to threaten the existence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)—and thus draw China into the conflict—Washington kept a weather eye on Chinese pronouncements. China made clear not just through words but through its military support to Hanoi, including the stationing of People’s Liberation Army forces in North Vietnam, that PRC national security interests were at stake. But Beijing apparently credited the limits that the U.S. was observing in its military operations against the DRV; the admonition to “rein in at the brink of the precipice” did not reappear.

Over the past decade or so, the warning has made a comeback, largely in connection with what Beijing sees as pro-independence activities in either Taiwan or Tibet, and alleged U.S. support for them. Although not conveying the same sense of urgency as in the Korean War, its core message remains clear: sovereignty is a fundamental issue for the PRC and its violation could trigger the severest consequences.