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Sabir Ahmadov

Baku State University

PhD student

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5261-4553>

sabir.ahmadov@bsu.edu.az

Three Communiqués and Their Impact on the Security in the Asia-Pacific Region

Abstract

This paper examines the historical context and implications of the “Three Communiqués” for the security dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region. The Asia-Pacific region (APAC) occupies a central position in both China’s and the United States’ foreign policies due to its growing strategic and economic significance. To secure its interests across the region, Washington sought to normalize relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), widely regarded as the most powerful and influential actor in Asia, and to mitigate potential threats emanating from its rise. Favorable geopolitical conditions for this rapprochement emerged in the late 1960s, when the ideological and political split within the communist bloc created a conducive environment for both the United States and the PRC to re-evaluate their foreign policy priorities.

For China, rapprochement with the United States offered an opportunity to counterbalance the Soviet Union and gain a strategic partner, while for the United States, it represented a means of advancing its political, economic, and security objectives in the broader Asia-Pacific region. Since the early 1970s, a series of diplomatic milestones have marked the gradual normalization of Sino-American relations, the most significant of which was the signing of three joint communiqués between the two governments in the early 1970s and 1980s. These documents—collectively known in historiography as the “Three Communiqués”—constituted the cornerstone of modern U.S.–China relations. Moreover, these communiqués played a decisive role in shaping the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: *USA, PRC, China, Taiwan, APAC, Asia-Pacific, communiqué*

Sabir Əhmədov

Bakı Dövlət Universiteti

doktorant

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5261-4553>

sabir.ahmadov@bsu.edu.az

Üç kommünike və onların Asiya-Sakit Okean regionunda təhlükəsizliyə təsiri

Xülasə

Məqalədə Asiya-Sakit Okean regionunun təhlükəsizlik kontekstində Çin ilə ABŞ arasında imzalanan “Üç Kommünike”nin tarixi əhəmiyyəti və regiona təsiri araşdırılır. Asiya-Sakit Okean regionu (ASR) özünün strateji və iqtisadi əhəmiyyətinə görə ABŞ-ın xarici siyasətində mərkəzi mövqe tutur. Regiondakı maraqlarını təmin etmək üçün Vaşinqton Asiyanın ən güclü və nüfuzlu dövləti olan Çin Xalq Respublikası (ÇXR) ilə münasibətlərini normallaşdırmağa və onun artan hərbi və iqtisadi imkanlarından irəli gələn təhdidləri azaltmağa çalışır. Bu cəhətdən 1960-cı illərin sonlarında iki dövlət arasında münasibətlərin normallaşması üçün əlverişli geosiyasi şərait yarandı. Belə ki, kommunist bloku daxilində yaranmış parçalanma həm ABŞ, həm də ÇXR üçün xarici siyasət prioritetlərini yenidən işləmək üçün əlverişli mühit yaratdı.

Çin üçün ABŞ ilə yaxınlaşma Sovet İttifaqını tarazlaşdırmaq və strateji tərəfdaş qazanmaq üçün fürsət təqdim edirdi, ABŞ üçün isə bu, Asiya-Sakit Okean regionunda siyasi, iqtisadi və təhlükəsizlik məqsədlərini həyata keçirmək üçün bir vasitə idi. 1970-ci illərin əvvəllərindən etibarən Çin–ABŞ münasibətlərinin tədricən normallaşması başladı. Bu yaxınlaşmanın zirvə nöqtəsi isə 1970-ci və 1980-ci illərin əvvəllərində iki hökumət arasında üç birgə kommünikenin imzalanması olmuşdur. Qərb tarixşünaslığında bu sənədlərə ümumi ad olaraq “Üç Kommünike” deyilir. Bu sənədlər müasir ABŞ–Çin münasibətlərinin təməl daşı olmaqla yanaşı, həmçinin Asiya-Sakit Okean regionunun təhlükəsizlik sisteminin formalaşmasında həlledici rol oynamışdır.

Açar sözlər: ABŞ, ÇXR, Çin, Tayvan, ASR, Asiya-Sakit Okean regionu, kommünike

Introduction

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the balance of regional powers shifted in favor of the communists. The United States, as the principal opponent of the communist bloc, chose not to recognize the PRC, opting instead to maintain diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. The Korean War (1950–1953), along with the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954, severely exacerbated Sino-American relations. Consequently, the trajectory of relations between the PRC and the USA during the 1950s through the 1970s is commonly delineated into three primary periods (Leksyutina, 2017, pp. 12–13): the initial period (mid-1950s to late 1954), the second period (December 1954 to the mid-1960s), and the third period (the latter half of the 1960s until 1979).

While the first two phases were characterized by profound hostility, the third phase signaled the beginning of a significant rapprochement in U.S.-PRC relations. This warming trend critically influenced both the expansion of U.S. strategic interests and the maintenance of security in the APAC region. In the first phase, the U.S. adopted a policy of overt intervention in regional disputes, particularly regarding the Taiwan issue. The second phase commenced following the signing of the *Mutual Defense Treaty* between the U.S. and the ROC (Taiwan) on December 2, 1954. During this stage, the United States reinforced its position in the APAC region as the guarantor of peace and security, with the primary objective of serving as an ally in the regulation of PRC–Taiwan relations.

As for the third phase, it was marked by the development of a new approach in the U.S. attitude toward the Taiwan issue. The escalating geopolitical rivalry with the Soviet Union was a major catalyst for this shift in American foreign policy. Concurrently, the PRC also pursued normalization with the U.S., culminating in the signing of the *Shanghai Communiqué* on February 28, 1972 (Robert & Philip, 2021, pp. 26–27). This document, the first of the three key communiqués, marked a decisive initial step toward formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the PRC. The document formalized Washington's acceptance of Beijing's One China framework, signifying a major diplomatic concession.

Research

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC in the 1970s marked a turning point in the geopolitical landscape of the APAC region. As noted by key figures like Henry Kissinger, this rapprochement between Washington and Beijing was not an abrupt occurrence but rather the result of a gradual strategic reassessment, heavily influenced by the shifting dynamics of the Cold War. The United States, preoccupied with the Vietnam conflict and challenged by growing Soviet assertiveness, sought to strategically realign its foreign policy priorities. China, concurrently, found itself increasingly isolated following the Sino-Soviet split and was therefore open to diplomatic engagement with the West.

The first major step in this process was President Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing in 1972, which resulted in the *Shanghai Communiqué*. This document established the principle of the “One China” policy and emphasized the necessity of peaceful coexistence (Office of the Historian). Furthermore, it laid the groundwork for future cooperation across political, economic and cultural spheres. The communiqué demonstrated that both countries recognized the strategic necessity of collaboration despite their ideological differences.

Main Part

The Sino-American diplomatic relationship entered a difficult period of confrontation following the establishment of the PRC. An early effort to normalize these relations was the initiation of the Warsaw Talks in 1958, a series of ambassadorial-level discussions between China and the United States. These talks spanned over a decade and primarily centered on the Taiwan issue. However, due to the persistent U.S. policy of intervention in the PRC's domestic affairs, a total of 136 meetings were held without yielding any significant results by 1970 (Yanting, 2021, p. 67).

The normalization of relations in the U.S.–PRC–Taiwan dynamic by the late 1960s was primarily driven by the foreign policy realignment under President Richard Nixon. However, a significant contributing factor was China's precarious geopolitical position in the late 1960s, facing dual military pressures: the Vietnam War to the south and intensifying border conflicts with the Soviet Union to the north (the Sino-Soviet split). Therefore, Mao Zedong chose to prioritize national security by adopting the classical Chinese strategic principle of “using barbarians against barbarians” and enlisting the distant rival (the U.S.) against the immediate threat (the USSR) (Kissinger, 2012, p. 202).

This shift in Mao Zedong's strategic posture toward the United States was foreshadowed as early as 1965. American journalist Edgar Snow, who had previously conducted extensive interviews with Chairman Mao in the 1930s, served as a crucial, albeit informal, mediator between the PRC and the U.S. In 1965, Mao Zedong invited Edgar Snow to Beijing and conveyed his perception of the U.S., stating:

“Naturally, I personally regret that forces of history have divided and separated the American and Chinese peoples from virtually all communications during the past 15 years. Today the gulf seems broader than ever. However, I myself do not believe it will end in war, and one of history's major tragedies.” (Ibid., p. 204).

Moreover, in this interview Mao Zedong explicitly signaled a resignation from the intrinsic communist doctrine of global revolutionary intervention, a notable departure from his rhetoric in earlier decades. He clarified the PRC's limited role in supporting global revolution:

“Wherever there is revolution, we will issue statements and hold meetings to support it... We like to say empty words and fire empty cannons, but we will not send troops.” (Ibid., p. 206).

Recognizing the escalating tension between the USSR and the PRC during the late 1960s, the U.S. leadership strategically reconsidered its policy toward the PRC and sought closer engagement. The border clashes in 1969, particularly those near Damansky Island and Lake Zhalanashkol along the Sino-Soviet frontier, further accelerated the reorientation of U.S. policy. Consequently, American diplomatic strategy centered on exploiting the Sino-Soviet split to its advantage, aiming to draw China closer into its strategic orbit as a counterweight to Soviet power.

The events of 1971 are widely regarded as the genesis of modern U.S.–PRC relations. The visit of the U.S. table tennis team to China in the spring of 1971 constituted the initial breakthrough in establishing bilateral dialogue, an event famously known as “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” (John, 2016, p. 321). Following “Ping-Pong Diplomacy”, preparations immediately began for the secret diplomatic mission led by U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to Beijing.

Concurrently, a Chinese commission consisting of Zhou Enlai, Huang Hua and Ye Jianying formulated the key preconditions for normalization that China would present to the U.S. during the upcoming negotiations. **These demands were:**

1. Withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the Taiwan Strait and the island within a timeframe specified by China;
2. U.S. recognition of Taiwan as an integral part of Chinese territory and the Taiwan issue as an internal matter, rejecting any foreign interference (from the U.S., Japan or other powers);
3. A commitment that China was prepared to resolve the issue peacefully;
4. Abandonment of “Two Chinas” and “One China, One Taiwan” policies;
5. The inclusion of conditions beyond Taiwan, such as the gradual withdrawal of U.S. military forces from other East Asian countries (Japan and South Korea) and Southeast Asia (John, 2016, p. 322).

First Communiqué

From February 21 to 28, 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon undertook his historic visit to China, meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, culminating in the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué. The main principles of the Shanghai Communiqué included:

1. The belief that the development of normal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the PRC serves the interests of all nations in the Asia-Pacific region;
2. A mutual affirmation of commitment to reducing the risk of major international military conflict;
3. A shared understanding that neither state would seek to establish hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and a commitment to opposing efforts by any other nation to establish such dominance (American Institute in Taiwan, 2022a).

Article 11 of the Communiqué formally acknowledged the centrality of the Taiwan issue in the normalization process and its direct bearing on the future development of U.S.–PRC relations. The pivotal issue was addressed in Article 12. According to this article, the U.S. government formally acknowledged the “One China” principle, affirming that “there is but one China and Taiwan is a part of it (PRC)” (Puzynya, 2022, pp. 2–4).

Simultaneously, the U.S. government committed to the progressive withdrawal of its armed forces and military installations from Taiwan, a measure intended to reduce tensions across the Asia-Pacific and in the broader context of international relations. Crucially, while the Communiqué marked a diplomatic thaw, it contained inherent ambiguities regarding the future security status of Taiwan. The U.S. position maintained that its future policy toward Taiwan would be contingent upon the peaceful resolution of the issue by the Chinese themselves, a position often informed by domestic political and military considerations (Taiwan Relations Act, 1979).

The Shanghai Communiqué clearly outlined the respective positions of both sides. For the PRC, its importance lay in the U.S. recognition of China’s unity for the first time. For the U.S., the key point was maintaining support for the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan problem. Notably, the Communiqué intentionally omitted any detailed provisions for security cooperation between Taiwan and the U.S., which left room for future cooperative mechanisms.

Following President Nixon’s victory in the 1972 elections, the U.S. policy of engagement with the PRC remained consistent and continued to advance, contributing to the broader stabilization of the APAC region. Key diplomatic contact was largely sustained through Henry Kissinger (now U.S. Secretary of State). In 1973, Kissinger held further high-level meetings in China, including his first formal meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong on February 18, followed by subsequent consultations with Premier Zhou Enlai throughout the year. Concurrently, 1973 saw the establishment of Liaison Offices in Beijing and Washington, which effectively served as *de facto* embassies, facilitating continuous high-level communication between the two states (Vasil'yev, 2017, p. 16).

In 1974, Secretary Kissinger again visited China, at which time the Chinese side reiterated its demands for normalization, which included the following three main principles:

1. The official severance of U.S. diplomatic relations with Taiwan;
2. The termination of the Mutual Defense Treaty concluded between the United States and Taiwan in 1954;
3. The complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Taiwan and the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the PRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China).

Second Communiqué

The discussion of these principles was interrupted by President Nixon’s resignation due to the Watergate scandal, leading to a temporary period of stagnation in U.S.–PRC relations. The dynamic shifted significantly with the 1977 election of James Carter as U.S. President. During the initial years of his administration, U.S.–PRC relations faced challenges and a brief period of uncertainty. However, momentum was restored in May 1978, when Zbigniew Brzezinski, then National Security Advisor, visited the PRC and met with Deng Xiaoping. Brzezinski signaled the U.S. readiness to accept the three principles that China had put forward in 1974. Despite certain points of contention

that required negotiation, an agreement was rapidly reached following Brzezinski's diplomatic initiative.

The intense negotiation process culminated on December 15, 1978, with the signing of the second key document on U.S.–PRC relations, officially titled the *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China* (Sun, 2021, p. 4). This Communiqué stated that formal diplomatic relations between the two states would be established on January 1, 1979, effectively concluding the third phase of U.S.–PRC relations and opening a new chapter.

The key articles of the *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations* included:

1. The United States and the People's Republic of China formally agree to recognize each other and to establish full diplomatic relations effective January 1, 1979;
2. The U.S. government officially recognizes the PRC as the sole legal government of China;
3. Both sides reaffirm the principles of the Shanghai Communiqué and re-emphasize their shared intention to reduce the danger of international military conflict and the agreement that neither shall seek hegemony in the APAC region;
4. The U.S. government acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China (American Institute in Taiwan, 2022b).

Both states agreed to exchange ambassadors and establish embassies on March 1, 1979. In accordance with the three principles demanded by the PRC, the United States began the process of reducing its official governmental relations with Taiwan on December 31, 1978. Crucially, on January 1, 1980, the United States formally terminated the Mutual Defense Treaty concluded with the Republic of China in 1954. Yet, this termination was immediately counterbalanced by the U.S. Congress's adoption of the *Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA). This domestic law effectively replaced the former treaty, establishing a legal and political framework for continued unofficial relations and, significantly, committing the U.S. to making defense articles and services available to Taiwan. The TRA cemented the U.S. legislative commitment to Taiwan's security, demonstrating that despite normalization with the PRC, Taiwan remained a fundamental strategic interest and a central element of U.S. policy in the APAC region.

Third Communiqué

The complexities of the U.S.–PRC–Taiwan dynamic led to further tension, specifically concerning U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. This issue was addressed in the third major document, the *Joint Communiqué of August 17, 1982* (commonly known as the “August 17 Communiqué” or “Third Communiqué”).

This Communiqué synthesized the history of U.S.–PRC relations, reaffirmed both parties' positions on the Taiwan issue, and critically focused on the highly contentious arms sales. In this document, the U.S. stated its intention to gradually reduce the sale of arms to Taiwan, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, and affirmed that this reduction would be contingent on the PRC's demonstrated commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue. However, because the Communiqué's language was carefully imprecise and lacked mandatory, concrete timetables for the cessation of sales, it effectively allowed the U.S. to maintain significant policy flexibility.

The key articles of the August 17 Communiqué included the following agreements:

1. Both sides reaffirmed the principles governing their relationship—specifically mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs—principles established in the *Shanghai Communiqué* (1972) and the *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations* (1979);
2. The U.S. government recognized the PRC as the sole legal government of China and reiterated that it has no intention of infringing upon Chinese sovereignty or territorial integrity, interfering in China's domestic affairs, or pursuing a policy of “Two Chinas” or “One China, One Taiwan”;
3. The improvement of the U.S.–PRC relations is deemed conducive not only to the interests of the two nations but also to global peace and stability;

4. With the goal of fostering the healthy development of the U.S.–PRC relations, maintaining global peace, and opposing aggression and expansion, both governments reaffirmed the guiding principles established in the previous two Communiqués (American Institute in Taiwan, 2022c).

Immediately following the signing of the Communiqué, on August 18, the U.S. government, under President Ronald Reagan, privately offered Taiwan the “Six Assurances” to guarantee its security, which are sometimes called “Reagan’s Six Assurances.” These assurances explicitly undercut the spirit of the August 17 Communiqué and were intended to assuage Taiwan’s fears, stating that the U.S. would:

1. Not agree to set a date for the termination of arms sales to Taiwan;
2. Not agree to prior consultation with the PRC regarding future arms sales to Taiwan;
3. Not revise the *Taiwan Relations Act*;
4. Not mediate between the PRC and Taiwan;
5. Not pressure Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC;
6. Not formally recognize the sovereignty of the PRC over Taiwan (*The “Six Assurances” to Taiwan*, 1982).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the successful negotiations and adoption of the Three Communiqués were instrumental in fostering relatively stable diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and the United States, thereby significantly contributing to the peace process within the Asia-Pacific region. These agreements compelled two major nuclear powers (China became one in 1964 as a result of Lop Nur testing) and former ideological rivals to acknowledge and respect each other’s core interests.

The Communiqués formally obligated both nations to avoid intervention in each other’s domestic affairs and to refrain from seeking regional hegemony. This profound shift in bilateral relations was strategically driven by external pressures: the U.S. facing setbacks in the Vietnam War and the PRC losing its principal ally due to the Sino-Soviet split. Ultimately, both states were forced to redefine their mutual perceptions.

For China, this evolving policy was anticipated, perhaps best captured by Mao Zedong’s opening address at the Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China:

“We must endeavour to establish normal diplomatic relations, on the basis of mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty and of equality and mutual benefit, with all countries willing to live together with us in peace.” (Mao Tse-Tung, 1966).

This carefully crafted policy of engagement helped institutionalize stability. While the process was complicated by the concurrent adoption of the *Taiwan Relations Act* and the *Six Assurances*, which introduced a policy of strategic ambiguity, the foundation laid by the Three Communiqués successfully enhanced regional security and stability throughout the 1980s.

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