The ‘One China’ Framework at Fifty (1972-2022)
The Myth of ‘Consensus’ and Its Evolving Policy Significance

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This article surveys the history and evolving policy legacies of the “One China” framework 50 years after Nixon’s historic 1972 visit to China. It begins by introducing key concepts and highlighting the crucial difference between Beijing’s self-defined “One China principle” and the U.S.’s, Japan’s, and key other countries’ variable “One China” policies as it relates to Taiwan. It argues that three seminal 1970s' developments consolidated a “One China” framework as an informal institution of international politics. The ambiguity baked in by Cold War-era geopolitical necessity provided flexibility sufficient to enable diplomatic breakthroughs between erstwhile adversaries, but also planted seeds for deepening contestation and frictions today. Recent developments—especially Taiwan’s democratization and Beijing’s increasingly proactive assertion of its sovereignty claim—have transformed incentive structures in Taipei and major international partners. The net effect is that the ambiguities—and myth of consensus—underpinning the framework’s half-century of success face unprecedented challenges.

Key words:
China; Taiwan; ‘One China’; United States; Japan; politics; foreign policy, cross-Strait
Fifty years ago, on February 21, 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon arrived in mainland China for a week-long visit intended to accelerate rapprochement with the communist-led People’s Republic of China (PRC; below, “China”) and to enable late-Cold War strategic realignment against the Soviet Union. This “week that changed the world” and the landmark *Shanghai Communique* signed during Nixon’s visit enabled a historic U.S.-China partnership after two decades of acrimony and set Washington on a path toward ultimately—in 1979—severing formal diplomatic ties and its twenty-five-year-old mutual defence pact with the Republic of China (ROC; below, “Taiwan”), withdrawing military forces from Taiwan, and recognizing the PRC as the “sole legal government of China.” Notably, however, in the 1979 U.S.-PRC Normalization Communique, Washington did not recognize Beijing’s position on “One China,” an essential component of which is Beijing’s claim that Taiwan is a PRC province. Rather, the U.S. government merely “acknowledge[d] the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan [emphasis added].”

The announcement in July 1971 of Nixon’s planned China trip had transformative effects internationally. It facilitated the October 1971 United Nations (UN) vote that granted Beijing “China’s” seat. It also precipitated a cascade of foreign governments’ switching diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. Most significantly for Taiwan, in September 1972, Tanaka Kakuei, prime minister of Japan, then the world’s second-largest national economy, a U.S. treaty ally hosting tens of thousands of U.S. forward-deployed military forces close to the Taiwan Strait, and a key partner of Taipei itself, would travel to Beijing to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC, thus effectively ending Japan-ROC official ties. Together, Nixon’s and Tanaka’s 1972 visits augured a two-decade “Golden Age” in U.S.-Japan-PRC economic cooperation and strategic alignment, significantly contributed to China’s post-1978 “rise,” and reshaped both the Cold War in Asia and international politics more generally.²

Crucially, however, even after recognizing Beijing as China’s “sole legal government,” neither Tokyo nor Washington recognized the PRC’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan. Furthermore, both insisted on maintaining practically significant, if “unofficial” and “non-governmental”

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¹ AIT 1979b.
² Vogel, Yuan and Tanaka 2002.
engagement with Taipei thenceforth. As these two critical cases show, and despite Beijing’s increasingly proactive assertions to the contrary today, there has never been a universal consensus about what “One China” means, either in theory or in practice. Five decades later, much remains unsettled and in flux, with continuing and profound consequences for China’s foreign relations, Taiwan, the region, and the world.

Over the half-century since “the week that changed the world,” the unresolved nature of the cross-Strait dispute over Taiwan’s sovereignty and Beijing’s all-but-guaranteed pushback against any perceived challenge to its self asserted “One China principle” (yi ge Zhongguo yuanze)—i.e., Beijing’s position that “there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China, and the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China”3—together with foreign governments’ varying degrees of qualified acquiescence, have consolidated a “One China” framework as an informal institution in international politics.

The contributions to this special section reflect on the significance of the “One China” framework for China’s foreign relations, Taiwan, cross-Strait dynamics, and international politics since the 1970s. They build upon and update existing scholarship to reflect the latest real-world developments, especially the dramatic worsening of cross-Strait and U.S.-China frictions since 2016 and unprecedented interest in U.S. allies in Asia and Europe in speaking out in support of, and deepening practical cooperation with, democratic Taipei. They explore under-examined but immensely consequential cases beyond the U.S.- and security-centric framings that dominate the existing literature. These diverse case studies include Japan, the European Union (EU), and various countries’ approaches to Taiwan during the COVID-19 pandemic,4 and help elucidate the variability in how the “One China” framework operates internationally—not only across, but also within, important cases. Two additional contributions apply legal and international relations theoretic perspectives, respectively, to assess how contemporary cross-Strait vicissitudes have transformed the meaning and consequences of the dispute over “One China,” with profound international political ramifications.5

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3 See, for example, Taiwan Affairs Office 2004. As Chen’s and Lin’s contributions (this issue) point out, Beijing’s own position on “One China” has evolved subtly over time.
4 Liff, this issue; Brown, this issue; Kastner, et al., this issue.
5 Chen, this issue; Lin, this issue.
The special section advances an understanding of the “One China” framework as an informal and flexible institution that has shaped China’s foreign relations since 1972, but whose effective bounds have always been largely implicit, flexible, and politically contingent. It also contributes to dispelling the fallacy actively asserted by Beijing today that its “One China principle” is a “norm of international relations and universal consensus in international society.” Instead, it highlights a historical and contemporary reality of immense, and fluid, complexity both across the Taiwan Strait and internationally. The 50th anniversary of Nixon’s and Tanaka’s historic visits and U.S.-China relations’ post-1972 nadir make this a particularly opportune moment to critically assess the “One China” framework and its evolving contemporary policy significance.

This article is organized as follows: First, a conceptual overview introduces the “One China” framework and explains its significance as an informal institution. Next, a historical section briefly discusses its origins and 1970s consolidation. After summarizing the post-1949 dissensus across the Strait and Cold War-era competition between the PRC and ROC for international recognition, it demonstrates how a series of PRC negotiations with Washington and Tokyo—Beijing’s and Taipei’s two most important international partners after 1972—powerfully consolidated the ambiguities about Taiwan’s status at the heart of the framework. A third section briefly analyzes the “One China” framework’s practical implications for international politics between the 1970s and today, highlighting the importance of analytically differentiating Beijing’s self-defined, self-asserted “One China principle”—and its essential claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan—from many foreign governments’ variable and dynamic “One China” policies. A penultimate section examines how contemporary strategic, political, and other vicissitudes both across the Strait and beyond present the framework’s continued viability with more serious challenges today than at any point in the past fifty years. A final section concludes.

1. What the “One China” Framework Is and Why It Matters

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6 Waijiaobu 2020.
The “One China” framework, as used herein and across this special section, denotes a tacit understanding in the international community that allows foreign governments to maintain formal, diplomatic relations with the PRC while also enjoying nominally “unofficial” or “non-governmental”—but, in several significant cases, deeply substantive—ties with Taiwan, which the PRC has never governed but claims as a province. The framework effectively creates a gray area that enables other states to recognize the first of two claims essential to Beijing’s self-defined “One China principle”—that the PRC is China’s “sole legal government”—but avoid taking a position on the second—Beijing’s assertion that Taiwan is a PRC province and therefore should be denied international status as a separate entity able to, inter alia, freely join most international organizations or sign treaties. Critically, the bounds of the gray area, and therefore the framework’s flexibility, are contested and politically contingent. Thus, though Beijing demands all foreign governments recognize PRC sovereignty over Taiwan, it has grudgingly tolerated the ambiguous status quo with numerous countries for decades. As discussed below, the United States and Japan are particularly significant cases in point.

The inherent vagueness and flexibility at the heart of the “One China” framework, and the policy variability and dynamism enabled by it, have had profound practical consequences over the past half-century. On the one hand, it facilitated first the rapprochement and then extensive practical cooperation between erstwhile adversaries (especially the U.S. and China) after 1972 that had long been at intractable loggerheads regarding key issues related to Taiwan. It also enabled considerable variation in its effective manifestation and operationalization across and within cases (including the Taiwan Strait itself) that, among other things, kept the peace and enabled Taiwan to persist as a de facto autonomous international political actor, maintain extensive and robust, if unofficial, ties with many of the world’s most powerful democracies and advanced economies, thrive economically and, eventually, democratize. On the other hand, as discussed in Section 4, the vagueness and flexibility at the heart of the post-1970s “One China” framework also planted the seeds for the considerable frictions unfolding across and beyond the Strait under very different circumstances today.

Indeed, another recurring theme since the 1970s is that despite its grudging tolerance in practice, Beijing has often signaled it will punish behavior it perceives to be violating its self-asserted “One
China principle.” In the interest of maintaining relatively stable ties with Beijing, other actors often acquiesce, or at least concede the rhetorical initiative to Beijing. It is thus helpful to understand the “One China” framework as what political scientists refer to as an informal institution: it defines the actual “rules of the game” which, though unwritten, shape “many of the ‘real’ incentives and constraints that underlie [leaders’] political behavior.” Any foreign government that crosses Beijing’s elusive redline on Taiwan can expect some form of negative backlash, though the severity can vary widely for political reasons. Fears of harsh consequences often incentivize self-censorship in the international community and effectively constrain states’ behavior in response to or in anticipation of potential backlash from Beijing, regardless of countries’ official positions on “One China.” As discussed in Section 4, the expanding scope of Beijing’s proactive policing of its “principle” in recent years, including beyond the halls of international diplomacy, is an additional source of increasing friction.

Fifty years after Nixon’s groundbreaking visit, real-world developments raise serious questions about the framework’s continued viability and, by extension, the sustainability of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. In this regard, China’s growing power and intolerance for perceived departures from its self-asserted “One China principle”; Taiwan’s robust democratization, together with the U.S. and other major democracies’ manifest desire to deepen practical support for Taiwan’s effective autonomy in the face of deepening pressure from Beijing; and China’s increasingly fraught relations with Washington and most major U.S. democratic allies more generally conspire to present the extant “One China” framework with perhaps its greatest challenge of the past half-century.

2. The Origins and Consolidation of the “One China” Framework in the 1970s

The dispute over “One China” emerged internationally in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War when, in 1949, the KMT (Kuomintang, or Chinese Nationalist Party) was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and fled to Taiwan. The KMT set up a “provisional” capital in Taipei for the extant ROC regime. Meanwhile, the CCP established the new People’s Republic’s capital in Beijing that October. The PRC coined the term “One China” in the mid-1950s because of

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7 Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 734.
suspicions that U.S. containment strategy vis-à-vis international communism meant Washington was plotting to establish Taiwan as a country independent of China.⁸ Therefore, the genesis of “One China” was direct opposition to what Beijing called “Two Chinas,” where Taiwan would be recognized as a “second” China, or “One China, One Taiwan,” where Taiwan would be an independent country with no connection to the PRC or the ROC regime.

Between 1949 and 1991, the KMT/ROC regime also categorically rejected “Two Chinas” to support its claim that the Chinese Civil War was not over. Internally, the ROC government—composed mainly of “Mainlander” elites who had fled to Taiwan in 1949—maintained that Taiwan was part of Chinese territory to justify its single-party government and to refuse popular elections on the island. Externally, the ROC government wanted to prevent the PRC from asserting that it had succeeded the government of China and should replace the ROC and represent China in the international community (especially at the UN).⁹ It was not until 1991, when the ROC government abolished the “Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion” as part of its rapid democratization, that the ROC formally renounced its claim of authority over mainland China.

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⁸ Huang 2001.
⁹ Liu 2001, 113; Rigger 2011, 137.
The dispute over “One China” manifested most conspicuously in the PRC’s and ROC’s zero-sum competition for diplomatic allies. [Figure 1] Throughout the Cold War, and consistent with its own claim to represent “One China,” Taipei refused to claim Taiwan as another sovereign China or as another state unaffiliated with the PRC or ROC—even when major countries (e.g., the United States) appeared open to the option before 1972.\textsuperscript{11} The consequences for Taiwan’s international status of this shared opposition to “dual recognition” were profound. As noted above, U.S.-PRC rapprochement helped mark the 1970s as a historic turning point: since then, more than 100 countries have recognized Beijing—\textit{with} 40 switching from Taipei in the 1970-1973 period alone.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Falv baihuawen yundong 2019; Gao 1994. Miscellaneous news reports.
\textsuperscript{11} Tucker 2009, 17.
\textsuperscript{12} Xiu 2015, 35.
Yet, the practical significance of the “One China” issue after the 1970s transcends the quantitative matter of which “China” enjoyed official diplomatic recognition from more foreign governments. Fifty years after losing its UN seat, and although its most important international partners do not officially recognize it as a sovereign state, Taiwan continues to enjoy de facto international autonomy. To understand how this was possible, it is important to briefly review how critical decisions made by Washington and Tokyo—Beijing’s and Taipei’s two most important international partners in the 1970s—profoundly affected the meaning and practical significance of “One China” thenceforth. Crucially, though both allies would ultimately sever diplomatic relations with Taipei, the ambiguity of their official positions on Taiwan’s status at the time and their evolving policies toward and support for it afterward were fundamental to consolidating a “One China” framework in international politics, with vagueness and flexibility at its heart.

**The 1972 U.S.-PRC Shanghai Communiqué**

When Nixon announced his historic visit in 1971, Washington had never recognized the PRC regime and still maintained official relations and a mutual defence pact with Taipei. Therefore, one major precondition for mutually-desired U.S.-PRC rapprochement and strategic realignment against the Soviet Union was a *modus vivendi* with Beijing on the question of Taiwan.
The critical issue Beijing sought to address was the U.S. position on Taiwan’s status vis-a-vis “China,” which since the 1950 outbreak of the Korean War had been that it was “yet to be determined.” During Henry Kissinger’s secret trip to China in July 1971 to lay the groundwork for Nixon’s visit, PRC Premier Zhou Enlai demanded that Washington recognize the PRC as the sole legitimate government representing the Chinese people; recognize that Taiwan belongs to China; not support a “Two Chinas” or a “One China, One Taiwan” policy, or the so-called Taiwan independence movement; and not assert its position that the status of Taiwan is undetermined. However, Kissinger did not commit to recognizing that “Taiwan belongs to China.”  

In the Shanghai Communique Nixon signed the following year, the PRC unilaterally reiterated Zhou’s four requirements, while Washington adopted the “acknowledge” and “does not challenge” formula regarding the PRC’s position on Taiwan’s status.

Meanwhile, Washington pushed Beijing to commit to resolving cross-Strait disputes peacefully. Beijing resisted adamantly, asserting that the Taiwan question was a matter of PRC sovereignty and thus an “internal affair.” In the Shanghai Communique, Beijing stated (unilaterally) that “the liberation of Taiwan is China’s internal affair in which no other country has the right to interfere,” while Washington “reaffirm[ed] its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question.”

As Romberg explains, what Beijing got from the Shanghai Communique, at best, was a U.S. concession to forswear a “One China, One Taiwan” or “Two Chinas” framework, or support for Taiwan independence. However, this formula did not rule out “accepting” Taiwan independence or unification. Rather, it committed Washington only to take a neutral position on the outcome, provided it was reached peacefully.

14 AIT 1972.
15 Romberg 2003, 35.
More importantly, though, around the time of Nixon’s trip, Washington and Beijing faced international and domestic constraints that limited concessions each could make.\textsuperscript{16} In the \textit{Shanghai Communique}, the two sides cleverly adopted an “agree to disagree” format to circumvent these constraints.\textsuperscript{17} This flexible approach reflected a lack of consensus on Taiwan, but also enabled them to reconcile their respective domestic needs and increasingly aligned strategic interests.

\textbf{The 1972 Japan-PRC Normalization Communique/“Japan Formula” and the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship}

Once Nixon announced that he would visit China in 1972, Tokyo moved quickly to normalize relations. Initially, Beijing asserted that Tokyo would have to recognize its position that there is only one China and that the PRC is its sole legitimate government; that Taiwan is a province of China and an inalienable part of Chinese territory; and that the 1952 Japan-ROC peace treaty was “illegal.” However, Japan’s negotiators succeeded in getting Beijing to accept a normalization communique in which Tokyo only “recognized” the PRC government “as the sole legal Government of China,” while effectively circumventing Beijing’s second and third conditions.\textsuperscript{18}

In short, Japan’s official 1972 position on “One China” allows only that Tokyo “fully understands and respects” the PRC’s stand “that Taiwan is an inalienable part” of PRC territory.\textsuperscript{19} Significantly, Tokyo does not take a position on Taiwan’s status. As Liff points out in this issue, this vague posture subsequently enabled Tokyo to carve out considerable flexibility concerning subsequent engagement with Taiwan, without violating any putative commitment to Beijing. Furthermore, under the precedent-setting “Japan formula,” Beijing tacitly accepted Tokyo’s unilateral assertion that Japan would maintain robust, if unofficial, ties with Taiwan, to include what many consider a de facto embassy in Taipei. Thus, Japan-PRC 1972 negotiations—just seven months after Nixon’s visit—resulted in two major outcomes foundational to the “One China” framework’s subsequent consolidation and operation in international politics: Tokyo normalized diplomatic relations with

\textsuperscript{16} Tucker 2001, 235, 255-56.
\textsuperscript{17} LRO 1997, 490-91.
\textsuperscript{18} He 2017, 2.
\textsuperscript{19} MOFA 1972.
the PRC despite not recognizing Beijing’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, and it insisted on maintaining practically significant, if unofficial, ties with Taipei thenceforth.²⁰

Amidst perceived strategic necessity (read: containing Moscow) and Beijing’s desire for massive U.S. and Japanese economic cooperation as it launched “reform and opening up,” this post-1972 status quo proved sufficiently tolerable to PRC leaders that they agreed not to even discuss Taiwan during negotiations over what would become the 1978 Japan-PRC Treaty of Peace and Friendship. (The signed treaty does not even mention “Taiwan”)²¹ This lack of contestation and the conspicuous absence of any reference to Taiwan in the second major political document defining Japan-PRC relations further established the 1972 normalization communique and “Japan formula” as institution-creating precedents whose vagueness, flexibility, and lack of Japan-PRC consensus were fundamental to their viability.²² Beyond their direct significance for Japan-Taiwan relations after 1972, these outcomes provided a direct model for Washington and several other countries.²³

The 1979 U.S.-PRC Normalization Communique

As normalization negotiations shifted into higher gear under the Carter Administration, the U.S. eventually resigned itself to abolishing the U.S.-ROC Mutual Defence Treaty, withdrawing U.S. troops from Taiwan, and severing diplomatic relations with Taipei. The fundamental issues regarding the U.S.’ official position on Taiwan’s status and demand for the PRC to commit to a peaceful resolution, however, remained unsettled. Over years of negotiations, both aforementioned 1972 precedents were repeatedly referenced as the two sides sought to accommodate each other’s incompatible positions.

Eventually, the 1979 normalization communique referred vaguely to the Shanghai Communique and contained no indication of the U.S. position on Taiwan’s status; it merely “acknowledge[d] the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China” (emphasis added).²⁴

As for continuing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, the PRC vehemently objected. However, Washington

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²⁰ Liff, this issue.
²¹ Waijiaobu 1978.
²² Liff, this issue.
²³ Hirakawa 2006.
²⁴ AIT 1979b.
would not budge on packaging the sale of defensive arms in its “full range commercial relations” with Taiwan to meet the island’s legitimate security concerns.\textsuperscript{25} Ultimately, the PRC allowed normalization to go forward but wished to address the arms sales issue later.\textsuperscript{26} In another related development, under U.S. domestic legislation known as the 1979 \textit{Taiwan Relations Act} (TRA), Washington made an ambiguous commitment to Taiwan’s security, committed to selling “defensive” arms, and created a nominally private corporation (supported with government funding) to continue the U.S. “unofficial” presence in Taiwan.\textsuperscript{27}

In all three critical cases above, international and domestic political exigencies interacted to shape what was possible and incentivized compromises between Beijing and its erstwhile early-Cold War adversaries that, though representing progress in principle, did not fundamentally resolve the issue of Taiwan’s status. Nevertheless, vague concessions, compromise, and flexibility worked into these agreements were sufficient to enable Beijing to agree to normalize diplomatic relations with both Tokyo and Washington—transforming the Cold War and international politics and accelerating economic cooperation that would facilitate China’s rapid post-1980s rise. Yet both Japan and the U.S. also carved out space for maintaining substantive and robust, if officially unofficial, ties with Taiwan.

The idea of “One China” predated Nixon’s historic visit to China. However, the combination of the PRC’s admission to the UN that followed Nixon’s announcement of his upcoming trip, the \textit{Shanghai Communique} signed during his visit, and both the terms under which Tokyo and Washington normalized official relations with Beijing (and chose to operationalize “unofficial” ties with Taipei thenceforth) marked the 1970s as a critical juncture in the “One China” framework’s consolidation as an informal institution shaping China’s foreign relations and international politics ever since. As the contributions to this special section demonstrate, even beyond the U.S. case that has dominated the existing literature, the vagueness and flexibility at the heart of the framework have had profound real-world consequences for other parties’ relations with Beijing (and Taipei) over the past fifty years.

\textsuperscript{25} Romberg 2003, 88-94.  
\textsuperscript{26} LRO 2004, 452-53; Garver 2016, 407-08.  
\textsuperscript{27} Romberg 2003, 87-88.
3. The “One China” Framework as an Informal Institution in Practice

The “One China” framework emerging from the above 1970s developments reflects two political understandings widely shared in the contemporary international system. The first is that no foreign government can simultaneously recognize both the PRC/Mainland China and the ROC/Taiwan as sovereign states. Instead, each must choose either Beijing or Taipei concerning official diplomatic relations and representation of “China” in international organizations. Importantly, the idea that there is (or can be) only “One China” has no basis in international law or treaty; rather, it is an informal (and contested) political norm—one enforced internationally by both Beijing and Taipei throughout the Cold War, and Beijing exclusively after 1991.

Second, especially since the early 1970s, even after formally recognizing the PRC, there is considerable flexibility concerning whether, how, and how extensively foreign governments choose to develop their “unofficial” relations with Taiwan. These bounds are amorphous, unspoken, and politically contingent—and can vary considerably across cases and time. Most famously, Beijing tolerates levels of U.S. engagement with Taiwan, including military cooperation and high-level dialogues, that it would (presumably) never allow in other cases. Furthermore, the breadth and depth of U.S.-Taiwan cooperation, while nominally “unofficial,” has varied significantly over time. Conversely, despite having an official 1992 position on “One China” similarly vague to its U.S. ally’s, South Korea has long avoided robust cooperation with Taipei—presumably because Seoul is more concerned than Washington about potential backlash from Beijing.

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28 Bush 2017, 8.
29 E.g., UN Resolution 2758, which effectively granted the PRC “China’s” seat at the UN does not mention “Taiwan” or the “Republic of China,” much less say anything about the government’s sovereignty or prospects for future participation in the UN. Drun and Glaser 2022.
The Myth of Consensus in Practice: Beijing’s “One China Principle” vs. Others’ “One China” Policies

Though an essential implied manifestation of China’s self-asserted “One China principle”—non-recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state—enjoys basic conformance internationally (see Figure 1), thirteen foreign governments and the Vatican do maintain official diplomatic ties with Taipei today. However, arguably of greater practical significance for Taiwan are two essential facts at the heart of the “One China” framework’s effective operation in international politics over the past fifty years. First, major advanced democracies and some of the world’s largest, most influential economies (including the United States, Japan, the EU, and other key U.S. allies in Asia and Europe) recognize the PRC as the “sole legal government of China” but do not recognize Beijing’s claim of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. Most maintain ambiguous positions on Taiwan’s status; others adopt none at all. Second, in practice, even after officially recognizing Beijing, many major democratic powers develop robust, even if nominally “unofficial,” ties with Taipei. The U.S. is the most famous and practically significant example, but it is far from the only one. Other major powers, including Japan and the EU, adopt similarly vague positions and, especially in recent years, have increasingly pursued practical cooperation with Taipei.30

Nevertheless, despite the ambiguity embodied in the framework since the 1970s and the objective reality of key players’ ambiguous official positions and practices on “One China,” in recent years, Beijing has more proactively asserted that its “One China principle” is a “basic norm of international relations and universal consensus in international society.” To exert control over the global narrative about “One China,” Beijing strongly, albeit misleadingly, implies that the U.S., Japan, and every other country that has normalized relations with the PRC has agreed to it.31 It also retroactively and erroneously claims that UN Resolution 2758 meant that UN member states determined that Taiwan is part of the PRC.32 In other words, Beijing today boldly asserts universality and implied equivalence between its “One China principle” and other foreign governments’ policies on “One China” (i.e., their “One China” policies). The empirical reality, however, is far more complicated and variable—both across cases and within them.

30 Brown, this issue; Liff, this issue.
32 Drun and Glaser 2022.
Across this special section, we conceive of a foreign government’s “One China” policy as basically encapsulating two factors: first, its official position on “One China” (read: Taiwan’s sovereign status); and second, how the government chooses to operationalize that position in practical terms: i.e., the nature, degree, and extent of effective engagement of, cooperation with, and public support for Taiwan in the absence of formal diplomatic ties. Though the phrase “One China policy” is often used in reference to the United States, Washington is not alone in adopting positions and policies clearly inconsistent with Beijing’s self-asserted “principle” and preferences.

The first factor—the government’s official position on “One China”—is usually, though not always, formalized in a signed political communique normalizing diplomatic relations with the PRC. As such, it is typically static. Some governments effectively adopt the PRC’s language on “One China” verbatim, and there is little, if any, daylight between their official position on Taiwan’s sovereignty and the PRC’s. Other foreign governments, however, adopt either no position or an ambiguous one reflecting subtle, but significant, differences with Beijing’s “One China principle.” Examples of the latter group include not only the immensely consequential United States and Japan but also other major U.S. democratic allies.

Beyond the varying language in bilateral communiques, the empirical record also demonstrates considerable variability in how foreign governments choose to operationalize their official position in terms of practical policies vis-à-vis Taiwan. Excepting the third rail of official recognition of Taipei, the bounds of what is possible policy-wise are ambiguous and shaped by domestic and international political factors. For example, today, Beijing effectively, if grudgingly, tolerates far greater support for and cooperation with Taiwan from Washington than it would (conceivably) ever brook from smaller, weaker powers. And though Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington all adopt similarly vague official positions in their respective normalization communiques with Beijing, their respective levels of practical engagement and public support for

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33 In his study of U.S. “One China” policy, Bush notes this could also include the government’s position on how cross-Strait differences should be resolved. Bush 2017, 18-22.
34 Drun 2017.
Taipei differ significantly—with Seoul by far the most reluctant to risk angering Beijing, and with Tokyo more willing but still not nearly as forward-leaning as its U.S. ally.\textsuperscript{35}

Indeed, as the U.S., Japan and other cases demonstrate, the manner in which governments choose to operationalize their vague position on Taiwan’s status—if they even have one—in policy terms can vary widely—both across cases, and even within them (i.e., changing over time). How leaders choose to interpret “unofficiality” is politically contingent. In analysis of the U.S. case, Bush notes four factors that affect U.S. decision-making: consideration of national interests, expected reaction from Beijing, Taiwan’s own policies, and domestic political pressures.\textsuperscript{36} The same generally applies in other cases, as well.

\textit{The U.S. example, and beyond}

The most famous and consequential manifestation of the aforementioned disconnects between Beijing’s “principle” and another country’s effective “policy” is the U.S. “One China” policy, which is not defined in a single document, much less any agreement with Beijing. Rather, it is the effective culmination of decades of statements and policies, including not only the (non-binding) bilateral communiques that Beijing prefers to cite\textsuperscript{37} but also domestic legislation (such as the 1979 TRA),\textsuperscript{38} presidential statements (such as the recently declassified 1982 \textit{Six Assurances}),\textsuperscript{39} and various other policies.\textsuperscript{40} As mentioned already, though the U.S.’ official (1979) position on “One China” recognizes the PRC “as the sole legal government of China,” it does not recognize Beijing’s claim that Taiwan is part of the PRC. More critically, though the U.S. “does not support Taiwan independence,” it asserts an interest in “maintaining strong, unofficial relations with Taiwan,” adopts variable policies and rhetoric in support of Taiwan’s effective autonomy and democracy, and insists on “the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences.” Washington’s operational

\begin{footnotes}
\item[35] Lee and Liff forthcoming.
\item[36] Bush 2017, 17-18
\item[37] These communiques include the 1972 Shanghai Communique, 1979 normalization communique, and the August 17, 1982 U.S.-China Communique on Arms Sales to Taiwan.
\item[38] AIT 1979a.
\item[39] AIT 1982.
\item[40] For seminal overviews of U.S. “One China” policy, see Romberg 2003; Bush 2017. On U.S. position regarding whether communiques are “binding,” see Romberg, 228-229.
\end{footnotes}
mantra is that it “opposes unilateral changes to the [cross-Strait] status quo by either side, and encourages both sides to continue their constructive dialogue on the basis of dignity and respect.”41

Not only is U.S. policy not based upon any consensus with Beijing on Taiwan’s status, its vague 1979 position has allowed significant changes to how Washington operationalizes its “One China” policy. For instance, recent years have witnessed unprecedentedly high-level dialogues and visits involving senior U.S. officials and military officers, more frequent arms sales, and more forward-leaning congressional legislation and government rhetoric in support of Taiwan’s effective autonomy and expanding U.S.-Taiwan cooperation. For example, in January 2021, the State Department terminated unilateral, self-imposed restrictions on U.S. government contacts with Taiwanese counterparts, the intent of which had been to make U.S.-Taiwan ties appear less “governmental” or “official.”42 Importantly, Beijing’s rhetoric belies tacit recognition of the lack of consensus, such as when it demands that the U.S. carry out a “genuine” (zhengzheng de), as opposed to “fake” (jia de) “One China” policy.43 In short, U.S. “One China” policy has evolved significantly over the past fifty years, often in response to changing circumstances in Taiwan and across the Taiwan Strait, and without asking for Beijing’s permission.

Though the U.S. case is illustrative, the contributions to this special section move beyond it to explore the considerable variation internationally about what “One China” can mean in practice and how key governments choose to operationalize their actual policies toward Taiwan. The exercise is revealing. The differences in effective policies—including among countries with similarly vague “non-recognition” positions vis-à-vis Beijing’s “One China principle”—are practically significant. The United States and its robust military and other connections to Taiwan remain an outlier case in crucial regards. Still, others line up along a continuum, with some meaningful shifts closer to Washington in recent years.

In this special section, Liff demonstrates how Japan’s approach to Taiwan has evolved and how Japan-Taiwan’s “unofficial” relations have deepened significantly over time, despite Tokyo’s

41 State Department 2018.
42 NPR 2021.
43 Waijiaobu 2021.
officially unaltered 1972 position on “One China.” Brown shows that since the 1970s, both the EU’s and its member states’ policies evince variable but increasing willingness to expand practical links to, and cooperation with, democratic Taipei—especially in recent years. Kastner, et al. demonstrate cross-national variation in responses to Taiwan’s effort to contribute to the global fight against COVID-19, including willingness to support Taiwan’s participation in the World Health Organisation (WHO). Chen’s analysis of cross-Strait vicissitudes further exposes the inherent subjectivity and contestation of “One China’s” definition and operationalization. It also highlights how the effective “One China” positions and policies of many important international political actors have been, and will inevitably continue to be, powerfully affected by domestic debates within Taiwan about how to resolve its dispute with the PRC, as well as Beijing’s response.

In sum, the meaning, significance, and acceptability of Beijing’s self-defined “One China principle” have always been contested outside the formal boundaries of the CCP-administered territory. This complex reality belies the “myth of consensus” increasingly asserted by Beijing. There is no global agreement on the question of “One China,” much less how it should manifest in terms of foreign governments’ policies toward Taiwan.

The PRC has tolerated other countries’ diverse, often ambiguous, official positions and operations on “One China” only grudgingly. In practice, in recent years, Beijing has increasingly used its various and expanding levers of influence to attempt to shape international public and official behavior toward de facto conformity with the “One China,” as Beijing defines it. For instance, in 2021, after Lithuania allowed a “Taiwanese” representative office in Vilnius, Beijing downgraded diplomatic ties and engaged in various forms of economic coercion.

In the face of Beijing’s threats to punish behavior it perceives to be violating its self-defined “One China principle,” and in the interest of ensuring stable economic and other ties with the PRC, many

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44 Liff, this issue.
45 Brown, this issue.
46 Kastner, et al, this issue.
47 Chen, this issue.
governments have traditionally seen different interpretations of “One China” as potentially incendiary political conflicts to be avoided, rather than principled positions to be proactively defended. Romberg describes Beijing’s and Washington’s modes of operation on the “One China” issue as mirror images: since the 1970s, the U.S. can quietly do more than it can openly say, while the PRC government feels it must openly say more, even if it actually does less.49 One significant consequence is that Beijing’s misleading narratives gain traction internationally, facilitating the PRC’s effort to unilaterally claim international legitimacy for its “principle” and demand other actors correct their “wrongs.” As a result, the “One China” framework has worked as an informal institution in practice that, though unwritten, effectively constrains international actors’ behaviour—albeit to varying degrees. The expanding scope of Beijing’s proactive policing of its “principle” today manifests as yet another driver of intensifying political frictions with the U.S. and many other democratic powers in Asia and Europe.

4. Contemporary Factors that Challenge the “One China” Framework Today

With the benefit of a half-century’s hindsight, the 1970s’ strategically and economically expedient ambiguity that enabled extensive trilateral cooperation among Washington, Tokyo, and Beijing in the late Cold War also planted seeds for the worsening contestation and frictions manifesting under very different circumstances today. By the 1990s, the shared Soviet threat that brought them together had evaporated, and Taiwan’s rapid democratization unleashed long-repressed voices that transformed cross-Strait dynamics and global democracies’ interest in supporting the island. More recently, the U.S. and its allies’ perceived strategic (and to a growing extent, economic) interests appear increasingly at odds with a more powerful and assertive China. The combination of deepening contestation within democratic Taiwan over its relationship with Beijing, shifting geopolitical winds, and major democracies’ concerns that authoritarian China poses a severe challenge to shared interests have transformed the context in which the “One China” framework operates. One recent consequence: the United States and key allies in Asia and Europe appear eager to significantly deepen practical support for and cooperation with Taipei.

49 Romberg 2003, 48.
Exacerbating extant frictions is what appears to be an increasingly assertive PRC campaign to conflate other countries’ nuanced or vague official positions on “One China” with Beijing’s “One China principle.” As noted above, from individual country cases to the United Nations, Beijing unilaterally and often misleadingly asserts that an international “consensus” on Taiwan’s status exists, aiming to squeeze the gray area in which other countries operationalize their practical relations with Taipei. In key instances, foreign governments have openly pushed back.\textsuperscript{50}

Ambiguities in the fifty-year-old framework are now enabling these two conflicting developments simultaneously. The net effect is that, though the ambiguity at the heart of the “One China” framework has so far proved resilient, the very vagueness enabling its extraordinary success in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century now allows conditions that present major stress tests for its flexibility in the 21\textsuperscript{st}.

### Taiwan’s Democratization and Deepening Contestation across the Strait

Between 1949 and 1991, the cross-Strait dispute over “One China” was about whether the PRC or ROC represented China’s “legitimate” government. It was largely contested between two authoritarian regimes dominated by men born in Mainland China. In contrast, as explored by Chen and Lin in this special section, Taiwan’s democratization and generational change have transformed cross-Strait dynamics, introducing greater complexity and contestation over the idea of “One China,” both within Taiwan and across the Strait. These cross-Strait vagaries are shaping and shaped by worsening geopolitical frictions between Beijing and other major powers and evince profound consequences for international politics more generally.\textsuperscript{51}

Most prominently, Taiwan’s democratization has empowered long-oppressed voices advocating positions that Beijing sees as a threat to the very idea that Taiwan is a part of China. Because most people in Taiwan never shared the authoritarian KMT regime’s dream of retaking or unifying with the Mainland,\textsuperscript{52} Taiwan’s democratization has allowed various sentiments—including some that are unambiguously pro-independence—to transform discourse (and political leaders’ electoral incentivizes) on the “One China” issue. Today, the vast majority of people in Taiwan support the

\textsuperscript{50}DoD 2022. Price 2022.
\textsuperscript{51}Chen, this issue; Lin, this issue.
\textsuperscript{52}Rigger 2011, 4-5.
status quo of effective autonomy, and extremely few support unification under current conditions. Against this changing domestic political backdrop, even some KMT leaders appear to be reconsidering the party’s past stances.53

Thus, the ROC’s official 1991 renunciation of its intent to compete with the PRC to represent China internationally did not resolve the dispute over “One China.” On the contrary, Lin argues that it merely transformed the dispute from one of indivisible sovereignty more susceptible to escalation to what international relations scholars call a “commitment problem.” Taiwan’s democratization and renunciation of its intent to retake the Mainland have effectively removed this indivisibility issue but made Beijing doubt Taipei’s commitment to stay connected to “China.” Meanwhile, Taipei doubts Beijing’s commitment to respect its people’s will in settling the “One China” issue. This dynamic leads Beijing to think it cannot renounce the threat of force, while Taipei feels it cannot renounce the possibility of a de jure independence.54 Understanding these dilemmas is essential to both cross-Strait and international efforts to keep the peace and promote reconciliation.

In her contribution, Chen demonstrates how positions on “One China” differ among the three key political players across the Taiwan Strait—the CCP, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and KMT. Myriad factors today—the lack of consensus within Taiwan regarding relations with the PRC, a consolidating exclusively Taiwanese identity, Xi Jinping’s call for the “one country, two systems” formula for “reunification” with Taiwan, the complete collapse of the “one country, two systems” model in Hong Kong since 2020, and the DPP’s electoral victories in 2016 and 2020—collectively place the “One China” framework under unprecedented strain across the Taiwan Strait. Under these new circumstances, finding and maintaining a modus vivendi within the framework that is tolerable to Taiwan’s democratic electorate and acceptable to Beijing is challenging political leaders’ imagination and presents arguably the most fundamental test of the informal institution’s flexibility since its effective international consolidation fifty years ago.55

53 ESC 2022; Zhongyang Tongxunshe 2021.
54 Lin, this issue
55 Chen, this issue
Frictions beyond the International Political Realm

Another increasingly prominent feature of Beijing’s campaign to assert its “One China principle” goes beyond the Strait and proactively polices even overseas non-governmental entities’ language concerning Taiwan. For many democratic governments, Beijing is perceived to be exploiting its “principle” to undermine freedom of speech overseas.\footnote{We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to highlight this point.} Recent years have witnessed numerous instances of foreign businesses, non-governmental organizations, Hollywood and sports celebrities, and even local governments or other institutions being pressured to treat Taiwan as part of China. For example, in 2018, Beijing famously shut down the Marriott hotel chain’s website after its customer survey listed Taiwan as a separate country, forcing Marriott to apologize. In 2021, the PRC even demanded that a high school in Colorado “correct” a reference to Taiwan on its school website as a condition for attending the UN Commission on the Status of Women.\footnote{WSJ 2021.}

This trend has introduced new drivers of international and even domestic political friction over “One China” and invited backlash from foreign governments. For example, in response to Beijing’s demand that major U.S. carriers change how Taiwan references on their websites, the U.S. government issued a statement demanding that Beijing “stop threatening and coercing American carriers and citizens” and expressing concern about “a growing trend by the Chinese Communist Party to impose its political views on American citizens and private companies.”\footnote{Press Secretary 2018.}

Trouble Ahead? An Ambiguous Framework Confronts Unprecedented Strain

The Cold War’s end eliminated the shared Soviet threat that initially made the ambiguities embodied in the “One China” framework tolerable and geopolitically expedient. Today, however, as major democracies’ concerns about Beijing’s expanding power, crackdowns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and international behavior grow, interest in bolstering practical cooperation with democratic Taiwan as a partner appears to be deepening. So, too, has an apparent willingness to publicly push back against Beijing’s efforts to shrink Taiwan’s international space—for example, Beijing’s post-2017 denial of Taiwan’s observer status at the WHO, even amidst a global pandemic. Remarkably, this international pushback and support for Taiwan is not limited to major powers.\footnote{Kastner, et al, this issue.}
Even the EU and many European nations appear eager to deepen ties with Taiwan. For example, in 2021 Taiwan received numerous and unprecedented European delegations. Most remarkably, the small Baltic nation of Lithuania demonstrated solidarity with Taipei despite Beijing’s threats, downgrade of diplomatic ties, and economic coercion. And an unprecedented cascade of bilateral and multilateral statements issued by U.S. democratic allies “underscor[ing] the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait,” “encourag[ing] the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues,” and/or calling for Taiwan’s “meaningful participation in international organizations,” inter alia, demonstrate that geopolitical and geoeconomic concerns vis-à-vis China have diminished major democracies’ strategic interest in accommodating Beijing’s hard line on “One China.” Of potentially greatest significance, in response to perceived saber-rattling from Beijing, U.S. President Joe Biden has even suggested a U.S. commitment to Taiwan’s defense that some interpret as indicating a departure from the U.S.’ longstanding posture known as “strategic ambiguity.” In response, Beijing demanded that Washington “scrupulously abide by the One China principle.”

Meanwhile, China’s growing power and influence and a weakening perception of common strategic purpose with the U.S. and other players appear to have reduced Beijing’s tolerance of “One China’s” inherent ambiguities. Internationally, Beijing has become more assertive in demanding that all states, international organizations, and increasingly non-state actors as well, embrace Beijing’s self-asserted position on “One China.” Across the Strait, China’s hardening position manifests in its post-2016 refusal to engage in quasi-official dialogue with Taipei, provocative military exercises near Taiwan, and freezing Taipei out of international organizations (such as the WHO) with which it was previously allowed to engage.

China’s growing willingness to use military, diplomatic, economic, and other means to pressure Taiwan and third parties to toe Beijing’s line on “One China” has threatened to shrink the international space crucial for Taiwan’s economic vitality and democratic vibrancy, further undermining Taipei’s interests in staying within the “One China” framework. Deepening

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60 Brown, this issue.  
61 Reuters 2021.  
62 e.g., G7 2021.  
63 Waijiaobu 2022.
perceptions in key foreign democratic capitals that Beijing poses a growing threat to Taiwan’s consolidated democracy and effective autonomy have led them to voice interest in deepening cooperation with Taipei. From Beijing’s perspective, increased international support for Taiwan has further consolidated a long-extant belief that the U.S. and others seek to contain China’s rise and “national rejuvenation.” The net result is worsening geopolitical and geoeconomic frictions and questions about the continuing viability of the “One China” framework.

Thus, fifty years after 1972, the “One China” framework’s purpose-built ambiguities face unprecedented challenges, and it remains to be seen how far its vague and amorphous bounds can be stretched. Today, Beijing increasingly asserts its sovereignty claim over Taiwan and maneuvers to shrink its international space, Taipei tries to parry Beijing’s pressure and preserve its democracy and effective autonomy by diversifying its international connections, and Washington, Tokyo, and other democratic partners try to support Taiwan’s resilience—all while avoiding Beijing’s red line.

Potentially at risk are the implicit assurances provided by the framework’s longstanding ambiguities: for China, the idea that peaceful unification is possible; for democratic Taiwan, that any future settlement will not violate its citizens’ free will; and for the United States, Japan, and many other democracies, that substantive—if unofficial—ties and practical cooperation with Taiwan can sustain and deepen without inviting a confrontation with Beijing.

5. Conclusion
This lead article explored the consolidation and practical consequences of the “One China” framework since the early 1970s as an informal institution of international politics—one which has fundamentally enabled and politically conditioned China’s engagement with the U.S., Japan, much of Europe, and other major international players ever since. The flexibility and vagueness built into the framework in the 1970s made possible China’s cooperation with the U.S., Japan, and other major democracies during the late Cold War, significantly facilitating China’s subsequent “rise.”

Fifty years after Nixon’s visit and Japan-PRC normalization, however, real-world developments raise serious questions about the framework’s continued viability and, by extension, the
sustainability of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. China’s growing power and intolerance for perceived departures from its self-asserted “One China principle”; Taiwan’s robust democratization, together with the U.S. and other major democracies’ deepening practical support for Taiwan’s effective autonomy in the face of mounting pressure from Beijing; and China’s increasingly fraught relations with Washington and most major U.S. democratic allies more generally conspire to present the ambiguities that have made the “One China” framework so successful over the past half-century with perhaps its greatest challenge to date.

As an indication of complexity today, although Beijing’s renewed effort since 2016 to isolate Taiwan internationally has reduced Taipei’s official diplomatic partners from 21 to 14, the substantively meaningful—if “unofficial”—ties and support it receives from the U.S., Japan, EU, and other major democracies have never been greater. Yet, none of the latter actually recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state.

Against this ever more complicated backdrop, it is important for scholars, journalists, and policymakers to appreciate not only the contemporary and variable manifestations of the “One China” framework in international politics but also the decades-old modus vivendi that made them possible. As the late Alan Romberg advised, for the framework to continue to work, it would “require[…] not just finesse and sensitivity, but a clear understanding about the nature of the ambiguity, the issue it left unresolved, the commitments that permit it to function, and the redlines that could cause it to collapse.” As policymakers consider future steps, it is worth reflecting on what then-former U.S. policymakers (now both serving in the Biden administration) have called “the greatest unclaimed success in the history of U.S.-Chinese relations”; one with the potential to serve as a model for constructive engagement with the PRC “on a variety of other issues, which are similarly likely to include intense engagement, mutual vigilance and a degree of distrust, and a measure of patience and necessary restraint.”

64 Romberg 2003, 106.
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