

## Occasional Paper 45

### Taking Exception to a US-PRC "Fourth Communiqué"<sup>1</sup>

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Richard Holbrooke recently argued that the United States and the PRC should negotiate a "fourth communiqué" to update the 1972, 1978, and 1982 joint communiqués that set the terms of Sino-US relations. Ambassador Holbrooke has been deeply involved in US relations with China and has done much to advance them. And he has unique experience negotiating seemingly "impossible" accords.

In this case, however, while much of his analysis about problems in the US-PRC relationship is right, including about elements of instability, his prescription is wrong. The problem with his proposal is not that we should "let sleeping dogs lie," which he dismisses, but rather that a fourth communiqué is impractical—for both countries—and unnecessary.

Holbrooke argues that, on the basis of a new common strategic adversary—terrorism—the two sides should forge a new, constructive phase in the relationship. He is right about the new strategic adversary, and its existence has already allowed the introduction of a more positive tone. But he overstates the degree to which this shared problem is perceived by either side as altering the core undertakings of US-PRC relations and thus the prospects for leveraging it into creation of a "new phase." Moreover, he understates not only the difficulty of the negotiating task but also the mischief that even attempting it would cause.

The idea of a "fourth communiqué" is not new. Reports of a PRC proposal for one abounded as the two countries prepared for the exchange of summit visits in 1997 and 1998. But then, as now, any restatement of US Taiwan policy would have had to include, among other things, reference to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act that governs unofficial US relations with the island. That would be intolerable to the PRC even in an "our side/your side" structure. In the event, the joint statement issued during the October 1997 Clinton-Jiang summit in Washington merely reaffirmed its adherence to the three joint communiqués and the "one China" policy.

Holbrooke argues that the previous communiqués are now out of date and that a new communiqué not only "would go a long way toward building a stronger relationship with China," but could strengthen America's hand in promoting our values and national agenda. If we agreed

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on most of the fundamental questions, he might be right. But we do not agree, and any effort to spell out our positions would only underscore the differences rather than any coincidence of views.

He says that a new communiqué "would perhaps help Taiwan open a more productive dialogue with the mainland." Such a dialogue is badly needed. But, while we have a role to play, resolving cross-Strait problems is fundamentally for the two sides of the Strait to work out, not the United States.

Moreover, the US "one China" policy is not identical to the PRC's "one China" principle, a point that China would not want to highlight. While the United States acknowledges, and does not challenge, the PRC view that there is "one China" with Taiwan a part of it, the US does not endorse that view. Moreover, the United States does not advocate "unification" between Taiwan and the mainland—only "peaceful resolution" of cross-Strait issues—even though it is pledged not to support various positions such as "one China, one Taiwan" or "Taiwan independence" that would be inconsistent with unification. Perhaps even more important, the pre-1989—i.e., pre-Tiananmen/pre-Soviet collapse—consensus in the United States no longer exists to underpin a new, comprehensive US statement about what our Taiwan policy should be and perhaps even about the central importance of US-PRC relations.

In any event, what could a fourth communiqué offer China? A chiding US statement on Tibet? A warning that the fight against terrorism should not be used as an excuse to clamp down on legitimate political and religious expression? A caution that the United States will not overlook activities that violate nonproliferation norms? Even where American and Chinese positions coincide, there are limits to what could be stated. On Korea, for example, it is unlikely we could go beyond platitudes calling for peace, stability, and a non-nuclear Peninsula.

Clearly it would help give positive impetus to Sino-US relations if the United States acknowledged not only China's importance but its right to pursue legitimate national interests, including, for example, a strategic national deterrent. But that is not something this administration, and perhaps any administration, will or can do. What we can do, and need to do, is expand cooperation in the areas Holbrooke identifies—terrorism, narcotics, AIDS, and the environment, as well as in strategically sensitive areas such as Korea and South Asia.

But we don't need a new communiqué to do that. We should do it because it is in the national interest of both countries to do so.