For more than fifty years, the United States has adhered to a "One China Policy" in regards to the competing Chinese regimes located in Beijing and Taibei. It is interesting to note that the reasons for this adherence changed over time.

In the aftermath of the crushing defeat in the Chinese Civil War of 1945–1949, Nationalist leader Jiang Jieshi and his Guomindang supporters in late 1949 fled to Taiwan, an island one hundred miles from the Chinese coast. For the next twenty-five years, U.S. foreign policy officially regarded the Nationalist regime in Taibei, Taiwan as the government of all China and equally officially refused to recognize the Communist regime in Beijing, China as the effective rulers of the mainland. This played out in various ways, most notably in the continuing U.S. effort to recognize the Republic of China on Taiwan and not the People's Republic of China on the mainland as the government recognized for China's permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Over these twenty-five years a distinct Chinese society began to emerge on Taiwan, and, equally importantly, a distinct political system and political issues also began to emerge. After Jiang and his son and successor, Jiang Jingguo, died, native Taiwanese assumed leadership positions, and the politics of the "One China Policy" became considerably more complicated. When President Richard Nixon traveled to China in February 1972, the most difficult part of the negotiation with his Chinese hosts concerned the status of Taiwan. The government in Beijing insisted that there was only one China, that Taiwan was a part of China, and that eventually the mainland had to bring Taiwan back into China. The U.S. government officially agreed to disagree.

Beginning in the 1990s, Taiwan political leaders began considering the idea of Taiwan as a country separate from but friendly with China. They were quite willing to give up any dream of reuniting China under their control, but they also wished to be free of the mainland to pursue their own political, social, and economic future. After the British returned Hong Kong, Jiulong (Kowloon), and the New Territories to China, China's sometimes heavy-handed approach to Hong Kong helped strengthen the attractiveness of independence to many Taiwanese. Thus, in 1999 President Li Denghui of the Republic of China suggested that People's Republic of China and Taiwan were separate countries, and the Communist government in Beijing cut off the dialogue in anger. Chen Shuibian became President of the Republic of China in 2000, and appeared sympathetic to Li's view of Taiwan and China as separate countries. Indeed, in early August 2002, he noted, "It is clear that both sides of the straits are separate countries." Both Chinese Communists and surviving remnants of the Guomindang on Taiwan rejected this Two China Policy but for obviously different reasons. As Taiwan moved closer to elections in 2004, Chen publicly rejected the One China Policy, while his principal opponent, Lian Zhan (Lien Chan), continued to support the older formulation of "one China, different interpretation," which suggests after some period of negotiations, Taiwan might reunite with the mainland. Chen won a razor thin election victory, but Lian has challenged the results.

The future of this policy may well determine whether there will be war between the mainland and the island. The People's Republic of China makes any government seeking relations to accept its One
China Policy. Taiwan is undergoing a lively political discussion, and several times, when it has appeared that Taiwan might officially proclaim its independence of the mainland, Beijing has threatened to use its military might, which potentially embroils the United States in the conflict.

See also
Taiwan; Two China Policy; United Nations; Cold War; Shanghai Communique.

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