Comprehending Strategic Ambiguity:  
US Policy Toward the Taiwan Strait Security Issue 

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Abstract  
Strategic ambiguity, the long-standing US dual deterrence policy toward the security issue in the Taiwan Straits, has come under attack in recent years, especially since the PRC’s bellicose display of military aggression during their missile tests in 1996. The strategic ambiguity opponents argue that new factors in the cross-strait dispute necessitate that the US strategy be updated with more transparent policy guidelines. On the one hand, Taiwan’s transition to a democratic form of government has given rise to an increased desire to move toward independence. Mainland China’s growing military strength and strong nationalistic sentiment has, on the other hand, produced in Beijing a sense of urgency that Taiwan should be prevented from moving toward independence. We analyze two crisis cases, the 1954 Quemoy crisis and the 1996 missile crisis, in which the US policy of strategic ambiguity was successful. Is the strategic environment in today’s cross-strait dispute really that different from these two examples? If the strategic environment has not changed, then why should the US abandon a policy that has been successful for fifty years? The dual deterrence strategy pursued by the US has been successful because it introduces a modicum of uncertainty into a tense conflict with an otherwise certain undesirable outcome. Being uncertain about the US commitment has dissuaded either side of the dispute from provoking the other. Calls for a more transparent policy toward the Taiwan issue would, contrary to their best intentions, actually compromise the delicate balance that strategic ambiguity can achieve.
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One of the most puzzling and fascinating aspects of US foreign policy toward the security issue in the Taiwan Straits is the notion that peace and stability can somehow be brokered by deliberately increasing the level of uncertainty in a stressful crisis situation. On first glance, such an overtly enigmatic policy strikes one as being, at best, unlikely to succeed and, at worse, dangerously risky and irresponsible. Yet, this is precisely the nature of the policy that dictates the level and degree of US intentions and commitments in the dispute over the official status of Taiwan. The policy at issue – the policy often referred to as “strategic ambiguity” – has for decades sought to balance competing US interests in both China and Taiwan, and, at the same time, maintain credibility, peace and stability in the region.

At its most basic level, strategic ambiguity aims “at avoiding giving either China or Taiwan a blank check” in their attempt to resolve their ongoing dispute over the official status of Taiwan.\(^1\) The conflict between the PRC and the ROC consists in a fundamental disagreement about the form that a “one-China” policy should take. The PRC considers itself the legitimate governing seat for all of China. The government in Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province and refuses to renounce the use of force to keep Taiwan from declaring independence. Taipei’s view of the status quo differs from Beijing’s view. The ROC officially agrees to a “one China” policy but refuses to acknowledge the PRC as the legitimate ruling power for all of China. Since the ROC lacks the military capability to unite the mainland under ROC rule, it maintains that “one China” is a goal yet to be defined, much less attained. Thus, the ROC, far from agreeing that it is a province under PRC authority, maintains that the problem facing “one China” is the specification of the conditions under which Taiwan and the mainland will be reunited as China. By contrast, the PRC dismisses outright the claim that Taiwan and the mainland are

somehow currently independent from one another and proceeds as though it alone is the sole legitimate ruling power of China and Taiwan. One of its primary concerns, therefore, is to ensure that its territorial boundaries remain intact. A Taiwanese declaration of independence will, in the PRC’s view, violate the sovereignty of the PRC and, therefore, can legitimately be frustrated with military force.

The US plays a crucial role in the cross-strait dispute because if China senses that US commitment to defend Taiwan is weak, then a PRC government determined to unite Taiwan and China under PRC rule can, in light of its military superiority, wield considerable leverage in its dealings with Taiwan. If, on the other hand, the US guarantees Taiwan’s defense under any condition, then an emboldened Taiwan might, in an attempt to creep toward independence or to declare outright independence, provoke the PRC and risk embroiling the US in an undesirable military confrontation with the PRC.

US interests are best served if the status quo is not disturbed. Not only is China a vast potential market for US businesses but, because of China’s increasing ability to impact global affairs, it is in the US most vital strategic interests to urge China to pursue international and domestic political goals that are more closely aligned with top US priorities. Thus, risking a military confrontation with China is of no small concern to the US. Taiwan’s politically independent status also serves US interests. Taiwan continues to be one of the US’s top trading partners and has long been a faithful ally to the US. In recent years the ROC has made remarkable political achievements by establishing the first democratic ruling body in the history of China. To abandon Taiwan for US interests on the mainland would damage US international credibility and interrupt US economic interests on Taiwan.

The PRC’s and the ROC’s conflicting demands in regards to the cross-strait dispute threaten to upset the status quo and thus harm US interests. As the 1995 report of an independent task force declared, “One of the highest national security priorities of the United States must be to
help reduce tensions over the Taiwan issue.”

In order to balance its strategic interests in the Taiwan Strait, the US has pursued a policy of strategic ambiguity, a policy that intentionally introduces uncertainty into the decision-making processes of the actors of the game. Assuming that the US possesses a sufficient amount of resources to affect the decision-making processes of the players involved in the dispute, the uncertainty brought about by the US will, it is hoped, preempt either the PRC or the ROC from making a move that would upset the status quo. That is, the PRC should think twice before resorting to military force to resolve the Taiwan issue, and the ROC cannot take for granted that the US will defend Taiwan in the event that Taiwan provokes mainland China.

In recent years, especially in the years since the 1996 missile crisis, there has been a great deal of discussion regarding the ability of the US strategic ambiguity policy to manage effectively the increasing tensions between China and Taiwan. Each of the positions that objects to strategic ambiguity contends that the changing dynamic in the Taiwan Straits positions the PRC and the ROC on a collision course that warrants a clearer US policy directive that will not cause a confrontation due to Chinese or Taiwanese misinterpretation of US intent.

The following paper evaluates the notion that strategic ambiguity is no longer necessary to deal with the increasingly complex nature of the cross-strait dispute. We first set forth the main anti-ambiguity arguments and the solutions proposed by each. Then, in order to comprehend better how strategic ambiguity works in US foreign policy, we look at two historical examples – the 1954 Quemoy crisis and the 1996 missile crisis – where the US ambiguously negotiated its way through each crisis and still managed to preserve its own interests. We are interested in these two examples because we can evaluate the current applicability of strategic ambiguity by comparing the circumstances under which President Dwight D. Eisenhower used strategic ambiguity to manage the Quemoy crisis with the crises that have and potentially might

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arise out of the current cross-strait dispute. Each of these examples are especially interesting
because they are notable for their complex, high-crisis natures -- the very characteristic that
ambiguity opponents contend warrants the replacement of strategic ambiguity with a clearer US
policy. After comparing these two historical cases, we provide some general comments about the
efficacy of strategic ambiguity as a dual deterrence policy and then draw some specific
conclusions about the relevance of strategic ambiguity to today’s cross-strait dispute.

Objections to Strategic Ambiguity

Opponents of strategic ambiguity typically point, either explicitly or implicitly, to three
growing trends in the changing nature of PRC-ROC relations to justify their claim that the US
“should,” as Joseph Nye puts it, “clarify its policy on Taiwan.”

1. Taiwanese Nationalism. Taiwan’s democracy and thriving economy have given rise
to growing Taiwanese nationalism and a desire for increased international
recognition. Taiwanese people, who have enjoyed a great deal of economic success
through foreign trade, are beginning to demand, through democratic means, that their
government find ways to increase the international identity of Taiwan.

2. Chinese Nationalism. With the erosion of communism as an ideology on the
mainland, Beijing is scrambling to establish a justification for the legitimization of
the PRC regime. The PRC, therefore, is aggressively pushing for the preservation of
its territorial integrity as a top political and military priority.

3. Military Imbalance. The growing imbalance of military power in the Taiwan Strait
reduces the cost to the PRC of using its military might either to force directly or to
pressure Taiwan through coercive means to agree to PRC terms for unification. Due
to burdensome US arms sales constraints, the ROC’s military is unable to access
easily the most advanced weapons systems. As the PRC grows militarily, Taiwan,

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which is increasingly unable to defend itself, must rely more and more on the US for its defense. However, as the PRC’s military begins to emerge as a force that can directly threaten US territory, US commitment to defend Taiwan becomes less and less credible.\(^4\)

Given that the PRC and the ROC are both pursuing interests that situate them on a collision course with one another, the US must, in the eyes of strategic ambiguity opponents, clarify its policy lest all involved become entangled in a disastrous outcome. Amongst the opponents of strategic ambiguity there are two main positions that advocate replacing strategic ambiguity with a more transparent policy. Those who favor a clearer policy in favor of China, the position referred to by Ted Galen Carpenter as the “accommodationist” approach,\(^5\) prefer abandoning strategic ambiguity in favor of a policy that more explicitly forges a strategic relationship with the PRC. The accommodationists argue that a strategic ambiguity policy will likely cause Taiwan to misinterpret US intentions. They contend that the lack of a clear policy toward the Taiwan issue may mistakenly provide Taiwan with an inflated sense of security and thus encourage the emboldened ROC to make moves toward independence that would provoke a military response from Beijing. On the other hand, those who prefer a clearer policy in favor of Taiwan, the position that we shall hereafter refer to as the pro-Taiwan approach, argue that if the US continues to be ambiguous about its commitment to Taiwan, then Beijing might perceive the US commitment to Taiwan to be weak. As the PRC becomes stronger, it is likely to consider it cost-effective to undertake the risk of flexing its military muscles to pressure Taiwan and test the

\(^4\) There is widespread agreement that these changing elements in China’s relationship with Taiwan are producing a new dynamic that affects the balance of power in the straits and threatens the possibility of a peaceful resolution to the cross-strait conflict. For more about the current changing dynamics in the Taiwan Straits, see, for example, Managing the Taiwan Issue: Key is Better U.S. Relations with China, Report of an Independent Task Force, Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, 1995; Testimony of Carl W. Ford, Jr. given before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 25, 1999; T. Y. Wang, “Strategic Ambiguity: An Outmoded Relic of US Foreign Policy,” published under the sponsorship of the American Political Science Association Conference Group on Taiwan Studies.

level of US commitment to defend Taiwan. In what follows, we will consider each position in
greater detail.

The accommodationist approach -- whose most notable proponent is Joseph Nye, former
assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration -- contends that Taiwan’s
democratization has given rise to the increasing assertiveness of Taiwan’s independence
movement. Since any moves toward Taiwan independence will invite a PRC military attack, the
status quo, inasmuch as it is conducive to Taiwan’s creeping independence, jeopardizes all of the
players involved. A PRC attack on Taiwan will harm Taiwan’s economic and democratic
development and will force the US either to come to Taiwan’s defense or to abandon Taiwan.
Neither outcome is in the US’s interests. Absolute US abandonment of Taiwan will, among other
things, harm US credibility, and US defense of Taiwan in the midst of a PRC attack on Taiwan
will embroil the US in a military confrontation with the PRC that could threaten US security
interests both in the region and at home. The PRC will also suffer, economically and politically.
More importantly, US relations with PRC will suffer immeasurably. Therefore, the US should,
according to the accommodationist position, move away from the “calculatingly ambiguous”
language of the Shanghai Communique and the TRA. Instead, the US should, in Nye’s view, do
three things: 1) declare a policy that will not “defend” Taiwan in the event that Taiwan declares
independence and will not “accept” the PRC’s use of force to keep Taiwan from becoming
independent; 2) negotiate more international living space for Taiwan contingent upon their
willingness to reject independence as a possibility; and 3) insist that Taiwan express its
willingness to avoid any movements toward independence.

The accommodationist approach abandons current US strategic ambiguity policy in two
important ways: 1) by proposing that the US take a position on the future status of Taiwan, and 2)
by stipulating in advance the conditions under which the US would defend or abandon Taiwan.

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7 Ibid, C7.
US policy under the three communiqués merely acknowledges that “one China” is the position of both the PRC and the ROC. Moreover, current US policy further states that the Taiwan issue is something that constitutes a dispute over a civil affair and, therefore, the Chinese on both sides of the Straits must work out their differences themselves. By insisting that the three objectives in Nye’s proposal should be “negotiated or declared unilaterally,” indicates both that the accommodationist position would, contrary to existing US policy, have Washington decide the outcome of the dispute. Moreover, to achieve its goals, the accommodationist position would – again contrary, as we show below in more detail, to US policy -- accept the notion, heretofore only acknowledged as the Chinese position, that there is only one China and Taiwan is part of China. Additionally, the Nye position proposes to negotiate for Taiwan “more international living space” if Taiwan will forswear independence. Hence, by insisting that Taiwan forswear independence as a future option for the island, Washington would essentially determine for Taiwan what its domestic and international future should be and thus remove the Taiwanese voters from the decision-making process.

Furthermore, beyond unilaterally determining an important aspect of Taiwan’s political future, the accommodationist position would, in another way, tilt the already delicate cross-strait balance toward Beijing. Nye’s proposal basically states that the US will punish whichever party makes the first move away from the status quo; it insists that the US should refuse to defend Taiwan if Taiwan moves toward independence and should refuse to accept the PRC’s use of force to coerce Taiwan. This marks a significant departure from US strategic ambiguity policy by stipulating in advance the conditions under which the US would be willing to protect Taiwan. As we will discuss in greater detail below, knowing these conditions in advance enables both sides of the Strait to plot their strategies. Since any Taiwanese move toward independence would mean

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8 The “one China” language in the Shanghai Communiqué reads as follows: “The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.”
that the US would refuse to defend Taiwan, the PRC would have an incentive to begin to define what we should mean by a “move toward independence.” Furthermore, the US has, by stating in advance that it will not accept the PRC’s use of force, implicitly committed US forces and troops to some future military confrontation without first knowing what the confrontation entails. Beyond prematurely committing US forces to unforeseen eventualities, the credibility of US commitment to resist a PRC display of force diminishes the more committed the US becomes toward PRC interests that conflict with Taiwan interests.

The second objection to strategic ambiguity, the position that we shall refer to as the pro-Taiwan approach, agrees that the changing trends in the cross-strait dispute place China and Taiwan on a collision course with each other. Prompted by the PRC’s bellicose actions during the 1996 missile crisis, many in the pro-Taiwan camp, including several members of the US Congress, began to express their desire for increased levels of US defense commitment toward Taiwan. California Rep. Christopher Cox said, referring to China’s military exercises, that “All of these things are changed circumstances, and they require a response.”9 In March 1996, House Republicans introduced a non-binding resolution that called for guarantees that “the U.S. military forces should defend Taiwan in the event of invasion, missile attack or blockade by the People’s Republic of China.”10 During a 1997 trip to China, House Speaker Gingrich told a group of PRC officials, “We want you to understand that we will defend Taiwan. Period.”11

The existing US policy framework as contained in the TRA asserts that the US deems “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.” The pro-Taiwan proposal, however, goes beyond the existing ambiguity of US defense assurances in current US policy. Rather than vaguely insisting on a “peaceful

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resolution” to the Taiwan issue, these pro-Taiwan statements, and others like them, propose a shift in US policy to an automatic commitment of US military forces to the defense of Taiwan.

T. Y. Wang, another advocate of the pro-Taiwan approach, believes that the 1996 missile crisis provides evidence in support of this proposition. According to Wang’s objection to strategic ambiguity, “Chinese leaders might have perceived Washington’s belated warning as a sign of unwillingness by the US to use its military might to enforce a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue.” Wang maintains that because strategic ambiguity is a deterrence policy, it requires “prompt and clear action” in order to respond to crisis situations and restore the status quo. However, since ambiguity by nature favors “little or no action,” therefore, a strategic ambiguity policy would produce a delayed response to a crisis situation where a quick, decisive decision would otherwise be implemented. Wang contends that inasmuch as delayed action or non-action in a crisis situation might send the wrong signal to other players, strategic ambiguity thus is inherently flawed and could easily lead to a military conflict. Wang also looks to the 1996 missile crisis for a policy solution that could replace strategic ambiguity. He claims that although US military response was slow coming to Taiwan’s defense, once the US took a stand and sent the aircraft carrier Nimitz to the scene, the PRC promptly backed down. Wang thus proposes that “to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, Washington needs to make a clear commitment to Taiwan’s defense that any means other than peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue will not be tolerated.” Because a “show of US military force in the Taiwan Strait would act to stabilize the Asia-Pacific region, Wang proposes actions such as “bringing back the Seventh Fleet” to bolster the credibility of the US commitment to defend Taiwan.

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12 T. Y. Wang, “Strategic Ambiguity: An Outmoded Relic of US Foreign Policy,” Published under the sponsorship of the American Political Science Association Conference Group on Taiwan Studies, p. 5.
13 Ibid, p. 11.
14 Ibid, p. 11.
We have separated the main anti-ambiguity positions into two different categories: accommodationist and pro-Taiwan. Both categories perceive a need to adjust US foreign policy away from ambiguity on the basis that strategic ambiguity is ill equipped to handle the current trends in the cross-strait conflict. Both offer proposals that only treat one side of the problem. That is, both propose to abandon strategic ambiguity in favor of a policy that would preempt one side from making a move that would provoke the other. Necessarily, any policy of the sort would favor one side of the dispute more than the other.

While both categories share many of the same assumptions, each differs in one critical aspect -- each position advocates replacing strategic ambiguity with a proposal that tilts the cross-strait balance in favor of a different side. Our objective, therefore, is to evaluate both policy solutions to discover which, if either, proposal produces an outcome most favorable to the security situation in the Taiwan Straits. This, of course, means that we need to come to a greater understanding of the way that the US policy of strategic ambiguity works in the cross-strait conflict. We thus evaluate strategic ambiguity in the context of two historical examples -- the 1954 Quemoy crisis and the 1996 missile crisis. The 1954 Quemoy crisis illustrates how President Dwight D. Eisenhower deliberately used ambiguity to strategically negotiate one of the most stressful crises in the history of the cross-strait conflict. We then compare the Quemoy crisis with the circumstances involved in the post-containment era to learn whether or not strategic ambiguity should still apply. In particular, we look at the 1996 missile crisis, comparing the dynamics of that crisis to the crisis that Eisenhower faced.

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15 Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, argues against both the accommodationist and pro-Taiwan positions. His own position is that “Washington should reduce America’s risk exposure by making it clear that the United States would not intervene in a PRC-Taiwanese struggle.” This involves refusing both to specify Taiwan’s future status and to defend Taiwan under any circumstances. The solution, according to Carpenter, would be to allow Taiwan to defend itself by lifting existing constraints on US arms sales to Taiwan. See Carpenter, p. 8.
Some regard strategic ambiguity as a Clinton administration creation. Others view strategic ambiguity as a 20 year-old policy guideline that emerged from an institutional matrix defined the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, the 1978 Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China, the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), and the 1982 United States-China Joint Communiqué on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan. Although the Clinton administration has adhered to the strategic ambiguity policy in some of its dealings with China and Taiwan, strategic ambiguity “is certainly not,” in the words of Georgetown University historian Nancy Bernkopf, “a Clinton policy, and it is not a Democratic policy.” Indeed, strategic ambiguity is not even a policy that is unique to the policy framework of the TRA and the three communiqués. According to Bernkopf, “[The concept of] strategic ambiguity goes back to the Eisenhower administration. It began with Eisenhower and [Secretary of State John Foster] Dulles not wanting the Chinese to know what we were going to do in the Taiwan Strait.” Although in the 1950s US commitment to defend the island of Taiwan from PRC invasion was never in question, the US was, even at the height of a risky crisis, ambiguous about its commitment to defend Taiwan’s offshore islands.

On September 3, 1954, the PRC began a limited shelling campaign on the Quemoy islands that lasted intermittently for the next several months. The Nationalists on Taiwan, who controlled the Quemoy, Matsu, and Tachen island groups, claimed that these offshore islands were important “stepping stones” for the Nationalist mainland recovery objective. Hence, while the offshore islands were not critical to the defense of Taiwan, it was believed that the loss of the

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islands to the Communists would have “bad, possibly disastrous, psychological effects” on the
Chinese Nationalists.¹⁹

Because the offshore islands lay directly off of the coast of China and because
historically they always belonged to China, the Communists believed that they rightfully
belonged to the PRC. More importantly, the Quemoy island group blocks the Amoy port, and the
Matsu islands obstruct the Foochow coast. Any assault on Taiwan launched from Amoy or
Foochow would, therefore, first have to go through these Nationalist-occupied military outposts.
The Communists needed to take control of these islands before they could proceed to launch a
liberation campaign against Taiwan.²⁰

In the Quemoy crisis of 1954-1955, the United States faced what Eisenhower referred to
as a “horrible dilemma”²¹ between “appeasement and global war.”²² The Eisenhower
administration feared that Communist expansion throughout East Asia would threaten US
interests in that part of the world and possibly even threat en the US directly. In a letter to
Churchill, Eisenhower referred to his fear of the “domino effect” of Communist expansion by
stating that “The French are gone--making it clearer than ever that we cannot afford the loss of
Chiang unless all of us are to get completely out of that corner of the globe. This is unthinkable
to us. . .”²³ Senator Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin summed up the fears of many when he said,
“Either we can defend the United States in the Formosan Straits -- now, or we can defend it later
in San Francisco Bay.”²⁴ Since the US considered it in US security interests to keep Taiwan in
friendly hands, US commitment to defend Taiwan was never doubted during the Eisenhower
administration. In fact, at one point during the Quemoy crisis, Eisenhower told a reporter that

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 463.
²⁰ Ibid., p. 461.
²¹ Ibid., p. 463.
²² Ibid., p. 483.
²³ Ibid., p. 472.
“any invasion of Formosa would have to run over the Seventh Fleet.” The primary question at issue was, Will the US defend the Nationalist-occupied offshore islands from a Communist attack?

While Eisenhower did not believe that Taiwan’s defense was in any military way contingent upon continued Nationalist occupation of the offshore islands, he did believe that the morale of the Nationalists was critical to Taiwan’s security. Any US move to abandon these offshore islands would be perceived by the Nationalists as an attempt to appease the Communists. Appeasement would bring the Communist liberation campaign that much closer to Taiwan’s doorstep and could cause fearful and/or opportunistic Taiwanese and Chinese Nationalists to defect to the Chinese Communist movement. The result would be the eventual Communist takeover of the island of Taiwan. Eisenhower wrote to Churchill, “The morale of the Chinese Nationalists is important to us, so for the moment, and under existing conditions, we feel they must have certain assurances with respect to the offshore islands.” However, Eisenhower never spelled out exactly what the content and degree of those assurances would be.

Clearly, Eisenhower feared that appeasement of the PRC Communists might lead to the eventual loss of Taiwan to the Communists. On the other hand, however, Eisenhower was careful not to over-commit to the defense of the offshore islands. Domestically and internationally, there was a great deal of agreement that the offshore islands were not necessary to the defense of Taiwan. Moreover, many contended that the offshore islands, unlike Taiwan, had always belonged to the mainland. Walter Lippman warned that if the US were to “intervene in the offshore islands, we would be acting on Chinese territory in a Chinese civil war.” Not only did many question the legitimacy of US involvement in China’s internal affairs, but there was also

28 Ibid., p. 471.
29 Quoted in Divine, p. 56.
the added fear of getting the US involved in another war. This, even more than the questionable legitimacy of the US intervention in China’s civil affairs, seemed to concern Eisenhower. Three of the four members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advised Eisenhower to authorize Chiang to bomb the mainland in response to the Communist shelling of Quemoy and, if the communists attacked Quemoy, to permit US forces to help defend the island. This approach, however, would have essentially extended to Chiang a blank check guaranteeing the use of US military might to undertake his mainland recovery objective. The dissenting Chief of Staff, General Ridgway, argued that such an action would lead to full-scale war. Eisenhower agreed: “We’re not talking now about a limited, brush-fire war. . . We’re talking about going to the threshold of World War III. If we attack China, we’re not going to impose limits on our military actions, as in Korea. Moreover, if we get into a general war, the logical enemy will be Russia and China, and we’ll have to strike there.”

In order to navigate between appeasement and global war, Eisenhower chose a path of ambiguity. Secretary of State Dulles later described Eisenhower’s policy as “deterrence by uncertainty.” The foremost objectives of this strategy were 1) to restrain Chiang from taking any actions that would embroil the US in a confrontation with the PRC, and 2) to pose a military threat to the PRC to discourage a Communist attack on the offshore islands. Over-commitment to either one of these single objectives would increase the probability that one or more of the other objectives could not be achieved. Hence, in order to maintain US freedom of action and to keep control over a complex series of events, Eisenhower believed that he could maximize his success by not fully committing to either of the objectives and by sending ambiguous signals to the players. The resulting policy solution lay somewhere between commitment and non-

commitment: it appeared to give the impression of US commitment to the defense of Quemoy and Matsu, and at the same time it disavowed any intention of coming to the islands’ aid.

Absolute commitment to the first objective would threaten the success of the second objective. That is, Chiang could embroil the US in a war with the PRC if the US extended an absolute guarantee to defend the offshore islands. Yet, any explicit rejection of Nationalist requests to commit the US to the defense of the islands would give the Communists the impression that the US, like many other nations of the world, had all but resigned the offshore islands to an inevitable Communist takeover. Clearly, this inhibits the ability of the US to pose a credible military threat to the PRC and thus restricts US freedom of action in the event of a full-scale military crisis in the Taiwan Straits. Ultimately, the offshore islands would more than likely fall to the Communists and the security of Taiwan itself would be at risk.

If, on the other hand, the US gave Chiang the defense commitment that he so dearly desired, then Chiang could harass Communist forces on the mainland until the Communists counter-attacked. Having committed itself to the defense of the offshore islands, the US would find itself in the middle of a war -- a civil war at that -- with the PRC, and, as Eisenhower noted, perhaps even with the USSR. Thus absolute commitment to the second objective would threaten the success of the first objective.

In the wake of the initial Communist shelling campaign of the Quemoy islands, Eisenhower signed a Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROC. The ambiguous language of this treaty served two purposes: 1) to send a message to the Communists indicating explicit US commitment to Taiwan and ambiguous US commitment to the offshore islands, and 2) to restrain Chiang from taking any military actions that would drag the US into a war with the PRC. While the treaty explicitly declared US commitment to the defense of Taiwan, the language in the treaty, insisted upon by Eisenhower, intentionally extended commitment to “such other territories as may be determined by mutual agreement.” The Communists and Chiang both had to feel baffled by the statement. The Communists had no way of knowing whether or not further PRC military
action aimed at the offshore islands would provoke a US response. The Nationalists, on the other hand, would have to move cautiously, for there were no guarantees that the US would come to their aid should they intentionally try to provoke the Communists. Furthermore, the statement, together with the treaty notes, stipulated that any “use of force” from any area controlled by Chiang “will be a matter of joint agreement.” While this statement places considerable restraints on Chiang’s military mobility, the Communists would still be unwise to interpret this to mean that the US would abandon the offshore islands, for the US went to the extent of entering into a defense treaty with Taiwan, something that the US resisted in the past, and the US went to great lengths to ensure that the language of the treaty did not preclude the US from defending the offshore islands.

Both sides of the Taiwan Strait made rhetorical moves in an attempt to flush out the level of Eisenhower’s commitment to the offshore islands. On January 1, 1955, Chiang Kai-shek predicted “war at any time” over Quemoy and Matsu. Zhou En-lai stepped up his propaganda campaign by announcing that a Chinese invasion of Formosa was “imminent.” Finally, on January 10, 1955, the Chinese Communists invaded the Tachen islands and successfully captured Ichiang island.

Eisenhower decided to abandon the Tachen islands and, in order to sweeten the deal for Chiang, to increase the appearance of US willingness to protect Quemoy and Matsu. Consequently, Eisenhower sent the Seventh Fleet to assist in the evacuation of the Tachens. Additionally, he sought a joint-resolution from Congress that authorized the president to use force to protect Formosa, the nearby Pescadores, and “closely linked localities.” Although there was much disagreement about the final language in the agreement (most wanted the agreement to commit the US more transparently to either one side or the other), Eisenhower wanted it

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deliberately ambiguous.\textsuperscript{33} After finalizing the language of the resolution, it finally passed Congress with overwhelming support.

Although the Nationalists felt like the resolution reinforced overall US commitment to Formosa and its territories, they could not conclusively infer from the ambiguous language of the resolution any US commitment to defend Quemoy and Matsu. In addition to curtailing aggressive actions by the Nationalists that would provoke the PRC, Eisenhower’s deliberate ambiguity also deterred the Communists on the Mainland from trying to take control of Quemoy and Matsu. Although the PRC had captured the Tachen islands, the Communists, in light of the fact that the US was still unclear about its willingness to get involved militarily, could not afford to give way to over-confidence and step up the level of its assault on other Nationalist controlled regions.

Throughout the entire crisis, Eisenhower continued to advance ambiguous statements. He told Sam Rayburn that he would not commit troops to the defense of Quemoy and Matsu unless he perceived that an attack on these islands was part of larger assault on Formosa itself.\textsuperscript{34} In order to assuage England’s fears that US actions in the Taiwan Straits were representative of a hasty, aggressive, and immature US foreign policy, Eisenhower wrote to Winston Churchill that the US will make a distinction “between an attack that has as its only objective the capture of an off-shore island and one that is primarily a preliminary movement to an all-out attack on Formosa.”\textsuperscript{35} While on the face of it, these statements seem to prescribe an explicit condition under which the US would choose to defend Quemoy and Matsu, the condition hinges on a subjective determination of the level of the Chinese Communist threat to the security of Taiwan. As indicated particularly in the statement to Rayburn, Eisenhower reserved for himself the exclusive privilege to determine the degree of the Communist threat to Taiwan. In another

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{33} Divine, pp. 59-60.
\item\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{35} Eisenhower, p. 471.
\end{itemize}
statement, Eisenhower claimed that an American response to an attack on the islands “would have to depend upon circumstances as they might arise.”\textsuperscript{36}

In March 1955, Dulles returned from Asia with a pessimistic view of what was happening. Fearful that over-confident Communists would now attempt to take Quemoy and Matsu, Eisenhower launched yet another series of ambiguous statements. On March 12, Secretary of State Dulles announced that the US possessed the ability to use “new and powerful weapons of precision which can utterly destroy military targets without endangering unrelated civilian centers.”\textsuperscript{37} Dulles told the press on March 15 that the administration was prepared to use tactical atomic weapons in case war broke out in the Formosa Straits.\textsuperscript{38} On March 16, Eisenhower made this response to a reporter: “Now, in any combat where these things [tactical atomic weapons] can be used on strictly military targets and for strictly military purposes, I see no reason why they shouldn’t be used just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else.”\textsuperscript{39} While these statements threatened Communist China, they never specified any conditions for the actual use of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the ambiguity of these statements did not always make it entirely clear that such statements were even aimed at the PRC. Yet, the ambiguous and even flippant method by which these statements were issued was intended to get the Communists to think twice about proceeding with an attack against Quemoy and Matsu. Eisenhower revealed his intentions when Jim Hagerty advised the president on March 23 to duck sensitive questions from the press on the Quemoy issue. Eisenhower responded: “Don’t worry Jim. . . I’ll just confuse them.”\textsuperscript{40} Eisenhower told the reporter that nothing in warfare is predictable, and that “every war is going to astonish you in the way it occurred, and in the way it is carried out.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{36} Quoted in Divine, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Eisenhower, p. 478.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
While to many it appeared as though Eisenhower was engaging in reckless brinkmanship with the PRC, Eisenhower instructed Hagerty to inform journalists that “the President did not believe that war was upon us.” Eisenhower even wrote in his journal: “...I believe hostilities are not so imminent as is indicated by the forebodings of a number of my associates. I have so often been through these periods of strain that I have become accustomed to the fact that most of the calamities that we anticipate really never occur.”

On April 23, Zhou En-lai said at the Bandung conference that the PRC does “not want to have war with the United States of America” and suggested negotiations to “discuss the question of relaxing tension in the Far East and especially the question of relaxing tension in the Taiwan area.” Then, Zhou stated that “The Chinese people are willing to strive for the liberation of Formosa by peaceful means as far as possible.” By late May, the PRC formally ceased firing on the Nationalists in the Taiwan Strait. After months of tension and ambiguity, the Quemoy crisis was finally resolved, if only temporarily. Through it all, Eisenhower undertook to preserve stability in the Strait by simultaneously playing an ambiguous deterrence strategy against both sides of the dispute. What is remarkable is that even now “no one can be sure whether or not the US would have responded militarily to an invasion of the offshore islands, and whether or not the US would have used nuclear weapons.” Eisenhower’s strategy of dual deterrence through ambiguity is aptly describing by his own recollection of his administration’s management of the 1954 Quemoy crisis: “The administration rejected all...suggestions [to explicitly clarify the content and level of US commitment], threading its way, with watchfulness and determination, through narrow and dangerous waters between appeasement and global war.”

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42 Ibid., p. 479.
43 Quoted in Divine, p. 64.
44 Ibid., p. 64.
45 Eisenhower, p. 482.
46 Divine, p. 65.
47 Eisenhower, p. 483.
Many aspects of the US-PRC-ROC relationship have changed since the Eisenhower administration. In the two decades that followed the 1950s Quemoy crises, both the US and the PRC placed the Taiwan issue lower on their priority list in order to cultivate Sino-US relations in other, more urgent areas. Although the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué did not abrogate Eisenhower’s 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROC, and although the Taiwan issue was still a source of tension between the two countries, President Richard Nixon’s visit to Beijing symbolized the beginning of a new, more productive US-PRC relationship. The US-PRC-ROC relationship underwent its most dramatic change in 1978 when President Jimmy Carter decided to normalize relations with the PRC. This meant, among other things, that the US would recognize “the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China” and acknowledge that both the PRC and the ROC affirm that Taiwan is part of China. Moreover, the US no longer recognized the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan.

In addition to the US switching its formal recognition from the ROC to the PRC, Taiwan has also undergone a significant transformation in recent years. Whereas in the 1950s Taiwan was a dictatorship with the objective of recovering the mainland as its highest priority, now the desirability of Taiwan’s official “one China” policy is something that is hotly debated amongst both Taiwanese citizens and politicians in the give and take of a democratic atmosphere. In addition to trying to stave off a Communist liberation campaign of ROC occupied territories, Eisenhower’s other major concern was to keep Chiang Kai-shek, who looked for every opportunity to stage his mainland recovery objective, from provoking the PRC and involving the US in a military conflict with the Communist forces. While the PRC still desires to have Taiwan united with the mainland under PRC rule, Taiwan no longer looks for opportunities to launch an attack on the mainland. The concern now, as we have seen, is that Taiwan could provoke the PRC by moving too closely to independence.
Although the specific preferences of some of the players may have changed, it is our position that the strategic environment surrounding the Taiwan issue remains the same today as it was during the Eisenhower administration. The PRC still regards unification as one of its highest priorities, and unification, in the PRC’s view, still means that the PRC is the legitimate ruler of Taiwan. Now democratic, the ROC no longer wants to attack the PRC. Nevertheless, inasmuch as independence poses as much of a threat to the PRC’s conception of “one China” as does Chiang’s mainland recovery objective, the ROC still possesses a similar capacity to provoke the PRC. Furthermore, the US still has an interest in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits.

How, then, has US foreign policy evolved over the years to accommodate both the changes and the persistent similarities of the US-PRC-ROC relationship? Just as Eisenhower relied on the ambiguous language of the Mutual Defense Treaty and the 1954 Congressional Resolution to increase US policy and military maneuverability, so too do institutions like the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and the three communiqués – the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, the 1979 Normalization Communiqué, and the 1982 Joint Communiqué -- provide a framework of ambiguity in which the US can remain flexible. By the 1996 missile crisis, strategic ambiguity had become institutionally embedded into US policy toward Taiwan and China. Not only did the US issue ambiguous statements and make ambiguous moves during the crisis itself, but strategic ambiguity had become part of the institutional fabric of US foreign policy and thus provided justification for the ambiguity in many of the US’s actions. The institutional nature of today’s strategic ambiguity is worth pointing out, not only because it illuminates, by contrast, the remarkable achievement of Eisenhower’s lone use of ambiguity to achieve success in the Quemoy crisis, but also because this framework is the very source of ambiguity that is in question in today’s US policy toward the Taiwan issue.

In the early 1970s, when forging a Sino-US relationship became strategically important to Nixon and Kissinger, the Taiwan issue was still a sensitive point between the US and the PRC.
In order to make progress on other diplomatic fronts, both the US and the PRC had to find a way to get around the Taiwan issue. The result was the highly ambiguous language of the Shanghai Communiqué.

The U.S. side declared: The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. With this prospect in mind, it affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan. In the meantime, it will progressively reduce its forces and military installations on Taiwan as the tension in the area diminishes. (1972 Shanghai Communiqué)

Just as Joseph Nye Jr. affirms, the Shanghai Communiqué “was calculatingly ambiguous on the subject of Taiwan.” It “merely takes note of the differing positions of the United States and the People’s Republic of China” and manages to achieve other diplomatic victories without acquiescing on the Taiwan issue. While it is the case that the US acknowledged that there is only one China, it did so only by stipulating that US acknowledgement is contingent upon the fact that both sides agree that there is only one China. Moreover, the US did not affirm what form the one China should take, nor did it concede that Taiwan belonged to the PRC. The US did, however, commit to the eventual withdrawal of US military installations on Taiwan. This cannot, however, be considered a significant concession by the US to the PRC. The claim made here specifically to reduce military installations on Taiwan, much like the later commitment in the 1982 Joint Communiqué to reduce arms sales to Taiwan, was a promise conditioned entirely upon the “peaceful settlement” of the issue and the reduction of “tension in the area”. Hence, beyond the ambiguous affirmation that both the PRC and the ROC maintain that there is only one China, the

US does not make any significant commitments to the PRC regarding the Taiwan issue in the Shanghai Communiqué.

Inasmuch as the intention of the 1978 Normalization Communiqué was to establish normal diplomatic relations between the PRC and the US, it went beyond the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué in compromising Taiwan’s international position. By recognizing the “Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China” (1978 Normalization Communiqué), the US derecognized the ROC as the legitimate ruling power of China and abrogated its 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan. By severing formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan and by extending formal diplomatic recognition to the PRC, did the US essentially abandon Taiwan to PRC rule? Like the wording of the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, the carefully phrased language of the 1978 Normalization Communiqué again merely “acknowledges,” but does not necessarily affirm, “the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China” (1978 Normalization Communiqué).

With the subsequent passage of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) into law, the US further established the ambiguity of its foreign policy toward China and Taiwan, for the TRA essentially recognizes both the PRC and the ROC as de facto politically independent entities. The TRA stipulates that continual US affirmation of diplomatic relations with the PRC is contingent upon “the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means” (Taiwan Relations Act, Sec. 2b). Additionally, although the US was no longer obligated to defend Taiwan under the terms of the Mutual Defense Treaty, in the TRA the US reserves for itself the ability to sell defensive arms to Taiwan and “to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan” (Taiwan Relations Act, Sec. 2b). Adding to the ambiguity of the US policy toward the Taiwan issue, the TRA further states that any US response to a threat to Taiwan’s security must be a joint decision between the President and the Congress, a requirement that bases US reaction
to crisis situations on the uncertain outcome of the particular political forces in power at the time of any given crisis.

The 1982 US-China Joint Communiqué addresses the issue of US arms sales to Taiwan. In this communiqué, the US declared that “it does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the US and China, and that it intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution” (1982 US-China Joint Communiqué). While reduced arms sales is clearly the stated goal of the 1982 Communiqué, the language of the communiqué implies that the successful achievement of this goal is conditioned upon the “peaceful resolution” of the Taiwan issue. This is made abundantly clear in President Ronald Reagan’s follow-up statement regarding the 1982 Joint Communiqué: “Regarding future U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, our policy, set forth clearly in the communiqué, is fully consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act. Arms Sales will continue in accordance with the act and with the full expectation that the approach of the Chinese Government to the resolution of the Taiwan issue will continue to be peaceful.”

The 1982 Communiqué states that the US has “no intention . . . of pursuing a policy of ‘two Chinas’ or ‘one China, one Taiwan’” (1982 Joint Communiqué). This, however, merely stresses the US position that the Taiwan issue be resolved by the Chinese themselves. Far from either taking a position on the future status of Taiwan or recognizing that Taiwan is a part of the PRC, the US in the 1982 Communiqué reiterates the language of the 1972 and 1978 communiqués that the US only acknowledges the position held by both the PRC and the ROC that there is one China and Taiwan is part of China. Dennis Hickey has argued against those who allege that the three communiqués together embody a US foreign policy that essentially recognizes Taiwan as part of the PRC.
A careful examination of each of these documents [the three communiqués] . . . reveals that the United States has consistently stated only that it *acknowledges* the Chinese position that there is but one China, and Taiwan is a part of China. This phrase was deliberately chosen as the key word -- “acknowledge” -- indicates only “cognizance of, but not necessarily agreement with, the Chinese position.” Interestingly, the PRC used the Chinese equivalent of acknowledge (*ren-shi*) in the 1972 Shanghai communiqué, but has used the Chinese equivalent of acceptance (*cheng-ren*) in all other communiqués. In each of the U.S. communiqués, however, U.S. officials have consistently used the word “acknowledge” and “have stated that, in interpreting this phrase, the U.S. will adhere only to the English version.\(^{50}\)

The three communiqués and the TRA provide a strategically ambiguous framework in which the US can freely adapt to any eventuality regarding the politically sensitive Taiwan issue. The three propositions that can be derived from this framework and that constitute the ambiguity of the existing US foreign policy toward the Taiwan issue are that 1) the US acknowledges the Chinese position that there is only one China and Taiwan is a part of China, 2) the US agrees that the differences between the PRC and the ROC are China’s internal affairs and should be resolved by Chinese themselves, and 3) the US insists that however China and Taiwan define their relationship, it must be done so peacefully. US policy does not stipulate what types of arrangements between China and Taiwan might be acceptable to the government of the US, nor does US policy declare what Taiwan’s global position, form of government, or socio-economic system should be. Rather, US policy toward the Taiwan issue, at its most basic level, reiterates the US’s long-standing interest that the issue be resolved peacefully and that the US be able to continue to carry out its own interests in both regions.

\(^{49}\) Statement [of President Ronald Reagan] on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan.  
\(^{50}\) Dennis Hickey, *Taiwan’s Security in the Changing International System*, (Lynne Reinner Publishers: Boulder and London, 1997), 143.
In view, then, of the extent to which US policy commits itself to Taiwan, both sides of the Taiwan Straits should be confused about the US resolution to defend Taiwan. What does US foreign policy really say? It appears to be contradictory: on the one hand it maintains that the PRC is the sole legal government of China and it acknowledges that both the PRC and the ROC agree that China includes Taiwan. On the other hand, however, US foreign policy also strongly suggests that the US has an interest in the peaceful resolution of and, to a great extent, the literal defense of Taiwan. Thus, the PRC, assuming that it considers the US a formidable military opponent, must think twice before using military might to enforce its view that Taiwan is part of China. While the US policy is intended to deter the PRC from attacking Taiwan, it does not extend to Taiwan the blanket defense of the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty. Rather, because the US extends to the PRC normal diplomatic relations and because the US acknowledges that the Chinese agree that Taiwan is part of China, Taiwan should not take for granted that the US will defend it, especially if a deviation from the status quo is initiated by a Taiwanese move toward of independence. Additionally, the 1982 Joint Communiqué should discourage Taiwan from deliberately provoking the PRC; proponents of Taiwanese independence should be deterred by the US commitment in the 1982 Communiqué to reduce over time its arms sales to Taiwan. Hence, the ambiguous US policy, much like Eisenhower’s own policy regarding the defense of Quemoy and Matsu, cuts both ways. As the New York office of the Council on Foreign Relations declared: “If Taiwan declares independence, don’t count on us; if the PRC invades Taiwan, don’t count us out.”

**Strategic Ambiguity in the 1996 Missile Crisis**

The policy framework defined by the three communiqués and the TRA has been effective in achieving the goal of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits. In the 1980s, there was not an immediate threat of a military confrontation in the Straits. Consequently, economic and cultural interactions increased rapidly between China and Taiwan. The PRC and the ROC
even made some political progress. In April 1993, the heads of the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) from Taiwan and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) from the mainland -- unofficial institutions authorized officially by the two sides -- held their first meeting.\textsuperscript{51} For a short time, political, economic, and cultural ties between the two sides were progressing at an unprecedented rate. Since 1993, however, the conciliatory atmosphere between the two sides has gradually deteriorated. In recent years, the increasing levels of cross-strait tension have largely been due to the conflict between competing factors: PRC nationalism and growing military strength, on the one hand, and Taiwanese nationalism and creeping independence, on the other.

Without the ideological thrust of Communism to maintain popular support and the authority of a weakening PRC regime, the government in Beijing has, in recent years, been compelled to look to alternative methods for their legitimacy. The PRC’s renewed emphasis on nationalism as a political issue necessarily implies that the PRC will be increasingly concerned about its territorial sovereignty. The PRC government has scored victories in this area with the recent return of both Hong Kong and Macao to the mainland, but the growing salience of Taiwan independence as a political issue amongst Taiwanese is something that Chinese on the mainland are increasingly unwilling to tolerate. That, coupled with the fact that the PRC continues to build up its military strength, has given rise to the PRC’s more aggressive approach to the Taiwan issue in recent years.

During the Chiang Kai-shek era, discussion of Taiwan independence was a political taboo in Taiwan. The Taiwan independence issue began to surface in the early 1980s when Chiang Ching-kuo was the president. After the birth of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986, the DPP, in order to take advantage of popular dissatisfaction with the KMT’s setbacks in the international arena, began calling for total independence from mainland China. Advocates

\textsuperscript{51} This was the first negotiation between the two sides since 1949.
of Taiwan independence contended that by declaring independence Taiwan could gain recognition in the international community, which in turn would help Taiwan secure its survival from the threats of foreign countries. This issue gained even more momentum in 1991 when the DPP started to campaign on “rejoining the United Nations” as a means of gaining recognition of Taiwan independence status. This campaign successfully helped the DPP increase its popular support. In 1993, reacting to the wide popularity of this campaign, the KMT decided to coopt this issue for their own political platform.

From the view of the PRC, the KMT’s decision to advocate “rejoining the United Nations” deviated from the “one China” policy. The PRC began to question President Lee’s attitude on the issue of Taiwan independence. Later, in an interview with a Japanese writer, Shiba Ryotaro, President Lee talked about leading the Taiwanese people to a new nation. Far from interpreting this statement as “pragmatic diplomacy,” the PRC considered it a direct affront to Chinese leaders in Beijing. The PRC believed that President Lee was moving Taiwan toward an independent status in world affairs. President Lee Teng-hui’s visit to the US in 1995 sharpened the sense of crisis in China, making real the threat of independence. They concluded that only a sharp and hostile turn in the PRC’s policy would compel Taiwan’s leaders to reassess their policies and refrain from deviating from the “one China” policy.

In early March of 1996, China launched the first of a series of three consecutive missile exercises in areas near Taiwan on the eve of Taiwan’s first presidential elections. Although the PRC had conducted missile tests in the preceding year, the missile exercises in March of 1996, in light of the dangerous threat that these particular exercises posed to the overall security of Taiwan and other areas in the region, marked the most serious conflict in the Taiwan Straits since the second Quemoy crisis of 1958. The 1996 exercises directly threatened the security of Taiwan and reflected the PRC’s intention to send the message and warning that the missile exercises could

52 The interview was first published by Japan’s Asahi Shimbun Weekly, May 29-June 4, 1994.
escalate into missile attacks. The missile exercises, which came dangerously close to Taiwan’s shore (one missile landed 19 nautical miles from Keelung, Taiwan’s major port city in the north), were accompanied by large-scale amphibious exercises in the sea and on islands near Matsu.

Taiwan responded by warning the PRC not to strike Taiwan or its territories. "If any of the missiles land within our 12-nautical-mile territorial waters, we will strike back immediately," said Defense Minister Chiang Chung-ling. US Defense Secretary William Cohen condemned the PRC’s exercises as “an attempt to intimidate Taiwan, an act of coercion” and announced on March 11 that the US would send two aircraft carrier battle groups to the regions “as a prudence, precautionary measure.” While the deployment of the USS Independence and USS Nimitz aircraft carrier battle groups appeared, at a glance, to be an unmistakable move toward the defense of Taiwan, the US obfuscated its reason for sending the aircraft carrier battle groups to the region by claiming that they were merely to “monitor” Chinese military exercises. In blatant disregard for warnings issues only weeks earlier by the PRC, the US, in December 1995, sent the USS Nimitz sailing through the Taiwan Straits. Again, the stated purpose for this action was ambiguous; US reports claimed that the USS Nimitz had to redirect its course due to “bad weather.” Meanwhile, the US continued its verbal attack against the PRC. Secretary Cohen charged the PRC with being “reckless,” claiming that their military provocations “smack of intimidation and coercion.”

The PRC responded to the US presence in the region with a string of rhetorical assaults. "Taiwan is a part of China and not a protectorate of the United States," PRC Foreign Minister

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53 Bureau Chief Andrea Koppel, “China to hold missile tests off Taiwan,” Associated Press, “March 5, 1996.
54 “U.S. sends second carrier group to Taiwan region,” Associated Press, March 11, 1996.
55 “USS Nimitz heads off to monitor Taiwan crisis,” Reuters, March 21, 1996.
56 Quoted in Moon, et al, p. 7.
Qien Qichen told reporters.\textsuperscript{58} “If foreign forces invade Taiwan ... we will not sit idly by.”\textsuperscript{59} The PRC further threatened that international intervention would be buried in a “sea of fire.”\textsuperscript{60}

On March 23, the presidential elections took place as scheduled and President Lee Teng-hui became the first democratically elected president of a Chinese-held region in history. The missile crisis came to an end when the PRC ended its third round of military exercises on March 25.

When asked under what conditions the US aircraft battle carriers would become involved in the dispute, Secretary Cohen refused to answer.\textsuperscript{61} It is not clear whether or not the US military presence in the region pressured the PRC to cease its provocation of Taiwan. The US’s strategically ambiguous posturing did, however, enable the US to maintain a presence in the region without sacrificing its maneuverability.

\textit{Some General Lessons about Dual Deterrence from the 1954 and 1996 Taiwan Straits Crises}

In the foregoing analysis, we contend that the US’s ambiguous dual deterrence strategy has successfully maintained peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for over fifty years. The policy was twice put to the test,\textsuperscript{62} and, during each crisis the US managed to alleviate cross-strait tensions through what has come to be known as the policy of strategic ambiguity. In the study of international relations, traditional extended deterrence models require that the defender’s commitment to protect the ally from the adversary must be credible, and the level of that

\textsuperscript{59} “China warns US not to get involved in dispute,” Associated Press, March 11, 1996.
\textsuperscript{60} “China can bury invaders in ‘sea of fire’ newspaper claims,” Reuters, March 21, 1996.
\textsuperscript{61} “China warns Washington not to get involved in dispute,” Associated Press, March 11, 1996.
\textsuperscript{62} We are here referring, of course, to the 1954 Quemoy crisis and the 1996 missile crisis. In this study we have not included the 1958 Quemoy crisis. In the 1958 Quemoy crisis, Eisenhower again used ambiguity to deter both Taiwan and China from provoking one another. We focus on the 1954 crisis because it is during this time that Eisenhower established the framework for his dual deterrence policy by entering into a mutual defense treaty with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and by getting the resolution passed in Congress that enabled Eisenhower to use whatever action he deemed necessary to resolve the cross-strait tensions.
commitment must be strong. However, in the example of deterrence in the cross-strait dispute, the defender -- in this case, the US -- has successfully resorted to a policy that, far from extending a credible and strong commitment to the ally, is actually ambiguous about its level of commitment. In order to understand how a defender can achieve a successful deterrence policy through ambiguity, we need to know something about how the strategic environments that call for dual and extended deterrence policies differ from one another. To that end, then, we must determine what general conditions make the two crises in our Taiwan case study similar. How, to sum up our foregoing discussion of strategic ambiguity, does a dual deterrence strategy respond to and maintain stability in situations like the two crises in our study? And, finally, why does dual deterrence require the defender to pursue a strategy almost completely opposite to the strategy used by the defender in an extended deterrence situation?

In studying the cases of both the 1954 and the 1996 crises, we learn that the two opposing actors will inevitably clash in a way that will upset the stability of the delicate security balance unless there exists a dual deterrence force, a power strong enough to counter the threat that each poses to the other. Our two crisis examples show that a wrong move by either the PRC or the ROC is sufficient to escalate the dispute into a high-crisis military confrontation. For any balancing force to effectively maintain stability, it must, first of all, be powerful enough to impact the decision-making processes of each of the opposing actors. That is, a relatively weak military power could not have influenced the outcome of the 1954 and 1996 disputes, because, in the event that a weak third party intervened on Taiwan’s behalf, the PRC would more than likely still consider it cost-effective to coerce Taiwan with military force and, by contrast, the ROC, as the weaker of the two actors, would likely not consider it cost-effective to provoke the PRC. Because of the strength of the US during both crises, it was able to influence the decision-making processes of both the PRC and the ROC by introducing real uncertainty into the situation. Not only is the US still powerful enough today to influence the players’ decisions and thus balance the current tensions between the two opposing actors, but the US still, as we have pointed out, has an
interest in preserving peace and stability in that region.

Our description of the Taiwan Straits security issue shows that a dual deterrence policy is necessary to prevent each of the opposing actors from provoking the other. There are three strategies by which a dual deterrence objective may be pursued: 1) the defender may declare that it will punish the first mover, whether it be the adversary or the ally; 2) the defender may specify in advance its level of commitment to defend the ally; or 3) the defender may be ambiguous about its commitment to the ally. We argue that in cases similar to the Taiwan Strait security issue, the first two strategy alternatives are less effective than the strategic ambiguity policy option.

By stating that it will punish the first mover, the defender extends a strong commitment to act whenever one of the opposing sides deviates from the status quo. If the PRC takes action against Taiwan, then the US will, based upon this strategy alternative, defend Taiwan, but if Taiwan moves toward independence without the PRC first provoking it, then the US will not intervene on Taiwan’s behalf. Under this policy, the US commitment level is not at issue. Although US commitment is conditioned upon one of the two opposing actors first deviating from the status quo, the level of US commitment, once it has been triggered, is actually quite high -- either the US will defend Taiwan or it will abandon. This policy, however, has the disadvantage of foreclosing the defender’s alternative modes of response to unforeseeable circumstances or unexpected fluctuations in the status quo, since the defender cannot foresee and stipulate responses for all of the conditions under which one of the sides might choose to make a move. In fact, a strategy that punishes the side that first deviates from the status quo would actually tend to favor the PRC over the ROC, because the PRC, in light of its military strength, would likely find such a commitment to be non-credible. Even if the PRC believes the US commitment to be credible, the strategy is still not waterproof because the PRC can manipulate circumstances in order to give the impression that Taiwan is the first mover. That is, since the US would be committed to dissolve its commitment to protect Taiwan if the ROC moves toward independence, the PRC will have an incentive to define any Taiwanese move that it finds
objectionable as a move toward independence. Thus, when the PRC takes action against Taiwan, it will justify its aggression by claiming that Taiwan is moving toward independence. Hence, although the PRC might actually be the first mover, it can legitimate its actions by contending that it is merely responding to Taiwan’s move. No matter what, Taiwan would be painted as the first mover, and the US, because it has already played its hand of cards, would either be compelled to abandon Taiwan or would be less able to deter the PRC with a credible deterrence threat.

We have seen that in the cases similar to the cross-strait dispute, extending a strong commitment to punish the first mover will likely bring about an undesirable outcome. The second strategy alternative is to specify in advance the level of the defender’s commitment level to the ally. If the defender specifies a level of commitment, then the opposing actors will take stock of that commitment to determine how high or low it is. Hence, if one of the actors stands to benefit from the defender’s commitment while the other side does not, then the side that benefits will have an incentive to provoke the opposing side. For example, in the 1954 case, Eisenhower was concerned that over-committing US forces to the offshore islands would give Chiang Kai-shek reason to take advantage of the US defense commitment and provoke the Communists, thus dragging the US into an undesirable war. Similarly, in the 1996 missile crisis, the US could have prematurely played its hand by committing US forces to the absolute protection of Taiwan. Such a commitment, however, would have created an incentive for Taiwan to respond with more aggressive moves toward independence, moves that would undoubtedly elicit a fierce response from the PRC. Like the 1954 example, hasty US over-commitment could actually, contrary to the US’s best intentions, destabilize the situation and bring about the very harm to Taiwan that it originally hoped to avoid.

The third party balancing power, therefore, must prevent each side from making a move that would provoke the other. How, then, can the defender simultaneously discourage each side from deviating from the status quo? From our analyses of the two crisis cases, we learn that to
deter Taiwan from provoking China, the US should not give Taiwan the impression that the US is likely to assist the ROC if Taiwan if attacked by China. We also learn that to deter China from attacking Taiwan, the US should convince China that the US commitment to defend Taiwan is credible. If there is no ambiguity about the level of US commitment, either China or Taiwan, after assessing the credibility of US commitment, might find it in its interest to provoke the other side. That is, if the US specifies a level of commitment that is sufficiently high to deter the PRC, then Taiwan will have an incentive, under a firm US defense commitment, to move toward independence and thus provoke the PRC. If, on the other hand, the US specifies a low level of commitment to defend Taiwan, then Taiwan will be deterred from deviating from the status quo, but the PRC will likely find it increasing cost-beneficial to take action against Taiwan. Hence, to achieve both of its deterrence goals simultaneously, the US cannot be explicit about the conditions under which it will defend Taiwan.

We have emphasized that punishing the first mover and specifying in advance the level of US commitment are two policies that will tilt the balance of power in favor of one side or the other and severely curtail US maneuverability. Being ambiguous is, as we have learned from the two crisis examples, the preferable strategy objective for the maintenance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. To be sure, strategic ambiguity is not a risk-free policy, but when the alternative is a higher risk of war, a strategic ambiguity policy actually becomes rather appealing. Eisenhower recognized that the Taiwan issue required a unique dual deterrence strategy, and he was the first in the history of the cross-strait dispute to realize that strategic ambiguity was the policy approach best suited to deal with the conflict in the Taiwan Straits. As we have seen, the US policy of strategic ambiguity was later formalized in the institutional framework built upon the ambiguous language of the three communiqués and the TRA.

The general applicability of a dual deterrence approach of strategic ambiguity is not unique to the Taiwan Straits conflict. Glenn H. Snyder has insightfully pointed out the following about strategic ambiguity, or what he refers to as the “straddle strategy”: “Success means
instilling cautious (and, hence, opposite) expectations in the ally and the adversary, rather than wishful (and opposite) ones, and doing so without unduly antagonizing either party. One wants the ally to think one probably will not fight, and the opponent to think one probably will.\textsuperscript{63} Snyder provides an example of the crisis of July 1914 involving Germany, Russia, and England. The 1914 crisis is very similar to our Taiwan examples, differing, for the purposes of our analysis, only in the outcome and only a few causal factors. England faced a dilemma: it needed to deter its ally, Russia, from provoking Germany, while convincing Germany that England was committed to the defense of Russia. The strategy failed, and war broke out. The main reason for the failure of England’s dual deterrence strategy was that, unlike the US presence in the Taiwan Strait in the 1954 and 1996 crises, “British power was not considered so decisive for the outcome of a war that the other states were unwilling to gamble with the uncertainty of its being used.”\textsuperscript{64}

As an example of a successful dual deterrence policy, Snyder points to Bismark’s role in playing the “straddle strategy” in its relations between Russia, Austria, and Germany in the 1870s and 1880s. Like the two Taiwan Straits examples, the conditions necessary for a successful strategic ambiguity policy were present in the Bismark case.

As we have seen, a successful deterrence strategy requires that the defender effectively manage to deter the adversary from attacking the ally. Cases that call for extended deterrence, however, differ significantly from situations in which the environment’s conditions warrant a dual deterrence strategy of ambiguity. Because an extended deterrence objective is concerned exclusively with the protection of the ally from the adversary and because the ally does not pose any real provocative threat to the adversary, the defender bears the singular responsibility of convincing the adversary of its commitment to defend the ally. As such, a defender’s deterrence strategy becomes more successful as the defender’s commitment becomes more credible and as the level of the defender’s commitment becomes stronger. The defender facing a dual deterrence


\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
dilemma, however, faces a more complex task: It must restrain the ally without abandoning it, and it must deter the adversary without provoking it. Like the objectives of the defender in extended deterrence cases, the defender still wants to convince the adversary that it is committed to defend the ally, but, because the ally possesses the capacity to provoke the adversary, the defender, unlike extended deterrence, must not over-commit and thus give the ally reason to provoke the adversary. Furthermore, in restraining the ally, the defender must be careful not to send to the adversary a signal that the defender intends to abandon the ally. Hence, while both extended and dual deterrence share the objective of deterring the adversary from attacking the ally, they differ in that the former relies upon the defender’s strong, credible commitments while, in the case of the latter, the ally’s defense rests upon the defender’s careful use of ambiguity to deter both the adversary and the ally from provoking each other.

From President Eisenhower to the 1996 missile crisis, the nature of the cross-strait dispute has called for a dual deterrence policy. The dual deterrence policy of strategic ambiguity has for over fifty years been successful in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. In spite of its ability to manage the complex cross-strait relationship, the policy of strategic ambiguity has come under fire by several of today’s leading politicians and scholars. We now turn back to the anti-ambiguity positions, evaluating their arguments based upon what we have learned.

Conclusion

We defined the accommodationist view as the policy proposal that seeks to replace strategic ambiguity with a clearer policy in two ways: 1) by attempting to specify Taiwan’s future in a way that favors Beijing; and/or 2) by placing, in a way that favors Beijing, conditions on the US’s willingness to use force to defend Taiwan. By intervening in a way that primarily deters the ROC from provoking the PRC, the US would tilt the scales in the direction of Beijing. The PRC already, even in the face of possible US interference, views the use of military force as an
increasingly cost-effective means by which it can force the Taiwan issue in a direction favorable to itself. Significantly, both accommodationist proposals, the specification of Taiwan’s future and the reduction of US defense commitment of Taiwan, would have deleterious effects for the overall security of the Taiwan Straits. We, therefore, contend that the accommodationist policy, if enacted, would more than likely lead to the very military crisis that it intends to avoid.

Specifying Taiwan’s future status -- whether by forswearing US future recognition of a future independent Taiwan or by defining the boundaries of Taiwan’s international living space – eliminates the role of Taiwanese voters and concedes to Beijing’s notion of “one China.” Beijing uses such concessions to redefine the nature of the cross-strait relationship and to erode the credibility of any possible US military intervention. A good example of this is Beijing’s reaction to President Clinton’s “three noes” statement.65

President William Jefferson Clinton’s controversial 1998 “three noes” statement met with a great deal of opposition from people both in Taiwan and the US who believed Clinton had gone beyond the boundaries of the established US policy framework. US Senator Majority Leader, Trent Lott, said that by ending the ambiguity in the American position, Clinton had harmed Taiwan without pressing Beijing leaders to renounce the use of force on Taiwan.66 The Washington Post criticized Clinton for reducing Taiwan’s bargaining power in cross-straits negotiations by ruling out “independence or any other option the Taiwanese people might choose.”67 Although the Clinton administration responding by saying that US policy had not changed,68 Beijing’s perception was altogether different. Hong Kong’s pro-China newspaper, Wen Wei Po, affirmed that Clinton’s remarks in Shanghai marked a substantial change in Sino-

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65 In a controversial statement, Clinton declared in June 1998 that “we don’t support independence for Taiwan, or two Chinas, or one Taiwan, one China. And we don’t believe that Taiwan should be a member in any organization for which statehood is a requirement.” See, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President and First Lady in Discussion on Shaping China for the 21st Century,” Shanghai Library, Shanghai, People’s Republic of China, June 30, 1998, p. 12.


US relations and reflected that US no longer adhered to an ambiguous policy toward the Taiwan issue.\textsuperscript{69} The \textit{Washington Post} quoted a high-level PRC official’s comment recorded in the \textit{China Daily} that called on Taipei to “face reality” and stated that Clinton’s comments “provided favorable conditions” for a resolution of the Taiwan issue.\textsuperscript{70}

Clinton’s third ‘no’ -- the ‘no’ that refuses to extend support to Taiwan’s participation in any international organization for which statehood is a requirement – does in fact mark a significant departure from the language of the TRA. It is neither technically consistent with nor is it consistent with the spirit of the policy framework established by the TRA and the three communiqués. The TRA extends the same laws to Taiwan that it extends to all “foreign countries, nations, states, governments, or similar entities.” Furthermore, Section 4(d) of the TRA states that “Nothing in this Act may be construed as a basis for supporting the exclusion or expulsion of Taiwan from continued membership in any international financial institution or any other international organization.” The TRA, far from prohibiting Taiwan’s participation in certain international organizations, asserts instead that the provisions in the TRA do not impede Taiwan from participating in \textit{any} international organization.

Clinton’s third ‘no’, much like Nye’s own accommodationist approach, deviates from established US policy. Both Nye’s approach and Clinton’s ‘three noes’ statement seek to do what has not been done in US foreign policy in the past twenty years – each attempts to establish what Taiwan’s future status in the global community should be. In addition to this major departure in US policy toward China and Taiwan, the US, by going beyond merely acknowledging China’s “one China” claim, implicitly goes beyond this ambiguous threshold and changes “its policy from acknowledging Beijing’s position of one China policy to accepting its claim.”\textsuperscript{71} The “three noes” policy, in Philip Y. M. Yang’s view, constitutes a “shift from ‘strategic ambiguity’ to ‘strategic

assertion.\textsuperscript{72} This is evident from the fact that Beijing, as we noted, saw Clinton’s “three noes” statement as a reinforcement of its own conception of “one China.” US defense credibility subsequently suffers, because once the PRC publicly declares that the US has changed its policy in Beijing’s favor, then the PRC feels justified in actually taking up the corresponding amount of slack in its relationship with Taiwan.

Both Clinton’s and Nye’s accommodationist positions indicate that they favor clearer cut policies that favor the PRC to those policies that are more ambiguous in nature. The more US policies explicitly favor the PRC authority over Taiwan, the less mobility the US has to provide Taiwan with a credible defense commitment. Harvey J. Feldman of the Heritage Foundation points out that after hearing Clinton’s ‘three noes’ statement, PRC officials argued that “if your President says [Taiwan] lacks the qualifications necessary for independence or statehood, and since the U.S. has recognized the PRC as the sole legal government of China, the U.S. necessarily must agree that Taiwan is a province of the PRC.” In this sense, then, the accommodationist position, including Clinton’s “three noes” statement, seeks to replace strategic ambiguity with a policy that forges a strategic alliance with the PRC at the ROC’s expense. Such a Sino-US relationship is forged at the cost of US credibility to the defense of Taiwan and increases the cost-effectiveness in the PRC’s eyes of using force to resolve the dispute.

In addition to embracing the PRC’s notion of “one China,” the accommodationist position would determine what the Taiwanese voters can and cannot choose for themselves. Taiwan independence is a key issue on the minds of many Taiwanese voters. By calling on Washington to oppose Taiwan independence and to “work hard to discourage other countries from recognizing Taiwan independence,” the accommodationist position violates the existing policy of the US and takes a position on Taiwan’s future. Moreover, the accommodationist view


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, p. 12.
would essentially ignore the fact that the people on Taiwan choose democratically for themselves that which they believe to be in their best interests. We can infer from Nye’s proposal that Washington should, with “unilateral declarations” if necessary, remove the issue of independence from Taiwan’s political arena. How such a policy would be carried out is not entirely clear. Should Taiwan’s chief opposition party, the party that has made itself known as the independence party, be banned? Should pro-independence voters be kept from voting? To prevent a democratic Taiwan from deciding its own future is a goal as unattainable as it is unrealistic. Clearly, it is this wishful thinking that gives rise to the idea that Washington can resolve the cross-strait dispute by unilaterally declaring that the ROC shall, if it wants to continue a relationship with the US, prevent the Taiwanese people from declaring or moving toward independence.

In addition to taking a position on Taiwan’s future, the accommodationist position also prematurely commits the US in a way that can actually be damaging to the status quo. As we have seen, the Nye position seeks to punish the first mover. Based upon his package, the US would commit to intervene only when one of the two sides upsets the status quo. Thus, if the PRC attacks Taiwan when the ROC has not made any moves toward independence, then the US would, presumably, move to prevent the PRC from attacking Taiwan. Conversely, if the ROC is the first mover -- that is, it makes a move toward independence --, then the US should make it clear that it will not stand in the way while the PRC uses whatever means necessary to keep Taiwan from declaring independence.

If the US declared that its policy was that it would punish whichever side first deviated from the status quo, each side would have an incentive to define the status quo to their own advantage. It is not, for example, entirely clear in our present case what constitutes a PRC use of force toward Taiwan or a ROC move toward independence. Should, for example, PRC missile tests in neutral waters over the Taiwan Strait qualify as forceful aggression against Taiwan? Should such exercises warrant a US response? If so, what kind of actions should the US take?
And, what constitutes Taiwanese moves toward independence? Does creeping independence mean that the president of Taiwan pays a visit to the US, that Taiwan continues to bid for membership in UN and other international organizations, or does it mean that Taiwan refuses to negotiate with the PRC on independence under conditions not agreed upon by Taiwan? Should actions such as these trigger a US abandonment of Taiwan? Based upon a US policy that would punish the first mover, one can imagine any number of scenarios in which the PRC would have an incentive to redefine the degree to which the ROC may act without giving the impression that it is moving toward independence. By incrementally constricting the sphere in which Taiwan may act, the PRC can redefine independence in a way that is entirely unacceptable to the democratic government on Taiwan. The PRC might claim that it is justified in using force to preempt Taiwan’s creeping independence. This is precisely what has occurred in the PRC’s release of its most recent White Paper. In the White Paper, the PRC maintains that if the ROC refuses to negotiate, sine die, on terms by unification can be finalized, then the PRC will be justified in using force to compel Taiwan to unify.

By stating that the US will punish the first mover, the US would, and, with many of the Clinton policies, has already, reduce the area of its strategy space by playing its hand prematurely. Consequently, not only would its ability to maintain stability be severely limited, but the US would be more likely to find itself involved in undesirable commitments from which it cannot easily extract itself. That is, by pursuing a policy in which it essentially punishes the first mover, the US could easily find that its strategy actually leads to its alienation of Taiwan or US involvement in an undesirable and costly military confrontation with the PRC.

In contrast to the accommodationist approach, the pro-Taiwan approach gives Taiwan considerable leverage in the cross-strait dispute. Just as the accommodationist approach would limit the set of actions available to the US in the event of a crisis or other future developments, so too would the pro-Taiwan proposal limit the number of alternatives available to the US. Stipulating the conditions under which the US would defend Taiwan increases the bargaining
power of the party favored by the change in US defense commitment. In addition to
relinquishing a great deal of freedom of US action, a clearer position specifying when and how
the US will defend Taiwan risks the very real possibility that one or more of the players involved
might consider it cost-effective to escalate an already tense dispute into a military confrontation.
Faced with a crisis, the US, having already specified its commitment prior to the unfolding of
unforeseeable future events, is thus limited in its range of motion. In such a scenario, the US
would be faced with a choice to make good or renege on its already specified defense
commitment; the dilemma for the US thus becomes, either risk US credibility or US security.

Both the accommodationist approach and the pro-Taiwan position, if fully enacted,
would, more than the strategic ambiguity policy, destabilize the Taiwan Strait and result in a
military confrontation. Just as over-committing to Taiwan’s defense would encourage an
emboldened Taiwan to spark a military confrontation with the PRC, explicitly refusing any US
willingness to defend Taiwan would more than likely open the door to the PRC’s use of military
force to pursue its interests on Taiwan. This, as we have seen, is the case because each anti-
ambiguity proposal, however well-intentioned it may be, only manages to deter one of the actors
from provoking the other. The remaining actor then has an incentive to seize its resulting
advantage in the one-sided deterrence policy. It, therefore, moves to achieve its own objectives.
War thus ensues.

We propose a policy that reverts to the ambiguity established by the TRA and the three
communiqués. Under such a policy, the US would insist only that the Taiwan issue be resolved
peacefully and by China and Taiwan. Beyond that, the US would act within the context of the
ambiguous language contained in the TRA and three communiqués, thus allowing the US to deal
with each contingency as it presents itself. We have argued that Clinton pursuit of the
accommodationist position has harmed the status quo by venturing beyond established foreign
policy. In attempting to delimit the international sphere in which Taiwan may operate, Clinton
has granted to Beijing a standard by which they may increasingly redefine Taiwan’s boundaries
of tolerable political behavior – a boundary that the ROC undoubtedly will find increasingly intolerable. We submit that a good foreign policy will not attempt to define the future status of Taiwan.

Currently, several members of Congress are pushing passage of the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act (TSEA). This bill, which has already been passed in the House with overwhelming support, is, no doubt, advocated by many of those who correctly perceive that growing PRC military strength coupled with Clinton’s accommodationist policy enhances Beijing’s position by deterring Taiwan from provoking China. The TSEA bill, which in essence updates the TRA with clearer guidelines, explicitly proposes to abandon the policy of strategic ambiguity. What is ironic, though, is that the bill does not contain any concrete commitments that actually clarify the conditions under which the US would defend Taiwan. On the issue of arms sales to Taiwan, the TSEA does resolve to reduce the authority of the commitment contained in the 1982 Shanghai Communiqué to reduce arms sales to Taiwan over time. Section 5(a) of the TSEA raises the TRA, which states that the US will sell arms to Taiwan adequate to Taiwan’s defense needs indefinitely, as the definitive standard by which the US will sale arms to Taiwan. However, this does not cut to the heart of strategic ambiguity.

Since the TSEA does not make any stipulations about concrete commitments in the Taiwan case, the TSEA does not, in our view, compromise, in letter, the policy of strategic ambiguity. However, inasmuch as its intent is to abolish strategic ambiguity in favor of a policy that, in spirit, clearly suggests an outright commitment to the defense of Taiwan, the TSEA may reduce the overall ambiguity of the US foreign policy. Significantly, proponents of the TSEA claim that the defense commitments called for in this updated version of the TRA are already justified by the language contained within the TRA itself.\footnote{Jesse Helms, Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions, US Senate, March 24, 1999.} If the TRA already justifies such action, why does it need to be officially updated with passage of the TSEA? Perhaps passage of
the TSEA is only necessary to recreate the delicate balance that has already been compromised by the accommodationist actions of the Clinton administration.

Whether accommodationist or pro-Taiwan, those who claim that they wish to protect Taiwan by stipulating the conditions under which the US will defend Taiwan may very well, contrary to their original intentions, endanger the security of Taiwan. Yes, Taiwan’s defense is important to US interests and critical to the stability of the Taiwan Straits, but to commit to Taiwan in a way that limits US maneuverability and, at the same time, emboldens Taiwan to provoke the PRC is hasty, at best, and disastrous, at worst. And, as we have shown, the other danger is to specify in advance a low level of commitment to Taiwan or to state that the US will punish whichever side first deviates from the status quo. Such a strategy will also reduce US maneuverability and will tilt the balance of power in the favor of the PRC, thus compromising Taiwan’s security. Instead of over-committing to either side, we suggest that the objective should be to stay focused on the ambiguous dual deterrence strategy originated by Eisenhower and later solidified in the institutional policy framework of existing US laws and agreements. The most well-intentioned solutions to the complex cross-strait problem are likely, in their haste, to court the very disaster that they are trying to avoid, and, in Eisenhower’s words, “The hard way is to have the courage to be patient.”

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74 Eisenhower, p. 483.