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To cite this article: Nien-chung Chang-Liao & Chi Fang (2021) The Case for Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:2, 45-60, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2021.1932088](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1932088)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1932088>



Published online: 17 Jun 2021.



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For decades, one key dimension of US policy toward Taiwan has been “strategic ambiguity.”¹ With its equivocal reassurance in defending Taiwan, while recognizing there is “one China,” Washington has sought both to prevent Beijing from launching an unprovoked attack on the island and to dissuade Taipei from declaring the island’s *de jure* independence from the mainland. Since Washington established diplomatic ties with the PRC in 1979, this policy has allowed the United States to maintain cooperative and beneficial relationships with both sides of the Taiwan Strait, contributing to peace and prosperity in the region.

In recent years, however, there have been clear signs that cross-Strait relations have become less stable and more war-prone.² China’s belligerence toward Taiwan is increasing—in particular, it has intensified its military exercises in the air and in the waters surrounding Taiwan—prompting a renewed debate over the appropriate level of US security assurances for the island. A growing number of scholars and analysts are calling for a clearer, enhanced US commitment to deter Chinese aggression, shifting Washington’s Taiwan policy to one of “strategic clarity.”³

The US government seemed to be moving in this direction. The Trump administration received Taiwanese leaders in US government facilities, dispatched cabinet-level officials to the island, and sold a large quantity of advanced weapons to Taipei.⁴ The Biden administration, while revitalizing traditional US

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© 2021 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 44:2 pp. 45–60
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1932088>

alliances and multilateralism, also reemphasizes Washington's security commitment in the region.⁵ Meanwhile, the US Congress passed a series of pro-Taiwan laws such as the Taiwan Travel Act and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018, as well as the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative of 2020, demonstrating strong US support for the island. These developments in Washington's Taiwan policy have attracted widespread support, including from US government agencies and a cross-section of the policy community. It is critical, however, that US policymakers consider the operational implications of this shift from strategic ambiguity to clarity, including the likelihood of a rapid escalation of cross-Strait tensions that could trigger conflict between China and the United States.

In this article, we argue that a shift in US Taiwan policy from strategic ambiguity to clarity would be counterproductive. The focus of the current debate on deterrence is not so much wrong as incomplete. One missing point is China's evolving strategy against Taiwan—while reserving the option of military unification, Beijing seeks to coerce the island into surrender and avoid an armed conflict with Washington. This is what some have called “gray-zone strategy,” which can be conducted using hybrid instruments, circumventing US red lines, and exploiting the asymmetry of security interests between the United States and its allies in a Taiwan contingency.⁶ We argue that a shift to strategic clarity would undermine, rather than increase, the flexibility of US extended deterrence commitments in the Taiwan Strait. Strategic ambiguity, on the other hand, gives the United States and its allies the resilience needed to counter China's gray-zone coercion. To deter a cross-Strait conflict in the gray zone, the United States should help Taiwan improve its cross-domain capabilities, enhance interagency governance, and develop a network of intelligence cooperation with like-minded countries in the region.

The Debate over Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity refers to the condition under which neither China nor Taiwan knows whether the United States would intervene in a cross-Strait conflict.⁷ It is a strategy wherein the United States provides security to Taiwan without the risk of becoming trapped in an undesirable war with the PRC. Strategic ambiguity has its origins in the US alliance dilemma in the Taiwan Strait.⁸ A strong commitment to Taiwan could drag the United States into an unwanted conflict with China. A weak commitment, on the other hand, could increase China's incentive to invade the island. This dilemma may be illustrated by the situation in the Korean War of 1950–53. The Truman administration sent the Seventh Fleet to “neutralize” the Taiwan Strait in defense of the Nationalist

government in Taiwan, but its commitment to Taipei became limited and conditional as Washington also sought to reach a *modus vivendi* with Beijing.⁹ While characterized by uncertainty and contingency, the policy of strategic ambiguity must walk a fine line between deterrence and reassurance if an all-out conflict in the Strait is to be avoided.¹⁰

Contemporary strategic ambiguity is based on Washington's "one China policy" enshrined in the three US-China communiqués and the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), in which the United States formally acknowledges that there is only one China while maintaining an unofficial relationship with Taiwan.¹¹ Under the TRA, the United States supports Taiwan's self-defense capabilities by selling it weapons. Without defining the conditionality or specifying what actions must be taken, Washington is also required 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."¹² Unlike a defense treaty, the TRA does not oblige the United States to safeguard the security of Taiwan, but it does reinforce the commitment of the United States to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue in broader terms.¹³

It is important to note that strategic ambiguity is not an end in itself. The goal of the policy is to encourage a convergence of cautious and cooperative policies from Beijing and Taipei to concur with US interests.¹⁴ In China's eyes, the United States could respond to its military threats while cooperating with Beijing in other areas. To Taiwan, Washington could guarantee the island's autonomy while avoiding charges of promoting Taiwan independence. As Taipei has learned the hard way, the US government will repeatedly disassociate itself from any boat-rocking moves by pro-independence leaders in Taiwan—in particular, during the mid-2000s, when President Chen Shui-bian of Taiwan played with the idea of independence through a series of election campaigns that stirred up trouble across the Pacific for both Beijing and Washington.¹⁵ In this regard, strategic ambiguity places the United States in a pivotal position in which it can practice "dual deterrence"—simultaneously deterring Chinese aggression and restraining Taiwan's provocations.¹⁶

Strategic ambiguity has its pitfalls, too. It could cause both China and Taiwan to underestimate or overestimate Washington's commitment. By obscuring its intentions, the United States could encourage both sides of the Strait to take risks rather than adopt a cautious approach.¹⁷ One example was the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis, which was triggered by Beijing's launch of missile tests and military exercises in areas near Taiwan on the eve of the island's first presidential election in March 1996. Washington responded to the test by sending two aircraft carrier groups sailing through the Taiwan Strait. This crisis nearly led to a confrontation between Washington and Beijing as both sides of the Strait probed the extent of the US commitment to maintaining the status quo.¹⁸

As Maryland professor Scott Kastner notes, however, both China and Taiwan have “obvious incentives to misrepresent their true perceptions concerning US resolve.”¹⁹ There may be some *a priori* factors, such as nationalism or power consolidation, contributing to a misinterpretation of US determination. Despite the pitfalls, therefore, successive US governments have maintained the policy of strategic ambiguity by imposing limitations on US arms sales to Taiwan, encouraging cross-Strait dialogue and interaction, and preventing both China and Taiwan from initiating or provoking a conflict.²⁰ The ambiguity remains essential to the US “one China policy” because the regional peace and stability it has facilitated outweigh these inherent risks and costs.

Some observers now believe that maintaining strategic ambiguity is no longer a game worth the candle.²¹ Strategic ambiguity works as long as both sides of the Strait are deterred, but many factors in recent years have weakened its effectiveness: increasing support for independence in Taiwan raises the stakes for Beijing to seek unification by force; Beijing’s imposition of a national security law on Hong Kong has reinforced Taiwan’s resistance to the “one country, two systems” model; significant US arms sales and bipartisan congressional support have opened the prospects of US intervention on Taiwan’s behalf under any circumstance; and a growing military imbalance in the Taiwan Strait has increased Beijing’s chances of successfully conquering Taiwan, even if Washington were to intervene.²² As a result, critics of the strategy warn of the risks of maintaining ambiguity and laud the benefits of clarity.

Strategic clarity is more likely to precipitate a cross-Strait crisis than prevent it today

Proponents of strategic clarity contend that Washington’s self-binding interactions with Taipei stand in the way of credible deterrence against Chinese aggression. With a clear and unconditional commitment to Taiwan, they argue, Washington would be better able to justify the security of the island as a vital US interest. The United States has to signal that it will take sides in a military confrontation in the Strait. In addition to selling substantial quantities of arms to Taipei, Washington should enhance its military consultations with the ROC military, expand diplomatic engagement with Taiwan, and be prepared to play high-stakes gunboat diplomacy in the Taiwan Strait.²³ In fact, many of these recommendations are extensions of existing policies; only a few are new and unprecedented, and most of them were notably advanced and accelerated under the Trump administration, which adopted a confrontational approach toward Beijing.²⁴

In the context of US-China power competition, however, strategic clarity is more likely to precipitate a cross-Strait crisis than prevent it.²⁵ The logic of strategic clarity is that Chinese aggression can be deterred if US security commitments to Taiwan are made more credible. This strategic adjustment is meant to make Beijing more conciliatory and less uncertain about US intentions. As US-China tensions escalate, many disputes—such as those concerning trade, human rights, North Korea, and the South China Sea—are capable of sparking a crisis between the two nuclear great powers. The danger of strategic clarity in this respect is that it will fuel Beijing's suspicions that Washington is actually moving toward support for Taiwan independence.²⁶

Such an outcome is more likely to trap the United States in an unintended war in the Taiwan Strait. The 1954–55 Taiwan Strait crisis is a similar example: the Eisenhower administration's mounting support for Taipei prompted Beijing to stop the formation of a US-ROC alliance by bombing Jinmen (Quemoy), a small Nationalist-held island less than a mile away from the mainland.²⁷ The United States subsequently signed a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan in 1954, but due to pressure from other US allies, Washington was reluctant to support a Nationalist attack on the mainland or to extend the US deterrence commitment to the offshore islands held by Taiwan.²⁸ A sensible US Taiwan policy, therefore, must be flexible enough to deter aggression while providing enough reassurance to avoid a spillover of tensions.

The Question of Deterrence

The current debate over strategic ambiguity is more about deterring rather than reassuring Beijing.²⁹ Strategic ambiguity skeptics fear that US commitments have been insufficient to deter China from using force against Taiwan, while supporters of the policy are concerned about the dangers of spiraling tensions and emphasize the sufficiency of arms transfers in deterring Chinese aggression. The same logic can also be found in discussions of future war games in the Taiwan Strait. These discussions mainly focus on the overall military balance between the two sides of the Strait and the prospect of China posing problems for the more powerful and technologically advanced US military. The scenario that has undergone the most evaluation is the ability of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to attack or conquer Taiwan through military operations such as strategic bombing, a naval blockade, or amphibious assaults.³⁰

The problem is that China is unlikely to launch an assault on Taiwan using traditional military means. Given the combination of high costs and low odds, it is infeasible for Chinese leaders to resort to force in a cross-Strait conflict.³¹ Despite the common design of war games to focus on the conventional

balance, unconventional and hybrid warfare seems to be the wiser choice.³² In fact, China has embarked on an unexpected approach—a “gray-zone” strategy that is aimed at accomplishing military and strategic goals while avoiding the direct use of force.³³ This strategy was exemplified during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal crisis, when China unilaterally occupied a disputed islet previously under de facto Philippines control and adopted a *fait accompli* strategy to seize control

China is unlikely to launch an assault on Taiwan using traditional military means

of the shoal without provoking a military conflict or US involvement.³⁴ Similarly, China will prioritize gray-zone coercion to achieve its geopolitical goals in the Taiwan Strait, such as taking away one of Taiwan’s offshore islands in order to intimidate the island into surrender.³⁵ If the current debate is focused only on how to deter overt Chinese military aggression, the more nuanced hidden menace will remain undetected.

So, what would a shift toward strategic clarity toward Taiwan do with respect to China’s more likely “gray-zone” coercion strategy which makes use of hybrid instruments, bypasses US red lines, and exploits the asymmetry of security interests between the United States and its regional allies?

Countering China’s Ambiguous Strategy

A gray-zone strategy involves the use of hybrid instruments in a single campaign to achieve desirable outcomes.³⁶ By combining attacks on IT infrastructure, imposing economic sanctions, and deploying paramilitary agencies, gray-zone coercion is likely to achieve battlefield results similar to military operations. Since it does not involve mobilizing traditional military forces, a gray-zone conflict is unlikely to cause large changes in local military balance, but it can distract the target’s resources and lower the cost of engagement and escalation.³⁷ According to Taiwan’s 2021 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, for example, China’s aerial and maritime incursions aim at “weakening morale, depleting the resources of the ROC Armed Forces, and eroding the national security” of the island.³⁸ Analyst Ian Easton calls Beijing’s coercion against Taiwan a “war of nerves” that makes the region “ever more unstable and ready for collision and collapse.”³⁹

However, China adopting a gray-zone strategy does not mean that it would be able to successfully conquer Taiwan, but if China’s leaders decided to initiate a low-key invasion—like Russia’s invasion of Crimea, for example—they would

be able to exploit the shortcomings of any US pledge to defend Taiwan under a policy of strategic clarity.

First, given the hybridity of a gray-zone strategy, China is more likely to move first in the Taiwan Strait. China could take the lead by using multiple tools in a single campaign. It could choose operations that circumvent traditional warfare and avoid triggering Washington's alliance obligations, which would mean that conventional deterrence measures would hardly be activated.⁴⁰ Even if the United States decides to counter China's gray-zone coercion by using a mix of measures—including embargoes, financial sanctions, and cyber operations⁴¹—these countermeasures would probably not be carried out by the US forces currently dedicated to the conventional defense establishment and military alliances. In this regard, a shift to strategic clarity in the US deterrence commitment would not be able to address China's gray-zone coercion by applying treaty provisions that focus primarily on wartime contingencies.⁴²

A shift to strategic clarity would not be able to address China's gray-zone coercion

Second, considering the menace from China's gray-zone coercion, a shift away from ambiguity would become the victim of its own clarity. Beijing is increasingly reliant on its own ambiguity, such as economic coercion and paramilitary conflict, exploiting loopholes in US alliance commitments and circumventing deterrence altogether.⁴³ Strategic clarity, while sending stronger signals to China, nonetheless draws a red line that could invite China's encroachment. A clear-cut commitment means not only what one is prepared to take a risk for but also what one would ignore.⁴⁴ Without resorting to force, China could wander close to red lines and create *fait accomplis* that target states cannot respond to with outright military operations.⁴⁵ It is thus questionable whether strategic clarity would deter China from employing gray-zone coercion against Taiwan if US deterrence commitments become easier to circumvent.

Strategic ambiguity, in contrast, means that the red lines that would trigger a US response are difficult to discern, thus preventing China from exploiting loopholes in existing promises. Given the ever-changing dynamics of the Strait, it affords the United States more flexibility and freedom from hand-tying guarantees. The United States, along with its allies and partners, is better able to devise a strategy in response to a gray-zone conflict through multi-faceted operations.⁴⁶ Perhaps more importantly, strategic ambiguity allows Washington to avoid new extended deterrence commitments, which could require the United States to specify certain contingencies that could deplete its resource capacities in the long run.⁴⁷ In this regard, strategic ambiguity is more resilient than strategic clarity as it gives Washington more latitude in dealing with China.

The inability of strategic clarity to counter China's gray-zone strategy is illustrated by the maritime disputes that have erupted between China and its neighbors. In the East China Sea dispute between China and Japan, US President Barack Obama's 2014 declaration that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands come under the US-Japan defense treaty did not defuse the tensions. Instead, China increased the number of its ships and aircraft in the disputed area.⁴⁸ In the case of the Scarborough Shoal dispute between China and the Philippines, although researchers Robert Ayson and Manjeet Pardesi argue that US strategic ambiguity was "more comforting than challenging to Beijing" because "China's fait accompli strategy made sense in part because of America's reluctance to declare red lines,"⁴⁹ the blame should fall mainly on Manila's mismanagement of the crisis. An attempt was made to resolve the dispute, which was initially triggered by the arrest of Chinese fishermen by a Philippines warship in the disputed area, by back-door diplomacy between Beijing and Manila. After a two-month standoff, the Philippines agreed to the Chinese suggestion that both sides withdraw from the disputed area. However, Chinese vessels remained, and the Chinese eventually took control of the island.⁵⁰ As then-advisor in the Obama administration Ely Ratner observed, Beijing's behavior was conducted in a way below "the line of militarization," thus "keeping the United States on the sidelines."⁵¹ If Washington were to declare the red line, Beijing would still be able to challenge the status quo by its ambiguous maneuvers.

Third, China's gray-zone strategy is more likely because of the asymmetry of interests between the United States and its allies which no declaratory policy can hide. With paramilitary agencies in disguise, a gray-zone strategy would create divergent threat perceptions among alliance members because of difficulties in identifying and attributing the attacker.⁵² In the case of Scarborough Shoal, the credibility of the US commitment was strained because Washington and Manila placed different values on the disputed islets.⁵³ Manila was dissatisfied with Washington's passivity in the face of Beijing's coercion and the way it undermined the utility of the US-Philippines defense treaty.⁵⁴ Short of military action by the Chinese, however, it is unclear how the United States could push back against China's creeping expansion in the South China Sea. Without shared interests and a common perceived threat between the United States and its allies, China's gray-zone strategy can inject uncertainty into an already ambiguous extended deterrence commitment and exaggerate the fear of abandonment as well as entrapment among alliance members. While strategic ambiguity, much like strategic clarity, may not directly address China's gray-zone threat, it nevertheless could reduce the chance of US entrapment in its allies' mismanagement and increase US flexibility in deploying countermeasures, thus undermining the effectiveness of Beijing's exploitation.

Advocates of shifting to strategic clarity also fail to consider other US allies' willingness to join Washington in making defense commitments to Taiwan. It is doubtful whether the allies would come to Taiwan's rescue if the island were exposed to a gray-zone conflict. Fear of entanglement would prompt Washington's regional allies to distance themselves rather than support more explicit security assurances for Taipei. Embracing strategic ambiguity is a more sustainable way of uniting efforts to neutralize Chinese coercion.⁵⁵ A case in point is Japan's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Australia, and India. Tokyo has deliberately maintained strategic ambiguity so as not to provoke China while accommodating the different expectations of other dialogue participants.⁵⁶ Not until Washington's allies perceive the threat from China to be imminent will a shift to strategic clarity be feasible collectively, and a unilateral US shift to strategic clarity could expose and complicate these rifts in the broader US Indo-Pacific strategy.

Advocates of strategic clarity also fail to consider other US allies' willingness to join Washington

Until then, scholars and policymakers should keep the art of commitment in mind for countering Chinese coercion in the gray zone. That is not to say that strategic ambiguity cannot be revised or recalibrated under any circumstance. As long as Washington pursues a Taiwan policy that relies on strategic ambiguity, it can always introduce various initiatives to support Taiwan in defending itself against China's gray-zone coercion. First, Washington should step up its commitment in the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act to promote Taiwan's asymmetric capability while maintaining ambiguity. By strengthening Taiwan's cross-domain capability through arms sales so that it can operate across different military services, the United States can increase the odds of local deterrence without switching to strategic clarity.⁵⁷

Moreover, the United States and its clients should improve their interagency exchanges to combat misinformation and enhance cross-domain governance. Interagency collaboration in the form of the Global Cooperation and Training Framework will be indispensable, given that gray-zone conflict mainly impacts the political, rather than military, domain. Finally, it is necessary to establish a coordinated network for intelligence sharing and information collaboration. In addition to demonstrating military strength and imposing economic sanctions, containing and resisting gray-zone coercion require intelligence cooperation among the concerned countries, such as a mechanism similar to NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence, in which an alliance can develop joint toolkits against latent attacks.⁵⁸

In short, without replacing strategic ambiguity, these policy prescriptions could improve Taiwan's asymmetrical and cross-domain capabilities and enhance interagency strategic coordination between the United States and other countries in the region, thus strengthening Washington's existing commitments to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait without exposing intra-alliance discrepancies in the emerging US Indo-Pacific strategy or running the risk of US entrapment in the Taiwan Strait. Despite China's mounting belligerence, the United States and Taiwan do not have to react to nebulous targets in the gray zone. Instead, they require a carefully but boldly crafted menu of measures for countering the emerging threat where it exists—below the military threshold. An innovative list of countermeasures against China's gray zone strategy will thereby serve US security interests even beyond the Taiwan Strait.

Meeting Beijing's Strategy in Ambiguity

China's gray-zone strategy is an emerging threat to US interests in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing reserves the option of taking the island by force, but in the meantime its strategy is to cause substantial damage to Taiwan's defense and morale. China may not use military force to invade Taiwan, but it could use gray-zone coercion to force Taipei to surrender. This is not to say that conventional deterrence determined by explicit commitments does not play a central role in US security assurances in the region. Yet if Beijing can master the hybridity of coercive instruments, bypass a declaimed red line, and manipulate the asymmetric interests between the United States and its allies, an extension of its commitment to Taiwan would not serve Washington's security interests.

As China-US competition intensifies, an unprovoked shift by the United States from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity would be counterproductive. Such a change would raise the possibility of a cross-Strait conflict while failing

A shift in US Taiwan policy to strategic clarity would be counterproductive

to counter China's gray-zone coercion against Taiwan. A more powerful China has become less likely to engage in direct armed conflict. Instead, it can combine economic and non-traditional coercion with information warfare, all in a careful manner designed to avoid provoking US involvement. If China can operate under the threshold of war, what reason would the United States have to make commitments above that threshold?

For more than four decades, through the end of the Cold War, the democratization of Taiwan, and the rapid rise of China, strategic ambiguity has

contributed to an uneasy peace in the Taiwan Strait. There has been a consensus within the US policymaking community that its benefits have exceeded its risks. It is difficult to imagine an alternative strategy that would both deter and reassure both sides of the Strait in the immediate future. To be sure, strategic ambiguity may need to be revised or recalibrated as circumstances change. However, the emergence of China's gray-zone strategy means that now is not the time for such a change. Faced with the profound challenges posed by China's rise in the region, it is more important for the United States and Taiwan to consolidate, rather than clarify, their overlapping interests in political, economic, and security cooperation.

Notes

1. The United States is required by the Taiwan Relations Act to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself, but the Act itself remains ambiguous about whether the United States would intervene militarily in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan. This is widely referred as the US policy of "strategic ambiguity" in the Taiwan Strait. See Taiwan Relations Act, Pub. L. no. 96-8, 93 Stat. 14 (1979), 14–21, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-93/pdf/STATUTE-93-Pg14.pdf>.
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