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Strategic Ambiguity Toward Taiwan

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Overview

China's growing military and economic strength, coupled with its increasingly aggressive posture in East Asia, have raised questions about U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Should the United States maintain its longstanding policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan, or should it clarify its stance?

Students will understand that changing dynamics in the world, such as China's growing military strength and its increasing assertiveness, could require U.S. policymakers to rethink their approach to Taiwan in an attempt to avoid conflict.

Students will understand that clarifying a U.S. intention to defend Taiwan could strengthen [deterrence](#) against aggression but carries the risk of a forceful Chinese response.

The Situation

U.S. policy toward Taiwan walks a delicate line. Although the People's Republic of China (PRC) has never governed Taiwan, it claims the island as part of its territory and remains determined to take control of it—by force if necessary. In 1979, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan and recognized the PRC as the “sole legal government of China.” It acknowledged—but did not endorse—China's claim on Taiwan. The United States established informal relations with Taiwan, and committed to supplying it with defensive weapons. Washington has also maintained the capacity to defend the island if its [sovereignty](#) were threatened. However, the United States has stopped short of clearly promising to intervene militarily if Taiwan were attacked; therefore, U.S. policy towards Taiwan is one of “strategic ambiguity.” The goal is that uncertainty about a U.S. intervention would deter Chinese aggression and restrain Taiwan from taking any reckless steps. Ultimately, strategic ambiguity aims to prevent conditions that could provoke a Chinese attack.

In the intervening decades, Taiwan has become a vibrant democracy and partnered with the United States on several global issues. It has also become a top ten U.S. trade partner and the world's largest supplier of advanced computer chips. These chips are critical for goods such as phones, electronics, and military equipment. U.S. strategic ambiguity has helped maintain largely stable relations among the United States, China, and Taiwan; while China has periodically threatened Taiwan, it has not attempted a full invasion. Meanwhile, Taiwan has not made a push for formal independence. However, shifting geopolitical dynamics have led some to question whether strategic ambiguity has run its course.

Some contend that strategic ambiguity's ability to deter aggression is waning. They argue that the policy was effective when China was weaker and more risk-averse. However, the rapid growth of China's military and economy has contributed to Beijing's higher risk tolerance when it comes to foreign policy.. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, China has militarized the South China Sea, fought a border clash with India, and undermined democracy in Hong Kong. Moreover, Xi Jinping has used economic tools to try to coerce countries into its [sphere of influence](#). Leaders in Beijing could conclude that, with a military capable of challenging the United States over Taiwan and an economy capable of withstanding severe [sanctions](#), invading the

island could be worth the risk of a harsh global response and even possible U.S. intervention. Some also assert that U.S. allies in the region expect the United States to defend Taiwan and would be unnerved if it stood aside. If the United States chose to do so, these allies could lose trust in U.S. security commitments. A loss of faith could see U.S. allies opt to either accommodate China's strategic interests or go it alone in their defense policy. This development would weaken the United States [alliance](#) system and would have potentially destabilizing effects in the Asia Pacific. Accordingly, analysts have increasingly begun to advocate for the United States to make a clear commitment to defend Taiwan against an attack. These analysts argue for the establishment of red lines that would trigger a U.S. response. The certainty of U.S. intervention, they argue, would provide a stronger deterrent against invasion.

However, some counter that strategic ambiguity remains the best approach. They point out that a defense commitment could prompt dangerous Chinese provocation toward Taiwan— even if such actions fall short of a full invasion. The establishment of red lines would also provide China with a meaningful advantage, as Beijing would know exactly what would and would not trigger a U.S. response. A commitment to defend Taiwan could also anger China and affirm its fears that the United States seeks to pull Taiwan further away from the mainland. Moreover, such a shift could embolden Taiwan to pursue independence or take other risky moves. Instead of strengthening U.S. [deterrence](#), therefore, clarifying U.S. intentions could increase the risk of a conflict. This policy shift would also obligate the United States to participate in a costly and potentially unpopular military operation. Given the potentially catastrophic risks of a conflict between the United States and China, policymakers need to carefully consider whether strategic ambiguity remains the best course of action. Policymakers must now decide whether the time has come to shift to “strategic clarity.”

Decision Point

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China's growing military and economic strength, coupled with its increasingly aggressive posture in East Asia, has led to renewed scrutiny of U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Most recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a similar instance of a nuclear-armed power attacking a smaller neighbor, has led many to question the longstanding U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan. Accordingly, the president has convened the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss whether the time has come to change U.S. policy toward Taiwan. NSC members will need to weigh the deterrent benefits of clarifying U.S. policy toward Taiwan against the risk of heightened tensions that accompanies such a move.

NSC members should choose between the following options:

- *Maintain strategic ambiguity.* Refraining from clarifying U.S. intentions about Taiwan's defense would avoid risking new tensions with China. It could also restrain Taiwan from taking potentially provocative actions. However, maintaining strategic ambiguity could fail to deter Chinese aggression toward Taiwan.
- *Adopt a new policy of strategic clarity.* This option would entail announcing a clear commitment to defend Taiwan. Strategic clarity would also require outlining the specific actions that, if China took them, would trigger a U.S. response. To ensure maximum credibility, this policy decision could entail strengthening the U.S. military presence in East Asia. The United States will need to show U.S. readiness to follow through with its commitment. This option could act as a stronger deterrent against Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. However, it could also amplify regional tensions. The United States would also be obligated to join a conflict if one broke out.

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