



The Taiwan Problem

ABSTRACT

Taiwan's status as an independent country and how it is acknowledged by other nations is politically complex. While Taiwan has its own independent government and military, it is left out of the United Nations and must be referred to as Chinese Taipei in global events like the Olympics. Taiwan's historically complicated relationship with the Republic of China (PRC) directly influences its foreign relations with national superpowers, like the United States, on how —strategically ambiguous their allyship can be. This paper explores the crux of this strategic ambiguity—how the United States can refrain from committing to Taiwan's defense while simultaneously maintaining diplomatic relations with both Taiwan and China. Furthermore, this paper will challenge how effective an approach of strategic ambiguity is as a long-term solution as well as propose moderate actions the United States can take ranging from a military and policy-driven standpoint to decrease the risk of global conflict.

Keywords: Taiwan, Taiwan Independence Movement, China-Taiwan Relations, U.S.-Taiwan Relations, Political Status of Taiwan.

Shaochi Shawn Chuang
Department of Social
Sciences,
Princeton High School,
USA

I. Introduction

Background and Significance of the Study

Despite Taiwan having its own government, military, and territory, most countries and international organizations do not consider it as an independent nation. Taiwan's status as an independent nation is a critical issue as it affects its participation in international organizations and its ability to form agreements with allies. Because of Taiwan's historically complicated relationship with China, other nations like the United States must undertake a general premise of strategic ambiguity to appease both sides. The United States is at a critical juncture; disharmonious relations between U.S. and China, the world's two largest economies, can lead to a global economic, political, and military crisis.

Historical Context

To understand the complexity of Taiwan's existence, one must understand its history, which began in the Chinese Civil War roughly 70 years ago. After the communists took over, the nationalist government of the Republic of China (ROC) escaped to the island of Taiwan. Since neither side ever officially conceded, both the ROC and the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC) continue to claim to be the —real China that controls both the mainland and the island of Taiwan. In the years following the war, the ROC had bold plans of —retaking the mainland and enjoyed broad international support from western powers that feared the rise of another communist power. However, over time as the PRC solidified its control of the mainland, the ROC and its allies began to lose hope, and countries began to switch alliances to access the PRC's massive economic potential. This chain of events culminated in 1971 when the UN voted to expel the ROC from the UN and the PRC took on the title of —China on the international stage. From this point on, the terms ROC and Taiwan, as well as PRC and China, will be used interchangeably.

Current Landscape

Since 1971, the situation has remained essentially the same. Both sides continue to officially claim to be the —one true China that rules over both the mainland and the island of Taiwan.

However, the number of countries with formal diplomatic relationships with the ROC has dwindled, with only 13 UN member states recognizing its sovereignty. Interestingly, many countries - most notably the United States - have found a loophole in the complicated Taiwan-China relations by officially recognizing the PRC but maintaining unofficial ties with the government of Taiwan.

Relations between United States and Taiwan

Taiwan Relations Act

While the United States officially switched recognition to the PRC in 1979, it remains one of Taiwan's closest allies. Under the Taiwan Relations Act, the U.S. establishes the policy of —strategic ambiguity‖ that dictates its relations with the island. Under the law, the U.S. must —provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character‖ as well as —maintain the capacity‖ to defend the island against threats (Zablocki, 1979). This law is, crucially, not an actual promise to defend Taiwan if a war were to break out; as recently as September 2022, the U.S. government has clarified that the country does not commit to sending troops to defend the island in the case of war. This is the crux of strategic ambiguity; by both refraining from committing to Taiwan's defense while simultaneously refusing to rule it out, the United States forces China to think twice before attacking while providing itself enough flexibility to maintain diplomatic relations with the PRC. Another layer of strategic ambiguity is the particular way the U.S. established diplomatic ties with China. In official documents, the United States officially recognizes the PRC as the government of China, but only goes as far as to —understand‖ China's position that Taiwan is a part of their territory, never officially accepting this claim (Green, 2017).

Strategic Ambiguity is Unsustainable

While it may have worked for the past forty years, strategic ambiguity was not meant to be a long-term solution: it was created as a temporary measure until China democratized and the PRC and ROC reunified. When reunification did not materialize, the national identities of the two began to diverge. Today, a growing number of ROC citizens identify as solely Taiwanese and call for legal independence from the Chinese mainland. China identifies these calls for independence as a serious threat as it would eliminate the possibility of a future reunification with the PRC. According to Lampton (2010), if Taiwanese independence were ever to be realized, it would —certainly mean some form of military conflict or economic embargo or an attempt by the PRC to destabilize Taiwan's economy‖. Additionally, strategic ambiguity does not consider China's massive military power today. Judging from countries' apathetic attitudes regarding China's recent crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China may be emboldened to invade Taiwan if it believes it will avoid serious consequences (Devine, 2022). Even worse, Strategic ambiguity further elevates this danger as it discourages other countries from aiding Taiwan due to uncertainty that the U.S. will follow suit. As the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity is questioned, a debate has spawned on how the United States should alter its policy to protect Taiwan while maintaining its economic interests most effectively in China.

Potential Strategies

Need for Moderate Actions against China

It is essential to recognize that the U.S. should focus on taking moderate actions against China as throwing out strategic ambiguity and officially recognizing Taiwan as a country will likely be a catastrophic decision for Taiwan and the world (Stavridis, 2020). This would cause China to immediately cut off all ties with the United States and lead to a global economic crisis as trade between the world's two largest economies grinds to a halt. As for Taiwan, cross-strait relations would take a turn for the worst as China steps up its military aggression and may even invade Taiwan in a last-ditch effort to —reunify the motherland‖. With that said, considering Taiwan's strategic military, economic, and technological position on the international stage, it would be unwise for the United States to decrease involvement in the region and leave Taiwan vulnerable to Chinese aggression. There are two semi-opposing stances that scholars usually take on the issue.

Increase Military Presence

The first stance is that the U.S. should step up its military commitments to Taiwan. The idea

behind this stance is that if the U.S. could build up its military presence in the region, it would effectively deter a Chinese invasion by drastically increasing the costs of an already tricky amphibious invasion (Mastro, 2022). However, this plan would require the U.S. to drop strategic ambiguity and fully commit to Taiwan's defense— a dangerous move since China would see it as an act of aggression and step up its military advancements in Taiwan. Furthermore, we must consider that the U.S. may not have the military power or influence to stop a Chinese attack as countries like Japan and the Philippines have mutual defense treaties with the U.S. but are still continuously subject to Chinese military aggression (Clarke, 2021). According to Cody, 2020, critically, the Chinese anti-secession law mandates reunification through force if all paths to peaceful reunification disappear. A decision by the U.S. to defend Taiwan unilaterally may force this law into effect.

Decrease Chance of War with Policy-Driven Measures

The second stance is that the United States should maintain its strategic ambiguity but alter certain aspects of the policy to decrease the chances of war. The proposed changes include advocating for Taiwan's independent involvement in international organizations such as the UN and the World Bank under —observer status like Palestine. This would allow Taiwan greater access to the international stage and calm Taiwanese independence activists who often cite Taiwan's inability to join international organizations as a reason for independence (Hickey, 2022). This would decrease the possibility of war and simultaneously improve Taiwan's current position. Opponents of this plan often stress the importance of eventual legal independence for Taiwan, believing that the nation's current situation is unsustainable for its citizens. They believe that this plan would only be a temporary solution because no matter how much the world tries to make Taiwan feel like a country, the only thing that will ever truly appease independence activists is officially making Taiwan a country.

Furthermore, an integral aspect of this stance is that the U.S. should threaten China with non-military actions that are unlikely to provoke a military response. Since China is deeply integrated into global trade, many of its largest trading partners are among Western liberal democracies. The U.S. should strategically ensure that China will suffer severe economic damage if it invades Taiwan. This would likely come in the form of the U.S. making agreements with regional allies like South Korea, Japan, and Australia to cut off trade with China in the event of an invasion of Taiwan. Considering the significant role that these countries' economies rely on China, an agreement of this sort would send a clear message to China that the world would not tolerate aggression. The main concern is its feasibility since, as stated, many of these countries heavily rely on the Chinese economy.

Nonetheless, if the agreements clearly state that this policy would only go into effect if China was to invade Taiwan, it would be neither an unprecedented nor an unexpected move and would likely only cause symbolic backlash from China. Another issue with this approach is that it could be underestimating China's desire to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. Considering Chinese President Xi's repeated assertion that China will —never promise to renounce the use of force to reunify Taiwan and the rapid increase in Chinese military incursions into Taiwanese airspace, the possibility of a Chinese invasion increases with each passing day (McCarthy and Gan, 2022). Total commitment to Taiwan's defense may be the only threat powerful enough to make China back down (Odell et al., 2022).

Analysis of Recent Events

Recent events have provided crucial insight into the possible actions and outcomes that the United States could take. Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan during her tour of Asia on August 2nd was a significant shift in the region's dynamics. Pelosi is the highest-ranking United States official to visit the island in 25 years, and her visit sparked an immediate backlash from China (Ifll). Upon her arrival in Taipei, Taiwan's Capital, the Chinese government immediately announced the most extensive military drills surrounding the island since the end of the Chinese Civil War. The drills simulated a blockade surrounding the island, emphasizing areas surrounding Taiwan's major ports and military bases (Hernandez, 2022). Additionally, the Chinese People's Liberation Army has announced plans to make drills of this sort a regular occurrence in the region (Buckley et al., 2022). This has sparked fears of war due to miscalculations or China using exercises to disguise a military buildup for an actual invasion.

However, upon deeper inspection, it becomes clear that China showed restraint in its response to Pelosi's visit. While the military drills simulated a blockade of the island, they intentionally maintained the traffic flow to and from Taiwan's ports. Additionally, other forms of retaliation from China, such as import and export bans, targeted specific industries and had little effect on Taiwan's overall economy (Ives and Wang, 2022). Notably, China refrained from targeting industries that would negatively impact the Chinese economy, such as Taiwan's semiconductor industry. This supports the idea that while China heavily values its control over Taiwan, its economic interests are more important to the government. As a result, China's overall reaction to Pelosi's visit may be characterized as a purely symbolic effort with the hopes of getting the United States to back down.

II. Conclusion

Ultimately, the best option forward is for the United States to maintain the general premise of strategic ambiguity while altering specific policies. The U.S. should increase its support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations and form agreements with allies to impose economic damages on China in the event of an invasion. Improving Taiwan's current position on the world stage would quell calls for Taiwanese independence and decrease the chances of war. Furthermore, China's restraint in its response to Pelosi's visit shows that China continues to value its economic interests above capturing the island. As a result, an agreement among allies to shut down economic activity with the PRC in the event of war would likely prove to be an effective deterrent to Chinese aggression. Additionally, fully committing to Taiwan's defense may trigger the Anti-Secession law, pressuring the government into war. As a result, the best way to support the Taiwanese people is to refrain from fully supporting us.

References

- Bandow, Doug. (2021). It's Time to End Strategic Ambiguity. Cato.com, CATO Institute, 16 Dec., www.cato.org/commentary/its-time-end-strategic-ambiguity.
- Buckley, Chris, et al. (2022). After China's Military Spectacle, Options Narrow for Winning over Taiwan. The New York Times, 7 Aug., www.nytimes.com/2022/08/07/world/asia/china-taiwan-military-unification.html.
- Clarke, Michael, & Matthew Sussex. (2021). Why Strategic Ambiguity Trumps Strategic Clarity on Taiwan. Rusi.org, 21 Nov., rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-strategic-ambiguity-trumps-strategic-clarity-taiwan.
- Cody, Edward. (2005). China Sends Warning to Taiwan with Anti-Secession Law. Washington Post, 8 Mar., www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2005/03/08/china-sends-warning-to-taiwan-with-anti-secession-law/5dcdfae8-4523-4350-9d45-77a85f6b240f/. Accessed 8 Dec. 2020.
- Devine, Peter. (2022). Strategic Ambiguity Isn't Working to Deter China on Taiwan – It Will Invade Anyway. It's Time to Commit. Just Security, 1 Sept., www.justsecurity.org/82912/strategic-ambiguity-isnt-working-to-deter-china-on-taiwan-it-will-invade-anyway-its-time-to-commit/.
- Green, Michael. (2017). What Is the U.S. One China Policy, and Why Does It Matter? Csis.org, 13 Jan., www.csis.org/analysis/what-us-one-china-policy-and-why-does-it-matter.
- Hernandez, Marco. (2022). Maps: Tracking Tensions between China and Taiwan. The New York Times, 7 Aug., www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/world/asia/taiwan-china-maps.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article.
- Hickey, Dennis V. (2013). U.S. Policy toward Taiwan: Time for Change? Asian Affairs: An American Review, vol. 40, no. 4, Oct., pp. 175–198, 10.1080/00927678.2013.847747. Accessed 10 Jan. 2022.
- Iffl, James. (2022). Following Nancy Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan, What Happens Next? Boston University, 3 Aug., www.bu.edu/articles/2022/nancy-pelosi-visits-taiwan/.
- Ives, Mike, & Zixu Wang. (2022). Mostly Bluster: Why China Went Easy on Taiwan's Economy.

- The New York Times, 12 Aug., www.nytimes.com/2022/08/12/business/china-taiwan-economy.html.
- Lampton, David. (2010). Experts' Analyses - Why the Taiwan Issue Is so Dangerous | Dangerous Straits | FRONTLINE|PBS.Pbs.org
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/china/experts/taiwan.html.
- Mastro, Oriana Skylar. (2021). The Taiwan Temptation. | Wwww.foreignaffairs.com, 3 June www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-03/china-taiwan-war-temptation.
- McCarthy, Simone, & Nectar Gan. (2022). China's Xi Is More Powerful than Ever. What Does It Mean for the World? CNN, 24 Oct. , www.cnn.com/2022/10/24/china/china-party-congress-consequences-world-intl-hnk/index.html. Accessed 16 Nov. 2022.
- Odell, Rachel Esplin, et al. (2022). Strait of Emergency? www.foreignaffairs.com, 21 Apr. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-08-09/strait-emergency.
- Porter, Patrick, & Michael Mazarr. (2021). Countering China's Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep33506. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.
- Stavridis, James. (2020). What Would Happen If the US Recognized Taiwan? Nikkei Asia, 25 Sept., asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/What-would-happen-if-the-US-recognized-Taiwan.
- Zablocki, Clement J. (1979). H.R.2479 - Taiwan Relations Act. 10 Apr., www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479#:~:text=Taiwan%20Relations%20Act%20%2D%20%20Declares%20it. Accessed 2022.