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***RESEARCH NOTE***

# U.S Strategies in Maintaining Peace across the Taiwan Strait

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*The U.S. strategy of "creative ambiguity" regarding the American response to potential military conflict between the PRC and Taiwan has helped to maintain peace across the Taiwan Strait for many years. This strategy is associated with Washington's traditional policy of "dual deterrence and dual reassurance," designed to prevent any unilateral change in the status quo that might be initiated by Taipei's movement toward de jure independence or a military attack on the island by Beijing. Taiwan's progress toward political democratization since the mid-1980s, however, has created a Taiwanese identity on the island and increased the likelihood of a war between the PRC and Taiwan. As political tension across the Taiwan Strait has heightened in recent years, calls are growing in U.S. academic and policy circles for a subtle shift from strategic ambiguity toward strategic "double clarity," a feature of which would be a conditional commitment to Taiwan's security. However, this policy option has not yet been accepted by policymakers in the United States.*

**KEYWORDS: strategic ambiguity; strategic clarity; China's unification; Taiwanese independence; Taiwan's security.**

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A thorny issue for policymakers and experts in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and the United States is how to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. A related subject is Washington's role in maintaining the status quo and its policy orientation. Several books published recently have shed fresh light on U.S. policies and strategies in managing the Taiwan Strait crisis.

*In Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations*, Alan Romberg analyzes the Taiwan issue from the macro perspective of U.S.-China relations.[1] According to Romberg, the United States neither challenges nor endorses Beijing's claim to sovereignty over Taiwan—there is only one China and Taiwan is part of it. The United States is not concerned about the ultimate shape of cross-Strait relations, as long as the process determining Taiwan's future is peaceful and the solution is agreed upon by people on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Romberg warns that, inattentive to the history and nuances of the normalization of U.S.-China relations, American leaders have unintentionally generated a crisis—and could do so again. Washington, therefore, must carefully handle its unofficial relations with Taiwan, including U.S. arms sales to the island.

Nancy Tucker contends in *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis* that Washington should maintain its traditional policy of strategic ambiguity toward any possible crisis involving the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Her main argument is that no one can predict all possible contingencies, and that by attempting to define what the United States will do under specific circumstances, policymakers will encourage both sides to probe the American position and limit U.S. options in a complex crisis. Since American domestic politics, as much as circumstances in the Strait, will determine Washington's reaction to a future crisis, no president will want to be constrained by decisions made in the past. Similarly, the U.S.

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[1]Alan D. Romberg, *Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003), 225, 231.

military establishment will want to be free to utilize force in the national interest during a possible war.[2] Tucker maintains that the United States should take an open position toward the scenario of China's reunification—Washington should have no objection if both sides of the Strait choose peaceful unification.[3]

In *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait*, Richard Bush recognizes that a political dispute between the PRC and Taiwan could escalate into war, but this worst-case scenario is avoidable if the political knot can be untied. According to Bush, the fundamental problem is that political leaders in Beijing and Taipei, due to domestic constraints, mistrust each other's motives and lack the political will to strike a deal.[4] Bush argues that Washington has eschewed any formal role as mediator, even though Beijing and Taipei have different expectations of Washington. However, the United States may act as intellectual facilitator between the two sides and interpret the views of one side to the other, in order to reduce their misperception of each other. He proposes that the two sides accept some type of confederation that would satisfy the minimum objectives of each side—Beijing would get a form of unification and Taiwan would preserve its claim that its government retains sovereignty within a national union.[5]

One common line running through the literature above is that the United States is not concerned about the ultimate shape of cross-Strait relations, as long as it is achieved peacefully. From the perspective of geopolitics, Taiwan's *peaceful* separation from mainland China might maximize U.S. national interests. However, due to Beijing's strong opposition to Taiwan independence, this scenario is unlikely to happen. The best choice for the United States, therefore, seems to be maintenance of the

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[2]Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 205-7.

[3]Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "If Taiwan Chooses Unification, Should the United States Care?" *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 15-28.

[4]Richard Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), chap. 1.

[5]Ibid., chap. 10.

status quo—an ambivalent and intermediate point between unification and independence. On the one hand, Washington adheres to the one-China policy and denies that Taiwan is a sovereign state, as reflected in President Bill Clinton's "three no's" statement during his 1998 trip to China and former Secretary of State Colin Powell's remark that "Taiwan is not independent" during his October 2004 trip to Beijing.[6] On the other hand, it implicitly challenges "PRC claims to sovereignty and reveal[s] the limits on the degree to which the United States can subscribe to those claims."[7] This is displayed by Washington's opposition to any PRC military attack on Taiwan and its insistence that the island's future should be resolved peacefully and accepted by the Taiwanese people. Quite apart from Washington's ambiguous definition of the status quo, it is also interpreted differently by the PRC and Taiwan, depending on whether China *is* one country or whether Taiwan *is* already an independent sovereign state. Given this political dispute between the two sides regarding the definition of the status quo, it is difficult to imagine that they could reach an interim peace agreement before finally deciding Taiwan's future. The status quo, therefore, is unstable by nature. However, it is regarded as a feasible policy option by the United States.

The next choice is to accept China's peaceful unification. From a geopolitical perspective, it is difficult to imagine that Washington is really happy to see the two sides moving toward peaceful unification. A unified China might have implications for current Washington-Taipei political, economic, and military relations, and result in the United States being marginalized in relation to the Taiwan issue. However, if the status quo is unsustainable, this option might be better than a military conflict across the Taiwan Strait which would force the United States to make a reluctant

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[6]The "three no's" refers to the U.S. policy that states: "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 of any organization for which statehood is a requirement." For Colin Powell's remarks, see Anthony Yuen, "Interview with Secretary of State Colin L. Powell," Beijing, October 25, 2004, http://usinfo.state.gov/p/eap/Archive/2004/Oct/-277540.htm (accessed November 15, 2004).

[7]Romberg, *Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice*, 7.

choice between standing by and stepping in. As Richard Bush proposed above, some type of confederation would accommodate Beijing's pursuit of unification and Taiwan's claim to independent sovereignty within a national union. This view accords with Tucker's argument that the United States has no reason to block China's unification process if it is acceptable to both sides of the Taiwan Strait. In the words of Thomas Christensen, if Taiwan wanted to accommodate the mainland, Washington could do little to prevent it.[8]

The worst-case scenario for the United States is to entangle itself in a war caused by Taipei's movement toward de jure independence or Beijing's determination to unify China by force. A war between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait is not in Washington's interest as it would then face a dilemma in decision-making. Some neo-conservatives in the United States may believe that Washington should do its best to protect a democratic Taiwan and let Taiwanese freely decide their future, including a formal declaration of independence if that is what they want. Other hard-liners on the right may want to play the "Taiwan card" to provoke a war across the Strait and therefore stop the momentum of China's "peaceful rise." However, these extreme viewpoints do not represent the mainstream American voice. Given the significantly divided opinions among politicians and the public in the United States regarding whether the United States should withdraw from Iraq soon, it is difficult to imagine that the United States as a whole is willing to fight another war with the PRC simply for the sake of Taiwan independence.

## The Advantages and Disadvantages of Strategic Ambiguity

In an effort to maintain peace across the Taiwan Strait, the United States long ago adopted a strategy of "creative ambiguity" regarding its

[8]Thomas Christensen, "The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Deterring a Taiwan Conflict," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 7-21 at 16.

**Table 1**
**Washington's Possible Responses to a War between the PRC and Taiwan under Different Circumstances**

| | A war provoked by Beijing | A war provoked by Taipei |
|---|---|---|
| **Interference** | More likely | Less likely |
| **Hands-off** | Less likely | More likely |

likely response to any military conflict between the PRC and Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) implies that "were the PRC to attempt to settle the Taiwan question by force," the United States would react accordingly, even though the Act does not "legally mandate that the United States come to the rescue of Taiwan if it is attacked."[9] President George W. Bush once declared that he saw the United States as having a clear obligation to defend Taiwan and that the United States was willing "to do whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself" under Beijing's military attack.[10] However, whether and to what degree the United States would get involved in a military conflict provoked by *Beijing's* attempt to unify China by force is unclear. At the other end of the spectrum, even if a Strait war was provoked by *Taiwan's* ambition for formal independence, one cannot exclude the possibility that the United States might still provide military support to Taiwan. Washington's possible responses—interference or hands-off—to a war provoked by either side of the Taiwan Strait are illustrated in table 1.

Washington's ambiguous strategy toward a possible war across the Taiwan Strait is associated with the traditional U.S. policy of "dual deterrence and dual reassurance." According to Kenneth Lieberthal, this policy has sent different signals to Beijing and Taipei:

[9]Luncheon address by U.S. Senator Craig Thomas at a Woodrow Wilson Center conference on "U.S.-China Relations since the End of the Cold War," May 9, 2000. See Gang Lin, ed., *U.S.-China Relations since the End of the Cold War*, Asia Program Special Report (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, August 2000), 9.

[10]Brian Knowlton, "Analysts See Comments as a Toughening of American Position," *International Herald Tribune*, April 25, 2001.

> [It] has signaled that Beijing cannot count on the United States' standing by if China attacks Taiwan and has signaled to Taiwan that it cannot count on U.S. forces to defend it regardless of the circumstances that precipitate the fighting. Washington has also assured Beijing that it will not change its one-China policy unilaterally and assured Taiwan that it will not sell out the island's interests.[11]

The "dual deterrence and dual reassurance" policy was designed to prevent any unilateral change of the status quo initiated by Beijing or Taipei. The signals of deterrence sent to the two sides, however, were contradictory.

The deterring message for Beijing was that it has to be prepared to fight the United States in a Strait war under any circumstances. As Condoleezza Rice put it during President Bush's 2000 campaign, the United States should deter any trouble across the Taiwan Strait and make it inconceivable for China to use force.[12] Some American policymakers and analysts suggested that Beijing should refrain from rushing into action if Taipei were to make a formal declaration of independence, but should instead rely on Washington to push Taipei back into the "one-China" box. To save its own face, Kenneth Lieberthal has suggested, the PRC should accept a definition of Taiwanese independence according to international law. That is, as long as "every single major country in the world not only recognizes Beijing as China's legitimate government but also shares the view ... that 'Taiwan is not independent'," Beijing does not need to take military action against independence activities on Taiwan.[13]

The deterring message for Taipei is that it should not count on the United States to defend Taiwan, not to mention go to war with the PRC for the sake of Taiwan's independence. Washington has made it clear to Taipei that it is Taipei's responsibility to defend the island. Taipei's long delay in purchasing U.S. weapons, which were offered by President Bush as early as spring 2001, has made at least some Americans wonder whether Taiwan

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[11]Kenneth Lieberthal, "Preventing a War over Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 53-63 at 55.

[12]Condoleeza Rice, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January/February 2000), http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20000101faessay5-p10/; and condoleezza-rice/campaign-2000-promoting-the-national-interest.html (accessed May 20, 2007).

[13]Lieberthal, "Preventing a War over Taiwan." 59.

is really serious about its own security. Moreover, Taipei's efforts at promoting legal independence over the years have increased Washington's concerns about being dragged into a war with the PRC.

The U.S. tactic of "strategic ambiguity" regarding Washington's obligation to come to the defense of Taiwan has helped to maintain the status quo across the Taiwan Strait for some years. The rationale for Washington sending contradictory messages to the two sides is an assumption that war planners on both sides have to prepare for the worst-case scenario and take Washington's messages for them seriously.[14] As long as Beijing takes the likelihood of U.S. military intervention in a Strait conflict seriously, and Taipei does not expect Washington to protect Taiwanese independence, the status quo can be maintained. However, the conflicting messages Washington sends privately to Beijing and Taipei, respectively, may create misperceptions of the American position among people on the two sides. On the one hand, Beijing may be misled by Washington's message for Taipei that it must rely on its own efforts to defend the island, and may thus underestimate the possibility of an American military intervention in a future war between the PRC and Taiwan. On the other hand, Taipei may be too encouraged by Washington's message to Beijing that the United States will intervene in a Strait war under *any* circumstances, and therefore take rash actions to promote Taiwan's independence.

In addition to the island's misperception that Washington will defend it against the PRC's military action under any circumstances, any assertion of Taiwan's independent sovereignty or underestimation of the danger from across the Strait is associated with domestic factors in Taiwan. Taiwan's progress toward political democratization since the mid-1980s has created a growing Taiwanese identity on the island. This provided impetus for Taiwan's ambitious former president, Lee Teng-hui (**李登輝**), to break out of the diplomatic blockade erected by the PRC and expand Taiwan's international space. Lee then bluntly announced his "two-state theory" (**兩國論**), while his successor Chen Shui-bian (**陳水扁**) has made efforts to

[14]Author's interview with Richard Bush, August 25, 2005, Washington, D.C.

make Taiwan into a normal state through a new constitution and public referenda, and by abolishing the National Unification Council (**國家統一委員會**) and the Guidelines for National Unification (**國家統一綱領**). To be sure, some nuance does exist between the consciousness of Taiwanese national identity and the desire for Taiwan independence. As Shelley Rigger observes, a Taiwanese cultural identity does not equate to support for independence, and neither are assertions of Taiwan's statehood (political identity or citizenship) necessarily indicative of a desire for formal separation from the mainland.[15] However, a growing Taiwanese national identity on the island does lead to a greater demand for maintaining Taiwan's independent sovereignty and less inclination for China's reunification. It is mainly because of Beijing's opposition to Taiwan's de jure independence that the awareness of Taiwanese national identity has yet to fully transform itself into greater support for independence. From the Chinese perspective, a formal declaration of Taiwan's independence and insistence on independent sovereignty are basically two sides of the same coin.

Faced with the growing sense of Taiwanese identity on the island and the swift change of regime, Beijing has sometimes doubted the feasibility of peaceful unification. Throughout the 1980s, military means were considered as a way of forcing Taipei into talks with Beijing on China's reunification.[16] In March 1990, Beijing made it clear that it would only resort to military means in two circumstances: to prevent Taiwan's independence and to oppose any foreign armed intervention in Taiwan.[17] Since the beginning of 2000, Beijing has shifted back to its old position in the 1980s

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[15]Shelley Rigger, "Disaggregating the Concept of National Identity," in *The Evolution of a Taiwanese National Identity*, Asia Program Special Report #114 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, August 2003), 17-21.

[16]For example, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Hu Yaobang (**胡耀邦**) said on May 10, 1985, that the PRC could not renounce the use of force against Taiwan, as this would make Taipei even more unwilling to hold peace talks with the mainland. See Lu Keng (**陸鏗**), *An Interview with Hu Yaobang* (New York: Sino Daily Express, 1985), 12-13.

[17]Remarks made by CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin (**江澤民**) when he was interviewed by a delegation from the Association for China's Reunification (**統聯**). See *Renmin ribao* (**人民日報**, People's Daily), March 12, 1990.

from time to time. In the 2000 White Paper on the Taiwan issue, Beijing stated that if Taipei refused talks on unification indefinitely, the PRC would resort to tough measures, including military means, against Taiwan. This position was restated in a statement of May 17, 2004, which provided only two options—either war or peace—for Taipei to choose from. The PRC's Anti-secession Law, published in March 2005, maintains that Beijing will employ non-peaceful means to resolve the Taiwan issue if all favorable conditions for peaceful unification have disappeared. If Beijing uses military means to settle the Taiwan issue or Taipei continues to pursue de jure independence and eventually crosses Beijing's red lines, Washington will have to make an unpleasant choice between fighting Beijing and abandoning Taipei.

In analyzing the security dilemma faced by the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, Richard Bush observes that it is Taipei's potential to take political action to gain legal independence that has created insecurity in Beijing and prompted the latter to make military preparations, which in turn have increased Taipei's insecurity.[18] Thomas Christensen notes that because the Taiwan issue is not primarily about territorial conquest, but about coercion and political identity, the thresholds of credible deterrent capabilities are very high, as are the obstacles to credible reassurance. As he says, "PRC weapons systems designed to deter Taiwan's independence can also appear capable of compelling Taiwan to agree to unification against Taipei's will." Meanwhile, "U.S. and Taiwanese efforts to deter such forced unification can easily appear to Beijing as efforts to create protective conditions for Taiwan's independence."[19] Ironically, while Taipei is politically on the offensive and militarily defensive, Beijing is politically defensive and militarily on the offensive. Faced with such a security dilemma, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait consider each other as revisionist and compete for U.S. sympathy and support in the complicated debate over what is, or what should be, the status quo.

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[18]See Bush, *Untying the Knot*, chap. 5.

[19]Christensen, "The Contemporary Security Dilemma," 13.

## Moving toward Strategic Clarity?

The growing danger across the Taiwan Strait has raised the issue as to whether Washington should clarify its specific response to a future war between the two sides. Is it time for the United States to consider a flat-out statement that Washington will *not* defend Taiwan militarily if Taiwan formally declares independence? The unpredictability of U.S. reaction toward a possible war in the Taiwan Strait, while giving Washington a freer hand in crisis management, may not work as well as strategic clarity in preventing the outbreak of such a war. The more likely it is that a military conflict will occur between the mainland and Taiwan and that it will involve the United States, the more vital it is that Washington should prevent misperceptions of its possible reactions by either side.

Since the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis Washington has gradually inclined toward a new strategy of conditional commitment to Taiwan's security to discourage Beijing from taking military action on unification and Taipei from moving toward de jure independence. As the former chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), David Dean, mentioned in the mid-1990s, if Taipei's movement toward independence were to result in a war across the Taiwan Strait, Taipei should not expect Washington to come to the island's defense, as in those circumstances Taipei would have caused the trouble itself.[20] Although Washington has strengthened its military exchange and cooperation with Taiwan over the years, with the aim of deterring Beijing from making a unilateral attempt to unify Taiwan by force, it continues to send political signals to Taipei that it opposes any unilateral change of the status quo. In other words, Washington's deterrence against Beijing's military actions is aimed at assuring Taiwan that the United States will not sell out the island. Meanwhile, Washington's repeated statements that it does not support (and even opposes) Taiwan independence have been widely interpreted as a way of

[20]Author's interview with David Dean during an international symposium on Taiwan and the World, sponsored by Missouri State University, Springfield, Missouri, April 1-2, 2006.

assuring Beijing that the United States will adhere to the one-China policy. While Beijing prefers the word "oppose" to "not support," these different wordings carry the same message for Taipei that it should not expect Washington to fight Beijing on behalf of Taiwan independence. The difference between the two terms, according to Banning Garrett, director of the Asia Program at the Atlantic Council, is that the term "oppose" suggests that the United States would force Taipei to give up independence should the island choose to cross the red line in the future.[21]

Consequently, President Bill Clinton put great pressure on Taipei when Lee Teng-hui described cross-Strait relations as "special state-to-state ties" in 1999. President George W. Bush, who was once considered by Taipei to be the most supportive U.S. president to the island, has personally put even greater emphasis on keeping President Chen Shui-bian under control because he realizes the importance of maintaining a peaceful status quo in the Strait. During his Evian summit with President Hu Jintao (**胡錦濤**) of China in June 2003, Bush even used the word "oppose," rather than "not support," when speaking of the likelihood of a Taiwanese unilateral declaration of independence.[22] On October 14, 2003, in response to a media reporter's question about Chen Shui-bian's provocative claim that Taiwan and China are separate countries on either side of the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, said: "It is our very strong belief that nobody, nobody should try unilaterally to change the status quo here."[23] This was followed by President Bush's December 2003 remarks that Washington opposed any unilateral change of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait when he met PRC Premier Wen Jiabao

[21]Banning Garrett's remarks at an international conference on Building Cross-Strait Strategic Understanding, sponsored by the Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., March 24-26, 2006.

[22]According to the Chinese side's record of this meeting, Bush told Hu that the U.S. government upholds the one-China policy, observing the three U.S.-China joint communiqués and opposing Taiwan's independence. Bush said the United States will not change that policy. *Chinese Embassy Newsletter*, November 4, 2003.

[23]Susan Lawrence, "United States and Taiwan: Diplomatic But Triumphal Progress," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 13, 2003.

(溫家寶).[24] The difference between "not supporting" and "opposing" Taiwanese independence was made evident by Secretary of State Colin Powell when he remarked: "We do not support Taiwan's independence, and we oppose moves by either side to unilaterally change the status quo."[25] On October 26, 2004, Powell made himself clearer in an interview with Hong Kong's Phoenix TV, saying that "Taiwan is not independent" and "it does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation."[26] On December 10, 2004, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage even described Taiwan as a "land mine" that could damage relations between China and the United States. When asked by PBS interviewer Charlie Rose if the United States would defend Taiwan, Armitage replied that Washington has "a requirement with the Taiwan Relations Act to keep sufficient force in the Pacific to be able to deter attack," and it is "not required to defend" the island.[27] In other words, American commitment to Taiwan's security is not a blank check that can be cashed by Taipei under any circumstances.

While Washington-Taipei military ties have reached a peak over the past two decades, Washington has suggested to Taipei from time to time that its commitment to Taiwan's security is conditional—if Beijing unilaterally uses military force to unify Taiwan, Washington will help Taiwan defend itself; but if the war is provoked by Taipei formally declaring itself independent, Washington will take a different policy. This position was revealed clearly when President Bush was interviewed by Neil Cavuto of Fox News on June 8, 2005. When asked whether the United States still stands by an agreement to defend Taiwan if it was ever invaded, President

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[24]Edwin Chen, "Talks Yield a U.S. Warning to Taiwan and Pledge by China to Ease Trade Gap," *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 2003.

[25]*Taipei Times*, March 5, 2004.

[26]*China Daily*, October 27, 2004. Interestingly, Powell's blunt remarks were described by a December 27 editorial in the English-language *Taipei Times* as "a falling off" and the "sorry wreck of a once principled man." The U.S. State Department immediately registered a complaint about this in a direct phone call from Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Randall Shriver to Charles Snyder, the newspaper's reporter in Washington, D.C. See *Zhongguo shibao* (**中國時報**, China Times) (Taipei), January 9, 2005.

[27]Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough, "No Policy Shift," *TheGertzFile*, www.gertzfile.com/gertzfile/ring123104/html, accessed on July 20, 2006.

Bush answered:

> Yes, we do. It's called the Taiwan Relations Act. The policy of the U.S. government is this: We're for a One China policy based upon what they call the Three Communiqués, and that we adhere to the Taiwan Relations Act, which means this: Neither side will unilaterally change the status quo. In other words, neither side will make a decision that steps outside the bounds of that statement I just made to you. If China were to invade unilaterally, we would rise up in the spirit of the Taiwan Relations Act. If Taiwan were to declare independence unilaterally, it would be a unilateral decision that would then change the U.S. equation.[28]

As far as Bush was concerned, if Beijing unilaterally attacked Taiwan, the United States would "rise up"; but if Taiwan unilaterally announced independence, the U.S. equation balancing the two sides of the Strait would be changed. The hidden message here is that the United States will adopt different policies (to "rise up" or not) under different circumstances. This position is a quiet departure from the strategy of ambiguity that accommodates four scenarios, though with different degrees of likelihood, in the event of a war provoked by either side of the Taiwan Strait. As Richard Bush observed in August 2005, Washington has shifted its policy from strategic ambiguity and double deterrence to strategic clarity and operational ambiguity. According to Richard Bush, while Washington has made it clear that its commitment to Taiwan's security is conditional and the United States will not help Taiwan defend itself should the island declare de jure independence, it is still ambiguous about the exact definition of Taiwan independence.[29]

This policy option of maintaining a conditional commitment to Taiwan's security, or strategic "double clarity," is derived from Washington's commitment to the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue and its one-China policy.[30] The United States has long regarded the peaceful resolution

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[28]Fox News, "Transcript: President Bush on 'Your World'," Wednesday, June 8, 2005, http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,158960,00.html (accessed June 10, 2005).

[29]Author's interview with Richard Bush, August 25, 2005, Washington, D.C.

[30]This author would like to thank one anonymous reviewer for his or her suggestion that I should use the term "double clarity" instead of "strategic clarity," which would mean that the United States would provide security for Taiwan under any circumstances.

of the Taiwan issue as a basic principle, and has taken a seemingly neutral position toward the two possible outcomes—the eventual reunification of China or Taiwan's formal separation from the mainland. However, neither of these two options is likely in the foreseeable future. Most Taiwanese are not ready to accept peaceful unification, just as most Chinese on the mainland strongly oppose Taiwan's formal separation from the PRC. By subjecting the U.S. one-China *policy* to the *principle* of peaceful resolution, Washington indicates that Taiwan's future should be determined by people on *both* sides of the Taiwan Strait. On the one hand, Washington does not regard the Taiwan issue as purely China's domestic affair. On the other hand, even if most Taiwanese were to choose legal independence from the mainland, the United States would not be expected to endorse such a movement and fight the PRC. According to U.S. Senator John Warner, a former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the United States might not be willing to aid Taiwan in repelling a Chinese invasion or other hostile military act, as called for in the Taiwan Relations Act, if Taiwan was seen as provoking Beijing. Warner's reason is quite straightforward: the United States "is heavily engaged militarily worldwide," and does not need "another problem in that region."[31] In other words, the idea of "double clarity" is informed by a realistic calculation of U.S. interests in the Taiwan Strait—rather than by a moral judgment.

As political tension across the Taiwan Strait has increased in recent years, there has been a growing voice within U.S. policy and academic circles calling for a shift from strategic ambiguity and double deterrence to strategic "double clarity" and a "conditional commitment" to Taiwan's security. As Thomas Christensen pointed out in 2002, "a clear but conditional commitment to Taiwan's security might best serve U.S. interests," and the United States "will not fight for Taiwan if it chooses to defy U.S. interests by declaring independence." According to Christensen, Washington should convince the PRC leaders that "the independence of Taiwan is incompatible with the selfish security interests of the United States" by

[31]Charles Snyder, "U.S. Congressman Warns Taipei Not to 'Play TRA'," *Taipei Times*, April 26, 2007.

adopting a more positive argument that "the United States has long-term security and moral interests in the political liberalization of the mainland and that Taiwan's status as a Chinese democracy—holding out the prospect of unification with the mainland under the right set of conditions—can be a powerful force for liberalization on the mainland."[32] Harry Harding offers another justification for the policy option of conditional commitment to Taiwan's security. According to him, no life insurance company would pay out for anybody who committed suicide, especially if the policyholder only paid a minimum premium; likewise, Taipei's push for de jure independence combined with its reluctance to purchase sufficient U.S. arms to defend itself is no way of guaranteeing an unconditional U.S. commitment to the island's security.[33]

Conditional commitment to Taiwan's security, however, has not developed into a firm policy of the United States. At least, U.S. government officials are reluctant to admit that Washington's commitment to Taiwan's security is conditional, particularly when they are pressed to predict an American response to military action by Beijing against a declaration of de jure independence by Taiwan.[34] As Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick testified to Congress on May 10, 2006, the United States does not support Taiwanese independence, because it would result in a war across the Taiwan Strait and might entail U.S. military casualties.[35] One cannot help but wonder whether the United States would dispatch a military force to the island if a war were to be provoked by a declaration of independence. It would be a non-issue from the perspective of conditional commitment to Taiwan's security. Zoellick's remarks display Washington's ambiguous attitude toward a possible war between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. According to Richard Bush's interpretation, Zoellick's remarks reflect Washington's previous strategy of "double deterrence" that did not exclude

[32]Christensen, "The Contemporary Security Dilemma," 19-20.

[33]Author's interview with Harry Harding, August 27, 2006, Washington, D.C.

[34]Author's interview with an official of the U.S. Department of State, March 28, 2006.

[35]Robert B. Zoellick, "China's Resurgence" (Testimony at the House International Relations Committee, May 10, 2006), http://www.fnsg.com/transcript.html (accessed May 15, 2006).

the possibility of U.S. involvement in a war provoked by Taiwan.[36] Harry Harding believes that Zoellick's remarks suggest that the United States has not changed its policy from strategic ambiguity to conditional commitment to Taiwan's security, an ideal state yet to be realized.[37] As a senior U.S. congressional staff member pointed out, Washington should keep its possible response to a Strait war ambiguous until the war materializes, and the utility of strategic ambiguity is that it can effectively deter a Chinese military attack on Taiwan.[38] Another senior official in the State Department has explained that Washington would not support a unilateral declaration of independence by Taipei and would make efforts to maintain the status quo; however, whether Washington would send its military to Taiwan in the event of a war provoked by Taipei is contingent on the U.S. president's discretionary judgment.[39]

Many policy analysts and scholars still favor the policy of strategic ambiguity and double deterrence. The disadvantage of strategic "double clarity," according to them, is that Washington's unambiguous opposition to Taiwan independence may send a dangerous message to Beijing that the United States might acquiesce in a limited use of force by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)—for example, the seizure of an offshore island, a temporary limited blockade, or a long-range missile attack on a military target in Taiwan—to deter independence. Because of this concern, Washington is unwilling to make a clear transition from strategic ambiguity to strategic "double clarity." According to Michael Swaine, if Taiwan declares de jure independence, Beijing should be patient and wait for the United States to persuade Taipei to retreat into the one-China box; even if Washington fails to achieve this goal, Beijing should be prepared to fight the United States before resorting to military force against Taiwan.

While Beijing is unhappy with U.S.-Taiwan military and political connections, it may consider the U.S. strategy of "double clarity" as the

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[36]Author's interview with Richard Bush, August 29, 2006, Washington, D.C.

[37]Author's interview with Harry Harding, August 27, 2006, Washington, D.C.

[38]Author's interview with Peter Yeo, August 29, 2006, Washington, D.C.

[39]Author's interview, August 29, 2006, Washington, D.C.

second-worst option, which might work better than "strategic ambiguity" in deterring Taipei's unilateral change of the status quo. Preoccupied with China's economic and social development and frustrated by Taipei's continuing political provocation, Beijing might find its best strategy is to co-manage the Taiwan issue with the United States. The PRC understands well that the United States may be unhappy to see China's reunification, but it would be even unhappier if it had to fight China. Realizing the infeasibility of immediate reunification, Beijing has considered maintenance of the status quo as its top priority in recent years. As long as Taipei does not declare legal independence and exclude unification as a future option, Beijing has the patience to wait.

Taipei's response to Washington's policy of strategic clarity is ambivalent. Taipei hopes the United States will do whatever is necessary to help defend Taiwan against a rising China without any preconditions. U.S. conditional commitment to Taiwan's security does not sound good enough for Taipei. For the ruling party and others who strive for Taiwan independence, the U.S. policy of conditional commitment to Taiwan's security is even more discouraging than strategic ambiguity, as the latter does not totally exclude the possibility of the United States getting involved in a war with the PRC provoked by a declaration of legal independence. Yet, "conditional commitment" may be welcomed by Taiwan's opposition parties who do not want to endorse the ruling party's risky strategy of seeking independence and provoking Beijing. For most Taiwanese, this policy can give them the assurance that the United States will support maintenance of the status quo, as strategic ambiguity does not necessarily guarantee Washington's interference in a war resulting from Beijing's eagerness to take Taiwan back.

## Conclusion

To preserve peace across the Taiwan Strait, the United States has for many years maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity. As long as Beijing has taken the likelihood of U.S. military involvement in a Strait conflict

seriously, and Taipei has not expected Washington to defend Taiwan in the event of a declaration of independence, the status quo in the Taiwan Strait has been maintained. Taiwan's progress toward political democratization since the mid-1980s, however, has created a Taiwanese identity on the island and increased the likelihood of a war between the PRC and Taiwan. As political tension across the Taiwan Strait has heightened in recent years, calls have increased in U.S. academic and policy circles for a subtle shift away from strategic ambiguity toward strategic "double clarity," a feature of which would be conditional commitment to Taiwan's security. This policy option, however, has not yet been accepted by policymakers in the United States.

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