

*The End of Washington's Strategic Ambiguity? The Debate over U.S. Policy toward Taiwan**

Charles Chong-Han Wu

Abstract

The Trump administration has shown a strong inclination to play the “Taiwan card” and strengthen relations with Taipei in lieu of Washington’s traditional strategic ambiguity. As the U.S.-China trade competition escalated after 2018, the contending bilateral relations between Beijing and Washington created an opportunity for the administration of Tsai Ing-wen to adopt a more provocative strategy toward Beijing. In order to prevent conflict resulting from Taiwan’s new approach, more fundamental discussions on the definitions and dynamism of why the United States should adjust this traditional security policy are needed, this research suggests, in order to address the question of whether the United States should change to strategic clarity across the Taiwan Strait or adhere to its traditional strategic ambiguity. Moreover, this study also covers relevant literature on strategic ambiguity, investigating the changing patterns of decision making in U.S. foreign policy with regard to cross-Strait relations and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Charles Chong-Han Wu is Associate Professor in the Department of Diplomacy, National Chengchi University.

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Scholars have shown that the strategic ambiguity resulting from the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and three U.S.-China communiqués have served as the most fundamental and most important guiding principle of U.S. policy toward the Taiwan Strait.¹ This study critically evaluates several key components of the strategic ambiguity that has underpinned the post-1979 U.S. cross-Strait policy. On one hand, the United States signaled the possibility that Washington would use military force to protect Taiwan in the event of a mainland Chinese attack. On the other, the United States also assured the People's Republic of China (PRC) that it would not endorse any *de jure* independence for Taiwan that would permanently separate it from the Chinese nation. The U.S. government insisted that "all cross-Strait issues must be resolved peacefully by the Chinese themselves" in the announcement of the Shanghai Communique of 1972.² In fact, the U.S. government has embraced strategic ambiguity since the late 1970s, and the approach was a well-organized diplomatic strategy that aimed to defend Taiwan's security, democracy, and autonomy by selling military weapons to Taiwan while also establishing a framework for U.S.-China relations.

Strategic ambiguity, in a sense, is what bought time for Taiwan to make itself unignorable, and more ambiguity is what will buy it the time to remain itself an independent state while allowing events in China to run their course. Since U.S. relations with China have shown an increasingly vicious cycle, which is bound to have hegemonic power rivalry and may fall into a final Thucydides Trap, Trump has played the "Taiwan card" to compete against China. Trump continued to support a more tilting policy toward Taiwan, questioning whether the United States should even adhere to the one China policy if the PRC persists in challenging U.S. security and economic interests in global and regional arena.

In this regard, the author raises some significant questions about future U.S.-Taiwan policy and especially Washington's "strategic ambiguity" in conducting its policy toward cross-Strait issues. One of the key questions this article considers is how to preserve Washington's influence in future cross-Strait relations while not being "entrapped" in its relations with Taiwan. The article examines the debated question of the change or maintenance of U.S. strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan with specific focus on how arms sales from Washington impacted the cross-Strait relations. The author reiterates that a clearer signal to Taiwan may accelerate changes to the status quo, which will encourage both hardliners in Taipei and Beijing to open a Pandora's box, bringing militarized conflicts, or outright war, even closer.³ Furthermore, a comprehensive consideration of strategic

ambiguity has remained the top priority for the U.S. president-elect, Joe Biden, as his administration prepares for the foreign policy guidelines, aiming to stabilize the increasing tension in the precarious U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle.

1. Strategic Ambiguity and U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan

When it comes to U.S.-China-Taiwan relations, the United States has promised that it will not support *de jure* Taiwanese independence or “one China, one Taiwan” because any strong security commitment from Washington will entrap the United States in potential cross-Strait conflict.⁴ China’s rapid economic development and growing economic clout means that the United States has an interest not only in the security of Taiwan but also in stable relations with China, and ties between the United States and China have grown markedly in many areas in recent decades. U.S.-China cooperation is essential if the international society hopes to address a wide range of critical issues including terrorism, environmental degradation, threats to public health, and energy supply and consumption. Therefore, maintenance of the status quo is an important policy objective for Washington.

In order to maintain the status quo, the United States has relied on a concept known as strategic ambiguity, as the cornerstone of its cross-Strait policy since the normalization of U.S.-China relations.⁵ Nancy Tucker gives the representative argument on strategic ambiguity, and dates the origins of strategic ambiguity to the Eisenhower administration.⁶ The essence of this concept is that the United States does not state clearly whether it will come to Taiwan’s defense in the event of an attack by the PRC.⁷ Based on this definition, Richard Bush has proclaimed that strategic ambiguity has resulted in dual deterrence for the two sides of the Strait. In dual deterrence, Washington directs warnings and reassurance toward both Beijing and Taipei not to take actions that would create unwanted instability.⁸ Dean Chen adopted Bush’s argument, pointing out that the strengthened U.S. presence in the regional does not endorse its promotion of Taiwan independence from China, and strategic ambiguity would result in Taiwan being left to its own fate if it takes unilateral and irresponsible actions that jeopardize cross-Strait relations.⁹

Essentially, U.S. strategic ambiguity consists of two main elements: a warning to Beijing against the use of force against Taiwan and signaling to

Taipei to deter it from declaring *de jure* independence. It is essential to link the implications of ambiguity to traditional discussions on alliance commitment in the field of international relations and relevant studies about conflict behavior. Scholars have claimed that an alliance may have a negative impact on war/conflict as a consequence of the balance of power. Alliances serve to achieve a balance of power by aggregating the power of member states in the anarchic international system. Alliances also provide an extended deterrence function by sending costly signals to opponents.¹⁰

As noted above, alliance commitments not only impose restraints on adversaries but also embolden partners. Alliance commitments should thus be considered as a principal component for systemic stability. As these concepts are applied to strategic ambiguity, it is clear that Washington's commitments have strong implications for America's protégés (or quasi-alliances). Ambiguous signals coming from Washington result in sufficient defense capabilities but also prevent a protégé from taking aggressive actions that threaten the international order.

2. Is Washington's Use of Strategic Ambiguity Changing?

The most critical question that needs to be examined is whether the United States has to abandon ambiguity for clarity. U.S. policy makers have positioned themselves in different positions along a continuum between strategic clarity and ambiguity in the history of U.S. foreign policy. For instance, during the 1995–1996 missile crisis, the Clinton administration contemplated increasing the number of U.S. troops in East Asia, but to avoid antagonizing China, it instead limited its military response, sending naval forces to patrol the cross-Strait area, and thus signaled that it wanted to avoid escalating the crisis. Indeed, it becomes apparent that the conduct of U.S. foreign policy for decades has been governed by these unstated operational guidelines. All stem from the fundamental U.S. policy objective of preserving stability and peace in the region of East Asia and its long-standing role as guarantor of that objective. In general, previous U.S. administrations have enthusiastically maintained some degree of ambiguity on the question of U.S. use of force and discouraged both China and Taiwan from provoking each other.

Trump has differed from previous U.S. presidents. He has demonstrated a willingness to sharply alter decades of U.S. policy orthodoxy to serve his own foreign policy interests, attempting to switch from strategic ambiguity toward greater clarity. As he adopted a more provocative

stance and attempted to play the Taiwan card to counter Beijing, policy makers and scholars argued that Taiwan deserved an upgrade in U.S. support and more robust military commitments. It was also argued that the island deserved long-term U.S. security commitments for two reasons.¹¹ First, Taiwan is inherently valuable to U.S. interests because of its democratic politics, vibrant economy, and high quality of human and technological resources. Second, a less-committed approach to Taiwan would endanger the informal security alliance and cause Taipei to lean further toward Beijing. In fact, Taiwan is also valuable to the United States because of its strategic location, acting as a barrier to Chinese naval operations beyond the so-called first island chain. Furthermore, the proponents of strategic clarity believe that Beijing may mistakenly misread U.S. commitments if security guarantee to defend are not made clear enough. If the pronounced security commitment from Washington to Taipei is weak, Beijing might be encouraged to adopt a riskier course rather than exercise caution.

Strategic ambiguity therefore became the subject of dynamic debates over its changing nature and possible outcomes. More pointedly policy makers and scholars began to ask whether or not it was crucial, both in domestic politics and foreign policy decision making to maintain ambiguity. Richard Haass, president of the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations, and David Sacks, a research fellow at the Council, correctly noted that China's coercive tactics and military buildup are eroding deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. They argued that the traditional strategic ambiguity had limited capacity to deter a Chinese attack. They also elaborated that it was time for the United States to switch to a policy of strategic clarity, making explicit that the United States would respond to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan.¹²

Calls for strategic clarity are evident in several governmental documents as well. There is a growing number of American policy observers arguing for strategic clarity. Both those favoring a security guarantee to Taiwan and those opposing any security commitment call for strategic clarity. For instance, Ted Galen Carpenter, an analyst associated with the CATO Institute who supports a stronger U.S. commitment to Taiwan, argued that "US military support for Taiwan is no longer ambiguous or hesitant," and "a de facto US-Taiwan military alliance is fast becoming reality."¹³ Enhancing military cooperation and boosting the U.S. military presence in the region could help Taiwan defend potential attacks from China. Similarly, the former director of Asia-Pacific Disaster Relief and

Humanitarian Affairs, Joseph Bosco, has called for a public statement from Trump and high-ranking officials to clarify Washington's defense commitment to Taiwan, arguing that such strategic clarity could help "avoid a fatal strategic blunder on Taiwan."¹⁴ Bosco has proposed that a clearer security signal from the U.S. government could help alleviate Taiwan's security anxieties and a sense of defeatism. Gerrit van der Wees has further argued that in order to help the United States step out from the "one China" concept and further reassure Taiwan, the most constructive steps taken by the Trump administration have been to "enhance bilateral relations on a number of fronts as well as supporting a more expanded participation and engagement in international organizations for Taiwan."¹⁵ Admiral Bill Owens, former vice chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested that continuing to sell arms to Taiwan is "an act that is not in our best interest."¹⁶ He described the TRA as "outdated legislation" in need of "thoughtful review" and called for a suspension of arms sales. His overall argument could be viewed as another call for less security commitment but more clarity on the U.S.-China relations.¹⁷

Another school of thought argues that Washington's interests would be best served by maintaining the policy of strategic ambiguity because clarity is even more dangerous. Explicit language will legitimize claims by China's hardliners that the United States has adopted a more hostile attitude. This camp argues that a clear U.S. policy shift would open the United States to accusations that it had become a revisionist power that aimed to destabilize the regional order. Proponents of ambiguity have argued that it has become extremely crucial to maintain a certain level of strategic ambiguity because "uncertainty breeds restraint."¹⁸ Any deviation from the current strategic ambiguity may change the status quo, especially if pro-independence activists in Taiwan gain sway over cross-strait relation. Thus, it is a risky proposition to send clearer security signals to Taipei.

Bonnie Glaser, senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has warned that the change from ambiguity to clarity would not solve the fundamental security problem and might even provoke an attack from China.¹⁹ Instead of sending strong and clear signals to Taiwan, the United States should signal credibly to Beijing that the results of invading Taiwan would be extremely high. In Glaser's words, Washington "should not provide any guarantee for Taiwan unconditionally," especially when there is no wiggle room related to Taiwan independence. Michael Mazarr, of the Rand Corporation, echoed Glaser with similar logic, arguing that there is no immediate danger in the

cross-Strait area. China has no intentions to solve the Taiwan issue during the pandemic period or anytime in the near future. Taiwan, simply, is not on the verge of being invaded by China. Washington should not spend too much energy on a hypothetical menace. Following this train of logic, a strong U.S. security pledge for Taiwan could prompt Beijing to military action to punish the United States. In other words, a more robust U.S. security commitment to Taiwan may provoke Beijing into taking a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis Washington, which will clearly increase risks for the United States.²⁰

The debates over strategic ambiguity are therefore of critical importance in the context of rising U.S.-China strategic competition. The opening of a Pandora's box of U.S. security assurances may lead to the most dangerous scenarios—militarized conflicts/war in East Asia. As realists have argued, the region could transform into an anarchic state of nature with states engaging in fierce security competition against each other. Washington abandoning strategic ambiguity would fundamentally alter the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and give a green light to the Taiwan independence movement. Most U.S. scholars believe that this would undermine core U.S. national interests. Haass and Sacks echoed this argument and proposed that the United States should recommit to the one China policy and reiterate that the United States does not support the Taiwan independence movement.

Additionally, a clear and strong strategic assurance would force other major powers in the region to make similar declarations—Japan among them—to defend the democratic island. The United States would then have to strengthen its military preparations and spending in East Asia to be able to respond to any sudden contingencies in East Asia. Similarly, Japan would also reinforce its security and diplomatic cooperation with Taiwan. Australia and India, other major powers nearby, might then be required to rearrange national security blueprints and respond militarily to an attack on Taiwan from China. By the logic of this interpretive framework, an increased military presence in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea may raise the possibility of military accidents between China and the U.S.-led alliances, potentially escalating to a general military conflict.

3. The Role of Arms Sales in the U.S. Strategic Ambiguity

U.S. arms sales to Taiwan play an important role in strategic ambiguity, since they have been viewed as a tactical mechanism for a formal U.S.

security commitment to Taiwan. The United States, on the one hand, reassures Taiwan by providing sufficient military capabilities to defend itself, while also restraining a *de jure* independence movement on the island. U.S. arms sales to Taiwan reflect America's strong concerns for Taiwan's security. Yet, looking at the history of changes and transitions in U.S. foreign policy, arms sales are still strongly correlated with U.S. strategic ambiguity. The issue has received considerable academic attention. The Taiwan Relations Act, in fact, established the legal framework for U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, and thus offers space for more nuanced observations when studying the variations of this cross-Strait policy in U.S. decision making.

U.S. strategic ambiguity and arms sales discussions have been intimately related for decades. As far as we know, strategic ambiguity is ambiguous in its means, but not in its end. The conditions and methods of American involvement in cross-Strait relations are uncertain. For instance, the U.S. government has never formally expressed whether that they would send troops to Taiwan, withdraw their entire support from the island, or simply do nothing in the event of conflict.²¹ Nonetheless, selling weapons to Taiwan has always been considered by the United States as a means to fulfill its commitment to the TRA. That being said, arms sales have long been used as a critical *tactic* under the structure of strategic ambiguity and provided Taiwan with sufficient military weapons to defend itself from China. In short, selling weapons to Taiwan represents another crucial security mechanism to strengthen Washington-Taipei ties.

Proponents of strategic ambiguity have consistently supported U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Arms sales, on the one hand, will strengthen Taiwan's national defense capabilities. On the other, they will discourage China from using coercive power for unification. The U.S. calculus is more complex but equally grounded in national interests. Arms sales to Taiwan allow Washington to contain China's expansion and maintain regional stability without the expensive deployment of U.S. troops. Washington has determined that it is in its national interest to achieve its ends through arms sales rather than troop deployments to Taiwan. Selling arms rather than troops would limit casualties in the event of military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Proponents of this strategy thus argue that the United States should avoid a traditional alliance arrangement and opt for arms sales alone because it both respects Taiwan's dignity as a democratic society and limits America's risk exposure.²²

Weapons sold by Washington are defensive in nature, as is required under the TRA. This law clearly states that the U.S. government aims to provide Taiwan with weapons adequate for its national security needs and that the quality and quantity of these weapons will be determined by the president and the U.S. Congress after consultation with U.S. military authorities. The arms sales have increased substantially since the passage of the TRA, aiming to help Taiwan enhance its military modernization and capabilities for the years to come.²³ The arms are intended to help Taiwan deter China's aggression and promote regional peace by allowing for a credible military deterrent. The arms sales are signal to Beijing that Taiwan is not alone and that the United States would prefer a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences—this is perhaps the arms sales' most valuable attribute.²⁴ However, past arms packages have been limited so as to avoid upsetting the cross-Strait military balance and U.S.-China political dynamics.

The trend toward more substantial arms sales has satisfied some members of the U.S. Congress, but has also negatively impacted U.S.-China relations. Escalating U.S. support for Taiwan may eventually lead to the discarding of America's one China policy and has certainly been provoking negative reactions from the PRC. China is no longer a weak regional power in the region; instead, it has become an increasingly powerful strategic competitor and vital economic player as the world's second-largest economy. With growing economic and military strength, Beijing has grown less tolerant of U.S. arms sales to Taipei, and it is increasingly eager to change the rules of game on the issue. For decades, China's assertive behavior has corresponded to John Mearsheimer's argument that China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere, and that China will be determined to drive the United States from the region because Beijing's ultimate goal is to ensure its own security.²⁵ Reducing or even terminating U.S. arms sales would effectively ensure China's core security interests and national survival.

In the next section, the study examines the history of arms sales from 1990 to 2020, and assesses the announcements from Washington on the military transactions. The main purpose of this project is to elaborate on how Washington implements strategic ambiguity that allows it to alleviate some negative effects of arms sales.

4. The Arms Sales and U.S. Government Announcements

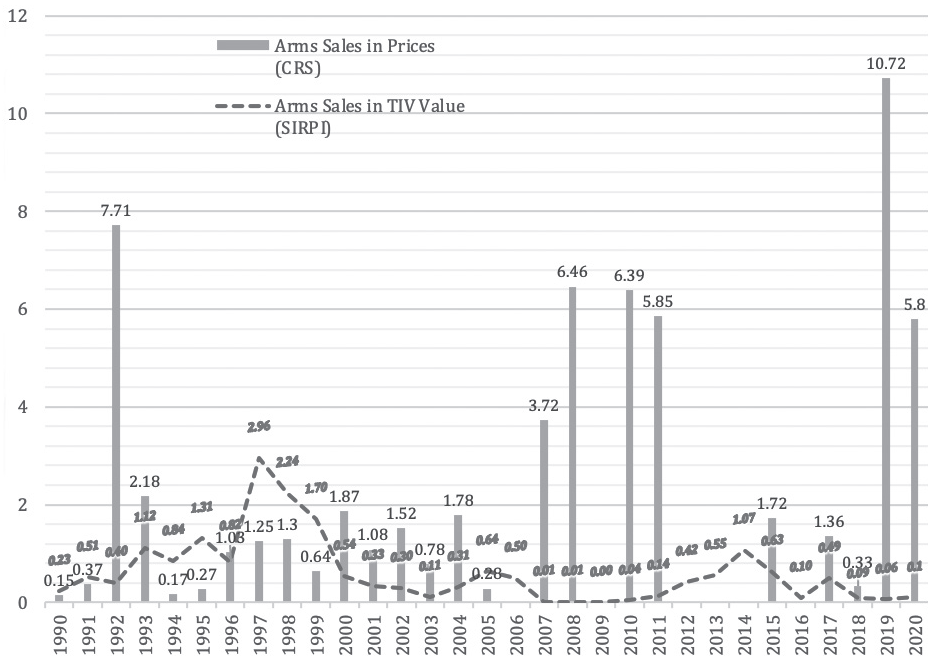
Taiwan has become one of the largest arms buyers in the world, and one of the most important customers for the U.S. defense industry. While Taiwan does not always get it wants, questions persist about the value and significance of the military equipment transferred from the United States. Even though the weapons have helped to boost Taiwan's defense, observers and military experts of Taiwan's national defense have criticized the quality of the weapons purchased and the prices the government has paid.²⁶

Within the academic field, consensus is elusive when it comes to assessing the quality of U.S. arms sold to Taiwan, especially when it comes to measuring the value of weapons. The only means of evaluating the financial value of arms sales is to rely on official datasets provided by governments and industry bodies. However, there are significant limitations in using official national data in this way. As far as we know, there is no definition of what constitutes "arms," and governments use different lists when collecting and reporting data on the financial value of their arms exports/imports. In addition, there is no standard methodology for collecting and reporting such data, with some states reporting on export licenses issued or used and other states using data collected from customs agencies.

Two different datasets available for the arms sales to Taiwan help inform some basic judgements on the arms sales from the United States. The first dataset is the SIPRI arms transfers database with a total trend-indicator value (TIV). This dataset is composed of the unit production cost, demonstrating the transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer. The TIV is considered the discounted rate for certain weapons, if they are refurbished or modified. Since this dataset reveals the true "value" not the "price" of transferred weapons, this indicator can be viewed as the "quality" rather than the "quantity" of arms transfer.²⁷ The second dataset employed here is the price of the arms sales collected by the Congressional Research Service.²⁸ The dataset shows the real prices that the Taiwanese government paid for transferred armaments.

By combining this data of price with the TIV in the SIPRI dataset, it can find more accurate information on U.S. sales (not deliveries) of major defense articles and services to Taiwan (Figure 1). Prices of arms sales as approved by the president and formally notified to Congress since 1990 are reflected in the bar chart, while the value of TIV dataset is shown by the dashed line.

Figure 1 : Price and Value of Arms Sales between the United States and Taiwan (1990–2020)



There are differences in the prices and values of the American weapons transferred to Taiwan. First, the value of weapons (TIV dataset) has continuously plunged since 1997, but arms prices remained high. This indicates that the scope and scale of Taiwan’s arms procurement efforts are impressive in an overall sense; however, the quality of the arms has remained a problem.²⁹ For instance, during President Chen Shui-bian’s first term (2000–2004), Taiwan maintained high defense budgets for U.S. weapons purchases, but the quality of the military equipment did not reflect the prices paid by Taipei. The same phenomenon occurred during the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou. During Ma’s first term (2008–2012), Taiwan purchased three major arms packages, but the value of the weapons delivered to Taiwan remained far lower than the price paid for the weapons.³⁰

Figure 1 also shows that arms sales varied during different administrations. During the administrations of Lee Teng-hui (1996–2000) and Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), the data show a continuous interest in U.S.



arms procurement. This was the result of the adoption of balancing strategies against Beijing by under both Lee and Chen that called for securing more U.S. military support. In contrast, Ma Ying-jeou scrapped Chen's provocative policies toward Beijing and sought to patch up relations with the United States. During Ma's two terms as president (2008–2016), arms sales occurred on a less regular basis and with less frequency (only three arms bundles in eight years).³¹

Generally, U.S. officials counter Beijing's complaints about arms sales by explaining that the sales are required by U.S. law while also reassuring Beijing that the United States remains committed to one China policy. Recent decades have been shaped by this strategic ambiguity, a two-handed strategy of selling weapons to Taiwan while maintaining a working relationship with China. Aiming at a more comprehensive understanding of the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity works, a dataset was created (Table 1) that quotes official U.S. government statements at the time of the arms sales to Taipei.

Arms sales to Taiwan have provoked angry responses from Beijing, but the actual policy response to these sales has typically been muted. One of the reasons may come from the Chinese government's hesitation to retaliate. In lieu of a more confrontational options, Beijing has generally threatened to adopt economic sanctions against the United States in retaliation for arms sales. Although Beijing has in the past threatened to impose economic sanctions on U.S. exports to China or on companies directly related to the arms sales, there is little evidence that China has actually retaliated with economic sanctions. According to Shi Yinhong, the director of the Center for American Studies Renmin University, "The arms sales will have a negative impact on Chinese public opinion toward the US, but in the end it probably won't affect the overall bilateral relationship, especially when it comes to trade and business."³²

Alternatively, the United States has tried to repair relations with Beijing once the arms sales were completed. Different U.S. presidents have attempted to establish more transparent and effective relationship with Beijing by focusing on stable and sustainable economic and trade partnerships. Washington's post-arms-sales announcements (shown in Table 1) indicate that the U.S. government reassures China by emphasizing its commitment to the one China policy. In a 1992 interview, President George H. W. Bush asserted after the largest sale of first-generation F-16 A/B fighter jets that the United States would adhere to one China policy and reiterated that the United States recognized the PRC as the sole legitimate

Table 1: The U.S. Government's Announcements after the Major Arms Sales to Taiwan

	U.S. Announcements	Source
	[President George H. W. Bush]	
1992	"And my decision today does not change the commitment of this administration and its predecessors to the three communiqués with the People's Republic of China. We keep our word. Our one China policy, our recognition of the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China. I've always stressed that the importance of the '82 communiqué on arms sales to Taiwan lies in its promotion of common political goals—peace and stability in the area through mutual restraint."	USC US-China Institute (1992) ¹
	[Thomas Christensen, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs]	The U.S. Department of State (2007) ²
2007	"While Taiwan's security required a strong military, it also required Taipei to avoid unnecessary, frivolous, and dangerous provocations of nationalism in the PRC."	
	[Karl Duckworth, State Department spokesman]	The Wall Street Journal (2008) ³
2008	"We appreciate Taiwan's efforts to reduce tensions in the Taiwan Strait and to build on the already excellent ties between the people of Taiwan and the US."	
	[Robert Gates, U.S. Secretary of Defense]	The U.S. Department of State (2010) ⁴
2011	"Having been through this in 2007 with the Bush administration and last year with the Obama administration, I can tell you that in both administrations the items that were considered for sale were carefully thought through with a focus on ensuring that we were providing defensive capabilities and, at the same time, underscoring, as I said in my remarks, our continued opposition to independence for Taiwan."	
	[Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs]	U.S. Foreign Affairs Committee (2011) ⁵
2011	"For more than thirty years, the TRA, and the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqués have served as the bipartisan foundation for our 'one China' policy, which has guided our relations with Taiwan and PRC."	
	[Myles Caggins, National Security Council spokesman]	Reuters (2015) ⁶
2015	"Our longstanding policy on arms sales to Taiwan has been consistent across six different US administrations. . . . We remain committed to our one China policy."	
	[Heather Nauert, State Department spokeswoman]	The Atlantic (2017) ⁷
2017	"Support for Taiwan's ability to maintain a sufficient self-defense policy." She added that the United States has not deviated from the one China policy, which prevents countries seeking diplomatic relations with China from maintaining the same ties with Taiwan.	
	[Randall Schriver, Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Asian and Pacific Security Affairs]	The South China Morning Post (2019) ⁸
2019	Washington would "treat Taiwan as a normal security systems partner."	

Notes: 1, Please see "Bush Announces Sale of F-16 Aircraft to Taiwan, 1992" University of Southern California US-China Institute, 2 September 1992. <https://china.usc.edu/bush-announces-sale-f-16-aircraft-taiwan-1992>; 2, Thomas J. Christensen "A Strong and Moderate Taiwan," U.S. Department of State, 11 September 2007, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2007/91979.htm>; 3, Ting-I Tsai and Kara Scannell, "U.S. Proposes \$6.43 Billion Arms Sale to Taiwan," *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 October 2008, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122331900259208407>; 4, Kan, Taiwan: *Major U.S. Arms Sales since 1990*, p. 80; 5, Mark Landler, "No New F-16's for Taiwan, but US to Upgrade Fleet," *The New York Times*, 18 September 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/world/asia/us-decides-against-selling-f-16s-to-taiwan.html>; 6, David Brunnstrom and Patricia Zengerle, "Obama Administration authorizes \$1.83-billion Arms Sales to Taiwan," *Reuters*, 17 December 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-taiwan-arms-idUSKBN0T2C520151217>; 7, Aria Bendix, "Trump Administration Approves Its First Arms Sales to Taiwan," *Atlantic*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/06/trump-administration-approves-its-first-arms-sale-to-taiwan/532239/>; 8, Cary Huang, "Under Trump, US Arms Sales to Taiwan Could be the New Normal," *South China Morning Post*, 25 August 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3024132/under-trump-us-arms-sales-taiwan-could-be-new-normal>.

government of China. In 2011, Robert Gates, the U.S. secretary of defense, stated: “As I said in my remarks, our continued opposition to independence for Taiwan.”³³ Similarly, Kurt Campbell, the assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said in 2011: “For more than thirty years, the TRA, and the three U.S.-China Joint Communiques have served as the bipartisan foundation for our ‘one China’ policy.”³⁴ Both Myles Caggins, National Security Council spokesman, in 2015, and Heather Nauert, State Department spokeswoman, in 2017, pointed out the importance of, and the ongoing U.S. commitment to, the one China policy. In general, arms sales have allowed the United States to boost Taiwan’s defenses, while subsequent conciliatory official U.S. statements for a Chinese audience indicated that Washington remained committed to its strategic ambiguity on cross-Strait relations.

5. Trump’s Symbolic Policy Tilting toward Taiwan

The Trump administration has sent clearer alignment signals to Taipei by offering larger arms sales. Trump considers himself a virtuoso “dealmaker,” and it appears that he would be willing to use Taiwan as a bargaining chip in negotiations with China. This type of transactional policy making—focused more outcomes, not ideological differences—has given U.S.-China relations more negotiating space on a broader range of issues.³⁵ Trump appears to prefer short-terms deals over long-term policy objectives and is likely to attempt to solve the trade deficit with China as soon as possible. For instance, Trump started this “deal-making” with China at the Mar-a-Lago summit in Florida in 2017, which resulted in promises from Beijing to help solve the North Korea nuclear issue. Trump went so far as to promise not to repeat his direct phone call to Tsai Ing-wen in exchange for Xi Jinping’s commitment to cooperate on the Pyongyang problem. Trump thus appears to be more practical than past U.S. presidents, and seems eager to achieve his foreign policy goals by treating all foreign policy issues as a series of business deals. This naturally raises the question of the Trump administration’s willingness to use Taiwan as a bargaining chip in negotiations with China.

Taiwan’s fields a credible military deterrent, with its fifth generation air and naval capabilities and well-equipped ground forces.³⁶ Taiwan, therefore, would not benefit from further purchases of advanced weaponry from the United States. Instead, what it needs is help assimilating the diverse and sophisticated array of equipment it now has and the further development

of domestic research and design capabilities for the production of indigenous weapons systems.³⁷ In this light, it is essential for Taiwan to strengthen military capabilities by increasing national defense budgets in order to achieve a stronger deterrence capacity. Taipei also needs to streamline its call-up of reserve forces, improve defense strategies, and move toward small, maneuverable, and survivable systems.³⁸

In addition to large arms sales, the Trump administration has also been supportive of Taiwan in both policy and diplomacy. Despite opposition from Beijing, in March 2018 Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act, which allows high-level U.S. officials to travel to Taiwan to meet Taiwanese counterparts.³⁹ It also allows for reciprocal visits by Taiwan government officials to travel to the, and permits for further latitude for the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office, Taiwan's de facto diplomatic representative offices, to conduct business with different branches of the U.S. government.⁴⁰ Based on this new act, supporters have argued the strengthening of relations between Washington and Taipei is based on an alignment of the U.S. executive and legislative branches responses to an increasingly assertive China and the intensification of the U.S.-China rivalry, especially in the realms of security, economic, and technological competition.⁴¹ The recent deterioration in U.S.-China relations has granted Washington more leeway to play the Taiwan card, strengthening relations with Taipei while making China the odd man out in the triangular relationships.⁴² However, dissenters have argued that recent Taiwan-friendly legislation and policies are symbolic and nonbinding. The United States and China have different views on the cold peace across the Taiwan Strait, but they share similar security interests in avoiding conflict and maintaining peace in cross-Strait relations.⁴³ For instance, Douglass Paal, the former director of AIT, opined that the Taiwan Travel Act "did not change anything real" because "US administrations already had discretionary authority to permit visits by senior Taiwanese officials and visits by senior US officials and military officers to Taiwan."⁴⁴

Likewise, the U.S. Senate also pushed for greater international recognition for Taiwan through the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative.⁴⁵ This act was passed by both the House and Senate and signed into law by President Trump in late 2020. U.S. congressional support is the result of China's stepped-up effort to chip away at the remaining diplomatic allies of the ROC. Since Tsai Ing-wen came into office, three major diplomatic allies in Latin America (Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador), two others in the South Pacific

Ocean (Solomon Island and Kiribati), and two in Africa (Burkina Faso and São Tomé and Príncipe) have severed ties with Taiwan in favor of formal relations with China. One of the chief motivations of the Taipei Act is to stop this diplomatic avalanche and prevent more of Taiwan's diplomatic allies from switching to Beijing. Nonetheless, critics have highlighted the hypocritical nature of Washington's new approach since the United States terminated relations with Taipei and normalized ties with Beijing in 1979.⁴⁶ In this light, the United States lacks the legitimacy to request countries in Latin America to maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei only because Washington wants to contain Beijing's rapid regional and global development. In short, there should be no tough messages or punishments from Washington toward Taiwan's diplomatic allies that cut ties to Taiwan in favor of China.

In the context of the changing U.S.-China policy, except for the Taiwan Travel Act and Taipei Act, the Trump administration renewed and passed the three National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA, 2017–2020). This is a crucial step in the switch from strategic ambiguity to clarity, and it is intended to give Taiwan more robust deterrent capabilities against the military threat from China. By acknowledging the increasingly coercive and aggressive behavior of China, the U.S. government has responded by reassuring Taiwan over this national security threat through a series of NDAA. NDAA 2020 in particular reiterated that the "Taiwan Relations Act" and the "six guarantees" are the cornerstones of U.S.-Taiwan relations. Based on the implementation of the TRA, the United States must maintain the Taiwan's ability to prevent China from creating a *fait accompli*.⁴⁷ However, Beijing has fiercely responded to the passage of the NDAA, claiming that the U.S. Congress has intervened in its national sovereignty and destabilized regional security. *Global Times*, a media organization controlled by the CCP, even pointed out that "If the US sends a military force to Taiwan ports, it would likely activate Article 8 of China's Anti-Secession Law, which authorizes China to use nonpeaceful measures to solve the Taiwan question."⁴⁸ The minister at the embassy of the PRC in the United States, Li Kexin, mentioned at an embassy event in Washington that "the day that a US vessel arrives in Kaohsiung is the day that our People's Liberation Army unites Taiwan with military force."⁴⁹

As the U.S.-China conflict spiral escalated, the U.S. House and Senate introduced a growing set of security bills to assist Taiwan. Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) proposed a draft of the Taiwan Defense Act in June 2020 to maintain the U.S. military's ability to prevent China from creating a *fait*

accompli with Taiwan and other purposes. The “fait accompli” defined in the draft refers to the possibility that China could seize control of Taiwan before the U.S. military had time to respond, while convincing the U.S. military that it would be very difficult or costly to respond. Additionally, Republican representative Ted Yoho (FL), ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee’s Asia subcommittee, proposed the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act on 29 July 2020, marking a red line in the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan. The provisions of the bill would authorize the U.S. president to use the armed forces and other measures under three conditions. The three conditions include the CCP’s direct armed attack on Taiwan, any CCP military occupation of territory effectively controlled by Taiwan, and any mortal threat to lives of Taiwanese soldiers or civilians.⁵⁰

Along with the proposed security bills introduced by the U.S. Senate, the Trump administration showed its willingness to cross China’s own red lines when it sent senior U.S. officials to Taiwan, namely, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar to Taiwan in early August 2020, followed by the American Under Secretary of State Keith Krach in early September. The visits of two high-level government representatives to Taiwan have raised excited speculation that diplomatic relations between the United States and Taiwan were heading toward the eventual reestablishment of formal ties between Taipei and Washington. Public opinion in Taiwan, and in many places elsewhere, believed that it was a high point in the bilateral relationship with Washington and a golden opportunity to further enhance relations.

Beijing responded to this gradual abandonment of strategic ambiguity by dispatching warplanes to intimidate Taiwan and to warn against Taiwan independence. People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft flew 217 sorties into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone and 49 across the median line of the Taiwan Strait. In response, Taiwan’s air force has mounted around 3,000 aircraft sorties to shadow, disperse, and monitor PLA aircraft.⁵¹ This repeated interference has kept draining Taiwan’s national capacity by scrambling almost US\$900 million to support air defense capabilities.

Despite more explicitly backing Taiwan, the Trump administration has continued to reassure China that the United States will neither recognize Taiwan as a *de jure* independent country nor attempt to transform the current quasi-alliance partnership into a formal alliance so far. Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in response to a question posed by Voice of America during a press conference before the 2020 election, reiterated

that the State Department is not changing its Taiwan policy, despite the growing calls for the United States to abandon strategic ambiguity.⁵² Similarly, Biden stressed not only once that the importance of strategic ambiguity, given that Washington had no obligation to defend the island since its abrogation of the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty. However, Biden's campaign platform and public statements, along with the Democratic Party's preferences, indicated he will maintain strong support for Taiwan once he takes office as president. Biden's victory in the 2020 U.S. election could herald the return of a more cautious and stable U.S. approach.

Biden will be more likely to inherit Obama's "Pivot to Asia" policy or Trump's "Indo-Pacific" in the region. Once the strategy is implanted, the United States will not turn strategic ambiguity to clarity across the Strait because a clear strategic guarantee for Taiwan will force other major powers in the region to follow suit and make similar statements to defend Taiwan if any militarized conflicts occur. The new administration has to increase its military spending in East Asia to cope with any emergencies, forcing the U.S. allies to cooperate with Taiwan on security and diplomatic requests. As a result, it is bound to increase instability in this area, and the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea are more likely to become the next arsenal. The White House Asia tsar, Kurt Campbell, pointed out that "there are some significant downsides to the kind of what is called strategic clarity" during an interview hosted by the Financial Times on May 2021.⁵³ In addition, secretary of the state Antony Blinken continues to emphasize that the U.S. will ensure Taiwan "has the ability to defend itself."⁵⁴ Based on the logic, the new administration will not easily change the strategic ambiguity. This is the reason why Biden has announced more than once that he will continue to uphold American obligations under the TRA, which does not and will not support Taiwan's de jure independence.⁵⁵ Taiwan should be cautious when interpreting the U.S. policy-making process and its final results. Any misreading of Washington's motivations and preferences will lead to harmful actions that vastly destabilize and endanger national and regional security. In other words, the Tsai Ing-wen administration should guard against being dragged into a potential conflict between the United States and China.

6. Conclusion

The TRA and three U.S.-China communiqués guide America's relations with China and Taiwan. Many legal experts argue that the TRA trumps all other

policy documents and official U.S. government statements because this law promotes the maintenance of economic linkages and unofficial political exchanges between Washington and Taipei.⁵⁶ The Joint Communique of 1982 was an executive branch decision, not an international treaty, and thus does not carry the force of law in the United States. The TRA, on the other hand, requires the U.S. government by law to abide by its provisions.

This study is not calling for the United States to abandon Taiwan. Instead, it argues that it serves the best interest of Washington to maintain stable, constructive relations with both Taipei and Beijing. Relevant studies have shown that a reduction of clear security signals to Taipei may therefore benefit Washington's policy objectives without jeopardizing America's credibility at home or in East Asia. Recently conducted polls in Taiwan on people's determination to defend democracy against threats from China show that 36.3 percent of Taiwanese respondents said they were "very prepared" to fight in order to defend Taiwan, with 31.9 percent saying they were "prepared."⁵⁷ In 2019, 68 percent of respondents indicated that they were ready to fight against potential attacks from China. In the 2020 poll, the percentage rose to 79.8, a rise of about 11.6 percentage points in a single year.⁵⁸ As China continues to menace Taiwan with aggressive military actions, public opinion in Taiwan is becoming more strident. A poll released in 2020 showed that 60 percent of Taiwanese believe that the United States would send troops to defend Taiwan.⁵⁹ The statistics indicate that stronger security assurances arriving from Washington may be emboldening Taiwan's willingness to fight China. The findings from the polls above, combined with the increasing arms sales in both quality and quantity from Washington, illustrate the dynamic phenomenon of how the Trump administration's gradual movement toward clarity has undermined cross-strait stability, and thus upset the regional balance of power. In contrast, maintaining a policy of strategic ambiguity may deter Taipei and Beijing from unilaterally changing the status quo, restrain both sides from allowing bilateral relationships to deteriorate, and even prevent military conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

To be sure, aspects of U.S. policy do appear unclear. But U.S.-Taiwan relations could move proceed more carefully and with a lower-profile; an ambiguous relationship may serve the best interests of all players. It is apparent that the United States and Taiwan have moved steadily closer since 1972. This trend is not unique to any particular administration, including the Tsai administration. But both politicians and scholars in

Taiwan have to be very careful that any closer partnership between Washington and Taipei may antagonize Beijing and that only by maintaining a flexible and practical strategic position will Taiwan find space for its survival. Small countries in this region have consistently proposed keeping an equal distance between great powers, and Taiwan is no exception.⁶⁰ Even as a secondary power in East Asia, Taiwan still occupies an essential position with strategic and economic value for Western democracies. Only if decision makers within the Taiwanese government realize the identifiable conditions of Taiwan's hedging behavior between the great powers can they have adequate capability to maintain regional peace.

Notes

- 1 The three major U.S.-China communiqués include the Shanghai communiqués in 1972, the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations in 1979, and the 817 communiqués in 1982. For discussions on the definition and details of strategic ambiguity, please see Richard Bush, *A One-China Primer* (Washington, DC: Center for East Asia Policy Studies, Brookings Institute, 2017); Dean P. Chen, "The Trump Administration's One-China Policy: Tilting toward Taiwan in an Era of US-PRC Rivalry?," *Asian Politics & Policy* Vol. 11, No. 2 (2019), pp. 250–278; Thomas J. Christensen, "The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Detering a Taiwan Conflict," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2002), pp. 5–21; Dennis V. Hickey, "Parallel Progress: US-Taiwan Relations during an Era of Cross-Strait Rapprochement," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2015), pp. 369–384; Denny Roy, "Prospects for Taiwan Maintaining Its Autonomy under Chinese Pressure," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (2017), pp. 1135–1158; Shelley Rigger, "Taiwan in US-China Relations," in *Tangled Titans: The United States and China*, edited by D. Shambaugh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
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- 3 Please see Charles Chong-Han Wu and John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "Alliance Commitment and the Maintenance of the Status Quo," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2016), pp.197-221.
- 4 Christensen, "Contemporary Security Dilemma," pp. 5–21; Charles Glaser, "A US-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2015), pp. 49–90; Robert Sutter, "Taiwan's Future: Narrowing Straits," *NBR Analysis*, May 2011.
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- 6 Nancy Tucker mentioned that the nature of strategic ambiguity has changed since the 1950s. Eisenhower initially refused to state the conditions for triggering American retaliation against the PRC. Contemporary critics mentioned that Eisenhower adopted a more ambiguous strategy on defending Quemoy and Matsu, which Chiang Kai-shek defied by refusing to evacuate troops from the islands. Please see Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "China-Taiwan: US Debates and Policy Choices," *Survival*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter 1998), pp. 150–167.
- 7 The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. There is a clear distinction between strategic ambiguity and political (or diplomatic) ambiguity regarding the U.S. one China policy, and the former is contingent upon the later. In the case of political ambiguity in the U.S. one China policy, the Shanghai Communique of 1972 states that the United States acknowledges that Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China. The United States did not explicitly elaborate the sovereign status of Taiwan in the three U.S.-PRC Joint communiques (in 1972, 1979, and 1982). In fact, the United States remains politically ambiguous on differentiating its one China policy from the PRC's one China principle. Since the study focuses on strategic ambiguity not political ambiguity, the issues of political ambiguity are left for further research.
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- 27 The method used to code the TIV value is as follows: a weapon that has been in service in another armed force is given a value of 40 percent of that of a new weapon. A used weapon that has been significantly refurbished or modified by the supplier before delivery is given a value of 66 percent of that of a new weapon.
- 28 Shirley Kan, *Taiwan: Major U.S. Arms Sales since 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014).
- 29 In order to detect the correlations between the TIV and prices paid for weapons (CRS report), a Pearson's correlation coefficient was conducted and showed a negative value, $-.37$. The result supported the observation in the text that the scope and scale of Taiwan's arms purchasing have increased in an overall sense; however, the quality of the arms has a negative correlation with the price. In a nutshell, the Taiwan authorities bought arms from the United States at sky-high prices.
- 30 During the George H. W. Bush administration, the United States approved the sale of 150 F-16A/B fighters and other military equipment to Taiwan in September 1992, to the total amount of US\$7.7 billion (transferred to Taiwan in 1997). This is the reason why we can see the peak TIV values in 1997, at about US\$2.95 billion. In addition, there were other large arms sales during President Ma Ying-jeou's administration, especially in 2008, 2010, and 2011. The arms sale in 2008 included 330 Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC)-3 missile defense missiles and 30 AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters, which were transferred to Taipei in 2013. There was

- another arms package sold in 2010, which shipped to Taiwan in 2014. It included 114 PAC-3 missile defense missiles and 60 UH-60M Black Hawk utility helicopters. However, only three major arms packages were delivered to Taiwan several years after the sale was announced. Most of the arms sales were transferred in the year signed. Please see the appendix for the details on arms sales from the United States to Taiwan.
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