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Evaluating the Value of US Diplomacy Through Strategic Ambiguity

Ethan Owens

Abstract: Through the growth of Chinese economic, political, and military power, tensions between the notorious “strategic triangle” of China, Taiwan, and the United States are at the forefront of political discussions of the future. The long-held US policy of strategic ambiguity regarding matters of political sensitivity between China and Taiwan has been an enduring and seemingly successful one, deterring military conflict between Taipei and Beijing since its creation through the Taiwan-Relations Act (1979). However, an increase in perceived tension between the strategic triangle has led some scholars to shed doubt on the continued ability of strategic ambiguity to prevent military conflict. This article aims to outline the “success” of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to preventing war, as well as the evident “failure” of strategic ambiguity in preventing the growth of tension through examining periods before and after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Keywords: Strategic ambiguity; Taiwan Strait Crisis; strategic triangle; Taiwan Relations Act; China; Taiwan.

Introduction

Since the Republic of China’s Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang) fled to Taiwan in 1949, tensions between mainland China and autonomous Taiwan have seen varying states of both stability and instability. This is largely due in part to the US’ stakes in the protection of Taiwan from China, preventing invasion and forceful unification under authoritarian rule. However, while the US has protected Taiwan from a Chinese invasion, it ended its formal alliance with Taiwan in 1972, as Washington began to ease tensions with Beijing in hopes of weakening the then-dangerous USSR. The US still sought to maintain democratic influence in the Pacific and saw Taiwan as an opportunity to further develop growing democratic values (which would solidify into democracy in the mid-1980s) and foster an opposing force in the face of a rising authoritarian China. Therefore, the US began a policy of strategic ambiguity through which it was able to utilize language and policy that ambiguously refrained from support or opposition toward either side to keep both China and Taiwan at bay and ultimately prevent conflict.

The majority of modern scholars agree that the use of strategic ambiguity regarding tensions between mainland China and Taiwan were invaluable in the protection of democracy and US assets in Taiwan, as well as preventing a large-scale military conflict with China. However, amid growing nationalism in Taiwan and increased militant/aggressive behavior between China and Taiwan in the past 20 years, many scholars have begun to shift their positions on the efficacy of utilizing strategic ambiguity in the face of a more
empowered modern China. This paper therefore serves to explore why the US policy of strategic ambiguity has been utilized to balance Taiwan-China relations since 1979, and to determine the extent to which it is still a viable option. This question will be explored by examining strategic ambiguity from 1979 until 1995 and then 1995 until 2013. Further analysis on post-2013 policy implication will also be highlighted. This will serve to examine the successes and failures of strategic ambiguity in correlation to the tensions arising between Beijing and Taipei in the modern era US involvement through ambiguous policy.

Strategic Ambiguity and Its Academic Value

Strategic ambiguity can be defined as any policy created by the US toward China and Taiwan that is purposefully ambiguous in its true intention of support or opposition to either a Chinese or Taiwanese agenda. The purpose of ambiguity as it pertains to Taiwan is preventing the Taiwanese government from declaring independence (and subsequently going to war with China), as well as to prevent China from an invasion and forceful integration of Taiwan into mainland China (this is also an act of war). Strategic ambiguity relating to US policy and attitudes toward Taiwan and China is therefore a constant variable that has seen success since 1979 due to the avoidance of direct military conflict it has produced. Along with the creation of the Taiwan Relations Act (1979), there has also been three Joint Communiques between the US and the People’s Republic of China that are of significance. The 1972 Shanghai Communique, the 1978 Normalization Communique, and the 1982 Communique on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan. The Shanghai Communique set the foundational groundwork for the type of language and perspective the US would take in handling the issues of diplomatic tension. The communique included language such as “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait,” and “interest” in “peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.”

This ambiguous language is continued through the normalization communique, which contains language that claims “[n]either [China nor Taiwan] should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region,” but also that “[t]he United States of America recognizes the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China,” and that “…the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.”

This dynamic of appeasing both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) diplomatically would become the exact kind of policy that the US would continue to develop in the coming decades.

Ambiguous language allows the US to maintain flexibility and prevent Taiwan from pursuing independence and China from invasion, as both sides are unsure who the US will support. Without clear dialogue on the US stance, both sides remain stable and avoid conflict due to fear of US involvement. These three communiques outlined the fundamentals of American ambiguity toward China and Taiwan, and are hailed as some of the best in maintaining peaceful diplomatic relations between the strategic triangle. In its simplest form, the purpose of ambiguity is to prevent military conflict, and it has therefore continued to see success in this domain as military conflict has been successfully avoided since the creation of ambiguous policy in 1979.
Tension and Ambiguity Argument

Strategic ambiguity was a strategy that saw successful merit from 1979 until the late 1990s due to the weaker state of China under strengthening US hegemonic rule, but amid historically high increases in military activity in the Taiwan Strait, the US can no longer handle ambiguous diplomacy between China and Taiwan if the ultimate objective is to maintain stability between the two. Ambiguity will therefore be examined as a means of examining the rising and easing of tensions between Beijing and Taipei since US ambiguous involvement in 1979. The independent variable is the concept of strategic ambiguity, while the dependent variables are the variations of tension diffusion exhibited in blocks of time spanning 1979 to 2022. I argue that ambiguity was successfully implemented as a means of tension diffusion from 1979 until the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995, and the evident successes of this time period in preventing tension escalation will be utilized to explore potential rises of tension leading to the crisis and following it. Failure of ambiguity to curb rising tension following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis will also be used in the concluding analysis to determine the current efficacy of US strategic ambiguity. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis is utilized as the division that highlights the growth of tension that has arisen following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and the lack thereof prior to the crisis. It should be noted that the purpose of strategic ambiguity in US policy making has been to prevent military conflict between the strategic triangle.

Although there has been no direct conflict, which other scholars would argue make strategic ambiguity a success, I argue that the tensions within the 17-year period highlighted from 1979 through 1995 represents a period of peaceful growth between Taiwan and China, whereas the 17-year period between 1995 to 2013 represents a period of rising tension and political discourse. The significance of the two 17-year blocks is to match the 17-year period of strategic ambiguity without crisis or significant tension from 1979 to 1995, with a period of time following the crisis that can be measured to compare the two. Effects of post-2013 tension will also be examined in order to understand the modern implications of Taiwan-China tension in international policy making. The “success” of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to preventing war remains stable, but the “failure” of strategic ambiguity becomes evident in the growth of tension. This distinction between the two time periods can be utilized to analyze the value of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to global politics. Three factors examined in this paper that contribute to the understanding of tension are the level of military testing, military spending, and government communication/cooperation between Taiwan and China. Tension will be compared between the period of time prior to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and afterwards in order to examine the value of strategic ambiguity as a means of preventing tension escalation. The three Taiwan Strait crises were separate events in which political discourse over China’s One-China policy resulted in a breaking point of tension that caused military operations such as missile testing and naval/aircraft movement in the strait. These crises are valuable due to the resulting threat of armed conflict and possible invasion that became more apparent following the crises’ resolution, most notably following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis due to its occurrence in a political environment of already rising tension.
It should be noted that this paper will consider China, Taiwan, and the US as unitary actor states, but this does not discredit the fact that many regional and political aspects influence the decisions of these nations. This is particularly true regarding China's large size and ethnic makeup as well as the US' network of bureaucratic foreign relations structures which make the conclusions of this paper relative to the central perspective of states as unitary actors. This is an important distinction to be aware of when discussing the overall values of a nation within the strategic triangle, so as not to discredit the complexity of cultures and government frameworks that contribute to the decisions and viewpoints that will be discussed in this paper.

Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism

In examining the value and purpose of US involvement and strategic ambiguity in Taiwan, we must first explore the concept of Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism. Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism explains a facet for the US' initial involvement in Taiwan and poses an explanation for the continued strong utilization of strategic ambiguity with Taiwan from an ideological perspective. Political scientist Dean Chen cites the Wilsonian Open-Door policy of the 1950s as the fundamental framework of the US' commitment to preserving the Kuomintang power in Taiwan. In short, the Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism outlines the concept that the US sought to preserve liberal democracies around the world and grow them through economic and military aid in order to create a democratic new world order. This concept is strengthened by the democratic peace theory, which furthers the potential aims of the US to grow democracies in authoritarian states like China to minimize their threat as a polarizing power. While the Kuomintang was an authoritarian government until 1986, the US still utilized Taiwan as a guinea pig for attempting to foster democracy in the face of communist China, and it saw Taiwan as an opportunity to spread these ideals.

Chen argues that “the United States has socially created an American liberal identity and interests that differentiate from those who are aliens to them,” contrasting the “American “liberal self” with the “illiberal others” through Open-Door internationalism, which makes American involvement in balancing relations with both China and Taiwan a delicate issue based on an emotional and ideological structure. Chen believes that strategic ambiguity therefore began with President Woodrow Wilson, which is a unique position to make. He argues this because the loss of Taiwan to China would not directly impact US security and would immediately strengthen estranged relations with China, but Wilson maintained protection of Taiwan nonetheless. While this makes a concrete case for the growth of American ties to Taiwan and the prospect of spreading democracy, it does not properly illustrate the essence of strategic ambiguity which is the factor of ambiguity itself. US foreign policy in the 1950s toward Taiwan was clearly in favor of preserving Taiwan as an autonomous state with no real attempt at reunification or diplomatic negotiations between the two governments. Nonetheless, the concept of American liberal identity through Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism helps strengthen the explanation for continued use of strategic ambiguity since 1979.
Deterrence and Arms Race

While the US remains attached to Taiwan ideologically through the lingering emotional beliefs of Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism, the security dilemma that arises from diplomacy between Taiwan and China is unavoidable and poses another explanation for the US’ desire to utilize ambiguous policy. This subject can help emphasize the consequences surrounding strategic ambiguity regarding arms race and deterrence that express the need to avoid tension growth. Pan Zhongqi’s article, “US Taiwan Policy of Strategic Ambiguity: A Dilemma of Deterrence,” further underlines the challenges posed to the US by continuing to pursue strategic ambiguity. In his article, Zhongqi argues that the aims of strategic ambiguity are deterrence, and that deterrence does not see an ultimate resolution but rather stagnates and maintains the problem, which will ultimately lead to weakening US power in the long run. Ultimately, Zhonghi sees strategic ambiguity as an endless security dilemma cycle, where Taiwan feels threatened by China, prompting them to increase arms sales between the US and Taiwan. This makes China feel threatened, prompting them to increase military exercises in the Taiwan strait, repeating consistently and growing tensions. This is believed to be the root cause of a potential arms race between China and Taiwan, for which the US will be caught in the crossfires and forced to make dangerous decisions that are easier to make before tensions get too unstable as a result of ambiguity.

Through ambiguity the US creates paranoia within China and Taiwan that results in more unstable decisions, making strategic ambiguity a very dangerous policy to maintain going forward. Zhongqi’s argument that “…Taiwan may further push its independence envelope if US arms sales give Taipei the perception that Washington would certainly come to its aid in a military conflict, no matter what the circumstances,” and that “[i]t does not matter whether these kinds of perceptions are correct and reasonable or not” are very flawed, however, due to Taiwan’s adverse relationship with independence. While nationalistic sentiments are consistently growing in Taiwan alongside Taiwanese identity, Taiwan realizes the dangers of independence and have sparsely pursued such policies in the past two decades.

Taiwan Strait Crisis Hypothesis

Based upon the background scholarship of American ideology being rooted in US political culture through Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism as well as the cyclic nature of a potential arms race between Taiwan and China by security dilemma, my hypothesis is that strategic ambiguity is no longer an effective form of policy in handling Taiwan. I reaffirm my position that strategic ambiguity saw successful merit from 1979 until the late 1990s due to the weaker state of China under strengthening US hegemonic rule, but amid historically high increases in military activity in the Taiwan-Strait, the US can no longer handle ambiguous diplomacy between China and Taiwan if the ultimate objective is to maintain stability between the two. Comparison of the successful stability of Taiwan-China relations under the ambiguous
US policies following the Taiwan Relations Act, against the current exponentially growing tensions beginning in the 1990s, can help to understand the efficacy of strategic ambiguity as it pertains to the US’ ability to maintain low-tension/peaceful relations. The premier case studies on concrete examples of explosive tensions between the diplomatic triangle can be found between the relative peace between the introduction of strategic ambiguity and the three Taiwan Strait crises, as well as tensions and military expansion going forward from the Third Strait Crisis into 2013. To clarify, I argue that the first and second Taiwan Strait crises were focused on more solidified defense of the ROC from PRC invasion following the US involvement in the Korean War (it had more to do with geopolitical behavior with China and Russia than with Taiwan itself) The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis will be utilized instead of the first and second as a factor in the dependent variable, as it occurred during the time of strategic ambiguity (while the other two occurred prior to the use of strategic ambiguity) and effectively highlights some of the successes and failures the US has seen in the policy of ambiguity in the face of fluctuating tension.

1979-1995 Tension

Following the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, the US solidified its dedication to strategic ambiguity and maintaining peace between Beijing and Taipei. The successes and failures of this can be seen in the combined level of tension between the creation of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 until the end of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, which represents the clearest evidence of the development of tension. In this paper, tension is defined by the level of military testing, military spending, and government communication/cooperation conducted by both Beijing and Taipei. Evidence from numerous sources suggest that economic growth is typically followed by increases in military spending, something that is common and normal in modernizing/industrializing nations. Therefore the slow growth of military funds in both China and Taiwan during the early 1980s is not valuable. However, in 1989 the Chinese military expenditure begins to rise drastically, increasing by 10-15 percent in less than 3 years. From 1985 to 1991, China saw an increase of 60.14 percent in military spending, while Taiwan saw an increase of 34.59 percent. Prior to 1985, the rise of both nations was steadily in line with the growth of other Northeast Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia which saw growing economic expansion tied with military growth. While post-1985 growth is an example of growing Chinese power, there is no direct correlation with tension as neither Taiwan nor China engages in behaviors that signify conflict. This further solidifies the argument that strategic ambiguity fostered peaceful relations between 1979 and 1995. It should be noted that military spending and expansion are not necessarily conducted with the express interest or understanding of tension creation among states. Military spending can increase for a variety of different means which do not all pertain to the issues with Taiwan specifically. For the purposes of this paper, however, an argument is made that these expenditures provide states with the ability to wage more effective war and thus consequently increase tension through security dilemma.
China’s military exercises and testing regarding Taiwan are surprisingly minimal leading to the 1990s. In May of 1980, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) naval task force conducted ballistic missile testing in the South Pacific as a show of force and dominance as a rising global power, which sparked concerns from Japan, the US, and Taiwan, but not enough to deeply sour any of the strengthening relations that existed at the time. This continues to solidify the argument of minimal political tension between Beijing and Taipei from 1979 to 1995.

Communications and relations between Beijing and Taipei, while still not fully resolved, began to see cultural and economic easing of tensions from 1976 to 1989. Growing sentiments of unification were beginning to be seen in both China and Taiwan in what was often referred to as “mainland fever.” On January 1, 1979, Beijing sent a New Year’s Day message to Taipei entitled “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan,” in which there was expression of desire for peaceful reunification. Among the soft and peaceful language included in the message, one section of particular significance read:

The Chinese Government has ordered the People’s Liberation Army to stop the bombardment of Jinmen (Quemoy) and other islands as from today. A state of military confrontation between the two sides still exists along the Taiwan Straits. This can only breed man-made tension. We hold that first of all this military confrontation should be ended through discussion between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Taiwan authorities so as to create the necessary prerequisites and a secure environment for the two sides to make contacts and exchanges in whatever area.

This physical action of peace sparked a new trend of communication, despite Taipei’s “Three No’s” (no contact, no negotiation, no compromise) policy, and by 1988, Kuomintang (KMT) senior statesman Chen Li-Fu began conversations with Beijing about a peaceful and culturally based unification. Tensions grew again in 1989 with the shocking discovery of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, which prompted ROC foreign minister Lien Ching to end animosity with Beijing, but as early as 1990 there was already a lifting of travel restrictions “permitting mainland cultural and athletic celebrities to visit Taiwan.” The Tiananmen Square Massacre would continue to hinder Chinese-Taiwanese relations, however, and many scholars have attributed this to a rise of pro-independence parties and democracy in Taiwan throughout the 1990s. The statistical reality of this time period persists, however, considering that no direct conflict occurred between 1979 and 1995, and both Taiwan and China actively attempted to open borders, emphasize cultural ties, and work to maintain peaceful relations.

The historically low level of animosity and clear lack of military engagement following the Taiwan Relations Act represents not only a successful implementation of strategic ambiguity by the US, but strategic ambiguity’s ability to ease tension during this
time period. By raising the stakes for declaring independence for Taiwan, and conversely raising the stakes for invasion to China, the US has been able to help the two governments foster a collective political and social culture of relative peace and stability. This was only possible due to China’s subdued power as a world leader, maintaining the US as a hegemonic power. As China grows in power, the value of strategic ambiguity’s ability to ease tension lowers. This is seen in the period from 1995 to 2013.

1995-2013 Tension

Since the resolution of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, there has been an unavoidable growth in ROC and PRC military spending and military exercises as well as a growing tensions and souring of cooperation. In 2005, the PRC defense budget was $30 billion at a 12.6 percent increase, while a fearful 2013 Taiwan Defense Report claimed that by 2020 China would have the military strength to launch a full scale invasion of Taiwan. While the fears and paranoia of both China and Taiwan about military conflict present a colorful perspective on these statistics that may not necessarily correlate to a mongering preparation for war, the reality is that the numbers do not lie. The PRC’s increase in military spending since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis is alarming. Since the late 1980s, the PLA began a campaign to modernize and expand their naval capabilities. One of the primary and explicitly stated goals of this campaign was the increase China’s nuclear deterrence abilities, and to prevent Taiwanese independence. The expansion of PLA naval military assets capable of crossing the Taiwan Strait from 1990 to 2010 can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1: PLA Naval Capabilities Growth 1990-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Destroyers</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frigates</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amphibious Ships</strong></td>
<td>58</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coastal Patrol</strong> (Missile)</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The expansion of military power and modernization of PLA military capabilities within a decade is a direct threat to Taiwan and has fostered growing fears and an increase in Taiwanese defenses as well. Taiwan has actively begun developing missiles with long range interception capabilities to defend itself from Chinese attack, knowing well that China currently holds and overwhelming military advantage. These expansions are unprecedented and increasingly growing, particularly in comparison to the military growth of the PRC and ROC prior to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. While the technology of the US military currently exceeds that of China in many respects, the fast expansion and competition in the past three decades is clear evidence of growing tension that many scholars fear may start an arms race between the strategic triangle. It should be noted
that many of the statistics gathered on Chinese military strength are formulated based on current US intelligence reports and are prone to minor inaccuracy due to the secretive and closed-off nature China expresses about its military regarding foreign inquiry.

Military exercises have also increased tremendously since 1995. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis saw military exercises and missile testing in March of 1996 within the Taiwan strait, sparking the US to send aircraft carriers in defense of Taiwan. Ronald O’Rourke, a naval affairs specialist, states that “China’s naval modernization effort … has been underway for more than 25 years, since the early to mid-1990s, and has transformed China’s navy into a much more modern and capable force. China’s navy is a formidable military force within China’s near-seas region, and it is conducting a growing number of operations in more-distant waters …” This information shows China’s domestic push for modernization and military expansion during the mid-1990s, following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Evidence has even surfaced that US Marines have been training Taiwanese soldiers on the island of Taiwan to fend off Chinese invasion since 2008, further developing a sense of tension and militaristic attitudes toward diplomacy, and angering China. A possible explanation for increases in Chinese military spending and advancement is the humiliation of backing down from the US in the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, which evoked a strong desire by Chinese policy makers to become better prepared for possible conflict with the US. This still holds strategic ambiguity as the root problem, however, as China’s humiliation and increase in military spending is in an attempt to sway the ambiguity in its own favor, making the US unsure of China’s power and therefore allowing China to see more success in any future strait crises.

The growth in tension between a Beijing and Taipei cooperation standpoint is unavoidably evident in the democratization of Taiwan. In 1987, martial law was officially lifted in Taiwan, but Taiwan remained authoritarian in government structure until the first official election in 1991. The first presidential election was held in 1996, at the concluding year of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. While there was no evident immediate backlash from China regarding the democratization of Taiwan, the relationships between the two have soured since then as relations with the US has grown around support of Taiwanese democratic domestic policy. The democratization of Taiwan also saw the emergence of an independence party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which in 2008 “not only promoted Taiwanese identity, a staple of election contests, but … proposed a referendum on membership for Taiwan in the United Nations, which created concern in Beijing and Washington that it was moving to independence.” Conversely in 2008, Taiwanese President Ma Ying-ju delivered his inaugural address in which he presented a stance of “no unification, no independence, and no use of force,” which assumed a maintenance of the “status quo” which would exclude extensive cooperation with China. Prior to the democratization of Taiwan, the ROC’s beliefs in independence did not express itself on an electoral stage where it could garner direct criticism and fear from China, whereas following Taiwan’s democratization, the Taiwanese independence as a threat to China has seemingly grown.
2013-Present Tension

The present existence of tension between China and Taiwan since 2013 is undeniably real and growing. Today, the PLA numerically has “the largest navy in the world with an overall battle force of approximately 355 ships and submarines, including approximately more than 145 major surface combatants,” according to a 2021 US Department of Defense Report. At its current pattern of expansion, the PRC’s Navy is estimated to reach 549 ships by 2030, totaling more than the US Navy’s 283 ships. China constructed its first aircraft carrier in 2012, its second in 2019, and a third is projected for 2024, placing China in a position to rival the US in naval and air capabilities. While Chinese military expansion can also be attributed to its rise to global prominence in the past few decades, its particular interest in naval modernization efforts point to a strong desire for China to control valuable regions of the Pacific, Taiwan included.

Furthermore, an example of China’s interest in raising tensions and pushing the boundaries with military exercises can be seen in early October of 2021 “[d]uring China’s National Day weekend … China dispatched 149 military aircraft southwest of Taiwan in strike group formations, causing Taiwan to scramble aircraft and activate its air defense missile systems. Taiwan’s Defense Ministry said … such tactics were aimed at wearing down the island’s defenses and degrading morale.” This military expansion, aggressive behavior, and competition with the US all points to the predicted arms race between the strategic triangle brought on by the inability of the US to curb tension with meaningful policy. Strategic ambiguity as a means of preventing conflict is therefore becoming weaker as China becomes stronger and the power harbored within an unknown future through ambiguity fades away. While strategic ambiguity saw success in easing tension and preventing conflict prior to 1996, the growth in tension from 1996 to 2013 is now evident in the looming and undeniable post-2013 tension.

Domestically, Taiwan has seen an interesting divergence of political opinion regarding cross-strait ties to Beijing and the prospect of reunification. A split between the DPP and KMT political parties has seen discussions centered largely on ways to mitigate potential for Chinese invasion while maintaining sovereignty. Both parties have ultimately come to an overarching conclusion that opposes unification and independence but recognizes that maintaining the current status quo is becoming an equally dangerous risk due to China’s increasing pressure of unification. Arguments of de-jure and de-facto independence or unification still remain the primary political discussion domestically and continue to remain an area of heightened Chinese and American interest and tension.

Policy Implications

As evident by the comparison of case study time periods prior to and following the 1995 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the strategy of Strategic Ambiguity has created a buildup of tension that can create an eventual conflict within the strategic triangle. Without properly voicing problems and solutions amongst policy makers of the triangle, ambiguity will continue to
foster instability and paranoia that elevates the probability of future armed conflict. While strategic ambiguity has succeeded as a means of preventing conflict from 1979 to 1995, the continued expedited growth of China as a global economic and military superpower as well as the growing arms race between Taiwan and China, the US needs to consider its value in maintaining ambiguous ties with Taiwan. The weight of Wilsonian democratic ideals compared to the weight of a devastating conflict between the US and China must be rebalanced without contributing to the problem further. Policy must therefore begin to end ambiguous language and side with both China and Taiwan through cultural ties. As evident during the period of 1979 to 1995, the strategic triangle saw peaceful growth and cultural exchanges, aspects of which helped to ease tensions and foster cooperation between the two nations. The paranoia and uncertainty of strategic ambiguity was successful during this period because the US remained a force to be reckoned with on both sides.

As previously addressed, China has risen to a level of power that it is now able to push back on American agendas that are not in line with PRC agendas, particularly in political friction points such as with Taiwan. Because of this, the peaceful growth of cooperation between China and Taiwan is at a standstill, and the paranoia created through strategic ambiguity will not pressure China to conform but rather will pressure China to act out against the US. Policy must therefore be developed in such a way that it moves away from the friction point created by ambiguity. The US must still denounce Taiwanese independence movements, while also preserving its value as an ideologically democratic nation posed by Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism. Policy that directly considers Taiwan to be part of mainland China but autonomous in government, as well as emphasizing cultural similarities and fostering better cooperation and communication between Beijing and Taipei through positive and negative economic reinforcement to both China and Taiwan is essential (using strategies such as tariffs to dissuade action and stronger economic relations to promote). The US must therefore promote policy which binds China and Taiwan to one another culturally and not politically, to a point where the US does not have to resort to defense of Taiwan without fears of Chinese invasion, and China does not have to fear of Taiwanese independence from Chinese cultural ties. This can be achieved by the US decreasing arms sales to Taiwan and encouraging China-Taiwan policy that focuses on joint cooperation by increasing social relations of both nations via eased transportation, political rhetoric, and tension easing events (unifying entertainment means such as sports matches, festivals, and film conducted in collaboration) between both states. The decrease in arms sale will remove many fears of US military escalation as a friction point, and a perspective of cooperation under a culturally unified China-Taiwan policy with political autonomy can allow for a gradual beginning for cultural unification much like the period of low tension from 1979 to 1995.

Conclusion

The lack of tension compared to the evident tension between China and Taiwan seen during the Third Taiwan Trait Crisis stands as a division between a period of success
and failure of strategic ambiguity in relation to the development of tension. The subtle threat of the unknown constructed by the US in policy toward Beijing and Taipei helped maintain a status quo of stability and eased tensions. However, following a growth of the Chinese economy and military power, China now rivals the US and garners the ability to challenge the ambiguous nature of US policy. I argue in concurrence of both the Wilsonian Open-Door Internationalism argument as well as the security dilemma/arms race argument previously presented by Dean Chen and Pan Zhongqi respectively. The US is currently caught in a difficult situation where the morality of defending a democratic state that has tunneled deep into the hearts of Americans since the time of President Wilson stands in grave juxtaposition to the growing reality of rapid Chinese military expansion and threat to Taiwan which compounds cyclically into an arms race. The tensions developed since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis are a result of China's resistance to ambiguity and their growing desire to make their destiny clearer. I argue that the growing tensions between China and Taiwan are due in part to the escalating arms race cycle, but also due to China's understanding of its own domestic military and economic growth that helps rival the US. This begins to erode ambiguity about US intervention against Taiwan, because as China grows stronger every day, the likelihood of American protection of Taiwan grows smaller.

The response of the US should therefore be hardline diplomacy to end the ambiguity. The growth of cultural and political diplomacy that grew between China and Taiwan in the 1980s and 1990s is a powerful symbol that stability can be achieved. While the US was able to maintain this stability for diplomacy through ambiguity, it is clear now that the era of ambiguity has ended, and China is too powerful to be left in the dark on discussions about the fate of Taiwan. While the nationalistic culture of Taiwan continues to leave Taiwanese citizens feeling more Taiwanese than Chinese, their recent history shows that diplomacy and stability can still peacefully exist across the strait. The US should therefore strive to recreate policy between Beijing and Taipei in a manner that stresses peaceful re-unification on a social and cultural level, allowing Taiwan to remain a politically autonomous state with Chinese values. This can be negotiated to allow the US to decrease arms sales to Taiwan (which is seen as a threat to China), while also helping to reinforce and support joint cultural policy between China and Taiwan to ease cultural tensions and reinforce unification while maintaining political autonomy. This would require that policy is made to strengthen US commitment to protection of Taiwan while subsequently decreasing the weapons sold to Taiwan, and engaging in active policy writing summits and conversations amongst the triangle. The anticipation is that the instability of an emboldened Taiwan armed with US weapons will not declare independence or act irrationally, while in the same sense, China will not threaten Taiwan for fear of US intervention. In the state of diminished ambiguity, constant and concrete dialogue between the US, China, and Taiwan is required to make effective change. The US must maintain the democratic values of Taiwan in the same urgent sense that China must seek to unify Taiwan, which stresses the importance of ending the worsening tensions created by ambiguous policy making.
Ethan Owens is a 2022 graduate of Norwich University, with a bachelor’s degree in history and political science. He currently serves as a second lieutenant in the United States Army.

Endnotes

1. “Joint Communique between the United States and China,” February 27, 1972, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Staff Member Office Files (SMOF), President’s Personal Files (PPF), Box 73, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121325.


17. Lin, 772.


33. Chou, 125.
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Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33


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Feldman, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78.
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