The Situation:

Taiwan, formally known as the Republic of China, has been governed independently since 1949, when the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to the island after losing the Chinese civil war to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP, which established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that same year, views Taiwan as a renegade province and a reminder that its civil war remains unfinished. The PRC vows to bring Taiwan under its control, by force if necessary. The United States had supported the KMT during the civil war, but determined that it should cut its losses and was prepared to stand aside if the PRC attacked. That all changed with the Korean War, when the United States and China found themselves on opposing sides of the conflict and the United States positioned aircraft carriers between Taiwan and the mainland. The United States went on to sign a defense treaty with Taiwan and send economic aid, effectively freezing the conflict and treating the KMT as a government in exile.

In the 1970s, as it became increasingly clear that the KMT would be unable to retake the mainland, international recognition turned in favor of Beijing. In 1971, the United Nations gave China’s permanent seat on the Security Council to the PRC. The United States, witnessing an ongoing split between China and the Soviet Union and sensing an opportunity to work with China to counter the Soviet Union, began to pursue diplomatic normalization with the PRC. In 1979, the United States granted China full diplomatic recognition, cutting official ties with Taiwan and abrogating the defense treaty.

When the United States decided to break ties with Taiwan, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which obligated the United States to provide Taiwan with defensive arms, to maintain the capacity to protect Taiwan, and to consider any unpeaceful effort to determine Taiwan’s future “of grave concern to the United States.” The TRA, however, remained ambiguous about whether the United States would actually come to Taiwan’s defense.

When the United States broke relations with Taiwan, the KMT ruled Taiwan with an iron fist. In the years since, however, Taiwan has peacefully transitioned into one of Asia’s most vibrant democracies. It has become the ninth-largest U.S. trading partner and works with the United States on global issues such as public health, supply chain security, and women’s rights. It also manufactures nearly all of the most advanced computer chips in the world. Moreover, Taiwan’s geographic location helps keep China’s military bottled up and prevents it from posing an even more severe threat to U.S. allies such as Japan and the Philippines.

For four decades, the United States has maintained a policy of “strategic ambiguity,” refusing to definitively state whether it would defend Taiwan against China. This policy both deters China and prevents Taiwan from recklessly pursuing independence, because neither can be sure whether the United States will come to Taiwan’s aid.

Today, however, the geopolitical dynamics are shifting. China now has the ability to fight a war with the United States over Taiwan and is becoming more bellicose toward the island. Its tactics include increasingly aggressive military fly-bys, economic coercion, and diplomatic pressure. Some experts are concerned that a misstep—such as a collision between Chinese and Taiwanese jets—could spiral out of control. Moreover, Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated the question of Taiwan cannot continue to be passed down from generation to generation, demonstrating a sense of urgency to make progress on the issue.

Decision Point (Hypothetical)

The United States has been carefully monitoring the tense situation in the Taiwan Strait, and has intelligence that China is preparing for an invasion. Officials argue that the threat is so clear that the United States must either act now or risk not being able to prevent a forced Chinese takeover of Taiwan. The president has convened members of the National Security Council (NSC) for advice on whether and how to intervene.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- **Do nothing, signaling to China that the United States will not intervene.** Given the strength of the Chinese military, this option would likely result in China taking control of Taiwan. The United States could lose an important partner in the region, its allies could come to question America’s reliability and become strategically autonomous, China’s military reach and economic might could expand significantly, and a democracy could be crushed with 24 million people forced to live under the CCP’s rule. By opting not to intervene, however, the United States would avoid involvement in what could be a deadly and expensive military conflict.

- **Impose economic and diplomatic sanctions on China.** This option would isolate China on the world stage and stifle its economy, though it would have economic repercussions for the United States and China’s other trading partners as well. Such pressure could dissuade China from invading Taiwan and so avoid entangling U.S. forces in a conflict. China, however, could determine that any economic and diplomatic pain is worth it and invade Taiwan anyway.

- **Position the U.S. military to defend Taiwan.** This option would make it clear that the United States will defend Taiwan if China invades. The guarantee of U.S. involvement could dissuade China from attacking Taiwan. However, if China still goes forward with an invasion, the United States would find itself in a war with China.

Additional Resources:

1. [American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous (Foreign Affairs)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-09-06/american-support-taiwan-must-be-unambiguous)
2. [Taiwan’s Status Is a Geopolitical Absurdity (Atlantic)](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/taiwans-status-is-a-geopolitical-absurdity/571250/)

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here and here). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

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