Pop-Up Case: Strategic Ambiguity Toward Taiwan

China’s growing military and economic strength, coupled with its increasingly aggressive posture in East Asia, have raised questions about U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Should the United States maintain its longstanding policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan, or should it clarify its stance?

The Situation:

U.S. policy toward Taiwan walks a delicate line. Although the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has never governed Taiwan, it claims the island as part of its territory and remains determined to take control over it—by force if necessary. In 1979, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan and recognized the PRC as the “sole legal government of China.” It acknowledged—but did not endorse—China’s claim on Taiwan. The United States established informal relations with Taiwan, and committed to supplying it with defensive weapons and maintaining the capacity to come to the island’s defense. The United States, however, stopped short of clearly promising to intervene militarily if Taiwan were attacked, opting instead for a policy of “strategic ambiguity.” The goal is that uncertainty about a U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan could also anger China and affirm its fears that the United States is weakening its commitment. This option could act as a deterrent.

In the intervening decades, Taiwan has become a vibrant democracy and partnered with the United States on several global issues. It has also become a top ten U.S. trade partner and the world’s largest supplier of advanced computer chips, which are critical for goods such as phones, electronics, and military equipment. U.S. strategic ambiguity has helped maintain largely stable relations among the United States, China, and Taiwan; while China has at times threatened Taiwan, it has not attempted a full invasion, and Taiwan has not made a push for formal independence. However, shifting geopolitical dynamics have led some to question whether strategic ambiguity has run its course.

Some contend that strategic ambiguity’s ability to deter aggression is waning. They argue that the policy was effective when China was weaker and more risk-averse, but China’s military and economic strength and its tolerance for risk have grown. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, China militarized the South China Sea, fought a border clash with India, undermined democracy in Hong Kong, and used economic tools in attempts to coerce other countries. Leaders in Beijing could conclude that, with a military capable of challenging the United States over Taiwan and an economy capable of withstanding severe sanctions, invading the island could be worth the risk of a possible U.S. intervention. Some also assert that U.S. allies in the region expect the United States to defend Taiwan and would be unnerved if it stood aside. If the United States chose to do so, these allies could lose faith in U.S. security commitments and opt to either accommodate China’s strategic interests or go it alone in their defense policy, with potentially destabilizing effects. Accordingly, analysts have increasingly begun to advocate for the United States to make a clear commitment to defend Taiwan against an attack and establish red lines that would trigger a U.S. response. The certainty of U.S. intervention, they argue, would provide a stronger deterrent against invasion.

However, some counter that strategic ambiguity remains the best approach. They point out that a defense commitment, even if it made China hesitate to launch a full invasion, could prompt more Chinese provocation toward Taiwan, as China would know exactly what would and would not trigger a U.S. response. A commitment to defend Taiwan could also anger China and affirm its fears that the United States seeks to pull Taiwan further away from the mainland. Moreover, such a shift could embolden Taiwan to pursue independence or take other risky moves. Instead of strengthening U.S. deterrence, therefore, clarifying U.S. intentions could increase the risk of a conflict breaking out and obligate the United States to join in if it did. Given the potentially catastrophic risks of a conflict between the United States and China, policymakers need to carefully consider whether strategic ambiguity remains the best course of action or whether the time has come to shift to “strategic clarity.”

Decision Point:

China’s growing military and economic strength, coupled with its increasingly aggressive posture in East Asia, has led to renewed scrutiny of U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Most recently, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a similar instance of a nuclear-armed power attacking a smaller neighbor, has led many to question the longstanding U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan. Accordingly, the president has convened the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss whether the time has come to change course. NSC members will need to weigh the deterrent benefits of clarifying U.S. policy toward Taiwan against the risk of heightened tensions that accompanies such a move as they determine the future of U.S. policy toward Taiwan.

NSC members should choose between the following options:

• Maintain strategic ambiguity. Refraining from clarifying U.S. intentions about Taiwan’s defense would avoid risking new tensions with China. It could also restrain Taiwan from taking potentially provocative actions. However, maintaining strategic ambiguity could be insufficient to deter Chinese aggression toward Taiwan.

• Adopt a new policy of strategic clarity. This option would entail announcing a clear commitment to defend Taiwan and outlining the specific actions that, if China took them, would trigger a U.S. response. To ensure maximum credibility, it could also entail strengthening the U.S. military presence in East Asia to show U.S. readiness to follow through with its commitment. This option could act as a stronger deterrent against Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. However, it could also amplify tensions on all sides in the region and would obligate the United States to join a conflict if one broke out.

Additional Resources:

1. Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense (Council on Foreign Relations)
2. What Biden’s Big Shift on Taiwan Means (Council on Foreign Relations)
3. The U.S. Must Avoid War With China Over Taiwan at all Costs (Guardian)

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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 Cabinet Simulation:

Appoint yourself (or a student) to be 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. The president should ask questions and ultimately make a decision and explain their choice.

Cabinet Simulation With Assigned Opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign the class opinions. For example, divide your class into three groups, and assign each group one of the policy options presented in the case. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or another student) as president.

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