

Taiwan Public Opinion on Cross-Strait Security Issues

Implications for US Foreign Policy

Yuan-kang Wang

The Taiwan issue is one of the most intractable challenges for international security, as it has the potential to trigger a great-power war between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). For decades, the United States has adopted a policy of strategic ambiguity toward the Taiwan Strait. By not specifying a clear course of action if war breaks out, Washington hopes to use uncertainty about US intervention both to deter China from attacking Taiwan and also to deter Taiwan from taking actions that might provoke China. Uncertainty about the US response is expected to induce caution and discourage provocative behavior across the strait, thus having a deterrent effect.

The policy was put to a test from 1995 to 2008 when, despite growing economic ties between Taiwan and China, cross-strait relations deteriorated. Beijing feared Taiwan was moving away from its goal of unification, whereas Taipei feared its freedom of action was increasingly constrained by China's rising power and growing international clout. China built up its military capabilities across the strait and took actions to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, while Taiwan reasserted its sovereignty and struggled to break free of China's diplomatic isolation. Cross-strait tensions erupted into a crisis in 1995–96 when China launched missiles off Taiwan's coast and conducted amphibious military exercises. In response, the United States dispatched two aircraft carrier groups to the region, the largest display of US naval power since the Vietnam War.¹ Against the background of strategic ambiguity, both Beijing and Washington tested each other's resolve. Although the crisis tapered off

Dr. Yuan-kang Wang is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at Western Michigan University. He received his PhD in political science from the University of Chicago and was a visiting fellow in the Brookings Institution's Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies and an international security fellow in Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Dr. Wang specializes in international relations, East Asian security, and Chinese foreign policy and is the author of *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

after Taiwan's presidential election, the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis remained a sober reminder of the danger of miscalculations. In the aftermath of the crisis, Washington resorted to a proactive approach of “dual deterrence,” issuing both warnings and reassurance to Taipei and Beijing. With the election of Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou in 2008, cross-strait tensions eased. Washington was able to deemphasize dual deterrence and to foster a positive environment for cross-strait dialogue.²

The policy of strategic ambiguity is considered a better option than strategic clarity in preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.³ Yet, an understudied dimension of strategic ambiguity is Taiwan's public opinion regarding the strength of US commitments to the island. Before Taiwan's democratization, leaders in the three capitals of Washington, Beijing, and Taipei were the main players in the triangular relationship. With democratization, the Taiwanese voters emerged as a crucial factor influencing cross-strait security. As Chu Yun-han and Andrew Nathan point out, Taiwanese voters are now the “fourth player” in the US-Taiwan-China strategic triangle, holding “effective veto power” over any cross-strait agreement.⁴ If Taiwanese voters have strong confidence in US defense of the island, Washington's deliberate ambiguity may not deter them from choosing risky policies. Since Taiwan is a democracy, the public's belief regarding US support can influence how its elected leaders make policy decisions about China. It is thus imperative to study Taiwan's public opinion on cross-strait security issues.

This article analyzes four issues vis-à-vis Taiwanese public opinion on cross-strait security: (1) confidence in US support, (2) US arms sales to Taiwan, (3) cross-strait economic ties, and (4) a potential peace agreement. The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey conducted by the Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University in Taipei is the basis for this research.⁵ It reveals vast differences among the Taiwanese public across party lines on these four issues which will impact US foreign policy. Before analyzing the survey, it is necessary to provide a brief historical overview of the trilateral relationship.

The Past: Taiwan, the United States, and China

In 1949, having lost the civil war to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Kuomintang (KMT) government led by Chiang Kai-shek retreated to the offshore island of Formosa (Taiwan), which the United

States recognized as the Republic of China (ROC). The victorious communists quickly planned an amphibious invasion, but Taiwan was saved by an unexpected turn of events. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 forced the CCP to shelve the invasion plan and move the bulk of its troops to China's northeast border with Korea. The United States, seeing the Korean War as part of a global communist expansion, intervened with military force under the auspices of the United Nations. To avoid a second war front beyond the Korean Peninsula, Washington dispatched the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait to prevent either the CCP or the KMT from attacking each other. The unexpected Korean War also prompted US leaders, who were prepared to abandon Taiwan, to elevate the strategic value of the island in Washington's global strategy of containment. Taiwan became a US ally in the Cold War.

Because the KMT was severely weakened in the Chinese civil war, the United States became the security guarantor of Taiwan. US economic and military assistance was crucial to the survival of the government in Taipei. Taiwan relied on the United States to balance the power of the PRC. This strategy of balancing resulted in the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty, concluded in the midst of the first Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954–55. The subsequent influx of US economic and military aid helped revitalize Taiwan's economy and strengthen the island's defenses. Taipei turned Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu), offshore islands in close proximity to the Chinese mainland, into heavily fortified strongholds, stationing as many as 100,000 soldiers. It cooperated with the United States on joint intelligence gathering and flew aerial reconnaissance missions over the mainland.

Taiwan's formal alliance with the United States came to an end in 1979 when Washington switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC. In response, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), a US domestic law. Two key elements in the TRA are crucial to Taiwan's security: strategic ambiguity and arms sales. First, the law enshrines the policy of strategic ambiguity. It states explicitly that any effort to settle the Taiwan issue by nonpeaceful means will be considered "a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States." It authorizes the president, in consultation with Congress, to take "appropriate action" should conflict arise in the Taiwan Strait. Since what constitutes "appropriate" response to a PRC attack on Taiwan is open to interpretation, this policy was ultimately one of "strategic

ambiguity.”⁶ Embedded in strategic ambiguity is the uncertainty of US involvement if conflict breaks out in the Taiwan Strait. A clear commitment to Taiwan would be politically provocative to Beijing, thus jeopardizing US-China relations, and might embolden Taipei into taking an intransigent stance vis-à-vis Beijing, thus destabilizing the strait. On the other hand, a clear noncommitment to Taiwan might embolden Beijing to use military means against the island, creating a situation Washington wishes to avoid. In Washington’s calculation, strategic ambiguity gives the United States maximal policy flexibility and capacity to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.⁷

The second key element in the TRA pertains to US arms sales. The law stipulates that Washington shall supply “arms of a defensive character” to Taiwan. The arms sales ameliorate some of the power asymmetry between Taiwan and the much larger China, but more importantly, they signal the level of US political support of Taiwan. Needless to say, Beijing has repeatedly tried to limit the extent of the arms sales, most notably in the 17 August 1982 US-China communiqué. To reassure Taiwan, President Ronald Reagan pledged six assurances, including not to set a date for ending US arms sales and not to hold prior consultations with China.⁸ As China modernizes its military power, US arms sales help Taiwan maintain some level of self-defense, strengthen its bargaining position vis-à-vis China, and boost confidence on the island. In a way, the formal alliance between Taiwan and the United States prior to 1979 was replaced by an informal, quasi-alliance relationship.

Subsequently, Taiwan experienced a series of political reforms that culminated in the island’s democratization in the 1990s. The same period also witnessed the rise of Taiwanese identity as well as growing aspirations for international recognition. The process of democratization created opportunities for politicians to win elections by using the issue of Taiwanese nationalism to mobilize voters.⁹ For its part, Beijing saw Taiwan’s identity politics as deviating from the “One-China principle,” and it interpreted the actions of Taiwanese leaders as implicit moves toward creeping independence. In 1996, Taiwan held its first direct presidential election amidst missile threats from China. President Lee Teng-hui won a landslide victory. To Beijing’s chagrin, he declared in 1999 that cross-strait relations were akin to “special state-to-state relations.” In 2000 the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) replaced the KMT as the ruling party. President Chen Shui-bian took a

step further and declared in 2002 that there was “one country on each side of the Taiwan Strait.” Beijing sharply criticized these statements, viewing a series of Taiwan’s “de-Sinification” programs as moves toward independence. In 2005, China passed the Anti-Secession Law, giving it a domestic legal basis to use force if Taiwan declares independence.

During the same period, US-Taiwan relations were at a historic low, thanks to President Chen Shui-bian’s unilateral moves on cross-strait issues and lack of prior consultation with Washington. Preoccupied with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration saw Taipei’s actions as “rocking the boat.” Washington expressed its opposition to any unilateral moves to alter the status quo, as defined by the United States, in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁰ For its part, Beijing adroitly portrayed Taiwan as the troublemaker, a view that was widely accepted in the world. Few attributed the tensions to Beijing’s rigid One-China position and military buildup across the strait. Instead, Taiwan’s aspiration for sovereignty and international recognition was seen as overly provocative to China, and the island was blamed for destabilizing the delicate cross-strait balance.¹¹

The dynamics of Taiwan’s domestic politics began to change as economic downturns overshadowed identity aspirations. Voters became increasingly concerned with rising unemployment and other economic problems that threatened their livelihood. Many Taiwanese preferred to see cross-strait tensions reduced and to take advantage of the economic opportunities presented by China. With voters disillusioned and fed up with corruption, the ruling DPP began losing seats in local and national elections, including in the Legislative Yuan. In 2008, KMT presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou won a landslide victory. The new administration adopted the “1992 Consensus”—a cross-strait verbal agreement to disagree on what “one China” means—and proceeded to negotiate with Beijing on direct flights and a host of economic issues. Cross-strait relations began to thaw. As a validation of his policy, President Ma won reelection in January 2012.

As noted earlier, Taiwanese voters have become a crucial player in cross-strait issues. Through ballots, they can potentially affect the policy Taiwan’s democratically elected leaders choose vis-à-vis China. In the context of China’s rise, how does the Taiwanese public view the US security commitment and arms sales, cross-strait economic cooperation, and a potential peace agreement with China?

Confidence in US Commitment

The US policy of strategic ambiguity rests on the assumption that uncertainty about US action in the event of a PRC attack on Taiwan will induce caution. For Beijing, the prospect of US military intervention serves as a constraint on the use of force against Taiwan. For Taipei, the possibility of US nonintervention and abandonment works to constrain its leaders from taking unilateral moves that might provoke Beijing. Although leaders on both sides of the strait would prefer more clarity from Washington, they seem to understand the logic of strategic ambiguity. But how does Taiwan's public view the strength of US commitment to its defense?

A key result from the 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey shows a surprisingly high level of confidence in US support, despite Washington's deliberate ambiguity. In the event of a cross-strait war, most Taiwanese people are confident Washington would send troops to the island—even if China's attack were caused by a formal declaration of Taiwan independence. When queried about a situation where China attacked Taiwan because it declared formal independence, 56.4 percent of respondents said the United States would defend Taiwan. This confidence grows even stronger (73.5 percent) if the attack is unprovoked (i.e., Taiwan maintains the status quo and does not declare independence). Previous surveys also find the percentages of those confident of unconditional US support are greater than those who are doubtful (table 1).¹²

Table 1. If Mainland China attacks Taiwan because it declared independence, do you think the United States will send troops to help Taiwan?

Date	Yes	No
2003	47.5%	32.9%
2005	52.8%	28.2%
2008	46.6%	44.1%
2011	56.4%	27.4%

Adapted from Emerson Niou, "The Taiwan National Security Survey." Data were collected by the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University in Taiwan, in various years.

These findings are puzzling. The uncertainty of US support is expected to deter Taiwan from formally declaring independence, but a majority of its voters are confident Washington would militarily intervene, even if Taiwan declared independence. Such a high level of public confidence in

US support may complicate extended deterrence. Given the dynamics of Taiwan's fickle domestic politics, the public's high confidence in US support might increase the risk of miscalculation in cross-strait relations. Misperception of US resolve to defend Taiwan increases the probability of war in the Taiwan Strait.¹³

Cross-tabulations reveal the public's perception of US support is contingent on party identification. Those who identify with the pan-Greens (the DPP and Taiwan Solidarity Union) tend to have more confidence in US support than those who identify with the pan-Blues (the KMT, New Party, and People First Party). When asked about a scenario where China attacked because Taiwan declared independence, 85.7 percent of Green supporters believed that the United States would help defend Taiwan, compared with 55.6 percent Blue supporters (table 2). If the attack were unprovoked, 91.3 percent of Green and 76.4 percent of Blue supporters believed that the US would defend Taiwan (table 3).

Table 2: If mainland China attacks Taiwan because it declared independence, do you think the United States will send troops to help Taiwan?

		Party Identification:			
		Blue	Independent	Green	Row Total
US Support	No	44.4%	33.3%	14.3%	32.5%
	Yes	55.6%	66.7%	85.7%	67.5%
Column		45.0%	24.4%	30.6%	100%
		Pearson Chi-square=68.5, df=2, p<0.001, N=911			

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

Table 3: If Taiwan maintains the status quo and does not declare independence but mainland China attacks anyway, do you think the United States will send troops to help Taiwan?

		Party Identification:			
		Blue	Independent	Green	Row Total
US Support	No	23.6%	16.7%	8.7%	17.3%
	Yes	76.4%	83.3%	91.3%	82.7%
Column		44.0%	25.2%	30.8%	100%
		Pearson Chi-square=27.4, df=2, p<0.001, N=972			

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

It is widely believed that China's threat to use force restrains Taiwan from moving toward formal independence.¹⁴ The 2011 survey supports this view; 65.7 percent of respondents opposed independence if it would cause a war with China. Without China's threat of war, however, independence enjoys

widespread support among Taiwan’s public. The same survey showed that 80.2 percent would support declaring independence if it would not trigger a cross-strait military conflict. Further analysis reveals that the deterrent effect of China’s military threat is dependent on the respondents’ party identification. The threat of war deters Blue but not Green supporters from favoring independence. A majority of Green partisans (64.7 percent) would still favor a formal declaration of independence, even if it meant war with China, while 86.3 percent of Blue partisans oppose declaring independence if it would cause war (table 4). Conversely, if a formal declaration of independence would not cause war, a great majority of Taiwanese voters (92.6 percent of Green and 70 percent of Blue supporters) would favor independence (table 5). The 2011 survey suggests that China’s threat to use force works insofar as the Blues, but not the Greens, are concerned.

Table 4: If a declaration of independence by Taiwan would cause mainland China to attack Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan independence?

<i>Party Identification:</i>					
		<i>Blue</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Row Total</i>
Independence even if war with China	Not Favor	86.3%	65.0%	35.3%	65.7%
	Favor	13.7%	35.0%	64.7%	34.3%
Column		45.4%	24.5%	30.1%	100%
Pearson Chi-square=204.6, df=2, p<0.001, N=979					

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

Table 5: If a declaration of independence by Taiwan would not cause mainland China to attack Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan independence?

<i>Party Identification:</i>					
		<i>Blue</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Row Total</i>
Independence if no war	Not Favor	30.0%	17.7%	7.4%	19.8%
	Favor	70.0%	82.3%	92.6%	80.2%
Column		42.6%	26.2%	31.1%	100%
Pearson Chi-square=58.4, df=2, p<0.001, N=992					

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

Party identification is thus correlated with confidence in US support and with perception of China’s threat to use force. Green partisans tend to be more confident of US support and tend to disregard the threat of war with China. This brings forth a puzzle: Why do people still support

independence, even if it means war with China? As the United States is Taiwan's security guarantor, we can hypothesize that unconditional support of independence is contingent on confidence in US support; that is, those who support unconditional independence do so because they believe that the United States would defend Taiwan. Cross-tabulation lends credence to this hypothesis, showing that 81.4 percent of respondents who favor independence believe the United States would again defend Taiwan even if China's attack were caused by a formal declaration of independence (table 6). The unconditional support of independence is correlated with confidence in US intervention. The US factor is thus a crucial consideration in the Taiwanese voters' preference for independence.

Table 6: Support of unconditional independence and belief in US intervention

		<i>Independence even if war with China</i>		
		<i>Not Favor</i>	<i>Favor</i>	<i>Row Total</i>
Would the US defend Taiwan if the war were caused by a declaration of independence?	No	40.5%	18.6%	33.1%
	Yes	59.5%	81.4%	66.9%
Column		66.1%	33.9%	100%
		Pearson Chi-square=41.8, df=1, p<0.001, N=859		

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

US Arms Sales

The Taiwan Relations Act stipulates that the United States will supply defensive weapons to Taiwan. The power asymmetry between China and Taiwan means that Taiwan must seek an external ally to counter-balance China's power. For decades, US arms sales have been critical to Taiwan's self-defense capabilities. As China rises, the cross-strait military balance, however, puts Taiwan at an increasing disadvantage. The Pentagon's 2011 annual report on China's military power points out that the balance of military forces in the Taiwan Strait continues to shift in China's favor.¹⁵ China has deployed between 1,000 and 1,200 short-range ballistic missiles across the strait. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy now boasts the largest force of principal combatants, submarines, and amphibious warships in Asia, and it is developing aircraft carriers to project power overseas. In light of the growing military disparity, the Obama administration approved in early 2010 a \$6.4 billion

arms sale to Taiwan, including UH-60 Blackhawk utility helicopters, Patriot PAC-3 air and missile defense systems, and minesweeping ships. In September 2011, the administration authorized another \$5.85 billion arms sale package that includes upgrades to Taiwan's aging F-16 A/B fighters, F-16 pilot training in the United States, and an advanced radar system to detect stealth aircraft like the J-20.

Despite the arms purchase, most of the people on Taiwan have doubts about the island's self-defense capabilities. In the 2011 survey, 80 percent of respondents do not think Taiwan has sufficient military capability to defend against a Chinese attack. When asked whether Taiwan should strengthen its military power or adopt a more moderate policy in the face of China's military threat, 68.4 percent of the people favored more moderate policies, while only 23.7 percent favored strengthening Taiwan's military power. For most of the respondents, moderate policies were considered more effective in reducing cross-strait tensions than building up self-defense capabilities.

Nonetheless, a key rationale justifying continued arms purchases is that Taiwan should at least have the capabilities to withstand an initial attack from China until the United States has sufficient time to respond. A robust defense also makes Taiwan less vulnerable to China's military coercion and enables the island to bargain from a position of strength in cross-strait negotiations. From Beijing's standpoint, however, a Taiwan that is militarily weak would be more likely to accept Beijing's conditions of unification. To further tilt the cross-strait military balance of power in its favor, Beijing has continued to strengthen its military power opposite Taiwan, including the deployment of more than 1,000 ballistic and cruise missiles.

In his 2002 visit to the United States, China's president Jiang Zemin floated the idea of withdrawing missiles opposite Taiwan in exchange for a reduction in US arms sales to the island.¹⁶ His proposal received lukewarm response from Washington, as it contradicted the TRA and Reagan's six assurances barring negotiation with Beijing on Taiwan arms sales. Taiwan's leaders were also dismissive of the proposal. In contrast, its electorate is more receptive to the "missiles for arms sales" proposal. Many consider US arms purchases a futile attempt to confront China's military power, benefiting mainly arms brokers and defense contractors. In 2011, a majority (52.4 percent) of respondents favored a reduction in arms purchases from the United States in exchange for a withdrawal of

China's missiles opposite Taiwan, compared with 37.8 percent who opposed the deal. Cross-tabulation with party identification reveals that 68 percent of Blue supporters favored such a trade, while 53.4 percent of Green supporters were opposed to the deal (table 7).

Table 7: If China withdraws its missiles from along the southeast coast, do you favor a reduction in arms purchases from the United States?

		Party Identification:			
		Blue	Independent	Green	Row Total
Missiles for Arms Sales	Not Favor	32.0%	45.2%	53.4%	41.8%
	Favor	68.0%	54.8%	46.6%	58.2%
Column		44.1%	26.3%	29.6%	100%
		Pearson Chi-square=34.5, df=2, p<0.001, N=985			

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

Trade and Security

China's economic rise presents both opportunities and threats to Taiwan. Trade with China promotes Taiwan's economic growth, whereas economic dependence on China risks Taiwan's security. In the 1990s, President Lee Teng-hui attempted to limit Taiwanese investment on the mainland through his "patience over haste" policy, but Taiwanese entrepreneurs were able to bypass government restrictions through intermediaries in Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere. Economic exchanges between Taiwan and China continued to flourish under the Chen Shui-bian administration. As it turns out, despite government efforts to control it, cross-strait economic engagement is "a bottom-up phenomenon" that neither government can control.¹⁷ Taiwanese entrepreneurs, attracted by China's enormous economic potential, managed to devise ingenious ways to circumvent government regulations.

As Taiwan's economy faced rising employment and sluggish growth in much of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the economic opportunity presented by China had a magnetic effect on the island. Exports to China have soared since 2000. China is now Taiwan's largest export market, accounting for 27.24 percent of its total exports in 2011. China became Taiwan's largest trading partner in 2005, surpassing Japan. Cross-strait trade volume reached \$128 billion in 2011, accounting for 21.63 percent of Taiwan's total foreign trade.¹⁸ Taiwanese businesses have invested heavily in China, and more than half a million

Taiwanese people now live there permanently. On 29 June 2010, Taiwan and China signed a landmark trade agreement, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). Eager to tie Taiwan's economy closer to the mainland, Beijing made substantial trade concessions. The "early harvest" list of tariff concessions covered 539 Taiwanese products, valued at \$13.8 billion, compared to 267 mainland Chinese products, valued at \$2.9 billion.

With growing trade, however, come concerns about economic dependence. Taiwan's reliance on China's market may make the island vulnerable to economic coercion. China's rising economic capabilities give it leverage in its dealings with other countries. The 2010 flare-up over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, where a Chinese fishing trawler collided with a Japanese patrol boat, is a case in point. Beijing reacted angrily to the arrest of the Chinese captain, issuing a series of official denunciations. More importantly, China suspended shipment of rare earth minerals to Japan. Even when the Japanese government appeared to back down and released the captain, Beijing upped the ante by demanding an apology. These hardball tactics are a reminder of the risk of economic dependence on China.

In general, Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party views cross-strait economic ties with suspicion, worrying that increasing economic integration will push Taiwan into China's orbit and make the island vulnerable to economic coercion. The KMT party, in contrast, is more favorable of cross-strait economic ties, arguing that trade and investment agreements will help revitalize Taiwan's sluggish economy and prevent the country from being marginalized in the growing economic integration of East Asia. Taiwan's electorates are evenly split on this issue of trade versus security. Of the 1,104 respondents in the 2011 survey, 42.2 percent favored strengthening economic relations with China, and 42 percent were opposed. When we consider party identification, however, the differences in opinion on China trade become apparent. An overwhelming majority of Green supporters (82.8 percent) were opposed to strengthening trade relations with China, whereas 75.9 percent of Blue supporters were in favor (table 8).

Table 8: Do you favor strengthening trade with China so that Taiwan can earn more money or do you favor reducing trade with China so that Taiwan's national security will not be affected by the economic dependence?

		Party Identification:			
		Blue	Independent	Green	Row Total
Strengthening trade with China	Not Favor	24.1%	54.5%	82.8%	49.9%
	Favor	75.9%	45.5%	17.2%	50.1%
Column		43.9%	25.1%	31%	100%
		Pearson Chi-square=233.0, df=2, p<0.001, N=919			

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

Cross-Strait Peace Agreement

Regarding the choice between independence and unification with China, various surveys over the years have consistently shown that the majority of Taiwanese support the current state of affairs, the “status quo,” in the Taiwan Strait. Only 1.6 percent of respondents in the 2011 survey favored immediate unification, and 5 percent were for immediate independence. The majority (90.7 percent) favored some form of the status quo, either indefinitely or for a certain period. Among the status quo supporters were voters who based their preferences on the perceived costs of independence and unification; that is, some status quo supporters would favor independence if it could be done peacefully or support unification if there is not much difference in the political, economic, and social conditions between Taiwan and China.¹⁹

That Taiwanese voter’s change their preferences based on cross-strait conditions has not been lost on Beijing. In its attempt to move Taiwan toward unification, the Hu Jintao leadership in Beijing showed remarkable skill in dealing with Taiwan. Hu and other officials realized that the hardball tactics and harsh rhetoric of the past had driven Taiwan further away. To remedy this, they embarked upon a “hearts and minds” strategy aiming to win over Taiwanese voters. The focus of this new strategy is on preventing Taiwan from drifting toward independence. Beijing’s strategy for engaging Taiwan’s leaders is to start with the supposedly easier area of economic issues, hoping that the benefits of economic linkages will lead to political negotiation on the future status of Taiwan. As Shelley Rigger writes, “Beijing’s strategy is to prevent Taiwan from moving farther away toward formal independence while allowing the forces

of economic integration and political amity to pull Taiwan more deeply into the PRC's orbit."²⁰ Beijing muted the unpopular "one country, two systems" formula for unification and avoided reminding Taiwan that the use of force to deter independence or compel unification was still an option. To bring the island closer, Chinese leaders promised the benefits of closer economic, cultural, educational, and other ties for the Taiwanese people. For instance, Beijing opened the mainland market to agricultural products from southern Taiwan, an area traditionally unfriendly toward China; mainland universities meted out preferential treatment to Taiwanese students; academic scholars from both sides regularly held joint conferences; Taiwanese businesses received low-cost loans for investing on the mainland; daily direct cross-strait flights helped revitalize Taiwan's ailing airline industry and airports; and the influx of mainland tourists provided tangible gains to Taiwan's domestic economy.

Differences between political systems, economic development, and the social environment have kept Taiwan and China separated over the years. Previous surveys showed that the Taiwanese public would support unification if these cross-strait differences were narrowed. Recent efforts to narrow the differences, such as closer economic and people-to-people interactions, however, have not increased the proportion of Taiwan's public who favor unification. The 2011 survey shows that if the political, economic, and social conditions across the strait became roughly similar, only 34.4 percent of respondents would support unification, but 57.4 percent would still oppose it. On the other hand, if there are significant cross-strait differences, an overwhelming majority (73.7 percent) would oppose unification with China, compared with only 16.5 percent who would support it. This finding contradicts the expectation that increasing cross-strait ties would lead to political reconciliation. Cross-strait convergence in political, economic, and social conditions is expected to create incentives for unification, but an overwhelming majority of Taiwan's public opposes unification, even under favorable circumstances. If anything, longitudinal data reveal a decline in public support of unification. Figure 1 shows that the percentages who support unification under favorable conditions are steadily declining, whereas those opposing unification are gradually rising.

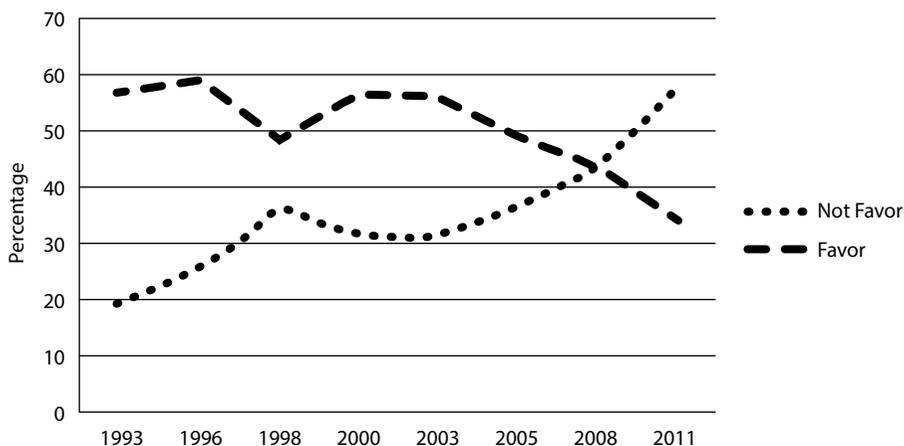


Figure 1. If China and Taiwan become politically, economically, and socially compatible, do you favor unification?

(Adapted from Brett V. Benson and Emerson M. S. Niu, "Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, and the Security Balance in the Taiwan Strait," *Security Studies* 14, no. 2 (April–June 2005): 279, and Niu, "Taiwan National Security Surveys" [various years 2003–11].)

Although the proportion of those on Taiwan who favor unification is declining, a great majority (74.5 percent) supports some kind of peace agreement in which China pledges not to attack Taiwan and Taiwan pledges not to declare independence. Cross-tabulation with party identification shows that the proposed peace agreement enjoys widespread support among both Blue (90.5 percent) and Green (64.3 percent) supporters (table 9). Despite this high level of support revealed by the survey, public opinion on the peace agreement can be malleable, depending on factors such as the exact details of the agreement and competition between domestic political forces. For instance, in his reelection campaign in late 2011, President Ma Ying-jeou broached the prospect of signing a cross-strait peace agreement, but after being criticized for moving too soon, he quickly abandoned the idea.

Table 9: If Taiwan and mainland China sign an agreement in which the mainland pledges not to attack Taiwan and Taiwan pledges not to declare independence, do you favor this kind of agreement?

		Party Identification:			
		Blue	Independent	Green	Row Total
Peace Agreement	Not Favor	9.5%	23.4%	35.7%	20.9%
	Favor	90.5%	76.6%	64.3%	79.1%
Column		44.3%	25.9%	29.8%	100%
Pearson Chi-square=77.5, df=2, p<0.001, N=1,024					

Note: Entries are column percentages. Source: The 2011 Taiwan National Security Survey

Implications for US Foreign Policy

The Taiwanese public's high confidence in US support does not necessarily suggest that the policy of strategic ambiguity has failed to achieve its objective. After all, China has not used military force against Taiwan, even after the termination of the US-Taiwan mutual defense treaty in 1980. While leaders in Beijing and Taiwan understand the logic of strategic ambiguity, the public stance differs. As confident as Taiwan's public is about US support, we should keep in mind that public opinion is malleable and constantly shifting; it is one of many factors leaders consider in making decisions. Nevertheless, the volatile mix of Taiwan's domestic politics and public misperception of US resolve can create destabilizing conditions across the Taiwan Strait. To minimize the risk of miscalculation, Taiwan's elected leaders need to emphasize that US support is not ironclad but rather ambiguous and contingent. The Taiwan public needs to be disabused of the idea that Washington will defend the island no matter what.

The US security commitment to Taiwan, however, is being questioned as China rises in power. Historically, power transitions generated instability and often resulted in war.²¹ A number of commentators, seeing the increased probability of a US-China conflict, recently began to call for Washington to back away from its security commitment to Taiwan and to reduce arms sales.²² They believe that once the thorny issue of Taiwan is removed, both the United States and China can engage in cooperative activities and build mutual trust, thus reducing the likelihood of war. Although the "abandon Taiwan" argument has been around since the Cold War,²³ it seems to have gained more traction now that China is poised to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy in the decades, if not years, to come.

Nevertheless, it would be misguided to scale down the US commitment or reduce arms sales in the face of a rising China. First and foremost, giving up Taiwan would not eliminate the root cause of US-China security competition. The reason the United States and China are engaged in a competitive relationship is international anarchy, not Taiwan. In an anarchic system with no central authority to enforce order, states will pursue more power relative to others to be secure. The intentions of other states are difficult to know, and even if known, they are changeable over time. States cannot rest their security on the goodwill of others. This is the structural cause of great-power rivalry.²⁴ Hence, the US-China

security competition exists independently of Taiwan. Even without Taiwan, other issues—such as the Korean peninsula, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the South China Sea, or even a trade dispute—could still erupt into a full-scale conflict. Recall that the only war between the United States and China was not fought over Taiwan but over Korea. Conceding Taiwan to China would not remove the structural cause of US-China security competition.

Second, appeasing China by giving up Taiwan will increase Beijing's foreign policy ambitions, not restrain them. Beijing is likely to see such a concession as a sign of growing US weakness and as a vindication of China's successful pursuit of power. US concession on Taiwan would also likely fuel Chinese nationalism.²⁵ It is dangerous to expect that, once Washington abandons Taiwan, Beijing would restrain its foreign policy ambitions or turn into a status quo power. On the contrary, China's capabilities to project power would be substantially enhanced should Taiwan fall into its orbit. Rather than limiting its aims, Beijing would likely push for more concessions on other issues. As international relations theorist John Mearsheimer argues, "appeasement is likely to make a dangerous rival more, not less, dangerous."²⁶

Third, Taiwan is a strategic asset for the United States and its allies. The island is strategically located along the crucial sea lines of communication from Japan to Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, GEN Douglas MacArthur famously referred to Taiwan as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier." Today, China's strategic planners see the island as an integral part of its future naval power, as a way to break out of the encirclement of the "first island chain." Acquisition of Taiwan would enhance China's naval capabilities and give the PLA navy greater strategic depth. It would adversely affect Japan's maritime security, making it more difficult for the United States to defend its ally. Taiwan's close location to the Philippine Sea and the Luzon Strait would also provide the PLA navy easy access to the South China Sea, an area fraught with territorial disputes.

Hence, walking away from Taiwan would not make for a more cooperative relationship between the United States and China. It would not remove the root cause of US-China security competition which stems from international anarchy. Appeasing China by giving up Taiwan would increase, not reduce, China's foreign policy ambitions and at the same time would enhance the PLA's naval posture and power projection. These strategic considerations are consistent with US ideological values;

abandoning a democracy to an authoritarian government would undercut Washington's stated interests in supporting democracy and freedom around the world. It is risky to assume that China's foreign policy is guided by limited aims and will remain unchanged as its power rises. Rising states tend to expand,²⁷ and we have no reason to expect China to behave otherwise.

Instead of abandoning Taiwan, the US policy of strategic ambiguity remains "safer and smarter" in light of the complex situation in the Taiwan Strait.²⁸ As stated earlier, a clear withdrawal of US commitment to Taiwan would embolden China to take military action to resolve the Taiwan issue. Strategic ambiguity also avoids the moral hazard problem: A clear security commitment to Taiwan would encourage the island to take risky moves vis-à-vis China, knowing that Washington would come to its rescue. Either a clear commitment or a clear noncommitment would create exactly the destabilizing situation that the United States wishes to avoid.²⁹ Strategic ambiguity, on the other hand, avoids the problem and gives Washington policy flexibility in deterring both Beijing and Taipei from destabilizing the Taiwan Strait.

Another advantage of strategic ambiguity is its distinct usefulness in dual deterrence. As Andrew Nathan points out, in a single-deterrence situation, the deterring state seeks to create enough certainty so the other side will not challenge the status quo while not so much that it knows how far it can push the envelope before triggering a response. The problem becomes more challenging in a dual-deterrence situation in which the deterring state tries to prevent two actors with opposing interests from taking destabilizing actions. By not specifying a clear course of action, strategic ambiguity helps the deterring state to find a balance in setting the level of threat against the two opposing actors. There is, however, a pitfall. In dual deterrence, actions that reassure one side will deassure the other, thus creating destabilizing effects. For instance, when President Clinton reassured China in 1998 by articulating the Three Noes (no support of Taiwan independence; no support of "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan"; and no support of Taiwan's membership in any organization that requires statehood), it caused anxiety in Taipei. Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui countered this "intentional tilt toward Beijing" by declaring that cross-strait relations were a kind of "special state-to-state relationship." The result was significantly heightened tensions.³⁰ By

the same logic, although backing away from Taiwan would reassure Beijing, it would confound Taipei and thus create destabilizing effects.

Conclusions

This article offers a glimpse of survey data collected in early 2011 revealing the partisan divide of Taiwan's public opinion on national security. Although Washington's policy in the event of a cross-strait military conflict is deliberately ambiguous, most Taiwanese people have high confidence the United States would defend the island. This public confidence in US support is divided along party lines: Green partisans are more confident of US support and more dismissive of China's threat to use force than are Blue supporters. This high level of confidence in US support hardened a large number of respondents' determination to support Taiwan independence, even if it were to mean war with China. When it comes to reducing cross-strait tensions, a majority favors moderate policies toward China instead of military self-strengthening. Most favor reducing US arms purchases in exchange for China's withdrawal of missiles across the Taiwan Strait. Green partisans are more concerned about the security implications of growing trade ties with China than are Blue supporters. During the last decade, in spite of increasing cross-strait economic and social interactions, Taiwanese public support of unification under favorable conditions has steadily declined. Although unification receives lukewarm support, the survey shows that a cross-strait peace agreement, in general, enjoys widespread support among Taiwanese voters, although more disagreement may arise over its details.

The impact of China's rise on Taiwan is profound and far-reaching. The China factor has become the most salient issue in Taiwan's national elections and will continue to be so in the future. Maintaining political autonomy as China's power and leverage continue to rise will become increasingly challenging for Taiwan. As China gains influence, its rising power may also reduce the willingness of the United States to help defend Taiwan.³¹ Walking away from Taiwan, however, will not solve the structural cause of US-China security competition; neither will it make for a more cooperative bilateral relationship. Strategic ambiguity has served the region well, and there is no good reason to change course at the moment. **SSQ**

Notes

1. James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 337.
2. Richard C. Bush, "Taiwan and East Asian Security," *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 274–89.
3. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "Strategic Ambiguity or Strategic Clarity?" in *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis*, ed. Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For a game theory assessment of strategic ambiguity as an optimal policy in the Taiwan Strait, see Brett Benson and Emerson Niou, "A Theory of Dual Deterrence: Credibility, Conditional Deterrence, and Strategic Ambiguity," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 12 April 2007.
4. Yun-han Chu and Andrew J. Nathan, "Seizing the Opportunity for Change in the Taiwan Strait," *Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2007/08): 77–91.
5. The survey was conducted in February 2011, with a sample size of 1,104. I thank Prof. Emerson Niou for providing the data.
6. Strategic ambiguity can be traced to the first Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954–55 when the Eisenhower administration deliberately adopted an ambiguous policy with regard to the defense of Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu). In a meeting with congressional leaders on 20 January 1955, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles explained the administration's policy: "Up to the present time we have been covering this situation [in the offshore area] by hoping the communists would be deterred by uncertainty." Quoted in Gordon H. Chang and He Di's, "The Absence of War in the U.S.-China Confrontation over Quemoy and Matsu in 1954–1955: Contingency, Luck, Deterrence?" *American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (December 1993): 1511, n. 21.
7. Yuan-kang Wang, "Preserving Peace in the Taiwan Strait," *Chinese Political Science Review* 33 (June 2002): 149–74; and Benson and Niou, "Theory of Dual Deterrence."
8. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 148.
9. Yuan-kang Wang, "Taiwan's Democratization and Cross-Strait Security," *Orbis* 48, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 293–304.
10. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly stated before the House International Relations Committee on 21 April 2004 that "the U.S. does not support independence for Taiwan or unilateral moves that would change the status quo as we define it."
11. Edward Friedman, ed., *China's Rise, Taiwan's Dilemmas and International Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
12. Among the four surveys, 2008 is the only year when the two responses are tied within the sampling margin of error.
13. Benson and Niou, "Theory of Dual Deterrence."
14. Brett V. Benson and Emerson M. S. Niou, "Public Opinion, Forei (April–June 2005): 286.
15. DoD, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Development Involving the People's Republic of China, 2011* (Washington: DoD, 2011), http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf. The point about the shifting military balance in favor of China has been in the Pentagon report since 2005.
16. Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 266.
17. Shelley Rigger, *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 122.

18. Trade Statistics, Bureau of Foreign Trade, Republic of China (Taiwan), <http://cus93.trade.gov.tw/ENGLISH/FSCE/>.
19. John Fuh-sheng Hsieh and Emerson M. S. Niou, "Measuring Taiwan Public Opinion on Taiwanese Independence," *China Quarterly* 181, no. 1 (March 2005): 158–68.
20. Rigger, *Why Taiwan Matters*, 160.
21. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).
22. Bill Owens, "America Must Start Treating China as a Friend," *Financial Times*, 17 November 2009; Bruce Gilley, "Not So Dire Straits: How the Finlandization of Taiwan Benefits U.S. Security," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (January/February 2010): 44–60; and Charles Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March/April 2011): 80–91.
23. For an informative review of earlier but similar arguments about whether Taiwan presents a "threat" to a cooperative US-China relationship, see Andrew D. Marble, "The 'Taiwan Threat' Hypothesis: Ideas, Values, and Foreign Policy Preferences in the United States," *Issues & Studies* 38, no. 1 (March 2002): 165–99.
24. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).
25. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?" *Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 25; and Shelley Rigger, "Why Giving up Taiwan Will not Help Us with China," *AEI Asian Outlook*, no. 3 (November 2011), <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/asia/why-giving-up-taiwan-will-not-help-us-with-china/>.
26. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 164.
27. Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.
28. Tucker, "Strategic Ambiguity or Strategic Clarity?" 205.
29. Benson and Niou, "Theory of Dual Deterrence."
30. Andrew J. Nathan, "What's Wrong with American Taiwan Policy?" *Washington Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 93–106.
31. Robert Sutter, "Taiwan's Future: Narrowing Strait," *NBR Analysis* (May 2011): 3–22; and Tucker and Glaser, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?"

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in SSQ are those of the authors and are not officially sanctioned by any agency or department of the US government.