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Going Too Far Bush's Pledge to Defend Taiwan

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Executive Summary

When he pledged to do whatever was necessary—even use U.S. military forces—to help Taiwan defend itself, President George W. Bush seemingly replaced Washington's long-standing policy of "strategic ambiguity" with a policy of strategic clarity. Although the president and his advisers subsequently retreated from his initial rhetorical stance, both China and Taiwan are likely to believe that Bush's original statement accurately reflects U.S. policy. That creates an extremely dangerous situation for the United States.

Proponents of a U.S. security commitment to Taiwan casually assume that Beijing would never challenge it. But that is an assumption based almost entirely on America's experience deterring Soviet aggression against major U.S. allies during the Cold War. Proponents ignore other examples of the failure of deterrence throughout history.

In addition to the balance of military forces, three factors are especially important in determining whether deterrence is likely to succeed or fail: the importance of the interests at stake to the guarantor power, the importance of those interests to the challenging power, and the inclination of the challenging power to gamble. All three factors work against the United States in the case of Taiwan.

President Bush was right to approve a robust package of arms sales to Taiwan. But that should be the extent of America's risk exposure. A security commitment creates the prospect of either a humiliating U.S. retreat during a crisis or a catastrophic war with a nuclear-armed China. Moreover, the likelihood of a challenge by the People's Republic of China to the U.S. commitment will grow ever stronger as China's military capabilities increase in the coming years.

Ted Galen Carpenter is vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and the coeditor of China's Future: Constructive Partner or Emerging Threat?

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Introduction

President George Bush startled people on both sides of the Pacific when he seemingly ended Washington's long-standing policy of "strategic ambiguity" regarding Taiwan. Previously, U.S. leaders had indicated that the United States would regard the use of force against Taiwan by the People's Republic of China as a serious breach of the peace and might—depending on the circumstances—intervene militarily. That posture did little more than reiterate the vague provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.¹

Sometimes, strategic ambiguity took extreme forms. During a visit to China in 1995, Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia Joseph P. Nye was asked by his hosts what the United States would do if war broke out between the PRC and Taiwan. Nye reportedly replied, "We don't know and you don't know."²

In a series of interviews on April 25, 2001, Bush appeared to discard all nuances and caveats. When asked by ABC News reporter Charles Gibson if the United States had an obligation to defend Taiwan, the president replied, "Yes, we do, and the Chinese must understand that." Would the United States respond "with the full force of the American military?" Gibson pressed. "Whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself," Bush replied.³

In making such statements, President Bush replaced strategic ambiguity with strategic clarity. Unfortunately, he clarified matters in precisely the wrong direction.

Indeed, even the new strategic clarity was muddied somewhat by subsequent comments of Bush and other administration officials. Later that same day, administration spokesmen were insisting that there had been no change in U.S. policy. Bush himself sought to temper his remarks by saying that the United States still adhered to a "one China" policy and opposed any declaration of independence by Taiwan and that the use of U.S. military force in the event of a crisis was merely "an option."⁴

The various clarifying statements following the president's original comments sowed confusion among Americans (and probably a good many East Asians).⁵ The *Washington Post* noted aptly, "Administration spokesmen, scrambling, said that Mr. Bush hadn't misspoken but that U.S. policy hadn't changed, both of which statements could not be true."⁶

Attempts to resuscitate strategic ambiguity did little to allay the suspicions of an angry China.⁷ Beijing's leaders seemed to regard Bush's initial comments as Washington's real policy. Their suspicions were exacerbated by reports in the Taiwanese press that Adm. Dennis Blair, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, had paid a secret visit to Taiwan to meet with military leaders there and propose more extensive cooperation between the U.S. and Taiwanese militaries.⁸ To make matters even worse, stories that were based on high-level leaks from the Pentagon appeared in the American press, saying that the administration was considering shifting targets for some U.S. nuclear weapons from Russia to China.⁹

Naive Enthusiasm

Predictably, advocates of a hard-line policy toward the PRC applauded the president's initial comments. Claremont Institute scholar and former Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate Bruce Herschensohn praised Bush's "moral instincts" and urged him to repudiate the entire "one China" policy.¹⁰ Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) stated that the president's words marked a welcome shift in U.S. policy and that the time had come to "go beyond" a policy of strategic ambiguity.¹¹ The *Wall Street Journal* editors likewise praised the shift, stating that it sent a message that "the U.S. sees a strong national interest in preserving Taiwan's democracy, and that China's attempts to undermine support for the island through bluster and threats will have the opposite effect."¹²

Such endorsements reflect a lack of realistic thinking. Even the public's attitude, while

somewhat more cautious, does not reflect an understanding of the possible consequences of rushing to Taiwan's defense. According to a nationwide poll conducted by the *Christian Science Monitor*, 38 percent of respondents thought the United States should intervene to defend Taiwan from a PRC attack; only 29 percent wanted to stay out of that fight.¹³

But one ought to wonder whether Americans would really be willing to assume the risk of a confrontation with a nuclear-armed China over Taiwan. That is an especially pertinent consideration as the PRC's military capability—probably including a much larger and more modern strategic deterrent—increases over the next decade or two.

Proponents of giving Taiwan a security guarantee blithely assume that Beijing would back down if faced with a clear demonstration of American "resolve." The reasoning of Tom Lantos was typical: "An unambiguous statement will guarantee that hostility in the Taiwan Strait will not take place."¹⁴ The *Wall Street Journal* also exuded confidence that a U.S. security commitment to Taiwan will never be challenged: "Thanks to Mr. Bush's statements repudiating the policy of 'strategic ambiguity,' there is now less chance of a miscalculation by China's leaders that they could attack Taiwan and then tough out the resulting international opprobrium."¹⁵

Realities of Deterrence

Such beliefs are based almost entirely on America's Cold War experience. The conventional wisdom is that aggressors will always be deterred from molesting a U.S. ally or client to whom Washington provides an unambiguous security commitment. But the assumption that the deterrence of Soviet aggression during the Cold War can be replicated with regard to China over Taiwan is dubious. A strategy of deterrence is hardly infallible. Indeed, the historical record is littered with the wreckage of failures of deterrence. Many Europeans in the early years of the 20th century assumed that the

Continent's elaborate system of alliances would make war unthinkable. The tragic events of 1914 demonstrated how wrong they were. A generation later, the explicit British and French security guarantees to Poland did not deter Germany from invading that country.

In addition to the balance of military forces, three factors are especially important in determining whether extended deterrence—attempting to deter an attack on an ally or client—is likely to succeed: the importance of the stakes to the protector, the importance of the stakes to the challenging power, and the extent of the challenging power's inclination to gamble. All three factors worked to Washington's advantage to an unusual degree in its confrontation with the Soviet Union.

America's major Cold War security guarantees—those for which the United States was prepared to put the safety of its own country at risk—were confined to Western Europe and Northeast Asia. Both regions were considered crucial to America's own security and economic well-being, and U.S. policymakers were determined to prevent those power centers from coming under the control of the rival military superpower. It was therefore credible to leaders in the Kremlin that the United States would be willing to incur significant risks—even the possibility of a nuclear war—to thwart a Soviet conquest.

Conversely, while those regions would have been a significant strategic and economic prize for the Soviet Union, neither area was essential to Moscow. Nor did Soviet leaders or the Soviet population have an emotional attachment to either region. There was, therefore, a definite limit to the risks the Kremlin was willing to run to gain dominion. Although Soviet leaders could never be sure that the United States would really go to war on behalf of its allies, challenging the commitment would have been an extraordinarily reckless gamble.

Fortunately for the United States, the Soviet leadership tended to be relatively risk averse. Most of Moscow's challenges occurred

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on the periphery, primarily in the Third World. Although Soviet leaders occasionally tested the U.S.-led alliance network (especially over West Berlin), they did not put their prestige on the line to such an extent that a tactical retreat became impossible. Indeed, as believers in Leninist doctrine, the Soviets were patient—pocketing geopolitical gains whenever they could be obtained at relatively low risk but backing off when the risk appeared excessive—supremely confident that their system would prevail in the long run.

There are crucial differences in all three deterrence factors when it comes to the prospect of a showdown over Taiwan. Taiwan may have some importance to the United States, since it is a significant trading partner and a sister democracy. Nevertheless, its relevance to American economic and security interests hardly equals the central importance U.S. policymakers thought that Western Europe and Northeast Asia had during the Cold War.

The problem is that Chinese officials probably understand that point as well. Soviet leaders may have considered it credible that the United States would risk a major war to keep Western Europe and Northeast Asia out of Moscow's orbit. But it is far less likely that the Chinese believe that Washington will incur the same risk merely to defend Taiwan—a “country” the United States does not even officially recognize.

While Taiwan's importance to the United States is much less, the island's importance to China is much greater than was that of Western Europe or Northeast Asia to the Soviet Union.

To Beijing, Taiwan is not merely a political and economic prize; the status of the island is caught up in issues of national pride and prestige. Taiwan is a reminder of China's long period of humiliation at the hands of outside powers. When such potent emotions are engaged, even normally dispassionate political leaders do not always act prudently or even rationally.

Nor is it as certain that the Chinese leaders will be as risk averse as the old Soviet hier-

archy. The reaction of high-ranking PRC military officers when Adm. Blair warned them a few months ago that the United States would come to Taiwan's aid in the event of an unprovoked attack was not reassuring. The military officers reportedly reacted with disbelief verging on scorn.¹⁶ That attitude is reinforced by a pervasive impression within the PRC military hierarchy—an impression founded on an interpretation of the rapid U.S. withdrawal from Somalia and the way the U.S. military waged the Gulf War and engaged in the Kosovo conflict—that the American people are so averse to casualties that they would simply be unwilling to fight a serious war over Taiwan.¹⁷

It matters little whether Chinese skepticism about U.S. intentions is right or wrong. If the Chinese believe the U.S. commitment is a bluff, they will be inclined to call that bluff. Applying the supposed lessons of the Cold War to deter China from settling the Taiwan issue on its own terms could, therefore, lead to either a humiliating U.S. retreat or a disastrous armed conflict.

Toward a Balanced Taiwan Policy

A clear distinction should be made between selling arms to Taiwan and giving the island a U.S. security guarantee. Selling weapons to Taiwan is a reasonable course of action. A militarily capable Taiwan makes it less likely that Beijing will contemplate using coercion to pursue its goal of national reunification, since the cost of doing so would be excessively high. That is the essence of a “porcupine” strategy for Taiwan.¹⁸ It would increase the likelihood that, as the economic ties between Taiwan and the mainland continue to grow, both sides will seek a peaceful resolution to their differences.

Moreover, the issue of credibility that is always a troubling factor in a case of extended deterrence would be less prominent. Beijing has ample reason to doubt whether U.S. leaders would risk their own country to

defend Taiwan. There would be little doubt that the Taiwanese would fight to prevent their own subjugation by armed force.

The proper course of action for the United States is not to return to a posture of strategic ambiguity, as some analysts have argued.¹⁹ That approach also entails the risk of miscalculation by either Beijing or Taipei. For example, one could easily envision a scenario in which Taiwan thought it had a security commitment it really did not have from the United States and pressed its de facto independence to the point that the PRC concluded it must respond militarily.

Instead of reviving strategic ambiguity, Washington should couple its policy of arms sales to Taiwan with a firm statement that the United States will not become involved in any armed struggle between Taiwan and the PRC. The Taiwanese could then make their own decisions about whether to opt for independence, seek to preserve the ambiguous status quo, or attempt to negotiate the best terms possible for eventual reunification with the mainland. They would pursue whatever course they chose at their own risk, not America's.

This approach is based on the recognition that Taiwan is a limited, or "peripheral," not a vital, American interest.²⁰ Advocates of a security commitment to Taiwan typically fail to make that distinction. Indeed, some of them exaggerate Taiwan's importance to absurd levels. Tom Donnelly, a scholar at the Project for a New American Century, argues that the island is "the functional equivalent of the Fulda Gap [the gateway for a Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe during the Cold War]."²¹ He ignores the important difference that China, unlike the former Soviet Union, does not have global messianic, expansionist ambitions. Ross Munro, a senior scholar at the Center for Security Studies and coauthor of *The Coming Conflict with China*, is even more apocalyptic than Donnelly. According to Munro, "The United States is finished as a world power if it does not come to the aid of Taiwan in an unprovoked attack by China."²² Somehow, one sus-

pects that a nation with a \$10 trillion economy, more than 7,000 strategic nuclear warheads, and a culture that permeates the world scene would still be a major player even if Taiwan succumbed to a PRC takeover.

Certainly, the American people would not like to see prosperous, democratic Taiwan forcibly incorporated into the dictatorial PRC. And if the United States can help prevent that result with minimal risk to itself, it should do so. But a security guarantee entails enormous, not minimal, risks. China already has some two dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching American cities. In the years to come, that number could well grow to several hundred. Even an armed skirmish originally confined to the Taiwan Strait might spiral out of control regardless of the intentions of U.S. or PRC policymakers. Such a level of risk should never be incurred except in defense of a vital American security interest. Preserving Taiwan's de facto independence does not meet that test.

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Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of the Taiwan Relations Act, see *Legislative History of the Taiwan Relations Act: An Analytic Compilation with Documents on Subsequent Developments*, ed. Lester L. Wolff and David L. Simon (Jamaica, N.Y.: American Association for Chinese Studies, 1982). The text of the act is on pp. 288–95. For a comparison of the U.S. defense "obligations" contained in the TRA and the very real defense obligations in the mutual defense treaty that it replaced, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Let Taiwan Defend Itself," *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* no. 313, August 24, 1998, pp. 11–12.
2. Quoted in Brian Mitchell, "As Bush Vows to Defend Taiwan, How Far Will the U.S. Really Go?" *Investor's Business Daily*, April 26, 2001, p. A22.
3. Quoted in David E. Sanger, "U.S. Would Defend Taiwan, Bush Says," *New York Times*, April 26, 2001, p. A1.
4. See Ben Barber, "Bush's Remarks Leave in Doubt U.S. Policy on Taiwan," *Washington Times*, April 26, 2001, p. A12; Charles Snyder, "Spin Begins on Bush's Comments," *Taipei Times*, April 27, 2001; Steven Mufson, "President Pledges

Defense of Taiwan," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2001, p. A1; and Sonya Hepinstall, "Cheney Takes Stab at Clarifying U.S. Stance on Taiwan," *Reuters*, April 27, 2001.

5. Robin Wright and Henry Chu, "Bush's Remarks on Taiwan Sow International Confusion," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 2001, p. A1; and Neil King Jr. "Bush Leaves Taiwan Policy in Confusing Straits," *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2001, p. A3.

6. "Foreign Policy Missteps," editorial, *Washington Post*, May 4, 2001, p. A24.

7. Charles Hutzler, "China Lashes Out at Bush for His Pledge to Defend Taiwan," *Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2001, p. A15.

8. Brian Hu, "U.S. Navy Official Made Secret Visit," *Taipei Times*, April 30, 2001. Also see William Foreman, "U.S. Commander Visited Taiwan," *Associated Press*, May 1, 2001.

9. Walter Pincus, "U.S. Considers Shift In Nuclear Targets," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2001, p. A23.

10. Bruce Herschensohn, "Bush Shakes Free from the State Department on Taiwan," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 2001, p. A17.

11. Quoted in Wright and Chu.

12. "Committed to Taiwan," editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2001, p. A20.

13. John Dillin, "The Price Taiwan Pays for U.S. Vow of Assistance," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 30, 2001.

14. Quoted in Wright and Chu.

15. "Committed to Taiwan."

16. "China Policy Check," *Washington Times*, March 20, 2001, p. A18.

17. For a discussion of these attitudes, see Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 17-20.

18. For a discussion of arms sales and the logic of the porcupine strategy, see Carpenter, "Let Taiwan Defend Itself," pp. 15-17. The porcupine strategy even reduces the likelihood of military blackmail by the PRC, which may be a more likely scenario than the actual use of military force.

19. Michael O'Hanlon, "A Need for Ambiguity," *New York Times*, April 27, 2001, p. A27.

20. For a discussion of how to categorize vital, secondary, and peripheral interests, see Ted Galen Carpenter, *A Search for Enemies: America's Alliances after the Cold War* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1992), pp. 170-79.

21. Quoted in Mitchell.

22. Quoted in *ibid*.

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