



Security Nexus Perspectives

STRATEGIC CLARITY: AN ARGUMENT FOR EFFECTIVE DETERRENCE

By Lt. Col. Jeffery C. Higgins¹

Abstract

As the national power parity gap narrows and strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) intensifies, clear and unambiguous communication between these global powers must be a top priority in order to prevent a military, kinetic conflict. The effectiveness of any national strategy is significantly impacted by the coherence or lack of coherence in which the instruments of national power are harmonized through strategic communications, a concept that the United States has in the past systemically failed to effectively optimize. Even when a nation's overall national power is seemingly unchallengeable, failed strategic communications can have the effect of undermining a nation's overall strategy. In what appears to be an addition to the United States' failed track record, the U.S. deterrence strategy of Strategic Ambiguity lacks the required coherence and is no longer effective, strategically communicating a confusing, counterproductive message about U.S. commitment to Taiwan, thereby emboldening the PRC and generating doubt about U.S. commitment among U.S. allies in the region. Without adopting a phased, deliberate and clearly understood shift towards Strategic Clarity, Strategic Ambiguity will remain America's Achilles heel to effective deterrence against the PRC's hegemonic behavior, eventually leading to an undesired and costly military conflict with the PRC.

¹ Army War College Fellow, DKI APCSS, Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.A

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

The defensive perimeter runs along the Aleutians to Japan and then goes to the Ryukyus...[and] from the Ryukyus to the Philippine Islands.... So far as the military security of other areas in the Pacific is concerned, it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack.... Should such an attack occur...the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the Charter of the United Nations....²

—Secretary Dean Acheson

Given on 12 January 1950 at the National Press Club, Secretary of State Dean Acheson's remarks sought to strategically communicate to the Soviet Union U.S. national security policy on Asia. Specifically, Acheson outlined a chain of territories and nations that the United States described as its "defensive perimeter." This defensive perimeter was communicated as President Truman's "red-line," designed to deter and contain Soviet expansion; if crossed, the U.S. would actively defend these interests. Regardless of its intended outcome, this attempt at effective strategic communication had the unintended effect of giving the "green light" to North Korea's war plans to reunite the Koreas by military force.³ By not specifically naming the Republic of Korea, the United States effectively communicated to Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il-Sung that America was not, from a strategic policy perspective, disposed to defend South Korea's sovereignty. Two weeks after Acheson's remarks, Stalin approved North Korea's invasion of the South.⁴ As a result, on 25 June 1950, only five months after Acheson's ill-fated remarks, Kim Il-Sung's military invaded South Korea, drawing the United States into a brutal three-year war on the Korean Peninsula that would ultimately claim the lives of nearly 35,000 Americans.⁵

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. emerged as a world power. With a massive, technologically advanced military, booming economy, and the author of the new world order, the United States had

² "Speech on the Far East," n.d. Teaching American History, accessed February 5, 2023, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/speech-on-the-far-east/>.

³ Miles Maochun Yu, "Dean Acheson's Fateful Speech and the Outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950," *World Tribune: U.S. Politics and Culture, Geopolitics, Northeast Asia, China, Geostrategy-Direct, International Security, Corporate Watch, Media Watch*, Originally published March 9, 2017, <https://www.worldtribune.com/dean-achosons-fateful-speech-and-the-outbreak-of-the-korean-war-on-june-25-1950/>.

⁴ Yu, "Dean Acheson's Fateful Speech and the Outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950."

⁵ "Fact Sheet: America's Wars - May 2016, Revised," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, accessed February 3, 2023, https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_american_wars.pdf.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

arguably the most dominant instruments of national power in the post-war world. If this was the case, what can adequately explain America's failure to deter communist North Korea from invading the South in June 1950?

In large measure, the answer rests in America's systemic inability to synchronize and harmonize all its instruments of national power and strategic interests with a vital component of deterrence: Strategic Communication. Described in Joint Publication 1-02, Strategic Communication is "focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power."⁶ When a nation fails to effectively align its instruments of national power and to clearly communicate its interests to relevant audiences, that nation runs the risk of creating conditions for the failure of intended deterrence. Unfortunately, U.S. history reflects failures of deterrence, leading to unintended consequences and jeopardy to strategic interests. Historically, U.S. strategies to achieve national interests have been undermined by ineffective and damaging diplomatic action, specifically Strategic Communications. Moreover, these communication blunders have often generated unintended and costly consequences for U.S. national interests.

Much like America's unintended and unwanted war on the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s, the United States appears to be on a similar collision course for war with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over Taiwan's continuing autonomy. The effectiveness of any national strategy is significantly impacted by the coherence in which the instruments of national power are harmonized through strategic communications. Even when national power is seemingly unchallengeable, failed strategic communications can have the effect of undermining the overall strategy. The U.S. engagement strategy of Strategic Ambiguity, for instance, is incoherent and no longer effective, strategically communicating a confusing, counterproductive message about U.S. commitment to Taiwan. This disjointed messaging is emboldening the PRC and creating doubt among U.S. allies in the region about America's commitment to Taiwan. **In order to rebuild effective deterrence and avoid conflict with the PRC, the United States must implement a phased adjustment from Strategic Ambiguity to Strategic Clarity that is informed by synchronized instruments of national power, harmonized with clear and consistent strategic communications.**

A History of Incoherent Messaging

Before examining how Strategic Ambiguity may no longer be fit for purpose as it applies to managing PRC-Taiwan relations, it is useful to review the U.S. track record on synchronizing strategic communications with U.S. national interests and strategy. A review of the last century, reveals a

⁶ "DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms," U.S. Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02, last modified February 15, 2016, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1024397.pdf>.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

number of significant ineffective strategic communications and incoherent messaging that has led to strategic failures, placing U.S. national interests at grave risk. In addition to Secretary Dean Acheson's failed strategic communication in 1950, several other important examples of failed U.S. strategic communications that are worth briefly examining follow.

Interwar Years: A Period of U.S. Disengagement

In the years that spanned between the end of World War I and World War II, the United States adopted an isolationist national strategy. This strategy was marked by several Neutrality Acts passed by congress, seeking to prevent U.S. involvement in any war outside its borders.⁷ Without resolute U.S. backing, Great Britain and France sought a strategy of appeasement in response to the hegemonic behavior of Adolf Hitler and Germany, essentially empowering and emboldening German leadership to set conditions for their nefarious war plans.⁸ By strategically communicating to Hitler that the United States was not willing to get involved in European affairs and communicating to allies that the United States would not support them, a "green light" was given to German leaders. Even later, as Germany and Japan began to flex their military muscle on U.S. allies and threaten U.S. interests abroad, America remained largely absent from the world stage, strategically communicating that affairs outside of the United States were not a priority for Americans.⁹ Here, U.S. policymakers failed to understand how American isolationism, erroneously thought to avoid war, was actually the most direct path towards war. When policy communicates unintended messages to adversaries and allies, consequently generating unintended action and inaction from them, the policy is at risk of failure. Perhaps if the United States had made it clear to Germany and Japan that America would defend its national interests at home and abroad with overwhelming military action, World War II may have been avoided or significantly dampened in scale and scope.

U.S. Withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership

A more recent example of unsynchronized strategic communications and national strategy occurred shortly after President Donald Trump began his term as President. Upon assuming office, he "signed an executive order to withdraw [the U.S.] from the Trans-Pacific Partnership [TPP], a trade deal explicitly designed...to strengthen ties with U.S. allies and create an effective instrument to contain the PRC's economic rise."¹⁰ At a time when the PRC's rapid rise in all strategic domains is threatening U.S. strategic global influence and national security, it seems only reasonable to take a multifaceted

⁷ John E. Moser, "Foreign Policy in the 1930s: From Neutrality to Involvement," n.d, *Bill of Rights Institute*, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/foreign-policy-in-the-1930s-from-neutrality-to-involvement>.

⁸ Robert Kagan, "Challenging the U.S. Is a Historic Mistake," *WSJ*, accessed 9 February, 2023, www.wsj.com/articles/challenging-the-u-s-is-a-historic-mistake-11675441152.

⁹ Andrew T. Shattuck, "A Modern Deterrence Theory Case Study: America's Failure to Deter Japan," *The Strategy Bridge*, accessed 05 February, 2023, <https://thestategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/6/9/a-modern-deterrence-theory-case-study-americas-failure-to-deter-japan>.

¹⁰ Arlo Poletti & Lorenzo Zambarnardi, Declining hegemony and the sources of Trump's disengagement from multilateral trade governance: the interaction between domestic politics and the international political economy. *International Politics* 59 (August 2021):1103, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00346-9>.

approach to contain Chinese growth and invest in and reaffirm U.S. strategic influence. In fact, TPP was designed to do just that. Comprised of 12 member states, led by the U.S., “the TPP became the second largest mega [Free Trade Agreement] in terms of its GDP and trade volume,” creating an economic multilateral platform to directly confront the PRC’s local hegemony and contain its growth and dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ Moreover, this partnership gave the United States a more decisive leadership role in Asian economics and diplomacy, as well as gave allies and partners another option for trade outside of the PRC. Nevertheless, when the United States withdrew from this strategic partnership in search of bi-lateral trade agreements, significant unintended consequences flowed, impacting the United States, allies and adversaries. For instance, some member nations shifted trade efforts to other partnerships, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and/or sought the PRC to fill the vacuum created by the sudden U.S. TPP departure.¹² Beyond these immediate consequences, the withdrawal from TPP also strategically communicated to the PRC and U.S. allies that America was stepping back from a leadership role and not interested in multilateralism, both signs of a declining hegemonic power.¹³

U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Within seven months of assuming office as President of the United States, President Joe Biden approved his predecessor’s order to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan. After twenty years of combat operations and nation rebuilding efforts, at the cost of over 6,200 American lives (military and contractor) and over \$1 trillion dollars, the United States military suddenly and hastily withdrew its last forces from Kabul in August 2021.¹⁴ ¹⁵ Despite promises from the U.S. Government that any withdrawal would be orderly and peaceful—not a repeat of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in the 1970s—and that Afghan Security Forces would hold the line against the Taliban, precisely the opposite occurred. In the days and hours leading up to the final departure of U.S. Forces, the Taliban quickly defeated Afghan forces, seized control of nearly every province, and generated a massive humanitarian crisis as thousands of Afghans attempted to flee the country on U.S. aircraft at Kabul International Airport. What is more, a suicide bombing among these civilians also killed 13 U.S. service members.

The chaotic scene that unfolded on news outlets and social media outlets surprised the world, strategically communicating to allies and adversaries alike that the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan

¹¹ Sang C. Park, RCEP versus TPP with the Trump Administration in the USA and Implications for East Asian Economic Cooperation, *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review*, 5(4), (2017): 143, <http://doi.org/10.15678/EBER.2017.050406>.

¹² Park, RCEP versus TPP with the Trump Administration in the USA and Implications for East Asian Economic Cooperation.
¹³ Poletti et al., Declining hegemony and the sources of Trump’s disengagement from multilateral trade governance: the interaction between domestic politics and the international political economy.

¹⁴ Samantha Lock, “How Many U.S. Soldiers Died in Afghanistan?” *Newsweek*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/number-us-soldiers-who-died-afghanistan-war-1619685>.

¹⁵ The New York Times, “Read the Full Transcript of President Biden’s Remarks on Afghanistan.” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/us/politics/biden-taliban-afghanistan-speech.html>.

was an utter failure. For instance, some NATO allies felt betrayed by the United States for having such a seemingly disastrous decision to hastily and unprofessionally withdraw “foisted on Europeans.”¹⁶ What is worse, adversaries such as Russia and the PRC interpreted the U.S. withdrawal as a confirmation of failure and evidence of a decline in U.S. influence in the region, arguably shaping their foreign policy around this assessment. In fact, both U.S. policymakers and senior military officials assess that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was the direct result of the poorly planned and executed U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁷ Based on testimony at the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2022 from both Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, and U.S. European Commander, General Tod Wolters, Russian President Vladimir Putin may have seized on the apparent weakness in NATO following the Afghanistan withdrawal to invade Ukraine.¹⁸ Moreover, Senator Mitch McConnell stated that “the precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August was a signal [strategic communication], to Putin and maybe to Chinese President Xi as well, that America was in retreat, that America could not be depended upon, and was an invitation to the autocrats of the world that maybe this was a good time to make a move.”¹⁹ Only time will tell how this strategic communication may shape the PRC’s approach to Taiwan.

Russia’s Invasion into Ukraine

“We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations....”²⁰ These comments were made by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 19 January 2022 in a direct retort to U.S. President Joe Biden’s comments at a press conference in which he stated: “I think what you’re gonna see is that Russia will be held accountable if it invades. And it depends on what it does. It’s one thing if it’s a minor incursion and we end up having to fight about what to do and not do, etc....”²¹ As a result of these comments, the United States received significant backlash from media and stakeholders around the world, citing that President Biden had given Putin the “green light” to invade Ukraine by differentiating between a “minor incursion” and a full force invasion. While these comments were later walked back by the White House, some argue that the United States strategically communicated to Russia that U.S. leadership was uncertain about how the United States planned to respond to a Russian invasion of Ukraine, imprudently eliminating any desired or intended deterrent effects. In fact, on 24 February 2022, nearly one month after these comments, Russia launched a multi-front invasion into Ukraine. In further review of the U.S. administration’s

¹⁶ John Hudson, et al, “Withdrawal from Afghanistan forces allies and adversaries to reconsider America’s global role,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/withdrawal-from-afghanistan-forces-allies-and-adversaries-to-reconsider-americas-global-role/2021/08/17/2808ddbc-ff84-11eb-825d-01701f9ded64_story.html.

¹⁷ Jerry Dunleavy, “Milley concedes Afghanistan withdrawal may have influenced Putin’s Ukraine move,” *Washington Examiner*, April 09, 2022, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/milley-concedes-afghanistan-withdrawal-may-have-influenced-putins-ukraine-move>.

¹⁸ Dunleavy, “Milley concedes Afghanistan withdrawal may have influenced Putin’s Ukraine move.”

¹⁹ Dunleavy, “Milley concedes Afghanistan withdrawal may have influenced Putin’s Ukraine move.”

²⁰ Mo Abbas, “There are no minor incursions: Biden’s candid Putin predictions criticized in Kyiv,” *NBC News*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/biden-minor-incursion-ukraine-putin-russia-invasion-nato-rcna12886>.

²¹ Libby Emmons, “Biden gave Putin ‘green light’ say officials in Kyiv: report,” *The Post Millennial*, January 20, 2022, <https://thepostmillennial.com/breaking-biden-putin-green-light-kyiv-officials>.

messages and actions, California and senior House Appropriations Committee Representative Ken Calvert suggested that beyond failing to deter Russia, the United States may have inadvertently strategically communicated to the PRC a message about U.S. resolve, stating that America's "timid measures to prevent Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression and its haphazard scramble in response sent signals that were received loud and clear in Beijing."²² Calvert further argued that "[a] similar message was broadcast during our chaotic and disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan just months before the war in Ukraine began."²³ In addition to Calvert's observations, one might argue that this strategic narrative about U.S. resolve and commitment to allies began as early as President Trump's tenure during his calls for a U.S. withdrawal from NATO and a massive drawdown of American troops from Europe.²⁴

Though pundits on both sides of the political spectrum might argue that strategic communication failures are evidence of failed party politics, the underlying truth is that they are egregious failures of strategic thinking and synchronization and effective integration of strategic communications with national interests and supporting strategy. Most alarming, each of these historical events has placed the United States at greater risk, historically accompanied by significant loss of life. So then, what can be learned from these historical mistakes and applied to the United States' current ambiguous strategic communication to the PRC about U.S. resolve for current and future Taiwan political autonomy and sovereignty?

U.S. Strategic Ambiguity

Since the early 1970's, the United States has engaged the PRC and Taiwan under the auspices of Strategic Ambiguity, an intentionally opaque deterrence strategy, informed by the United States' One China Policy.²⁵ Comprised of the Three Communiques and Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), America's One China Policy was established to implement dual strategic outcomes: (1) deter The PRC from military invasion of Taiwan; and (2) deter Taiwan from declaring independence.²⁶ This "dual deterrence" strategy—designed to keep both PRC and Taiwan in the dark on U.S. intervention plans on a potential cross-strait conflict—was created based on two fundamental premises.²⁷ The first premise was that

²² Representative Ken Calvert, "The failure of integrated deterrence, and what to do about China," *Defense News*, December 5, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/12/05/the-failure-of-integrated-deterrence-and-what-to-do-about-china/#:~:text=The%20Biden%20administration%E2%80%99s%20timid%20measures%20to%20prevent%20Russian,just%20months%20before%20the%20war%20in%20Ukraine%20began.>

²³ Rep. Calvert, "The failure of integrated deterrence, and what to do about China."

²⁴ Philip Crowther, "Trump threatens to quit NATO: White House official," *France 24*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170518-white-house-official-trump-threatens-leave-nato-usa-q7-russia>.

²⁵ Xiaodi Ye, "From Strategic Ambiguity to Maximum Pressure? Explaining the Logic of the US Taiwan Policy in the Post-Cold War Era," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no.8 (2022): 1511, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211058887>.

²⁶ Ye, "From Strategic Ambiguity to Maximum Pressure? Explaining the Logic of the US Taiwan Policy in the Post-Cold War Era," 1518.

²⁷ Nien-chung Chang-Liao & Chi Fang, "The Case for Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait," *The Washington Quarterly*, 44, no.2 (2021), 47, <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F0163660X.2021.1932088>.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

PRC would not use force to achieve unification, and the second was that Taiwan's independence was not key to U.S. strategic interest.²⁸ Moreover, the logic that informed these premises stemmed from a set of geopolitical conditions that have since significantly changed. For example, when Strategic Ambiguity was implemented, both PRC and Taiwan were dictatorships with little effective and operationally projectable military capability.²⁹ U.S. leadership believed that, over time, as a result of international trade and improving economic conditions, PRC would liberalize and cease pursuing a Taiwan-PRC reunification.³⁰

To the free world's dismay, the opposite has occurred. Although the PRC economy has risen to the second largest economy in the world—averaging nearly 10 percent growth in GDP each year since reforming its economy in the 1970s—it remains autocratic and even more determined to force Taiwan into annexation with a rapidly developing military.³¹ ³² Furthermore, in this same time period, PRC has insidiously flexed its national powers to seize control of strategic economic shipping lanes through the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and through to the East China Sea, placing a free and open Indo-Pacific region at strategically grave risk and fundamentally challenging the world order. Conversely, Taiwan has “transformed...to a stable and vibrant liberal democracy with expansive civil and political liberties.”³³ While Strategic Ambiguity may have deterred or delayed a cross-strait war for decades, recent conditions, statements and actions by the PRC are clear indicators that, if coercion fails, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is inevitable, perhaps sooner rather than later. If this is true, and the PRC has made the decision to use military force to invade Taiwan, then rationality seems to indicate that, at worst, Strategic Ambiguity has failed as a deterrent, and at best, it has run its course.

The Erosion of Strategic Ambiguity's Deterrence Value

Effective “[d]eterrence...demands the nuanced shaping of perceptions so that an adversary sees the alternatives to aggression as more attractive than war.”³⁴ Defined by RAND's Michael Mazarr in his article “Understanding Deterrence,” this explanation of deterrence is a simple and coherent way to think about an otherwise complex concept. Among other important components, successful “deterrence” policies are composed of deliberate action and communication signals that inform

²⁸ Yvonne Chiu, “Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy,” *The Strategy Bridge*, November 9, 2022, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2022/11/9/strategic-ambiguity-out-of-balance-updating-an-outdated-taiwan-policy>.

²⁹ Chiu, “Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy.”

³⁰ Chiu, “Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy.”

³¹ Chiu, “Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy.”

³² Poletti et al., “Declining hegemony and the sources of Trump's disengagement from multilateral trade governance: the interaction between domestic politics and the international political economy,” 1104.

³³ Chiu, “Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy.”

³⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” *RAND Corporation* (2018): 2, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf#:~:text=Deterrence%20the%20practice%20of%20discouraging%20or%20restraining%20someone%E2%80%94an%20effort%20to%20forcean%20actor%20to%20do%20something.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

adversaries of a national interest, thereby dissuading a challenger from acting against those interests. Said differently, Dr. Francis Hoffman—Distinguished Research Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies—describes deterrence as a shaped “perception about credibility and capability...to convince an adversary that the anticipated benefits of an aggressive move will not be obtained, and that the perceived costs will be much greater than any possible gain.”³⁵ He goes on to say that deterrence “is an exercise in interactive perception management that presumes clarity about the character of the geostrategic contest...and presumes a thorough understanding of competitors and their thresholds and decision calculus.”³⁶

In both Mazarr’s and Hoffman’s descriptions of deterrence, it is apparent that several key elements must be present to achieve desired deterrent effects. First, deterrence will not work if a challenger or adversary does not perceive that the defender has the capability and credibility to enforce its claim. Adversaries must perceive that a defender has the instruments of national power and attendant political will to impose a high cost—at an unacceptable threshold of risk—on the challenger or adversary. It is one thing to have the required military capability that is both strategically and operationally postured to effectively deter, but equally important to have the credibility or political will to take the phased steps to achieve lasting deterrent effects. Second, effective deterrence requires a clear understanding of how the adversary culturally views deterrence, how that adversary decides on and manages strategic risk, as well as what the adversary’s thresholds for risk toleration may be. An understanding of these factors can assist a defender in shaping and communicating a deliberate deterrence message for a specific audience. And finally, this whole notion of perception management is ultimately about deliberate, clear strategic communication to shape an adversary’s understanding of the environment, and thus change the adversary’s behavior, planned actions, and objectives, and avoiding war altogether. Ultimately, effective deterrence “is a form of [strategic] communication, a statement by leaders of one country that their country is willing to fight or take other action to prevent a challenger from taking something of value...or obtaining some change that the defender opposes.”³⁷

What is more, it is apparent that these key elements of effective deterrence are even more important and, thus, require a more deliberate effort with greater clarity of communication as opposing nations reach parity of strength across instruments of national power. In the case of near peer competitors, both with nuclear arsenals, there is little room for an error in communication or a misperception about interests and intentions. Consider the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, for example. By the time the United States realized the Soviet Union planned to use Cuba as a nuclear missile site, it was too late for any deterrent or preventive measures. The Soviets had already positioned missiles there and were in the process of moving additional nuclear capability to Cuba when President Kennedy

³⁵ Dr. Francis G. Hoffman, “Conceptualizing Integrated Deterrence,” *Lawfire*, January 8, 2022, <https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2022/01/08/guest-post-dr-frank-hoffman-on-conceptualizing-integrated-deterrence/>.

³⁶ Dr. Hoffman, “Conceptualizing Integrated Deterrence.”

³⁷ Anne E. Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 124.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

quarantined Cuba with U.S. Navy warships to prevent further delivery.³⁸ At the brink of war, Kennedy had to clearly articulate to the Soviets that the positioning of nuclear assets 80 miles from U.S. territory was unacceptable and justified—actually demanded clarity of—U.S. defensive activities, including combat operations if needed. Ultimately, the United States and the Soviet Union came to an agreement that resulted in the repositioning of the Soviet nuclear weapons and identified a need for a more effective strategic communication system between the two powers, giving life to a “direct hot-line between Washington and Moscow.”³⁹ The Soviet Union perceived the United States to have capable forces as well as the political will to employ them if an acceptable agreement could not be reached. Moreover, any unclear or ambiguous strategic communication by Kennedy throughout this crisis could have led to Soviet actions and decisions that resulted in conventional or even nuclear war.

Strategic Ambiguity may have once been an effective way for the United States to deter regional conflict between PRC and Taiwan, but given the immense changes to the geopolitical environment previously described, it is no longer effective and may be leading the United States closer than ever to war with the PRC. In addition to the reality that Strategic Ambiguity fails to clearly convey a capable force that is credibly postured, fails to demonstrate clear political will, and fails to appreciate how the PRC understands deterrence, it does not clearly communicate U.S. policy on what circumstances the United States will or will not defend Taiwan’s sovereignty. While some may argue that such clarity might provoke the PRC to take immediate military action, there are some indications that they have already made this decision because of the weak and confusing message that the United States has been sending to the PRC and other stakeholders in the region. Strategic Ambiguity not only confuses these audiences about U.S. intentions, but it internally desynchronizes U.S. instruments of national power, further weakening U.S. influence in the region.

The Unintended Consequences of Strategic Ambiguity

While the United States—seemingly oblivious to the changing geopolitical conditions of the world—continues to boast about past successes with its deliberately ambiguous approach to PRC, the PRC has been aligning its instruments of national power for decades, advancing its position in the region and world both diplomatically and economically, increasing its military budget “fivefold since 2001,” developing the “world’s largest missile force, the second-largest navy, and the third-largest air force,” and ultimately achieving “parity with or even an advantage over U.S. forces in five of nine operational areas involved in a Taiwan scenario.”⁴⁰ Beyond these statistics, Chinese actions and rhetoric clearly indicate that seizing control of Taiwan is vital, perhaps their number one priority, to achieve what the

³⁸ Philip M Taylor, *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media since 1945* (New York City, NY: Routledge, 1997), 40-41.

³⁹ Taylor, *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media since 1945*, 41.

⁴⁰ Raymond Kuo, “‘Strategic Ambiguity’ Has the U.S. and Taiwan Trapped,” *Foreign Policy*, January 18, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/18/taiwan-us-china-strategic-ambiguity-military-strategy-asymmetric-defense-invasion/>.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

PRC qualifies as “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by the year 2049.⁴¹ Recent bold, deliberate and clearly provocative actions that range from (a) seizing and occupying islands in the South China Sea to (b) demonstrating a full attack and blockade capability of Taiwan to (c) flying spy balloons over the United States, could not send a more clear message to the United States: the PRC is not deterred by current U.S. policy, suggesting Strategic Ambiguity is ineffective. Because the U.S. position on Taiwan’s sovereignty vacillates with its own mercurial domestic politics and the geopolitics of the region, the PRC detects a lack of U.S. commitment and is emboldened to take these provocative actions, and is employing an incremental, step-by-step strategy to secure an operational posture that can be quickly leveraged to annex Taiwan.

Adding to this incoherent messaging on PRC-Taiwan relations is a rash of recent unsynchronized U.S. actions and rhetoric. Perhaps a move toward clarity, several recent clear statements from President Joe Biden have indicated that the United States will defend Taiwan from a military invasion by PRC, using U.S. military forces.⁴² This seemingly clear departure from Strategic Ambiguity might have marked a strategic shift in U.S. deterrence policy if not for the injected confusion by White House officials attempting to walk-back the President’s statement, suggesting he misspoke.⁴³ Moreover, in the midst of these Presidential declarations of Strategic Clarity and walk-backs to Ambiguity, the PRC—unprecedentedly—demonstrated a massive military show of force including blockade drills and missile live-fires in and around the Taiwan Strait in response to Representative Pelosi’s Taiwan visit in August 2022.⁴⁴ In response, the United States provided a condemning narrative, but took no further actions. Despite President Biden’s rhetoric about defending Taiwan, this weak U.S. response signified a significant departure from historic responses to such military action in the Taiwan Strait. In previous administrations, when PRC exercised aggressive military action in the strait, the United States would send naval warships to thwart further aggressions.⁴⁵ These most recent blunders of strategic communication pave the way for a PRC perception that the United States is growing weaker and that its political will to defend Taiwan is in reality a “paper tiger.”

For Taiwan, Strategic Ambiguity is a state of play that requires them to assume the role of geopolitical pawn in a competition between world powers. On one hand, as a liberal democracy, Taiwan economically benefits from trade with both PRC and the United States; however, on the other hand, they live in a constant state of increasing threat of a PRC invasion and no clear path to independence. As a result, “[t]he majority of Taiwanese now loathe the prospect of losing their way of life were

⁴¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” U.S. Department of Defense (2022), <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23321290/2022-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china.pdf>.

⁴² Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Peter Baker, “Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese Attack,” The New York Times, May 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/world/asia/biden-taiwan-china.html>.

⁴³ Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Peter Baker, “Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese Attack.”

⁴⁴ Chiu, “Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy.”

⁴⁵ Ye, “From Strategic Ambiguity to Maximum Pressure? Explaining the Logic of the US Taiwan Policy in the Post-Cold War Era, 1525.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

Taiwan to be folded into the authoritarian mainland China.”⁴⁶ Because of the unclear messaging associated with Strategic Ambiguity, Taiwan is uncertain about U.S. resolve to defend its sovereignty upon a PRC invasion or blockade. They are left to find the lesser of two evils: should Taiwan bow to PRC reunification pressure to avoid war and realize a fate much like Hong Kong’s, or should Taiwan protect their sovereignty at all costs even when the odds are clearly not in their favor? Because the United States refuses to align its instruments of national power and commit to defending Taiwan—its democratic ally— from invasion, the Taiwanese are left to make a less-than-ideal choice about their future. A recent study conducted by several PRC and Taiwan geopolitical experts found that a majority of Taiwanese citizens would be more willing to defend Taiwan from invasion if they had a concrete commitment from the United States to back them.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, without this commitment, there is no real deterrent factor for PRC and Taiwan’s political will to resist PRC invasion-posturing and threats may be vulnerable. U.S. Strategic Ambiguity fundamentally fails to firmly back an ally, creating doubt in the hearts of the Taiwanese people and further emboldening the PRC.

The unintended consequences of Strategic Ambiguity equally extend to U.S. allies and partners. For example, Yvonne Chiu—a U.S. Naval War College Associate Professor—found that America’s adoption of Strategic Ambiguity has heavily influenced how their allies and partners should see and treat Taiwan. Following the lead of the United States, many allies and partners also approach Taiwan with ambivalence.⁴⁸ As long as the United States hides behind Strategic Ambiguity—hoping the problem goes away—there will never be adequate time and opportunity to build a coalition in support of defending Taiwan’s sovereignty. It is important to remember that even with 30 NATO countries supporting Ukraine economically and militarily for over a year, Russia has yet to be repelled from Ukraine. Taiwan does not stand a chance against an invasion from PRC without the support of a resolute coalition that is led by the United States. What is more, as PRC becomes more aggressive with military incursions and “gray zone” operations in the South China Sea and within Taiwan’s sovereign borders without U.S. action, allies and partners may also be developing grave concerns about U.S. commitment to them. Allies such as South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, for instance, depend on U.S. military backing to defend their sovereignty. If the United States continues to strategically communicate, in both word and deed, uncertainty towards PRC’s aggressive activities, other nations that do not have formal treaties with the United States may begin to “bandwagon” with the PRC in hopes of avoiding future conflict.⁴⁹ If the United States has a national interest in

⁴⁶ Dalton Lin, “‘One China’ and the Cross-Taiwan Strait Commitment Problem,” *The China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 1096. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/one-china-and-the-cross-taiwan-strait-commitment-problem/B3920960100A0B99C1D3F1F39DDAD965>.

⁴⁷ Alastair I. Johnston, Tsai Chia-hung, George Yin, and Steven Goldstein, “The Ambiguity of Strategic Clarity,” *War on the Rocks*, June 9, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/the-ambiguity-of-strategic-clarity/>.

⁴⁸ Chiu, “Strategic Ambiguity Out of Balance: Updating an Outdated Taiwan Policy.”

⁴⁹ Kuo, “‘Strategic Ambiguity’ Has the U.S. and Taiwan Trapped.”

maintaining its place as the world leader of national autonomy and freedom and the current international order, the United States must take clear definitive action to protect them.

Strategic Clarity: Strategic Communication with Deterrent Power

In the assessment of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Admiral John Aquilino, "the PRC considers establishing full control over Taiwan to be its number one priority."⁵⁰ And when it comes to this endeavor, U.S. Senator Chris Murphy believes that PRC "has already priced in a full U.S. defense" of Taiwan.⁵¹ Whether evidenced by these senior U.S. military and diplomat assessments or PRC's rapid military expansion towards parity with the U.S. or its aggressive posturing towards Taiwan, U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific, and U.S. national interests, Strategic Ambiguity is no longer an effective deterrent strategy to prevent a PRC invasion of Taiwan. Moreover, the conditions that once informed Strategic Ambiguity as an effective deterrence strategy have fundamentally changed, no longer communicating sufficient political will, no longer accounting for revised PRC perspective and national interests, and no longer painting a clear picture of the consequences that will flow from a PRC invasion. Without these conditions met, there is not only no credible deterrent effect, but the conditions for war between the PRC and the United States have actually ripened because of the strategic miscommunication that is occurring between two near-peer competitors.

Seemingly trapped in its commitment to Strategic Ambiguity, apparently tone deaf to PRC's malign rhetoric and actions, the United States is on track to add another blunder to its deterrence record. Unless the United States alters its strategy from ambiguity to clarity, PRC will attempt to compel, by force, Taiwan into unification. In order to reverse this path to conflict, the United States must deliberately synchronize its instruments of national power, clearly strategically communicating political will, capability, and the consequences that will follow any attempt by PRC to forcefully compel a unification with Taiwan. While U.S. policy makers would likely argue that they have such a strategy in Integrated Deterrence, I submit that Strategic Ambiguity is not aligned with this policy. Described by Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Colin Kahl, in November 2022 at the Brookings Institution, Integrated Deterrence is "[d]eterrence [that] must be integrated in the domains of land, sea, air, space and cyberspace. It must be integrated with allies and partners. Deterrence must be integrated within the U.S. government...to include U.S. dominance of the global financial system and our unmatched political power."⁵² Kahl's description suggests that Integrated Deterrence derives its effectiveness in dissuading adversaries from taking certain actions because of the deliberate aligning and harmonizing of U.S. instruments of national power. When this description is compared to the

⁵⁰ Shih-Kai Lin and Hung-Chang Chung, "Background, Rationale, and Nature of Biden Administration's Strategic Ambiguity towards Taiwan," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 34, no.2 (2022): 232, https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/landing/article.kci?arti_id=ART002844276.

⁵¹ Kuo, "'Strategic Ambiguity' Has the U.S. and Taiwan Trapped."

⁵² Jim Garamone, "New Strategy Seeks to Reinvigorate Deterrence in a Changing World," *DOD News*, November 8, 2022, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3213772/new-strategy-seeks-to-reinvigorate-deterrence-in-a-changing-world/>.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

strategy of Strategic Ambiguity, a disconnect is overwhelmingly clear. As long as the U.S. President uses tough rhetoric to address U.S. defense policy of Taiwan, only to be walked back by White House officials; as long as the United States remains behind PRC in many technology areas that are decisive to winning a war; as long as the United States is resistant to uncouple its economy from PRC's; and as long as the United States is unwilling to clearly and fully back its Taiwanese allies, among others, Strategic Ambiguity will not be an Integrated Deterrence strategy, exposing the United States to tremendous strategic risk in the Pacific.

To reverse this path towards certain conflict, the United States must commit to a strategy of Strategic Clarity with ways and means that are linked to clear strategic ends or objectives, implemented in a phased approach. Of course, any such strategy must include: (1) a plan to enhance Taiwan's defensive capability; (2) build Taiwanese and allied political will to protect Taiwan's sovereignty or at least the status quo; (3) rapidly position U.S. military capability in strategic locations that hold PRC aggression at risk; (4) build a resilient supply chain; (5) adjust U.S. economic ties to PRC to protect national interests; (6) and build a strong coalition of nations that give legitimacy to Taiwan's sovereignty or at least the status quo. Moreover, this strategy must synchronize these efforts with deliberately clear strategic communications. And, importantly, U.S. strategic communication must clearly indicate what the United States and its allies are doing and why and what consequences—militarily, economically, and diplomatically—will follow if PRC invades or attempts to forcefully compel Taiwan into unification.

Perhaps General Douglas MacArthur best summarized the risks of failed deterrence when he surmised: "The history of failure in war can almost be summed up in two words: Too Late. Too late in comprehending the deadly purpose of a potential enemy; too late in realizing the mortal danger; too late in preparedness; too late in uniting all possible forces for resistance; too late in standing with one's friends."⁵³ Closer than ever to a war with the PRC over Taiwan, it is now time for the United States to seriously review and learn from America's historically ineffective strategic communications, admit that Strategic Ambiguity is the Achilles heel to effective deterrence against the PRC, and thoughtfully adjust the policy to Strategic Clarity before it is too late!

⁵³ Theodore Kinni and Donna Kinni, *No Substitute for Victory: Lessons in Strategy and Leadership from General Douglas MacArthur*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Prentice Hall, 2005), 63.

Bibliography

Abbas, Mo. "There are no minor incursions: Biden's candid Putin predictions criticized in Kyiv." *NBC News*, January 20, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/biden-minor-incursion-ukraine-putin-russia-invasion-nato-rcna12886>.

Rep. Calvert, Ken. "The failure of integrated deterrence, and what to do about China." *Defense News*, December 5, 2022. <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/12/05/the-failure-of-integrated-deterrence-and-what-to-do-about-china/#:~:text=The%20Biden%20administration%E2%80%99s%20timid%20measures%20to%20prevent%20Russian,just%20months%20before%20the%20war%20in%20Ukraine%20began.>

Chang-Liao, Nien-chung & Chi Fang. "The Case for Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait." *The Washington Quarterly*, 44, no.2, 45-60. <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F0163660X.2021.1932088>

Crowther, Philip. "Trump threatens to quit NATO: White House official." *France 24*, May 18, 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20170518-white-house-official-trump-threatens-leave-nato-usa-g7-russia>.

Dunleavy, Jerry. "Milley concedes Afghanistan withdrawal may have influenced Putin's Ukraine move." *Washington Examiner*, April 09, 2022. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/milley-concedes-afghanistan-withdrawal-may-have-influenced-putins-ukraine-move>.

Emmons, Libby. "Biden gave Putin 'green light' say officials in Kyiv: report." *The Post Millennial*, January 20, 2022. <https://thepostmillennial.com/breaking-biden-putin-green-light-kyiv-officials>.

Garamone, Jim. "New Strategy Seeks to Reinvigorate Deterrence in a Changing World." *DOD News*, November 8, 2022, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3213772/new-strategy-seeks-to-reinvigorate-deterrence-in-a-changing-world/>.

Dr. Hoffman, Francis G. "Conceptualizing Integrated Deterrence." *Lawfire*, January 8, 2022. <https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2022/01/08/guest-post-dr-frank-hoffman-on-conceptualizing-integrated-deterrence/>.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

Hudson, John and Missy Ryan. "Withdrawal from Afghanistan forces allies and adversaries to reconsider America's global role." *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2021.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/withdrawal-from-afghanistan-forces-allies-and-adversaries-to-reconsider-americas-global-role/2021/08/17/2808ddbc-ff84-11eb-825d-01701f9ded64_story.html.

Johnston, Alastair, Tsai Chia-hung, George Yin, and Steven Goldstein. "The Ambiguity of Strategic Clarity." *War on the Rocks*, June 9, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/the-ambiguity-of-strategic-clarity/>.

Kagan, Robert. "Essay | Challenging the U.S. Is a Historic Mistake." *WSJ*. February 4, 2023. www.wsj.com/articles/challenging-the-u-s-is-a-historic-mistake-11675441152. Accessed 9 Feb. 2023.

Kanno-Youngs, Zolan and Peter Baker. "Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese Attack." *The New York Times*, May 23, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/world/asia/biden-taiwan-china.html>.

Kinni, Theodore and Donna Kinni. *No Substitute for Victory: Lessons in Strategy and Leadership from General Douglas MacArthur*. Upper Saddle River: FT Prentice Hall, 2005.

Kuo, Raymond. "'Strategic Ambiguity' Has the U.S. and Taiwan Trapped." *Foreign Policy*, January 18, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/18/taiwan-us-china-strategic-ambiguity-military-strategy-asymmetric-defense-invasion/>.

Lin, Dalton. "'One China' and the Cross-Taiwan Strait Commitment Problem." *The China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 1094-1116. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/one-china-and-the-crosstaiwan-strait-commitment-problem/B3920960100A0B99C1D3F1F39DDAD965>.

Lin, Shih-Kai and Hung-Chang Chung. "Background, Rationale, and Nature of Biden Administration's Strategic Ambiguity towards Taiwan." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 34, no.2 (2022): 231-248. https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/landing/article.kci?arti_id=ART002844276.

Lock, Samantha. "How Many U.S. Soldiers Died in Afghanistan?" *Newsweek*, August 16, 2021. <https://www.newsweek.com/number-us-soldiers-who-died-afghanistan-war-1619685>.

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

Mazarr, Michael J. "Understanding Deterrence." *RAND Corporation*, (2018): 1-14.

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf#:~:text=Deterrence%20the%20practice%20of%20discouraging%20or%20restraining%20someone%E2%80%A4,an%20effort%20to%20force%20an%20actor%20to%20do%20something.

Moser, John E. "Foreign Policy in the 1930s: From Neutrality to Involvement." n.d. *Bill of Rights Institute*. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/foreign-policy-in-the-1930s-from-neutrality-to-involvement>.

Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of Defense (2022), <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23321290/2022-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china.pdf>.

Park, S.C. RCEP versus TPP with the Trump Administration in the USA and Implications for East Asian Economic Cooperation. *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review*, 5(4), 135-152 (2017). <http://doi.org/10.15678/EBER.2017.050406>.

Poletti, Arlo. and Lorenzo Zambarnardi. Declining hegemony and the sources of Trump's disengagement from multilateral trade governance: the interaction between domestic politics and the international political economy. *Int Polit* 59, 1101–1118 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00346-9>.

Sartori, Anne E. *Deterrence by Diplomacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Shattuck, Andrew T. 2020. "A Modern Deterrence Theory Case Study: America's Failure to Deter Japan." *The Strategy Bridge* (August 2021). <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/6/9/a-modern-deterrence-theory-case-study-americas-failure-to-deter-japan>.

"Speech on the Far East." n.d. Teaching American History. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/speech-on-the-far-east/>.

Taylor, Philip M. *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media since 1945*. New York City, NY: Routledge, 1997.

The New York Times. "Read the Full Transcript of President Biden's Remarks on Afghanistan." The New York Times, August 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/us/politics/biden-taliban-afghanistan-speech.html>

Strategic Clarity: An Argument for Effective Deterrence

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "Fact Sheet: America's Wars - May 2016, Revised."
https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf.

U.S. Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02. "DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms." Last modified February 15, 2016. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1024397.pdf>.

Ye, Xiaodi. "From Strategic Ambiguity to Maximum Pressure? Explaining the Logic of the US Taiwan Policy in the Post-Cold War Era. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no.8 (2022): 1511-1543.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211058887>.

Yu, Miles Maochun. "Dean Acheson's Fateful Speech and the Outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950." *World Tribune: U.S. Politics and Culture, Geopolitics, Northeast Asia, China, Geostrategy-Direct, International Security, Corporate Watch, Media Watch*. Originally published March 9, 2017.
<https://www.worldtribune.com/dean-achesons-fateful-speech-and-the-outbreak-of-the-korean-war-on-june-25-1950/>.



The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. June 2023