

Time to switch to strategic certainty

Written by M. Dane Waters
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There is no ambiguity when it comes to war. Ambiguity begs for certainty and a lack thereof has historically led to war.

History is full of examples: Europe's and the US' ambiguity as to how they would respond to Hitler's growing territorial expansion in Europe was certainly a contributing factor to World War II. In the same vein, US ambiguity toward Japan's expansionist militarism in the 1930s clearly led to the Pearl Harbor attacks that started the war in Asia in 1941.

Ambiguity in a world with leaders like Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) will inevitably lead to them bringing their version of certainty to the conflicts and regions filled with ambiguity — and it is critical that democratic nations around the world not allow this to happen. Certainty, where and when there is none, must be defined by democratic nations, and not those whose interests are counter to freedom, fairness and human rights.

In 1971 when then-US secretary of state Henry Kissinger traveled secretly to China, followed a year later by the historic trip of then-US president Richard Nixon to Beijing, the policy of “strategic ambiguity” regarding Taiwan was established. History will be the judge of whether this policy was justified, but that debate is for another day. However, one thing is certain, it is time for ambiguity to be discarded and certainty established in regard to the future of Taiwan.

The question is who will define this certainty. On one hand, you have China, where it is clear that its recent political and military posturing is Xi's way of bringing certainty — the certainty that Taiwan is a resolute part of China. The type of certainty he has established over the fate of Hong Kong and the future of the Uighurs.

On the other hand, you have the US. Former US president Donald Trump began to bring certainty over the future of Taiwan by making it clear that Taiwan's territorial integrity and democracy must be protected. However, even his actions did not stray from the official doctrine of strategic ambiguity. US President Joe Biden has taken the next step in confronting China and nibbling at the edges of bringing certainty to US policy toward Taiwan — but still, strategic ambiguity remains Washington's de facto policy.

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For the past 50 years, Washington — Democrats and Republicans alike — has officially and formally stressed that the “one China” policy, the Taiwan Relations Act and the Three Communiques are the cornerstones of US policy toward Taiwan. Yet we all know that these three cornerstones are filled with strategic ambiguities. Therefore, unless these official cornerstones are openly renounced, the shadow US strategic ambiguity will continue to prevail, and any new attempt by the US to bring strategic clarity will never be credible and trusted.

This confusion is particularly true on the issue of the US’ “one China policy” versus China’s “one China principle.” The former projects US flexibility and ambiguity, while the latter projects a firm and fundamental stand of “red line” certainty and clarity. The international community and power politics are always looking for the fine lines between ambiguity and clarity for policymaking. This continued ambiguity is nothing but fuel for Xi’s fire to bring certainty to Taiwan’s future.

Taiwan is caught in the middle. Without question, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and a large majority of Taiwanese desire to return to their rightful place among the league of nations. However, Taiwan cannot make this journey alone and the only way this journey can end positively is with the abolition of strategic ambiguity — an end that can be accomplished with the world’s recognition that Taiwan is what it is — a truly sovereign and independent nation. However, time is running out.

The reality is that until the US policy toward its relationship with Taiwan is a postscript in the history books, war is not only likely, but inevitable. China has made it clear that it is time to end the ambiguity and replace it with certainty.

However, the world — especially the US — cannot let Xi create this certainty, for not only would it result in the loss of countless lives, but it would also usher in a new era of tragic world politics. An era where nations — such as Russia and China — can act with impunity. An era where the world once again becomes a chessboard where those nations with economic and military power, and with tyrannical leaders, can wield it with no consequence. Inevitably, there would be a new world war in which millions would die. There is little doubt that Russia and China see that a new world order based on their strategic partnership is possible.

All one must do to see the reality of this partnership is to look at the increased actions by Russia around the world, but most importantly in eastern Ukraine, where what is referred to as Crimea II is likely to occur by the year’s end — the violation of a sovereign nation’s territorial

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integrity. This, coupled with China's provocative and illegal actions in the South China Sea, and continued violation of Taiwan's airspace and territorial waters, is a prelude to conflict.

Simultaneous military action by Russia and China by the end of the year would certainly transform global politics and the world would not be able to counter this global coup d'état. These simultaneous actions are not coincidental, but a clear signal of a Putin-Xi global alliance.

This is why preemptive action is urgent — normal diplomacy, threats of sanctions and a show of military strength is simply not enough. This is where the US and Biden must take a stand. Stand up and replace strategic ambiguity with strategic certainty.

It is time that the US formally recognizes Taiwan as an independent nation. It is time for Biden to travel to Taiwan and stand side by side with Tsai, and recognize Taiwan as the true democracy it is. This action would not only blunt Xi's attempts to act with impunity, but also send a clear message to Putin that there is a new playbook when it comes to international diplomacy.

Would this avert war between Taiwan and China? Who knows, but the reality of Biden in Taipei, though certainly provocative to China, would be the strongest signal to Xi that the US would defend Taiwan, and would be much clearer than having US naval vessels in the Taiwan Strait.

Moreover, it would make it easier for Biden to rally Americans to support a potential military conflict with China — for Americans to know that they would be defending a sovereign nation against Chinese aggression, and not defending a disputed territory.

China also knows this, which is why Xi wants to bring certainty now before Taiwan is recognized as a truly independent and sovereign nation, making military support and harsher sanctions from democratic nations more likely — just like the world did when Iraq invaded Kuwait. There is little doubt that the world would have stayed silent if Kuwait was not a recognized sovereign nation.

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Strategic ambiguity must end now and the US, working with other respected and democratic nations, must define certainty before Xi does. Biden must replace strategic ambiguity with strategic certainty. The world must make clear to Xi that certainty is not Taiwan being a part of China, but the certainty that Taiwan is where it belongs — a free and democratic member of the league of nations!

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