

Expert explains US' ambiguity policy

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Although the US has a policy of “strategic ambiguity” toward Taiwan, it is committed to the security and wellbeing of Taiwanese, a US academic told a conference on Taiwan international relations on Friday.

“We are not ambiguous about our opposition to the threat or use of military force or any other form of coercion [against Taiwan],” Alan Romberg, the director of the East Asia program at the Stimson Center, said in a speech at the George Washington University conference.

However, Romberg stressed that the US also attached great importance to having constructive relations with China and so opposed all “unnecessary acts of provocation” that would harm these interests. He said that the US left open the question of whether it would become involved in a military conflict between Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

“[This] Strategic ambiguity is designed to say to the mainland [China]: ‘Don’t assume that we won’t become involved if you use or threaten force against Taiwan,’” he said. “And it says to Taiwan: ‘Don’t assume we will become involved.’”

Romberg said that if Washington said that it would come into the fray no matter what could encourage radical elements in Taiwan to push for de jure independence.

“This could have catastrophic implications for Taiwan, for US-PRC relations and for stability in the region,” he said.

Yet if Washington said it would not under any circumstance become militarily engaged in a Taiwan-China conflict, that could create a dynamic in which coercion could be applied far more easily, Romberg said.

“As we all know, the situation over the [Taiwan] Strait has changed dramatically over the last several years and the positions of the authorities in both Beijing and Taipei have evolved substantially,” he said, but added that the underlying reality had not changed.

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“Beijing still holds the goal of ultimate reunification [with Taiwan] and not only might different circumstances in Taiwan change the cross-strait climate, [but] a different political climate on the mainland might cause a rethinking of the current patience,” Romberg said.

He added that while the chances of a Taiwanese movement toward de jure independence in were somewhere “between zero and minus-76,” China could not completely trust that such a push would not happen.

While the idea of a war in the Taiwan Strait soon was “a bit far-fetched,” China, Taiwan and the US should still prepare for it.

“In pursuing this complex and nuanced policy, clarity in some respects is essential, but in other respects, focused ambiguity helps to create the space necessary for the two sides to interact effectively,” Romberg said. “It may not be as satisfying as a definitive position, but it works and that’s what matters.”

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