

# The American Conservative

## It's Time To End 'Strategic Ambiguity'

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December 16, 2021

The debate over “strategic ambiguity”—Washington’s attempt to make other countries guess its intentions—is heating up. Leaving friends and adversaries alike uncertain about America’s aims is supposed to cause both to be more cautious and less likely to take reckless action.

That long has been America’s approach to Taiwan. The U.S. terminated its security treaty with the island-based Republic of China after recognizing the People’s Republic of China. The Taiwan Relations Act established an unofficial relationship with Taipei, including defensive arms sales. Washington has since refused to say whether it would defend Taiwan from Chinese attack, attempting to simultaneously deter both Taipei from declaring independence, which could provoke Chinese intervention, and the PRC from attacking Taiwan, which would present Washington with a crisis.

Yet strategic ambiguity has come under fire. Last year, Richard Haass, president of the Council of Foreign Relations, advocated dropping the veil: “The policy known as strategic ambiguity has, however, run its course. Ambiguity is unlikely to deter an increasingly assertive China with growing military capabilities. The time has come for the United States to introduce a policy of strategic clarity: one that makes explicit that the United States would respond to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan.”

President Joe Biden, apparently without much forethought, made things temporarily unambiguous when he said in CNN town hall that the U.S. has “a commitment” to protect Taiwan; anxious aides eventually rolled back his comment. Last week, Ely Ratner, assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, took a tougher tone before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stating that Taiwan is “critical to the region’s security and critical to the defense of vital U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific.” The Quincy Institute’s Michael Swaine warned that Ratner’s language “clearly implies that, in fact, Taiwan should be regarded primarily as a strategic asset to be kept separate from Beijing.” Governments typically justify war by citing “vital” interests.

The U.S. could also be said to be acting with “strategic ambiguity” toward Ukraine. The Obama administration refused to go to war to defend Ukraine from Russia in 2014, and NATO has yet to accept Ukraine as a member. However, the U.S. and European Union imposed harsh economic sanctions on Moscow, which remain in place more than seven years later. The U.S. and other NATO members have also provided military assistance to Kyiv and recently escalated their rhetoric in response to increased Russian military pressure.

For instance, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke of America’s “unwavering commitment...to Ukraine’s territorial integrity, sovereignty, its independence.” Biden said much the same—presumably with talking points prepared by Blinken—when he later spoke with Zelensky. Some European states also pushed a rhetorically maximalist agenda. For example, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss opined: “What we have to do is deter Russia from taking that course of action. It would be a strategic mistake for Russia to do that,” explaining before the G7 Summit that the meeting “is about a show of unity between like-minded major economies that we are going to absolutely be strong in our stance against aggression with respect to Ukraine.” This sweeping language implies more than nominal support.

President Biden “certainly supports the aspiration of Ukraine” to join NATO, according to Press Secretary Jen Psaki. However, the president noted that Kyiv was not yet a member of the transatlantic alliance, so none of the latter’s legal obligations apply. And he appeared to foreclose military action, indicating that he would not “unilaterally use force to confront Russia.” Psaki refused to speculate on any circumstances that might change the president’s position. Multilateral intervention also remains possible, but other NATO members are unlikely to press for war over Ukraine. Even Europe’s hawks are most enthusiastic about *other* countries going to war on their behalf.

“Strategic ambiguity” is a foreign-policy artifact of a time when neither Taiwan nor Ukraine was a potential flashpoint to nuclear war. There are three good reasons to make America’s commitments clearer.

First, ambiguity works both ways. When the threat seemed minimal—China was incapable of invading Taiwan and Russia’s military was in desperate decline—opacity might have encouraged both sides to be cautious. However, Beijing and Moscow have since grown more powerful and appear less likely to take veiled threats seriously.

Feeling greater danger, Taipei and Kyiv might be more likely to believe vapid comments constitute firm commitments. With war a genuine possibility, it is important that no one gets the wrong message.

Second, fulfilling commitments typically requires action. Plans should be made and rehearsed. This is especially important if the U.S. contemplates going to war. Precisely what would Washington do, and how would the respective governments coordinate?

Third, the decision for war belongs to Congress—after a debate involving the American people. For instance, polls show the public backs Taiwan against China, but most Americans have no idea what that would mean: War with nuclear-armed China off its coast would mean large-scale U.S. casualties, major materiel losses, and possible defeat. This reality should be understood before a crisis.

Still, whether a commitment is ambiguous or clear remains the secondary issue. The primary issue is whether there is a commitment, and, if so, what it is. Today, the critical questions are whether Washington should go to war with China over Taiwan and Russia over Ukraine.

The answer is no.

Living in the shadow of Mao Zedong and his mad oppression of the People's Republic of China, and now under Xi Jinping's more-orderly but increasingly repressive rule, the Taiwanese have created a vibrant, free, and prosperous society. They deserve to make their own future and have established what meets all the criteria for an independent nation.

However, that is less important than the bad neighborhood in which they find themselves, merely 100 miles off the PRC's coast. And they live with the unfortunate historical fact that Taiwan was part of China until detached by Japan in war. Of all people, Americans—who fought a terrible civil war, the casualties from which, in proportion, would number eight million today—should understand the murderous appeal of nationalism.

China is deadly serious about completing its revocation of “the Century of Humiliation” and is unlikely to be deterred by threats of American intervention. The U.S. remains by far militarily superior; no one imagines the Chinese armed forces operating within 100 miles of the U.S. coast. However, it is far easier for Beijing to deter American military action near Taiwan than for Washington to project power thousands of miles away. The Pentagon's record in war games does not give reason for optimism.

War with China over Taiwan would be exceptionally dangerous for two reasons. First, the Chinese military would rely on mainland bases, making them inevitable U.S. targets. The PRC would feel the need to retaliate, necessarily escalating the conflict. China also is a nuclear power, though a modest one. Any escalation could have potentially catastrophic consequences. The U.S. cannot justify taking that risk for any issue not vital to its own security.

Ukraine is in a similar situation. Its people deserve to set their own national course. However, Washington's interest in Ukraine's future is minimal. Kyiv is not an important security interest. While Americans prefer to see weaker states treated fairly by their neighbors—a principle often violated *by the U.S.*—they have no reason to go

to war, especially with a nuclear power, over such an issue, particularly one viewed by Russia as being of vital importance.

Ukrainians' history is closely tied to Moscow, first as part of the Russian Empire and next as a republic in the Soviet Union. Crimea was historically part of Russia, transferred to Ukraine only in 1954, most likely as part of political maneuvers within the Soviet Communist Party to replace Stalin as Soviet leader. At the time, Crimea was administered from Moscow and the switch had little practical impact.

Although the majority of Ukrainians voted for independence, many, predominantly in the east, were of Russian heritage, spoke Russian, maintained family, cultural, and economic ties with Russia, and/or voted for Russia-friendly parties. Moreover, Russia's only naval base on the Black Sea is at Sevastopol, in Crimea. The 2014 U.S.-backed street putsch against the democratically elected (though highly corrupt) pro-Russian government threatened Moscow's access to the territory.

Unfortunately, the West's current relationship with Russia is marred by multiple perceived offenses against Moscow—busted commitments not to expand NATO to both the Gorbachev and Yeltsin governments, dismemberment of Serbia without considering Russia's interests, and U.S.-backed overthrow of governments in Georgia and Ukraine. Although the Putin government's response was not legally or morally justified, it is geopolitically understandable. Had Moscow behaved similarly in Latin America, the U.S. likely would have responded without concern for the wishes of neighboring states.

In any case, it is difficult to imagine a peaceful *modus vivendi* that does not address Russia's security concerns. And that means ending any presumption that Ukraine is ever going to enter NATO. Kyiv still could be independent politically and swing both ways economically while remaining neutral militarily, avoiding any U.S. or European squabbles with Moscow. Absent such an accommodation, conflict appears inevitable, even if the latest crisis dissipates peacefully. Yet Washington has one overriding interest in the ongoing confrontation: to avoid ending up at war with Russia.

The policies of strategic ambiguity, at least in terms of Taiwan and Ukraine, are no longer useful. Both issues have reached crisis-stage where honest dialogue is required for a peaceful resolution.

More important, though, are the underlying policies. The U.S. should abandon war plans over both Taiwan and Ukraine. Washington should work with allied and friendly states to prepare diplomatic, economic, and social sanctions in response to aggression by either China or Russia. However, these are not wars America should fight, especially on its own. Ultimately, Washington must deal with the world as it is, and not as Americans wish it would be.

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