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Strategic Clarity on Taiwan Would Be Disastrous

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On April 10, 1979, President Jimmy Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which for over four decades has successfully deterred China from invading Taiwan through the employment of “strategic ambiguity.”

Under strategic ambiguity, the United States is not obligated to defend Taiwan, but it maintains the capacity to do so. According to [Doug Bandow](#) of the Cato Institute, “Taiwan can’t take U.S. support as a given and therefore won’t do anything reckless. ... China can’t be sure that America wouldn’t send in the cavalry and therefore won’t take any chances.”

U.S. strategic ambiguity deters China from taking action to conquer Taiwan by avoiding provocation and keeping quiet about the circumstances in which the United States would intervene with force.

In what amounts to an abandonment of our official Taiwan policy, President Biden has several times made full-throated declarations that he would deploy the military to protect Taiwan from China. This, only to have his declarations immediately and repeatedly walked back by staff.

Each time the president makes this assertion, White House officials attempt to reassure the American people that the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity has not changed. But Biden’s persistent edicts nevertheless signal a belief that the commander-in-chief can engage in bombastic rhetoric without consequence.

As if compelled to ensure that the law matches the president’s pronouncements, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee recently approved legislation that would formally change America’s diplomatic posture toward Taiwan. The sponsors of the bill, Democrat Bob Menendez and Republican Lindsey Graham, tout the legislation as “the most comprehensive restructuring of U.S. policy towards Taiwan” since 1979.

That statement is perhaps the only point of agreement I have with the authors of this misguided piece of legislation.

The new bill, called the Taiwan Policy Act (TPA), proposes to expand the role of Taiwan in international organizations, threatens the use of sanctions on the People’s Republic of China, and increases spending on Taiwan’s military capabilities to over \$6 billion, courtesy of American taxpayers.

I offered an amendment to strip this military funding. I did this not only on the grounds that Americans should not be forced to subsidize Taiwan's security at a time of high inflation, but also because making explicit what has been implied—that American policymakers wish to maintain Taiwan's independence—is a shift away from ambiguity and may well be interpreted by China as a provocation.

The TPA takes a far more bellicose tone than the Taiwan Relations Act. Abandoning our careful approach for a far more explicit and aggressive one, I fear, will make war in the Pacific more likely.

That fear is shared by Peter van Buren, a former foreign service officer. In an [article](#) for *The American Conservative*, van Buren argues that “The risk [of moving to strategic clarity] is that we will talk ourselves into a crisis. The blathering about inevitability goes on, mutual demonization increases, and the policy response moves from prevention to war preparation.”

Preparation for war may very well be the Chinese response to the TPA and strategic clarity. If the United States announces an ironclad commitment to defend Taiwan prior to establishing the capabilities to do so, China may invade before the United States can significantly bolster Taiwan's military.

That is bad news for America. China is a country with economic power, a growing military, and alliances with our other adversaries. According to [Niall Ferguson](#), a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, the United States team consistently loses to China when engaging in war games simulating a CCP invasion of Taiwan.

This is not a time to radically change a longstanding policy that has preserved the peace. We must not resort to escalating tensions. We should not trade bellicose barbs and alter long-standing policy without an appreciation for the dire consequences that could follow.

Strategic ambiguity affords the United States the ability to keep the world guessing about how it intends to use its military might. That policy has worked and, despite the growing strength of China since 1979, the People's Republic has not invaded Taiwan. Abandoning that policy in favor of strategic clarity discards a successful strategy for a reckless one that makes war more likely, not less.