

The Future of U.S.-Taiwan Arms Sales

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Abstract: The periodic sale of American arms to Taiwan has become one the United States' thorniest diplomatic challenges. Not only has the issue forced the United States to carefully navigate between its long running commitments to Taiwan and its increasingly important relationship with China, it is an issue that could, if not carefully managed, lead to the outbreak of armed conflict between the two major regional powers. Given this danger, should the United States (1) cease arms sales, (2) increase arms sales, or (3) adopt a position somewhere in between? This essay will compare and contrast the merits of these three broad positions.

I. Introduction

The periodic sale of American arms to Taiwan has become one the United States' thorniest diplomatic challenges. Not only has the issue forced the United States to carefully navigate between its long running commitments to Taiwan and its increasingly important relationship with China, it is an issue that could, if not carefully managed, lead to the outbreak of armed conflict between the two major regional powers. In August of 2011, Barack Obama reignited this dispute when he announced that the United States would sell \$5.85 billion worth of arms to Taiwan in a package that included upgrades for Taiwan's F-16 A/B fighter jets.¹ Although the deal did not include the more advanced F-16 C/D fighter jets initially requested by the Taiwanese, China was quick to voice its opposition to the proposed package. Mainland media slammed the sale as "a serious blow to improving Sino-U.S. relations,"² and Gary Locke, the U.S. Ambassador to China, was summoned and warned that the sale would "inevitably undermine bilateral relations as well as exchanges and cooperation in military and security areas."³

Though China's opposition to the arms deal was not surprising, the proposed package was also subject to an unusual level of domestic scrutiny within the U.S., and an active debate emerged on whether or not the U.S. should continue arms sales to Taiwan in the face of strong opposition by the People's Republic of China (PRC). On one side of the debate, a number of scholars came out and argued that the U.S ought to stop, or seriously reduce, arms sales to Taiwan in order to eliminate a significant irritant in the United States' increasingly important relationship with China.⁴ On the other side, a number of lawmakers—like Senators John Cornyn, a Republican from Texas, and Robert Menendez, a Democrat from New Jersey—argued that the package proposed by the Obama administration was not actually significant enough.⁵ They maintained that not selling the more advanced F-16 C/D fighters to Taiwan was "a slap in the

¹ Bill Gertz, "Arms sale to Taiwan may fray China ties," *The Washington Times*, September 19, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/sep/19/arms-sale-to-taiwan-may-fray-china-ties>.

² "A blow to Sino-US ties," *China Daily*, September 23, 2011.

³ "Weapons deals hurt all," *China Daily*, September 23, 2011.

⁴ Charles Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War?: Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March/April 2011).

⁵ Jeremy Page, "U.S., China Dial Back on Taiwan," *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, September 20, 2011; Bill Gertz, "Obama agrees to sell arms to Taiwan," *The Washington Times*, September 15, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/sep/15/obama-rules-out-new-f-16s-for-taiwan/?page=all>.

face to a strong ally and longtime friend."⁶ Backing their position, a number of analysts expressed concern that Taiwan's air force would be unable to match China's without significant modernization—a concern that would be partly addressed by the sale of the more advanced fighters.⁷ The final package put forth by Obama in September of 2011 fell somewhere in between these two extremes. The administration agreed to sell Taiwan a package of arms but declined to include a full array of advanced weaponry.

Although the administration's final package provoked immediate condemnation from China, the issue of arms sales to Taiwan has, in the year since, faded from the popular spotlight. That is not to say, however, that the issue has been resolved; it continues to lurk below the surface of the Sino-U.S. relationship, putting stress on already strained ties. At the core of the debate, China continues to argue that its dispute with Taiwan is a domestic issue that international parties ought not to have a role in, while the U.S. continues to maintain that it has a long-standing commitment to ensure Taiwan has sufficient strength of arms to prevent its forcible reunification.

Given the conflicting positions of the United States and China, how should potential future arms sales proceed? This essay will seek to answer that question. It will begin by providing background history on the major international agreements and domestic legislation that have come to define each player's understanding of cross-strait relations. It will then explore the merits of three broad positions on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan: should the United States (1) cease arms sales, (2) increase arms sales, or (3) adopt a position somewhere in between? This essay will conclude that the first two options are fraught with danger. Halting or significantly curtailing arms sales will only embolden the PRC and increase the probability of aggressive Chinese action, while undermining Taiwan's confidence to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the mainland. Conversely, dramatically increasing arms sales could potentially lead Taiwan to make a rash break for independence, which might result in military aggression by the PRC. As a result, this essay will argue that the United States' best option is to continue a policy of strategic ambiguity by selling Taiwan some arms but not enough to give Taipei the confidence to declare independence. Such a policy also deters Chinese aggression by signaling that the U.S. is still committed to the 'One China' principle through peaceful negotiation.⁸ Furthermore, it leaves the question of possible U.S. intervention in a Chinese-Taiwanese conflict open ended, augmenting the deterrence factor of the policy. Although this particular stance may do little to immediately resolve the issue of who has ultimate sovereignty over Taiwan, it does create space for the two sides to engage in continued dialogue.

II. Background to the Conflict

Cross-strait relations are governed by four important agreements and pieces of legislation, each of which is interpreted differently by the involved parties. The modern structural dynamic between the U.S., China, and Taiwan began in 1979 with the termination of the 1954 *U.S.-Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty* and the enactment of the 1979 *Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA), a piece of U.S. domestic law. Prior to the termination of the mutual defense treaty, the United States recognized the Republic of China (ROC)—based in Taiwan—as the legitimate government of all of China. However, the shifting geopolitical balance of the 1970s led to a U.S.

⁶ Page, "U.S., China Dial Back on Taiwan."

⁷ Gertz, "Obama agrees to sell arms to Taiwan."

⁸ The 'One China' principle holds that there is only one state called China, despite the fact there are two governments, the PRC and ROC, who are vying for control of it.

rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, which began with Kissinger's visit to China in 1971 and culminated in the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1979. Thus, beginning in 1979, the U.S. chose to recognize the PRC, rather than the ROC, as the legitimate government of China. However, despite the shift in formal recognition, there was still a broad desire in Washington to maintain unofficial ties with Taiwan.⁹ This led the U.S. Congress to enact the *Taiwan Relations Act*, which created a legal framework for the U.S. to maintain economic, cultural, and military relations with Taiwan. Essentially, it resulted in the creation of parallel relationships, where the U.S. had both official relations with the PRC and unofficial, but significant, relations with Taiwan.

In addition to changing the official relationship between the U.S., Taiwan, and China, the TRA has also become the modern foundation for U.S. arms transfers to Taiwan. Specifically, the TRA requires the U.S. to "make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable it to maintain a sufficient self-defense capacity."¹⁰ It is significant to note that the TRA does not actually obligate the United States to intervene in Taiwan if the PRC invades, unlike the mutual defense treaty that preceded it. The TRA does, however, require the executive branch to consult with Congress in the event that Taiwan's security is jeopardized. American senators, many of whom strongly supported Taiwan, believed that this feature would prevent the administration from acting unilaterally to compromise Taiwanese security in the face of Chinese pressure.¹¹ However, because of disagreements between members of Congress, the TRA leaves the executive branch of government in charge of determining what types of arms are to be sold, how much should be sold, and when arms will be sold.¹² Thus, Congress only has the power to accept or reject arms deals—it cannot modify them. This remains the case to this very day.

Beijing was not particularly pleased by the passage of the *Taiwan Relations Act*, but Deng Xiaoping, eager to complete the normalization of relations with the United States, agreed to a compromise in the August Communiqué of 1982—the contents of which have become "part of the sacramental language of subsequent high-level dialogues and joint communiqués" between the United States and the PRC.¹³ In the communiqué, each side began by restating its perspective on the conflict: China asserted that the dispute between itself and Taiwan was a purely domestic issue, and the U.S. asserted its commitment to the peaceful resolution of the dispute. However, the United States also went one step further; it agreed that it would "not seek to carry out a long term policy of arms sales to Taiwan."¹⁴ As part of this pledge, the U.S. committed itself to "reduc[ing] gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution."¹⁵ Although purposefully ambiguous, the Chinese interpreted this commitment as indicating that the U.S. would eventually wind down the arms transfers that the TRA made available to Taiwan. Yet, despite the commitments it made in the August

⁹ Richard W. Hu, "The TRA, Cross-Strait Relations, and Sino-U.S. Relations: Searching for Cross-Strait Stability," *The Future of United States, China, and Taiwan Relations*, edited by Cheng-Yi Lin and Denny Roy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 53.

¹⁰ *Taiwan Relations Act*, Public Law 96-8, Section 3.1.

¹¹ Hu, "The TRA, Cross-Strait Relations, and Sino-U.S. Relations," 54.

¹² Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 121.

¹³ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2011), 382.

¹⁴ "Sino-US Joint Communiqué," August 17, 1982, <http://www.nti.org/db/china/engdocs/commk82.htm>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Communiqué, the U.S. has continued to sell a considerable volume of arms to Taiwan through a flexible interpretation of its limits—much to the chagrin of Beijing.

This flexible interpretation relies on six specific assurances that Ronald Reagan provided Taipei immediately prior to its initial signing of the August Communiqué. Initially, the assurances were simply designed to bolster Taiwan's confidence, as the contents of the communiqué seemed to significantly compromise important elements of the TRA. More specifically, Reagan's pledges were supposed to signal that Washington's commitment to Taiwan still took priority, despite the desire to enhance relations with Beijing.¹⁶ However, in the years since, the assurances have come to justify creative interpretations of the clauses of the August Communiqué, thereby allowing the U.S. to continue significant arms sales to Taiwan. As the 'Six Assurances' are now understood, they commit the United States to the following: (1) not setting a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan; (2) not holding prior consultations with the Chinese on arms sales to Taiwan; (3) not revising the Taiwan Relations Act; (4) not altering its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan; (5) not playing any mediation role between Taiwan and Beijing; and (6) not exerting pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the Chinese.¹⁷ When taken together, these assurances clearly run into conflict with interests of China, who would rather have the United States draw Taiwanese arms sales to a close in a timely fashion.

The most recent addition to the collection of principles framing cross-Straits relations is 2005's *Anti-Secession Law* (ASL), which was passed by the National People's Congress of China. Similar to the TRA, the ASL is a piece of domestic legislation. Drawing on the claim that Taiwan falls under Beijing's sovereignty, it asserts: "If possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the [Chinese] state shall employ *non peaceful means* (emphasis added) and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹⁸ Although China had never officially renounced the use of force against Taiwan, the ASL made it explicitly clear which conditions would lead to a use of force against Taiwan. The purpose of which was to "draw a clear red line to deter Taiwan's attempted move to formal independence."¹⁹ China enacted the ASL during a period of time in which the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was in power in Taiwan. At the time, the DPP, who favors independence, was working to enact measures aimed at cultivating an independent 'Taiwanese' identity, which caused considerable concern in Beijing.²⁰ Situated within this particular context, it becomes clear that the ASL was enacted to project a strong message to both Taipei and Washington that a declaration of Taiwanese independence would not be tolerated by the PRC—a message that continues to be stressed to this day.

These principles, agreements, and legislation explored above—along with all of their inherent contradictions—form the basis on which the U.S., China, and Taiwan conduct relations, though each party emphasizes its own particular interpretations. For the United States, the TRA and the 'Six Assurances' commit the United States to ensuring that Taiwan has sufficient support

¹⁶ Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 148.

¹⁷ This list was adopted and modified from: Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 148.

¹⁸ Quoted in John J. Tkacik Jr., "The 'ASL' as the 'Anti-TRA': The Impact of China's Anti-Secession Law on U.S. Relations with Taiwan," *The Future of United States, China, and Taiwan Relations*, edited by Cheng-Yi Lin and Denny Roy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 62.

¹⁹ Hu, "The TRA, Cross-Straits Relations, and Sino-U.S. Relations," 63.

²⁰ Cheng-Yi Lin, "A Status Quo with Different Interpretations," 74.

to prevent its forcible reunification with China. China, meanwhile, frames its opposition to continued arms deals by specifically referencing the August Communiqué, which commits the United States to reducing and ultimately ceasing arms sales to Taiwan. Further entrenching its position, China's *Anti-Secession Law* enshrines its explicit position on what types of actions would provoke a military response. Essentially, it sets in stone the Chinese view that Taiwanese independence is unacceptable. Moving forward, this collection of principles, agreements, and legislation must be kept in mind when discussing the future direction of U.S.-Taiwan arms sales, as they form the basis on which the parties have come to understand one another.

III. Contrasting Policies: Should Taiwan Be Abandoned?

Given the established framework governing Sino-U.S. relations over Taiwan, there are three broad positions taken on the question of continued arms sales to Taiwan. At one end of the spectrum, a number of scholars and policy makers argue that the United States should either abandon or, at the very least, sharply scale back arms sales to Taiwan.²¹ Effectively, this policy would see the United States abandon its commitments under both the TRA and the 'Six Assurances' in order to seek better relations with China. It would, however, better comply with the spirit of the August Communiqué by bringing an end to nearly three decades of arms sales.

Under what sort of conditions does ending a long-term alliance, such as the relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan, become attractive? In commentating upon the nature of asymmetrical alliances, Wei-Chin Lee argues that defections become particularly appealing to stronger partners when the alliance's "targeted adversary is no longer a threat to it, even though the opponent may still present a challenge to the weaker ally."²² Arguably, current Sino-U.S. relations could be interpreted in such a manner. With almost three decades of double-digit growth, China has become a major global actor and the world's second largest economy.²³ As a result, China's value as a cooperative partner has increased significantly over the past three decades. Chinese help has also become vital in managing a number of pressing global issues, such as the struggling world economy and the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis. With China's growth likely to continue in coming years—some estimates project that China will become the world's largest economy by 2016—China's importance to the United States will only continue to grow.²⁴

In contrast to China's growing clout, Taiwan's global impact has been in relative decline over the past decades; it has few global allies, its economy has been increasingly marginalized by that of its larger neighbor, and it continues to play a very limited role in international politics. Only twenty-three nations continue to recognize the ROC as the legitimate government of China, and none are major powers.²⁵ Nor does Taiwan have any major 'unofficial' allies beside the U.S. Meanwhile, its economy, which once outshone China's, is being increasingly eclipsed by PRC's

²¹ For an example of such an approach see: Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War?"

²² Wei-Chin Lee, "Arms Twisting: U.S.-Taiwan Arms Transfers in the First Decade of the Twenty-first Century" in *Issues and Studies* 46, no. 3, September 2010, 155.

²³ David Barboza, "China passes Japan as Second-Largest Economy," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

²⁴ The projection that China will overtake the United States by 2016 is based on purchasing power parity projections of GDP: Peter Shadbolt, "Will the 'Age of America' end in 2016?" *CNN*, April 26, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/BUSINESS/04/26/us.china.economy/index.html>.

²⁵ Shirley A. Kan and Wayne M. Morrison, *U.S.-Taiwan Relationship: Overview of Policy Issues*, Congressional Research Service, June 15, 2012, p. 1, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41925.

rapidly growing economic output. In 2011, China's economy was roughly thirteen times the size of Taiwan's.²⁶ Taiwan's current role in international politics is also limited and has been for quite some time. Ever since the PRC replaced the ROC on the United Nations Security Council in 1971, Taiwan has been generally excluded from all major international organizations, which has limited its role in the international system.²⁷ This combination of factors has led some scholars to conclude "great power politics are aligning in ways unfavorable to Taiwan's continued autonomy vis-à-vis China."²⁸ As a result, abandoning Taiwan has become an increasingly popular option among many commentators; it would enhance the U.S.'s ties with an emerging global power at the minor cost of an ally whose global importance is on the wane.

Abandoning Taiwan would, however, force the United States to overcome a number of challenging domestic obstacles. The most significant obstacle to halting arms sales is that it would require ending or modifying the TRA. As the TRA is a piece of domestic legislation, this would require the consent of Congress. There are two factors that make this unlikely. First, the domestic defense industry in the United States, which has a powerful lobbying arm, has a vested interest in continuing arms sales to Taiwan. In the 2006-2009 period, Taiwan ranked fourth among global U.S. arms customers.²⁹ As such, the defense lobby has and will likely continue to have a significant impact on Taiwanese policy within the United States. Perhaps most famously, both Clinton and Bush Sr. supported the sale of F-16s to Taiwan in 1992 in hopes of winning votes by protecting the defense industry.³⁰ Given the current tough economic circumstances in the U.S., such a strategy will likely continue to have considerable appeal for lawmakers, which defense lobbyists will be more than happy to point out. Secondly, Congress has had a long-standing pro-Taiwanese stance. In 2011, a bipartisan group of over forty-five senators actively supported selling Taiwan new F-16 C/D fighter craft.³¹ Given the overwhelming pro-Taiwanese disposition of Congress, ending or modifying the TRA would require the expenditure of considerable political capital on behalf of the administration, and there seems to be no such inclination at this time. Just as designed, the TRA essentially prevents the administration from unilaterally abandoning Taiwan under pressure from China.

More importantly, even if it were possible to overcome domestic opposition and end arms sales, such a policy would be major strategic error, as it would compromise the U.S.'s regional clout by emboldening the Chinese and casting doubt on U.S. strength in the eyes of its Asian allies. As Nancy Tucker and Bonnie Glaser argue in the fall 2011 issue of *The Washington Quarterly*, such a move would "prove to an increasingly confident China that Washington has become weak, vacillating, and unreliable."³² Combined with strong nationalistic sentiments within China, such a perception would only encourage China to continue taking an aggressive

²⁶ Estimate based upon purchasing power parity adjusted GDP: CIA, "Taiwan," CIA World Fact Book, accessed September 11, 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tw.html>; CIA, "China," CIA World Factbook, accessed September 11, 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>.

²⁷ Kan and Morrison, *U.S.-Taiwan Relationship*, 12-13.

²⁸ Denny Roy, "The U.S.-China Taiwan Relationship" in *The Future of United States, China, and Taiwan Relations*, edited by Cheng-Yi Lin and Denny Roy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 163.

²⁹ Shirley A. Kan, *Taiwan: Major U.S. Arms Sales Since 1990*, Congressional Research Service, June 3, 2011, 1-2.

³⁰ Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 210.

³¹ Bonnie Glaser and Nancy Tucker, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan," in *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4, 26.

³² *Ibid.*, 24-25.

stance towards Taiwan. At the same time, without U.S. support to bolster its confidence, Taiwan might put recently improving ties with China on hold. In the worst-case scenario, an abandoned and desperate Taiwan might even declare independence.³³ Under the boundaries delineated by China's ASL, this would almost certainly provoke an immediate military response—creating a major conflict with the potential to shatter the peace in East Asia.

Even if an abandoned Taiwan did peacefully agree to reunification under increased Chinese pressure, such a move would call the United States' commitment to democracy and liberal values into question, which would compromise its soft power. America's support for Taiwan also serves as a barometer by which other Asian nations can measure the United States' commitment to resisting the hegemonic ambitions of the Chinese. If America suddenly abandoned Taiwan, Pacific nations with strong ties to the United States, like Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines, might be prompted reevaluate their alliances with the United States. This would undoubtedly harm some of the United States' key interests in the region. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton notes, the United States' alliances with these nations "leverage [America's] regional presence and enhance [its] regional leadership at a time of evolving security challenges."³⁴ As such, there is good reason to think that the negative ramifications of abandoning Taiwan outweigh any of the potential benefits of trying to win Beijing's favor.

IV. Contrasting Policies: Should Military Ties Be Strengthened?

If the U.S. should not abandon its commitments to Taipei, should it move towards the opposite end of the spectrum and actually increase arms sales to Taiwan? There is an ardent group of analysts and policy makers who support this very stance. This group is critical of both those in the U.S. who are reluctant to sell arms to Taiwan as well as those in Taiwan who have been reluctant to approve arms sales. This group is particularly concerned about maintaining the military 'balance of power' across the Taiwan Strait. As Richard D. Fisher notes, "force of arms remains a key tool for Beijing to achieve its goal of unification under its terms."³⁵ This claim is supported by the Secretary of Defense's latest report to Congress, which found that Chinese "defense planners continue to regard Taiwan as the Chinese military's primary mission."³⁶ This leads some analysts to argue that the U.S. must do more to help Taiwan maintain the capacity to resist China's force of arms, and they cite the U.S.'s obligations to Taiwan under the TRA to justify this position.

It certainly does seem as if China will soon have the capability to take Taiwan by force. China's rapid economic growth has been accompanied by a rapid expansion of its military budget and capabilities. In the 2000-2010 period, China's military spending grew at an average of 12.1 per cent per annum, and total military spending reached \$160 billion in 2010.³⁷ This has effectively allowed China to develop a credible capacity to threaten Taiwan on short notice.

³³ Ibid., 35.

³⁴ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," in *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century.

³⁵ Richard D. Fisher Jr., "One China and the Military Balance on the Taiwan Strait," in *The "One China" Dilemma*, edited by Peter C. Y. Chow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 217.

³⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011*, 37, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_cmpr_final.pdf.

³⁷ Ibid., 41.

China currently has 1000-1200 short ranged ballistic missiles within range of Taiwan, about 400,000 troops deployed in the two military regions across from Taiwan, and over 490 combat aircraft within unrefueled range of Taiwan.³⁸ Taiwan's military budget, by contrast, peaked in 2000 at \$12.9 billion and is projected to decrease to \$10.2 billion in 2011.³⁹ Overall defense spending now sits at only 2.1 per cent of Taiwanese GDP, despite a 2005 promise to increase defense spending to 3 per cent of GDP.⁴⁰ Partly as a result of this significant gap in spending, the Office of the Secretary of Defense argues that although it remains unlikely that the Chinese would currently be able to execute a full-scale invasion of Taiwan, "the balance of military force continues to shift in Beijing's favor."⁴¹ If this trend continues unabated, it seems likely that China will acquire the capacity to invade within the coming decades, unless of course, Taiwan acquires additional defensive material. This projection forms the basis on which critics argue for increased quantitative and qualitative arms sales to Taiwan, so as to ensure that the PRC cannot invade or seriously threaten it.

Despite good intentions, the policy of ramping up arms sales to Taiwan in an attempt to maintain a balance of force across the Taiwan Strait is both misguided and dangerous. The goal of achieving a balance of power across the Taiwan Strait should not be overemphasized.⁴² Achieving a balance of forces across the Strait is not an end in itself. Instead, it should be viewed as means to the peaceful resolution of the current stalemate. As a result, Taiwan does not actually need to be able to defend itself without outside support. The very idea is unsustainable. The rate of China's economic and military growth makes any unilateral attempt by Taiwan to maintain a military balance across the Strait impossible in the long term. Instead, a sense of balance across the Strait relies on the implicit possibility that the United States would become involved in a Sino-Taiwanese dispute. One way that the U.S. signals this commitment is through periodic arms sales.⁴³ Given the symbolic nature of such sales, they do not need to include a considerable quantity of advanced weaponry, as their purpose is not to alter the balance of power across the Strait.

Even if ramping up arms sales to Taiwan cannot forestall the development of an asymmetrical balance between Taiwanese and Chinese forces, is there any harm in selling increased quantities of advanced arms to Taiwan to help alleviate pressure on the U.S. military? There are actually a number of risks entailed in ramping up arms sales to Taiwan. As Wei-Chin Lee observes in *Issues and Studies*, "the unrestrained and unconditional supply of advanced weapons to Taiwan could have the effect of upsetting the status quo in the region"⁴⁴ It is possible, for example, that an expansion of arms packages would embolden Taipei by creating the impression of unconditional American support. This might then lead Taiwanese leaders to take a risk and declare independence on the assumption that the U.S. would support them against China. This would almost undoubtedly provoke a military reaction from China, as declaring independence steps over the red lines set out by China's *Anti-Succession Law*. The United States,

³⁸ Ibid., 2-5.

³⁹ Kan, "Taiwan: Major U.S. Arms Sales Since 1990," 32.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 31-32.

⁴¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011," 7.

⁴² Jianwei Wang, "Seeking Something Bigger than Balance in Cross-Strait Relations," *Asia Policy*, no. 8 (July 2009), 10.

⁴³ Lee, "Arms Twisting," 156.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 156.

as Taiwan's guarantor, would then be under considerable pressure to meet China's aggression. This is clearly a position that the United States has a vested interest in avoiding, due to the potential for a nuclear conflict. What is the likelihood that increased arms sales would actually embolden Taiwan enough to rashly declare independence? It is hard to say, but recent improvements in Sino-Taiwanese relations makes it somewhat unlikely. However, given the catastrophic consequences of such an event, even the slightest possibility of U.S. entrapment in a Sino-Taiwanese conflict ought to be avoided.

V. Policy Recommendation: Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity

Drawing on the discussion above, it is clear that neither abandoning nor unconditionally arming Taiwan is in the interest of the United States. Instead, it seems to be in America's best interests to find a careful balance between the two extremes. A third policy option, which is the one this paper maintains is the most appropriate for the U.S. to adopt, is the policy of strategic ambiguity. Essentially, it is a policy of dual deterrence. It entails simultaneously deterring China from invading Taiwan and deterring Taiwan from declaring independence. It is also an approach that has a distinguished pedigree. It was first adopted by the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s, as a means of preventing both China from invading Taiwan and Taiwan from sparking a war with China by declaring independence—thereby avoiding resources being drawn away from the ongoing conflict in Korea.⁴⁵ To this very day, the situation in the Taiwan Strait remains remarkably similar. It continues to remain outside the interests of the United States to see either Taiwan break from China or see China feel emboldened enough to attack Taiwan.

To deploy such a policy, the United States ought to continue arms sales to Taiwan, as is the current administration's policy. However, care should be taken to make sure such sales remain limited in scope. It should be unclear to both the PRC and Taiwan as to whether or not the U.S. will become involved in any sort of crisis in the Strait. This policy does not heavily rely on maintaining a balance of power across the strait. Instead, arms sales become more of a symbolic commitment by the United States to defend Taiwan in the event of an attack. At the same time, limiting arms sales also signals that U.S. support for Taiwan has concrete limits, thereby discouraging rash action on the part of Taipei. This approach also has the benefit of balancing the United States' commitments under the TRA to arm Taiwan with its commitments under the August Communiqué to not sell increasing levels of arms to Taiwan.

Of the three options discussed, strategic ambiguity is the policy that has the best chance of eventually leading to a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait tension. It explicitly avoids conflict by maintaining the current status quo. It is under this very status quo that Sino-Taiwanese relations have recently begun to flourish. Such links may remain primarily economic in nature for the moment. However, they may one day develop into a political understanding as well. Essentially, the policy of strategic ambiguity works to prevent the eruption of conflict that would shatter the dream of peaceful reunification. It is also the policy that entails the least risk for the United States—though it does require constant vigilance, lest Taiwan or China become too emboldened. As it is both low risk and consistent with America's long term goals, strategic ambiguity remains the best approach to dealing with conflict over Taiwan.

⁴⁵ Tucker, *Strait Talk*, 4.

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