

AIR WAR COLLEGE

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SUSTAINING AN APPROACH OF STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY  
FOR

U.S. POLICY IN THE ASIAN PACIFIC

by

Jefferson J. O'Donnell, Lt Col, USAF

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Advisor: Dr. Xiaoming Zhang

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## **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Jefferson O'Donnell is a U.S. Air Force pilot assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He graduated from the University of Illinois in 1995 with a Bachelor of Sciences degree in Mathematics, and The George Washington University in 2005 with a Masters of Organizational Management. He earned his pilot wings in 1998 and has nearly 2,500 flying hours in the T-37, T-38, AT-38, and F-15E. He has served at both the MAJCOM and the Air Staff, and he is a graduated squadron commander.



## Abstract

Since the beginning of the Cold War, United States policy in the Asian Pacific has applied strategic ambiguity to sustain a status quo defined by stability and prosperity. This status quo has served U.S. national interests in a dynamic security environment while fostering China's rise to a great power in the 21st Century. As the United States rebalances its strategic focus to the Asian Pacific, this strategic approach will continue to serve U.S. national interests.

Strategic ambiguity, as an approach to U.S. policy in the Asian Pacific, is the paradoxical concept that stability is sustainable in the midst of a crisis by *increasing* uncertainty. By avoiding self-righteous behavior and quick closure, promoting cooperation through unified diversity and not focused wrongness, and signaling intentions through relationships and actions rather than just words, the United States has achieved normalization of relations with Communist China and maintained status as the global leader of a liberal international order.

As a benefactor of Asian Pacific stability and prosperity, China has risen to great power status, creating concerns for U.S. allies and partners in the region. While continued U.S. involvement in the Asian Pacific is consistent with its national interests, the United States must find the delicate balance between emboldening Asian Pacific nations, who would challenge China's increasing influence and assertiveness, and depriving them of U.S. security commitments. Emboldened or abandoned states are more likely to destabilize the region. The framework for an approach of strategic ambiguity provides U.S. policymakers with a guide to walk the narrow line that avoids instability and potential escalation to an undesirable confrontation between the U.S. and China.

During a trip to East Asia in November 2009, President Barack Obama identified himself as “America’s first Pacific President,” communicating his intent to bring the U.S. foreign policy focus back to the Asian Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, the language in the 2010 National Security Strategy focused on engagement and cooperation centered in shared interests of Asian Pacific prosperity, security, and global cooperation on “violent extremism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and global economic instability.”<sup>2</sup> In the wake of the U.S. drawdown in Iraq and Afghanistan, the administration renewed its avowed commitment. On a subsequent trip in November 2011, President Obama coined the U.S. “pivot” to Asia, raising serious concerns and uncertainty on both sides of the Pacific as to exactly what this “pivot” means for the future of U.S. policy in the Asian Pacific.<sup>3</sup> Since the beginning of the Cold War, U.S. policy in the Asian Pacific region has ranged from containment to engagement to hedging; however, a common characteristic of strategic ambiguity has served to preserve the status quo. Despite the changing strategic environment, this approach has ushered in U.S. primacy and fostered the rise of China to great power status. U.S. policy in the Asian Pacific under the Obama administration is currently prioritizing continued U.S. primacy and national interests of stability, security and prosperity; however, if the administration does not maintain an approach of strategic ambiguity, the status quo will change from prosperous U.S.-Sino cooperation and engagement to undesirable great power competition.

After the Obama administration publicized its intentions to rebalance U.S. strategy in the Asian Pacific, the debate ensued as to what exactly the “pivot” represents for U.S. policy. Liberal internationalists view China’s economic prosperity as a product of the U.S.-led liberal international order, a status quo which neither China nor the United States seeks to change.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, increased U.S. focus on the Asian Pacific is about strengthening

cooperation with China and her neighbors. Realists, on the other hand, believe China is seeking to increase influence and control of its security environment, and that the U.S. strategic rebalance is aimed at sustaining U.S. primacy by denying or containing a rising competitor.<sup>5</sup> Past U.S. policy vis-à-vis China answers this debate by revealing how strategic ambiguity walked the fine line between realist and liberal approaches. This strategic approach will continue to serve U.S. national interests as the United States rebalances its strategic focus to the Asian Pacific.

Strategic ambiguity is a foreign policy approach for security environments in which great power confrontation is undesirable. Strategic ambiguity is the paradoxical concept that a state with sufficient influence may sustain stability in a crisis situation by *increasing* uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> It is paradoxical because crisis *resolution* normally involves reducing uncertainty by clearly defining means and ways to achieve an outcome that alters the status quo to resolve the crisis. The primary mechanism in the strategic ambiguity approach is deterrence. Ambiguity about how certain behaviors will be rewarded or punished circumvents gaming and induces compliance or cooperation.<sup>7</sup> When a principal state pursues an ambiguous approach, states within the system facing a crisis will sustain the status quo because they are uncertain about the principal's response to any other behavior. Preserving the status quo requires stabilizing the situation, despite the existing crisis, by deliberately avoiding transparency about what actions other than sustaining the status quo will garner a response and what form that response will take.<sup>8</sup> When applying the above definition to a foreign policy approach, it is necessary to emphasize that the ambiguity is in means and ways, not ends.<sup>9</sup> The principal state clearly defines and communicates national interests, but it reserves information on how and when to apply instruments of national power.

Although the disputed issues are unresolved, sustainment of the status quo prevents escalation to direct confrontation, including interstate violence and war. Status quo exists in three variants: behavioral, contractual, and territorial; but, for the purposes of international relations and the relevance of strategic ambiguity, status quo is defined as the “*mutually perceptive* distribution of rights and privileges” with respect to territory and sovereign rights to that territory.<sup>10</sup> This definition purposely separates the means and ways inherent in behavioral and contractual elements from the ends of sustaining territorial sovereignty rights and privileges. What ultimately risks war are perceptions of intent and outright attempts to change the territorial status quo without mutual consent.<sup>11</sup> As this paper will describe, the strategic ambiguity approach leverages behavioral and contractual elements of foreign policy to sustain this status quo and avert direct conflict.

For the United States, the approach of strategic ambiguity has served to balance realist and liberal views in international relations to avoid confrontation with China. State behavior under realism focuses on sovereignty and a balance of power approach to international relations, not internal aspects like government and leadership.<sup>12</sup> Idealism, or liberalism, mitigates the power approach through international institutions and prefers governments that adopt liberal democratic values and choose cooperative policies.<sup>13</sup> A realist approach of self-help in an anarchical order may promote stability and prosperity absent concern for internal state dynamics; however, this approach may also be inharmonious for a state like the United States that emphasizes liberal values of individual equality and freedoms of religion, speech, and press. While democracy has underpinned prosperity and stability for the United States, other great powers’ strategic characteristics—e.g. history, culture, geography—are potentially incongruent with democracy. In such cases, strategic ambiguity provides a foreign policy approach to

balance national interests of stability and prosperity from a realist perspective with the promotion of democratic liberal reforms.

To observe the strategic ambiguity approach in past and present U.S. policy for the Asian Pacific, identifying specific behaviors that result in successful application provides an evaluative framework. The approach requires clear and methodical signaling to (1) avoid imposing self-righteousness, or superiority; (2) avoid pursuing quick closure to crises; (3) pursue “unified diversity” built on global cooperation, not “focused wrongness” backed up by dominance and power; and (4) signal through relationships and actions, not words.<sup>14</sup> In foreign relations, these elements occur in conditional commitments, not ultimatums or unqualified promises, and cooperative approaches, not confrontational or isolationist ones. As the following assessment of U.S. policy in the Asian Pacific since the beginning of the Cold War demonstrates, signaling consistent with the above four elements precipitated cooperative, stable, and prosperous U.S.-Sino relations while departure from them escalated tensions.

In 1949, the United States first adopted a strategic ambiguity approach in the Asian Pacific after the Chinese Nationalists fled to Taiwan. Dean Chen, Assistant Professor of Political Science, submits that the United States adopted a strategic ambiguity approach to restrain but support Taiwan as an example of Chinese democracy and encourage China to split from Soviet influence. The impetus for this approach was a Wilsonian Open Door internationalist future—“a united, liberal, and democratic China cooperating with the United States and other allies in maintaining a free liberal international order.”<sup>15</sup> By abandoning Taiwan, the United States would have abandoned the roots of a future unified democratic China; and by abandoning the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in favor of Taiwan, they would have escalated the Chinese Civil War, lost Taiwan, and firmly anchored a unified, anti-Western Communist China. Through



the chosen course of action, the United States avoided self-righteous behavior and quick closure of the crises, laid the framework for “unified diversity,” and permitted the development of relationships with both sides of the Strait that would allow actions, not words, to sustain stability and cooperation.

The first challenge to this ambiguity approach took place during the 1954-55 First Straits Crisis. President Dwight Eisenhower successfully balanced containment and idealism through the application of strategic ambiguity. When mainland forces shelled the offshore islands of Quemay and Matsu, the U.S. containment policy drove a response that demonstrated U.S. credibility to Taiwan but avoided hard power conflict.<sup>16</sup> Eisenhower pursued unified diversity by simultaneously avoiding commitment to Chiang Kai-Shek’s aggressive stance aimed at the mainland and deploying naval power into the Straits as a signal to discourage the PRC from attacking Taiwan. Dulles and Eisenhower also overtly discussed potential uses of new tactical atomic weapons but were intentionally ambiguous in relating them to the Straits Crisis.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the U.S. Congress passed the Mutual Defense Act of 1954, a conditional commitment to defend Taiwan—not the offshore islands—premised on Chiang’s promise not to use force against the mainland without a U.S.-Taiwan “joint agreement.”<sup>18</sup> The treaty’s message to the PRC was that the United States offered an “ambiguous commitment to the offshore islands.”<sup>19</sup>

During the Vietnam War era, U.S. policy pursued limited aims to avoid another direct conflict with the PRC. To balance the administration’s pursuit of détente and U.S. domestic pressure for continued containment, the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations applied a firm hand in the Asian Pacific.<sup>20</sup> Under a “containment without isolation” policy for the PRC, Johnson committed U.S. forces to war in Vietnam but with limited

political aims to avoid bringing the PRC into the fight.<sup>21</sup> The ambiguity principles are apparent in the U.S. decision to balance commitment to fight a war of containment with avoiding direct conflict with the PRC, thereby sustaining the status quo in U.S.-Sino relations.

In the 1970s, the Soviet Union became a common enemy of the United States and China, providing an opportunity for U.S.-Sino normalization while maintaining the Asian Pacific status quo. Containment and support for Taiwan became less significant; however, reassurance for allies like Taiwan still required an active U.S. posture. The two primary elements of the ambiguous approach were the nuanced “one China, but not now” policy and the Taiwan arms sales policy.<sup>22</sup> In the first joint communique, the United States *acknowledged* PRC’s insistence that Taiwan was part of China, restated desire for a peaceful settlement, promised to reduce U.S. military presence on Taiwan, and agreed not to support independence for Taiwan.<sup>23</sup> Consistent with the strategic ambiguity framework, the United States avoided self-righteous determination and quick closure of the crisis while pursuing unified diversity. Additionally, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, providing the option to sell defensive military systems to Taiwan and to provide conditional defense of Taiwan.<sup>24</sup> The Nixon administration’s ambiguous approach permitted normalization of U.S.-Sino relations while sustaining the Asian Pacific status quo.

As the Cold War approached its end, the United States faced a very different strategic environment—one without the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the United States had subordinated concerns about the PRC’s record on human rights to containing communism.<sup>25</sup> The new order provided an opportunity for the United States to shift priorities to liberal policies encouraging democratic reforms. Following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the George H.W. Bush administration experienced Congressional and domestic pressure to pursue a

“belligerent China policy.”<sup>26</sup> Congress threatened nonrenewal of Most Favorable Nation status unless China released political prisoners and adopted liberal reforms; and the U.S. government agreed to sell F-16s to Taiwan.<sup>27</sup> Ambiguity dissolved as the United States took a hard line toward China and flexed economic and diplomatic instruments of national power. To preserve U.S.-Sino relations, Bush sent the National Security Advisor to China. The United States continued its strategic ambiguity approach through senior leadership relationships and actions because it hoped continuing engagement with China would serve U.S. national interests.

From 1995 to 1996, two events in Taiwan presented a serious test for U.S. application of strategic ambiguity. When Lee Teng Hui, President of the Republic of China (ROC), privately visited Cornell University, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) responded by conducting missile tests and large-scale amphibious exercises, precipitating a Taiwan Straits crisis.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to an ambiguous approach, the U.S. response served to increase tensions by applying focused wrongness toward quick resolution. Although President William Clinton reiterated U.S. opposition to Taiwan pursuing independence, the administration officially protested against the PLA exercises and sent a carrier group through the Straits.<sup>29</sup> This unambiguous dominance and hard power display did not serve to sustain the status quo or de-escalate the crisis.

As the 1996 Taiwan elections approached, the diversion from a strategic ambiguity approach had the additional negative consequence of emboldening Taiwan. Chiang Chung-ling, ROC Defense Minister, threatened military retaliation against China.<sup>30</sup> Although strategic ambiguity was “institutionally embedded into U.S. policy,” the administration’s response to this crisis faltered in key aspects.<sup>31</sup> Defense Secretary Cohen openly condemned the PLA exercises, signaling additional focused wrongness aimed at China.<sup>32</sup> As in 1995, the administration backed the condemnation with a display of military dominance and power, this time with two carrier

battle groups. Ultimately, U.S. actions were ambiguous only because it was unclear under what conditions the U.S. naval forces would have escalated toward a direct confrontation with China in defense of Taiwan.<sup>33</sup> This diversion from an otherwise consistent U.S. approach of ambiguity in the China-Taiwan crisis demonstrated the delicate balance necessary for U.S. policy in the Asian Pacific.

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, U.S. concerns in the Asian Pacific have centered on China's rise to great power status; however, strategic ambiguity has continued to characterize the U.S. policy approach. Departing from Clinton's idealist approach to China, the George W. Bush administration adopted a realist hedging policy focused on preserving U.S. primacy.<sup>34</sup> The administration enhanced defense ties with Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam while focusing on common interests and cooperation with China; and Bush criticized Taiwan's provocative behavior, reiterating U.S. interest in sustaining the status quo.<sup>35</sup> His actions signaled the importance of China's undeniable economic prosperity to the Asian Pacific and the U.S. desire for support in the Global War on Terrorism.

Negotiations following the EP-3 incident before the events of September 11, 2001, provided another demonstration of the value of strategic ambiguity in U.S. policy toward China. The crisis centered on compelling one side to accept blame for causing the accident that resulted in the loss of the Chinese pilot and aircraft.<sup>36</sup> Restoring harmony and avoiding further damage to U.S.-Sino relations required delicate negotiations to create unified diversity while avoiding focused wrongness. Had China agreed to a quick resolution defined by fulfilling the U.S. request for immediate return of the EP-3 aircraft and crew, it would have signaled the efficacy of U.S. intimidation.<sup>37</sup> The negotiation process permitted a status quo defined by two diverse interpretations of the incident, no acceptance of blame for the accident itself, return of the

aircraft and crew to the U.S., and China's ability to diplomatically avoid legitimizing U.S. coercion. This event underscores the fine line the United States must walk through the application of strategic ambiguity in U.S. policy for the 21st Century.

Today, the United States faces a unipolar security environment defined by significant regional and global challenges, but China's rise continues to garner special attention. Although state and non-state actors combined with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and violent extremism remain on the list of global challenges, the Asian Pacific region presents concerns core to U.S. national interests of stability, prosperity, and free market principles.<sup>38</sup> China's rising economic and military power but perceived limited transparency cause apprehension for U.S. allies in the region, potentially impacting U.S. security commitments. Most significantly, China's rise creates uncertainty about continued global U.S. leadership of the rules-based international order.<sup>39</sup>

By pursuing a grand strategy of primacy juxtaposed with China's rise and core national interests, the United States has and will continue to face potential dangers to security, stability, and prosperity in the Asian Pacific region. According to Samuel Huntington, "the sustained international primacy of the U.S. is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world."<sup>40</sup> This becomes problematic in relation to China's stated core national interests: regime survival; sovereignty and territorial integrity; and economic development and social stability.<sup>41</sup> The Central Communist Party's one-party system is not consistent with the democratic political system. Additionally, U.S. leadership has expressed concerns over business practices and human rights violations also not aligned with Western values. More importantly, U.S. interests in China's sovereignty have primarily centered on Taiwan; however, China's expressed interests

include the East and South China Seas.<sup>42</sup> How the United States balances common national interests of stability and economic prosperity with incongruent value systems while addressing territorial disputes will continue to determine the stability of U.S.-Sino relations. In the 21st Century, three on-going territorial issues exemplify the diverse nature of U.S. commitments: Taiwan, the Senkaku islands, and the South China Sea.

As the bedrock of strategic ambiguity in U.S. policy, the Taiwan issue represents a successful model for future U.S. policy. President Bush demonstrated the efficacy of this approach in today's security environment through his handling of Chen Shui-bian's independence movement as ROC President between 2000 and 2008. Bush and administration officials consistently reassured China that the United States did not support Taiwan independence.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the United States and China achieved unified diversity through global cooperation in several matters. For example, after China did not veto the United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution authorizing use of force in Iraq, the United States announced intentions not to sponsor a UN Human Rights Commission resolution that condemned China.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the administration focused on relationship building through several official visits on both sides of the Pacific, including the initiation of biennial "strategic dialogues" as well as increased military exchange opportunities.<sup>45</sup> The sustainment and improvement of U.S.-Sino relations, despite Chen's aggressive posturing and in the absence of a common adversary, illustrates how a strategic ambiguity approach continues to serve U.S. national interests in the 21st Century.

The Senkaku islands dispute between China and Japan represents a more recent challenge to U.S. interests and continued strategic ambiguity. In late 2012, the Japanese government purchased the privately owned Senkaku islands and reasserted administrative control, drawing harsh criticism from China and Taiwan.<sup>46</sup> Under Article V of the 1960 U.S.-Japan Security

Treaty, if territory under Japanese administrative control is attacked, the United States has an obligation to defend Japan.<sup>47</sup> Because the treaty language does not follow the ambiguous design used, for example, in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the status quo is at risk. During a recent Chinese delegation visit to the United States, delegation members perceived U.S. leadership's attempts at pursuing ambiguity regarding the Senkaku issue as intentionally disregarding very clear treaty language.<sup>48</sup> This instance demonstrates how clear statements of commitment that favor one side in the dispute render strategic ambiguity less effective. Additionally, it suggests how unambiguous language provides opportunities for China and U.S. allies to question U.S. commitments in the Asian Pacific.

With its vital maritime passageways, the South China Sea presents a third challenge for U.S. policy. Like other neighbors, the Philippines stakes claim to portions of the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands. Despite the Obama administrations' stated interests of maintaining stability and freedom of navigation, China has repeatedly objected to U.S. involvement in what they see as bilateral issues.<sup>49</sup> The language in the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty is consistent with a strategic ambiguous approach as it is unclear whether the commitment extends to the islands; and, despite requests from foreign policy experts to clarify the conditions of the treaty, the Obama administration has avoided transparency.<sup>50</sup> This presents another risk of strategic ambiguity in U.S. policy because, although the treaty language is ambiguous, if the Philippine government or other Asian Pacific allies are sufficiently uncertain about U.S. commitment, they may upset the status quo by devaluing U.S. support and expanding their own defensive capabilities to balance against China's rise.

As the U.S. security arrangements with Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines illustrate, methodical signaling and conditional commitments are necessary for strategic ambiguity.

Stephen Walt argues international credibility as the champion of other nation's security was a Cold War necessity no longer relevant in the post-Cold War world. "The bottom line is that the United States is in a terrific position to play realpolitik on a global scale, precisely because it needs alliance partners less than most of its partners do."<sup>51</sup> When the United States places concerns for sustaining credibility above national interests, the United States relinquishes leverage to "weaker partners," thereby constraining its capacity to engage in meaningful diplomacy. He concludes, sarcastically, "it's a radical position: we are simply going to pursue the *American* national interest, instead of letting our allies around the world define it for us."<sup>52</sup> That American national interest is global U.S. leadership, or primacy, to ensure security, stability, prosperity and a continued liberal international order.

As the Obama administration continues rebalancing to the Asian Pacific, following three recommendations will promote regional stability, security, and prosperity, and reduce the potential for U.S.-Sino great power confrontation. First, a strategic ambiguity approach must continue to characterize U.S. policy in order to sustain the status quo. "U.S. strategic planners and their allies must use ambiguity, allowing actions to dictate intent to Chinese military and strategic planners."<sup>53</sup> This approach requires careful balancing and signaling of U.S. interest-based policy and value-based policy. While accusations of human rights violations satisfy U.S. domestic and liberal international institution pressures, focused wrongness is counterproductive to Asian Pacific stability and prosperity. Similarly, although quick resolution of issues is often desirable in American culture, it is not consistent with China's approach to conflict management, as demonstrated in the EP-3 incident. U.S. leaders should be prepared to assuage domestic pressure for quick, decisive action.



Second, the United States must avoid making and reaffirming unambiguous security commitments to allies in the Asian Pacific. By encouraging closer coordination between allies and investment in their own security, the United States might raise questions about her commitments; but this would also minimize “free riding.”<sup>54</sup> Credibility as a security umbrella was a Cold War approach that, if continued, may signal the United States intends to contain China and compel Asian Pacific partners to choose sides. Given China’s regional economic and growing military influence as well as the continued U.S. global leadership and influence, it is unlikely China’s neighbors will balance or bandwagon. By free riding, however, they will undermine U.S. strategic ambiguity by pursuing unambiguous security commitments that leave America hard-pressed to avoid involvement in regional disagreements. U.S. policymakers must find the operating space between emboldening and abandoning allies and partners, outside of which they are more likely to take actions that destabilize the Asian Pacific.

Third and finally, while continued global U.S. leadership will require a nuanced approach to China’s rise characterized by strategic ambiguity, it will also require continued emphasis on the diplomatic, economic, and military instruments of national power. In 2005, Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State, called on China to become a “responsible stakeholder” and help in shaping the international system.<sup>55</sup> Globalization, the rise of transnational organizations and groups, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and climate change together present a host of dynamic security and stability challenges for which the world has traditionally turned to unsurpassed U.S. capacity and capability. Considering domestic and international security and prosperity that have coincided with the era of U.S. primacy, it should come as no surprise that U.S. interests are fundamentally about sustaining global leadership. This position has allowed the United States to influence international affairs through the development of a liberal

international order that ensures the protection of Americans and America's interests, domestic and overseas, including access to vital resources. However, the United States cannot premise continued primacy on misapplication of Cold War principles in the face of a rising China.

As the history of U.S. policy illustrates, the methodical application of strategic ambiguity has underpinned U.S. national interests, promoted regional security and prosperity for Taiwan, and fostered the rise of China. The Cold War established the U.S. as the world power and champion of security, stability, prosperity, and liberal democracy. With these sustaining attributes, effectively implementing strategic ambiguity relies considerably on embracing cultural diversity in cooperative problem-solving, avoiding quick resolution and focused wrongness, remaining ambiguous in conditional security commitments to Asian Pacific allies, and strengthening all instruments of U.S. national power to defend American interests. The full nature of the U.S. strategic pivot to the Asian Pacific is, for the moment, creating uncertainty. To the extent that the United States is able to harness this uncertainty within a deliberate approach of strategic ambiguity, the status quo that has underpinned regional stability and economic prosperity will continue.

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