



China/Taiwan "Strategic Ambiguity" Survey Results
compiled by Eun Jung Cahill Che

During May 2001, the Pacific Forum CSIS conducted a PacNet Reader Survey, "Does Strategic Ambiguity Make Sense?" The survey was disseminated shortly after President George W. Bush seemed to move toward a more definitive cross-Strait policy by stating in interviews that the U.S. would do "whatever it took" to help Taiwan defend itself. (The statement was quickly modified by Bush and other high-ranking officials who insisted the U.S. did not intend to change its policy on Taiwan.) We asked for reader views on two questions: whether strategic ambiguity regarding cross-Strait issues should be maintained and whether the U.S. should oppose Beijing's 2008 Olympic bid. We received 82 responses: 55 from the U.S., 13 from Taiwan, one from China, five from Japan, and eight "others," including Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, etc.

Should the U.S. continue its policy of "strategic ambiguity" about possible responses to future cross-Strait scenarios?

Under the policy of "strategic ambiguity," the U.S. does not clearly lay out the terms under which it would intervene in the defense of Taiwan should the situation in the Strait become militarily confrontational. This gives the U.S. latitude in dealing with the situation in the Taiwan Strait. Fifty-seven percent (47 respondents) said yes, the U.S. should keep strategic ambiguity, 40 percent (33 respondents) said no, and two were uncertain. Among all respondents, there was a fundamental concern which policy would be more effective in preventing China from forcing Taiwan's hand by military means while simultaneously keeping Taiwan from making clear steps toward independence and provoking China.

YES. The majority of respondents favored maintaining the policy of strategic ambiguity, for a variety of reasons:

Many respondents thought that a more defined policy would not be useful because it is impossible to anticipate the circumstances in which the situation in the Taiwan Strait would become confrontational. One U.S. respondent referred to PacNet 18 by James A. Kelly, stating that "future scenarios depend on actual circumstances." In other words, the U.S. cannot determine its actions until it has all the details.

Another U.S. respondent stated that, "To declare a specific quid pro quo with China in the Taiwan case offers too many opportunities for misinterpretation on the part of China and potentially would encourage China to test our resolve."

Others thought that ambiguity was a good policy because of what is left unsaid: the U.S. would intervene on Taiwan's behalf should the situation become a contingency. A U.S. respondent opined,

"so long as some ambiguity is preserved, China is more able to tolerate what would otherwise become an intolerable U.S. position;" one that is at odds with its "one China" policy.

Ambiguity cuts both ways. While it leaves doubt in China as to whether the U.S. would intervene in a Taiwan contingency, it also leaves the same doubt in Taiwan. One respondent offered that, "The locus of uncertainty now is what the U.S. would do if... Taiwan made some clear moves toward independence and China responded militarily."

Participants in many countries worried that abandoning strategic ambiguity would be perceived as a fundamental shift in the U.S. position. As the reaction to President Bush's early May comments in both Beijing and Washington indicates, for the U.S. to change its policy now could have a greater impact than intended.

NO. Those against strategic ambiguity were most worried that ambiguity would be interpreted as U.S. complacency. This perceived lack of interest might embolden China to test the U.S. intention to protect Taiwan. One respondent stated, "The PRC is motivated by political needs as much as policy goals and could convince itself that the U.S. would not act. Recent events show [it does] not expect forceful response from the U.S. even in extenuating circumstances." Another stated that, "History shows that deterrence fails when an opponent misunderstands one's intentions, e.g. Korea."

A Japanese respondent made it plain: "We must give China a clear message: Taiwan's independence, prosperity, and fledgling democracy must be secured and protected."

Taiwan respondents were more inclined to support clarity. Of the 13 respondents, only four said yes to maintaining strategic ambiguity, seven said no, and two were uncertain. One Taiwanese survey participant thought that strategic ambiguity would mislead China into using force to solve the Taiwan problem. Another stated that abandoning strategic ambiguity would, "correct [the] PRC's formulation of its national security and its military preparation before it's too late." The assumption here, and among most who argued against ambiguity, was that greater clarity meant a firmer commitment to defend Taiwan.

Should the U.S. actively oppose Beijing's bid to host the 2008 Olympics?

There was a resounding "no" from the majority of survey participants from all countries. The bid to host the Olympics is viewed for the most part as a relatively painless way to extend good will to China. However, saying that the U.S. should not oppose Beijing's bid is not the same thing as saying that the U.S. should support it.

Among the respondents, there was great opinion variance as to whether the U.S. should support, or merely abstain from opining on, China's Olympic bid. Nonetheless, 85 percent (70 respondents) said the U.S. should not oppose, 9.75 percent (eight respondents) said the U.S. should oppose, while 5 percent (four respondents) were unsure. Three main arguments were put forth:

One, politics and the Olympics should not mix. The spirit of the Olympics should not be politicized and the U.S. should not use the games to further its own political agenda. Furthermore, the Olympics are not for the U.S. to grant or deny; the U.S. has little to no weight with the International Olympics Commission (IOC). Hence, U.S. opposition to China's Olympic bid would be merely symbolic, perceived as pettiness rather than morality. A U.S. respondent stated that "perhaps commending [China's] good behavior rather than condemning [its] bad behavior might go down better, not only with the world community, but also with the Chinese population." In addition, "opposing the bid will alienate precisely those in China who we should be courting. The younger generation will see this as hegemony and bullying, not a courageous stand in favor of human rights."

Two, supporting the bid, or abstaining, will facilitate the "opening" of China. Many respondents referred to the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, which invigorated its economy and helped move South Korea from developing nation status to developed nation status. As a host to the 2008 games, Beijing would have to be ready for the flow of foreign visitors to its country. All eyes would turn to China to see how the event would be handled. As one respondent offered, "the Olympics would bring precisely the intense public scrutiny and pressure for good behavior on China that we should desire."

Three, the U.S. should let history be its guide. A U.S. respondent stated, "The U.S. has supported or acquiesced in holding the Olympics in authoritarian countries before, including Mexico in 1968, the Soviet Union in 1980, and South Korea in 1988 - where the decision [was made] before it was clear that the country would transit peacefully to civilian rule." To now oppose China's bid to host the Olympics, given U.S. history of non-intervention in previous bids, could be perceived as a conscious decision to single China out.

The dissenters largely believed that the U.S. failure to actively oppose Beijing's bid to host the Olympics is a de facto validation and legitimization of China's political system and human rights record. The bid was viewed as an opportunity to send a clear message to China: if it wants to host the games, it will have to play by international rules.

The Bush administration agreed with the wisdom of our survey respondents last week when it announced that it would not oppose China's bid to host the 2008 Olympics.

The Pacific Forum would like to thank our readers who took the time to respond to our survey.