

SIGUR CENTER ASIA REPORT

"Opportunity in Ambiguity: Issues in Taiwan's International Relations"

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The Sigur Center for Asian Studies held a conference on March 1 entitled "[Opportunity in Ambiguity: Issues in Taiwan's International Relations](#)" which focused on two salient examples of ambiguity in Taiwan's external relations: the strategic ambiguity policy of the United States, and the 1992 Consensus. The first panel on strategic ambiguity--a policy in which the US is purposely unclear whether it would intervene in a cross-Strait conflict--featured presentations by Dean Chen of Ramapo College and Scott Kastner of the University of Maryland, as well as a keynote address by Alan Romberg of the Stimson Center. The second panel on the 1992 Consensus (a compromise also known as "one China, respective interpretations" in which Beijing and Taipei agreed in 1992 that there is only one China in the world, but disagree on what that "one China" is) included presentations by Yu-long Ling of the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Institute, Vincent Wang of the University of Virginia, and Dean Chen. Professor James Hsiung of New York University (NYU) began the conference with a discussion on the role of ambiguity in international relations more broadly. An audio recording of the entire conference is available [here](#).

Ambiguity in International Relations: A Double-Edged Sword

James Hsiung, Professor of Politics at NYU, initiated the conference with a discussion on the utility of diplomatic ambiguity in international relations. In his remarks, Dr. Hsiung delineated two schools of thought on diplomatic ambiguity: one that argues ambiguity can serve a useful purpose and can lead to auspicious results (i.e., constructive ambiguity), and one that argues ambiguity invariably muddles and often leads to inauspicious, if not disastrous, results. Likening diplomatic ambiguity to a double-edged sword, Hsiung argued that ambiguity can in fact lead to both favorable and unfavorable outcomes. He pointed to the Shanghai Communiqué and the 1992 Consensus as instances in which diplomatic ambiguity has led to auspicious results. Conversely, he argued that the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, in which the recipients of Japan's post-war occupied territories in Asia were purposely left vague, serves as an example of diplomatic ambiguity leading to disastrous results.

The United States' Strategic Ambiguity Policy: Origins, Alternatives, and Role in Current US-China-Taiwan Relations

Professor **Dean Chen** of Ramapo College began the morning panel on the United States' strategic ambiguity policy with a presentation on the origins of the policy. According to Chen, the roots of strategic ambiguity can be traced back to late 1949 and the early 1950s. Although the term "strategic ambiguity" was not explicitly used at that time, Chen noted that high-ranking US officials in the Truman Administration were purposely ambiguous on whether the United States would intervene in a cross-Strait conflict. This was because they did not want to give Chiang Kai-shek confidence that the US would support a rash decision to retake the Mainland on one hand, while on the other hand they did not want to give the PRC the impression that an unprovoked attack on Taiwan would not warrant US intervention. Despite dramatic changes in US-China-Taiwan relations since the 1950s, Chen argued that the core premise of strategic ambiguity, namely the US desire to give itself flexibility in cross-Strait security relations, continues to exist.

Scott Kastner, Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Maryland, followed Dean Chen with a presentation on the alternative policy approaches to strategic ambiguity frequently advocated by the policy's detractors. These alternatives range from unconditional US support to Taipei on one extreme, to an unambiguous non-commitment to Taiwan (i.e., "abandonment") on the other extreme. Kastner noted that these various policy alternatives stem from concerns that a lack of clarity about US intentions could either cause China to underestimate or Taiwan to overestimate future US involvement in a cross-Strait conflict. Despite these concerns, Kastner ultimately argued that strategic ambiguity continues to effectively serve US interests. He noted that unconditional US support to Taipei is untenable if the US wants to have a cooperative relationship with China. Moreover, he said US abandonment of Taiwan could lead to cross-Strait instability in that China might be more apt to compel or even intimidate Taipei to agree to its terms.

In his keynote address, **Alan Romberg** of the Stimson Center discussed the role of strategic ambiguity within the broader context of US-China-Taiwan relations. Like Kastner, Romberg argued that strategic ambiguity continues to serve US interests, and that a shift to clarity could lead to instability. He said ambiguity has not only allowed the US to retain fruitful ties with both China and Taiwan, it has also given Beijing and Taipei the space to interact with each other in a constructive way. Romberg noted that although the US is ambiguous about whether it would intervene in a cross-Strait conflict, the US is unambiguous on several points: its desire to see peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific, its concern for the security and well-being of the Taiwanese people, and the fundamental importance it attaches to constructive relations with the PRC. Coupled with strategic ambiguity, clarity on these particular points has resulted in a complex and nuanced US policy towards Taiwan that Romberg referred to as "focused ambiguity." While abandoning strategic ambiguity in pursuit of a more clearly defined policy might be more appealing for some, Romberg noted however that focused ambiguity "works and that is what matters."

The 1992 Consensus: Its Significance and Future Utility

Yu-long Ling, Director of the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Institute in North America, began the second session on the 1992 Consensus with an overview of the sovereignty dispute bedeviling China and Taiwan, and the 1992 Consensus's role in shelving this dispute in order to advance cross-Strait relations. Ling pointed out that the sovereignty dispute between Beijing and Taipei extends back to the end of the Chinese Civil War. Although Mao Zedong declared in October of 1949 that a new Chinese state named the People's Republic of China (PRC) had replaced the former Republic of China (ROC), the KMT in Taiwan asserted that the ROC continued to exist. Since that time, both the PRC and the ROC have maintained that they are sovereign over all of China, while viewing the other side to be an illegitimate authority. In order to bypass this seemingly intractable sovereignty dispute and advance cross-Strait relations in a time of burgeoning economic interaction, Mr. Ling noted that Taipei and Beijing agreed to a compromise in November of 1992 that was later referred to as the 1992 Consensus. In this compromise, both Beijing and Taipei agreed that there is only one China in the world, but disagree on what that "one China" is. For Beijing, "one China" refers to the PRC, while Taipei views "one China" as synonymous with the ROC. According to Mr. Ling, the ambiguous nature of this compromise allows Taiwan and China to advance relations with each other because each side's sovereignty claim is protected.

Professor **Vincent Wang** of the University of Richmond followed Yu-long Ling with a presentation on the recent usefulness and future limits of the 1992 Consensus. Wang noted that the acceptance and revival of the 1992 Consensus by the Ma Ying-jeou government since 2008 has allowed for a historic cross-Strait rapprochement in recent years in which Beijing and Taipei have signed 18 bilateral agreements, including the 2010 Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). Wang argued that the 1992 Consensus's recent usefulness can be witnessed by both Beijing and Taipei shelving their long-standing sovereignty dispute in order to focus on pressing bilateral economic issues. Wang noted however that the 1992 Consensus could soon be approaching the limits of its usefulness, as low-hanging fruit on relatively easy trade and transportation issues have already been picked. If the more difficult political and security issues are to be solved, Wang argued that a new agreement or communiqué will have to be reached in which the constitution, laws,

policies, and prevailing public opinion of both China and Taiwan should be taken into account.

Professor **Dean Chen** rounded out the second panel with a discussion on the role of ambiguity within President Ma Ying-jeou's mainland policy. He outlined three options that the Ma Administration could have pursued under the 1992 Consensus: soft balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging. According to Chen, hedging is the best option and President Ma has adopted this approach as a way to enhance Taiwan's security, as well as not anger larger powers, notably the United States and China.

In the end, all six speakers contributed to a fruitful discussion on the role of ambiguity in Taiwan's external relations.

By Kyle Churchman, Staff Assistant, Sigur Center for Asian Studies, the George Washington University

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