

Strategic Ambiguity, Strategic Clarity, and Dual Clarity

Abstract

The U.S. had successfully intervened and prevented the military conflict between China and Taiwan since the 1980s by the *Strategic Ambiguity* (SA) policy, which discourages both sides from deviating from the status quo (SQ) by not committing *to defend* or *not to defend* Taiwan. The recent US-China tensions and the increasing nationalism in China and Taiwan drew critics to SA and suggested it be replaced with strategic clarity. We argue that the choice of Dual Clarity (DC) – the US promises to defend only if Taiwan did not provoke first – is widely ignored. We develop an updated game-theoretical model incorporating the rising nationalism in China and Taiwan and examine the psychological motivations through a pre-registered within-subject survey experiment in Taiwan (n=910). The model indicates that DC's capacity to maintain the SQ is the same as S, and the survey confirms our theoretical expectations.

Keywords: Strategic Ambiguity, Dual Clarity, Incomplete Information Game, China Politics, Survey Experiment

Introduction

Successful deterrence is often hard to measure—wars that are avoided cannot be seen (e.g., see Signorino 2002). Watchers of U.S.-Taiwan-China relations have attributed the lasting peace to the “strategic ambiguity” policy first introduced in 1979 by the United States (Chang-Liao and Fang 2021). For decades, the policy has allowed the United States to maintain its official relations with the PRC while not abandoning Taiwan though both sides ended official ties since 1979. Most importantly, the policy enables the U.S. to take “appropriate actions” in response to any threats to the peace and security in the Strait.

The implementation of the policy hinges on the U.S. constantly refusing to make clear commitments to either side of the Strait when a contingency arises. On the one hand, the U.S. never disavows or commits to come to Taiwan’s defense if China attacks Taiwan. On the other hand, the U.S. never rules out the possibility of intervening if China invaded Taiwan (Haass and Sacks 2020). Thus, both sides of the Strait have no complete confidence in what the US would do in a crisis (Sharp 2019). The policy thus maintained the “dual deterrence” of both Taiwan and China (Bush 2005; Kastner 2006). Since “nobody knows” the final resolution from the United States, Taiwan and China are deterred from changing the status quo. For Taiwan, the U.S. does not endorse a “blank check” so the country could declare *de jure* independence; for China, an intervention by the U.S. could largely thwart the CCP’s goals of taking Taiwan.

With the increasing frictions between China and the U.S. in recent years, the vitality and sustainability of the strategic ambiguity have come under attack (Chang-Liao and Fang 2021; Wu 2021; Lin 2007). Many start to doubt whether the three assumptions that allow this policy to succeed are still relevant today. The first factor is the increasing nationalism in both Taiwan (Wang

2017) and China (Weiss 2019). Few Taiwanese are now willing to unify with China,¹ while more Chinese now support hawkish measures for reunification with Taiwan.

The second factor is the narrowing relative military strength between China and the United States, which, as Mearsheimer (2014) suggests, could harbor a costlier mission for the United States in a cross-Strait confrontation. Two scenarios are possible: one, China could outpace the United States in its overall military strength in the West Pacific. A second more possible scenario is that Chinese efforts to use anti-access/area-denial (A2AS) strategies will be used to make it prohibitively costly for the U.S. to intervene. In both scenarios, whether the U.S. could maintain an ambiguous policy or not is a moot point (Goldstein 2021).

The third moving piece is chaining public views toward China and Taiwan among Americans. Growing anti-CCP narratives in Congress, the ongoing US-China trade war, and the COVID-19 pandemic have all exacerbated the negative feelings among Americans toward China, which translate into support for defending Taiwan (For example, see polls by Chicago Council of Global Affairs 2021; Silver 2021).

Because of the above reasons, there have been more advocates for a *strategic clarity* policy. Strategic clarity is defined as US' *unconditional* commitment to defend Taiwan under any circumstance.² The major advantage of strategic clarity is eliminating the likelihood of misjudgment from Taiwan and China. But there are other clear drawbacks associated with this policy. Taiwan could now be emboldened to pursue *de jure* independence realizing that the United States would provide unconditional support. China could become exacerbated about this policy

¹ For latest coverage, see Amy Qin and Amy Chang Chien, “‘We Are Taiwanese’: China’s Growing Menace Hardens Island’s Identity.” *New York Times*, Jan 19, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/19/world/asia/taiwan-china-identity.html>.

² For further clarifications between the strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity policies, see Chang-Liao and Fang 2021; Hsu 2010.

change and decide to use force against Taiwan before the US could intervene. Both scenarios could make a Sino-US war more likely. This major drawback strongly undermines the motivation for the US to consider such an option.

Dual Clarity as a widely Ignored Option

However, strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity are not the only viable options for managing cross-Strait relations, although most ink has been used to discuss them (e.g., Brunnstrom and Martina 2021; Clarke and Sussex 2021; Carpenter 2021). An often neglected third option is dual clarity, meaning that the United States publicly commits to defending Taiwan under certain scenarios, such as if Taiwan does not declare *de jure* independence (Lin 2007). Making U.S. stance clear nullifies the need for both sides to speculate the others' action, an approach called "dual clarity."

In the game-theoretical framework, dual clarity is also called "conditional commitment" (Benson 2012). In Benson's model, conditional commitment means "...*pure conditional commitments obligate the third party if the adversary initiates the conflict and the protégé does not.*" (*ibid*, p. 95) Under this definition, the strategic clarity is also called "unconditional commitment" since it describes the strategy that the United States claims to defend Taiwan no matter China invades or Taiwan declares independence. Similarly, strategic ambiguity is called "probabilistic commitment" since the likelihood of the US to defend Taiwan is incomplete information to both Taiwan and China.

Why is dual clarity widely ignored? An often-cited explanation is that it cannot solve the moral hazard problem that the United States could still be pulled into a conflict if Taiwan still pursues formal independence, although Taiwan vows that it would not do so. For example, Pan

(2003) explicitly argues that “*once the US clarifies its commitment to Taiwan’s security no matter whether unconditionally or conditionally, it will encourage Taipei’s hard-liners to pursue independence.*”. Likewise, Benson (2012) similarly argues that the conditional commitment of dual clarity will be exploited by Taiwan to maximize its own interests in its relations with China.

However, this moral hazard assumption behind both strategic clarity and dual clarity has never been empirically examined. Based on the current strategic ambiguity policy, scholars have found that US commitment will Taiwanese’ willingness to fight (Benson and Niou 2005; Wang 2019; Goldstein et al. 2021). But many key questions remain unasked. First, is the corollary true that the public in Taiwan could retract support from independence when the US explicitly refuses to provide backing? Also, how could citizens in Taiwan respond with respect to their stance on independence when offering to trade their pursuit in exchange for US backing?

Contributions

In this paper, we provide answers to these questions by developing a game-theoretical model defining strategic ambiguity, strategic clarity, and dual clarity; we then conduct a survey experiment to empirically test the assumption and inference from the model.

In the model, we incorporate increasing nationalism in both Taiwan and China and its restraining effects on U.S.’ ability to maintain the status quo. Moreover, we formalize the Taiwan-China negotiation as a zero-sum game based on public opinion polls. Given that the majority of Taiwanese people object to unification with China (Cheng and Lee 2017, Ch. 2) and prefers independence if China will not attack (Niou 2004, Chen et al. 2017), especially overt threats from Xi Jinping’s 2019 new year’s speech (Grossman 2020), unification could never render a positive payoff relative to the status quo. Our model will capture how nationalism influences the room for

maintaining the status quo; meanwhile, our model shows that the dual clarity would have the same and even a higher level of capacity to maintain the status quo.

We then filed an original survey experiment to examine the hypotheses from the model. The hypotheses and the experiment results help us assess the virtues of each policy compared to the current status quo. Confirming conventional wisdom, we find that citizens in Taiwan will become more supportive of pursuing formal independence when knowing that US backing is certain (Strategic Clarity). We also found causal evidence of the effect of Strategic Ambiguity – when citizens learn that U.S. support is uncertain, they reduce their support for independence. Last, we refute worries of moral hazard that Taipei will pursue independence even under the condition that it explicitly refuses to do in exchange for US protection. Results from the Dual Clarity show that Taiwanese citizens will support the independence less in this case (Figure 5 and Table 2).

Theoretical Model Setting

We formalize the concept of strategic ambiguity and clarity into an incomplete information game shown in Figure 1. Three players, including US, TW, and CN, move sequentially. The US privately decided to help TW or not first, but TW and CN do not know US's decision. TW can choose independence or maintain the status quo without knowing the type of the US (the upper dash curve). If TW chose independence, CN would certainly fight regardless of the cost and the type of US. Nevertheless, if TW chooses to maintain the status quo, CN will gauge the US's type to calculate whether to attack Taiwan or not (the lower right curve).

U - US chance of winning in US-CN conflict, $0 < U < 1$
P - TW and CN's perceived likelihood of US helping TW, $0 < P < 1$
T - Strategic value of Taiwan (relative to the SQ)
I - Nationalism of successful independence/unification
C - Cost of TW-CN conflict if TW claimed independence
Z - Cost of US-CN conflict

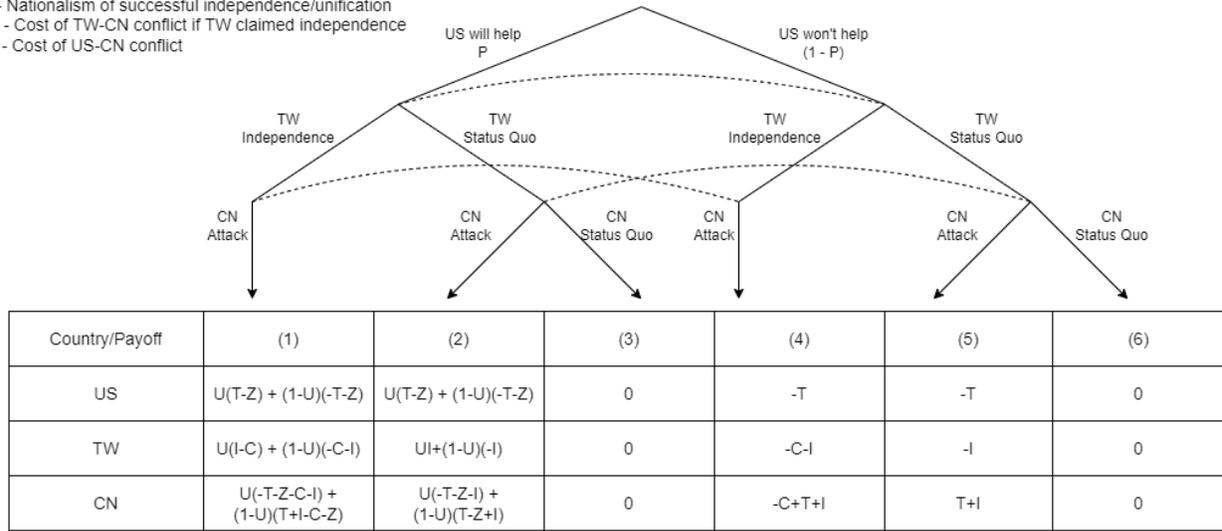


Figure 1. Strategic Ambiguity Model

There are six parameters in this game. The first is U , the likelihood that the US will win in the US-China military conflict, $0 \leq U \leq 1$. We assume that U is common knowledge to all players since the military strength (number of soldiers/army/jets) is observable under today's information-rich world. The second is P , the likelihood that the US will help defend Taiwan once China attacked Taiwan, $0 \leq P \leq 1$. This decision is only observable to the US, so TW and CN have a common guess on the value of P . When $P = 1$, which means that the United States will help unconditionally, the whole model can be reduced to the left side and is the formal definition of strategic clarity. When $0 < P < 1$, the model captures that both TW and CN need to guess the type of the US, so it is the strategic ambiguity (which is the probabilistic commitment in Benson (2012)'s model). When $P = 0$, it indicates that the US will abandon Taiwan unconditionally.

The third parameter is the strategic value of Taiwan, $T > 0$, to the US and CN. Taiwan is crucial for the stability of the US's first island chain, but Taiwan is also geographically important for CN to enter into the South China Sea and the western Pacific Ocean. T can also capture the

reputation between the United States and China. If Taiwan reunifies with China, it may evidence another successful story to China's regime and a failure for the US foreign policy and its leading role in the democratic system. We simplify the discussion above by the parameter T , and assume that once Taiwan successfully becomes independent, the US will receive T while CN will lose T , and vice versa. In other words, the independence of Taiwan is assumed to be a zero-sum game between China and the United States.

The fourth parameter is the level of nationalism in Taiwan and China, $I > 0$. Numeric evidence shows that the level of nationalism is growing in both China and Taiwan. Studies in Taiwan show that the level of nationalism is strongly correlated with the support for independence. Meanwhile, nationalism in China also helps explain the warrior wolf narrative in its foreign policy. It is believed that the perceived century of humiliation is the emotional source for Chinese people to seek reunification with Taiwan. Hence, we assume that if Taiwan successfully became independent, TW will receive I while CN will lose I , and vice versa. I also captures the zero-sum frame between Taiwan and China. In other words, when Taiwan reunifies with China, China will gain both I (nationalism in China) and T (the strategic importance of Taiwan).

The last two parameters are the cost of military conflict. Assuming that if Taiwan declares independence and decides to fight against China, both will cost $C > 0$. Meanwhile, if the US and China conflict, both will cost $Z > 0$ and $Z > C$. Since both US and China are nuclear weapon countries, the conflict between US and CN would be much more costly than between China and Taiwan alone.

In the incomplete information game in Figure 1, there are six different outcomes, and each player will receive the payoff once each outcome arrives. In Scenario (1), the US committed to defending Taiwan, Taiwan declared independence, and China decided to attack Taiwan after

Taiwan's independence. In (1), the expected payoff of the US is $U(T - Z) + (1 - U)(-T - Z)$, which is (the likelihood of winning the war) X (dominates Taiwan minus the cost of US-CN conflict), plus (the likelihood of losing the war) X (loses Taiwan minus the cost of US-CN conflict).

The expected payoff of TW in (1) is $U(-C + I) + (1 - U)(-C - I)$, which is the (expected likelihood of US winning the war) X (nationalism from independence minus the cost of TW-CN conflict), plus (the likelihood of the US losing the war) X (losing nationalism from unification minus the cost of TW-CN conflict).

In the end, the expected payoff of CN in (1) is $U(-C - T - Z - I) + (1 - U)(T - Z - C + I)$. The former half of the payoff function means that the US wins and Taiwan becomes independent, so CN needs to cost its conflict with Taiwan (-C), conflict with the US (-Z), Taiwan's strategic importance (-T), and nationalism of losing Taiwan (-I). Nevertheless, if CN wins with the likelihood (1-U), then CN still needs to cost its conflict with TW (-C) and the US (-Z), but China will win the strategic value of Taiwan (+T) and nationalism from the reunification (+I).

Everything remains the same in Scenario (2), except for Taiwan not declaring independence. In such a scenario, Taiwan may not be ready to fight against China, so the cost of the TW-CN conflict would be minimal ($C = 0$). Meanwhile, the payoff of TW is mainly decided by the level of nationalism and the chance of the US winning, while CN can also ignore the cost of TW-CN conflicts.

In Scenario (3) and (6), since both TW and CN choose to maintain the status quo, all three players receive the status quo with the utility centered at zero.

In the end, in Scenario (4) and (5), the US will not help defend Taiwan, so the cost of the US-CN conflict would be minimal ($Z = 0$). Therefore, in this situation, the only cost for TW and CN is the TW-CN conflict C after Taiwan declares independence.

Our strategic ambiguity model in Figure 1 is different from Benson and Niou (2001) and Benson's (2012) pioneering strategic ambiguity model (BN model hereafter) in three salient aspects. First, we introduce the level of nationalism (I) as an important motivation for both Taiwan and China to pursue independence and unification, respectively. Therefore, we assume that the unification-independence issue is a zero-sum game between China and Taiwan, which is reflected by public opinion. Second, our model assumes that the relative strength between China and the US is observable, while the BN model does not. In the BN model, the US may hide its weakness by manipulating the level of commitment. However, it is not surprising that both US and China may be able to estimate the strength of their military and economic power and, therefore, calculate the chance of winning during the US-CN conflict. Instead, we formalize the strategic ambiguity with a continuous variable P , which enables the model to capture how the different levels of commitment influence the action of both China and Taiwan. In the end, the BN model assumes that the United States can move again after observing Taiwan and China's behavior; in other words, the United States may not follow its commitment. If it is the case, both Taiwan and China are uncertain whether the commitment itself is credible. Therefore, our model assumes that the US will follow its commitment accordingly, but both Taiwan and China are uncertain whether the US will help in the first place in the Strategic Ambiguity Model.

Our model is also different from Wu's triangular model (2005) in several ways. First, the triangular model simulating the US-China-Taiwan relationship implicitly assumes (about) equal strength between the three, and each can observe the others' behavior. In our strategic ambiguity model, however, the US enjoys the advantage of incomplete information. Moreover, the triangular model assumes that the three players will interact with each other in the long run. In the scenario

between the Taiwan-China competition, however, unification means that there is no way back; Taiwan is not able to regret the decision.

Analysis of the Strategic Ambiguity Model

Six major implications can be derived from the theoretical model in Figure 1.

Implication 1: When TW chooses the status quo, CN will still choose to attack when P (the likelihood US will help TW) is sufficiently low.

Proof: Backward induction is used for the proof. When CN can choose between attack or status quo, CN knows that TW already chose status quo. Hence, CN only needs to consider the type of the US. CN's expected payoff of attack is $P[U(-T - Z - I) + (1 - U)(T - Z + I)] + (1 - P)[T + I]$, while the expected payoff of the status quo is 0. CN will attack if the expected payoff of attack is positive, which is $P < \frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)}$ derived from the function above. Hence, CN will attack given TW status quo if the likelihood of US help is perceived as small enough. Q.E.D.

Implication 2: TW will seek independence when P is sufficiently high.

Proof: Backward induction is used again for the calculation of TW. The first situation is that CN will certainly attack, $P < \frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)}$. In this situation, TW's payoff in choosing independence is smaller than choosing the status quo regardless of the type of US. Hence, choosing the status quo is the dominant strategy when China will certainly attack.

In the second scenario, China will not attack when Taiwan chooses the status quo, which means that $P > \frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)}$. In this situation, TW will get 0 after choosing the status quo. TW will choose the independence only if its expected utility is positive, which means that $P[U(-C + I) +$

$(1 - U)(-C - I)] + (1 - P)[-C - I] > 0$. In other words, $P > \frac{C+I}{2UI}$. If the perceived P is higher than this threshold, TW will be motivated to choose independence given the certain attack from CN. Q.E.D.

Implication 3: When the cost of US-CN conflict is sufficiently high, Strategic Ambiguity always exists when P is not sufficiently too high and not sufficiently too low.

Proof: In Implication 1, when $P < \frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)}$, CN will certainly attack regardless of the type of the US and the choice of TW. In Implication2, when $P > \frac{C+I}{2UI}$, TW will certainly seek independence regardless of the type of US, and CN will therefore attack in response. In both scenarios, the outcome deviates from the status quo. Meanwhile, when $\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} < P < \frac{C+I}{2UI}$, CN will not attack if Taiwan chooses the status quo, and Taiwan will choose the status quo because the expected payoff of independence is not positive. When both CN and TW choose the status quo, the US will be indifferent between help and not. The only requirement is that the US needs to maintain the signal that P is within this range. *We define this range as the strategy of Strategic Ambiguity.* US did not commit to defending TW ($P = 1$) nor did US abandon TW ($P = 0$) because either strategy will change the expectation of CN and TW and, therefore, lead to the outcome worse than the status quo in the eye of the US.

When either TW or CN breaks the status quo, the US will receive $-T$ for not defending TW. If US chose to help TW, the expected payoff is $U(T - Z) + (1 - U)(-T - Z) = 2UT - T - Z$. Since $0 < U < 1$, US's expected payoff for defending TW is $2UT - T - Z < 2T - T - Z = T - Z$. If $T - Z$, indicating that the strategic importance of Taiwan is smaller than the over the cost of US-CN conflict, is negative, then the dominant strategy for the US is the strategic ambiguity, which will yield 0 as the status quo. Hence, if the cost of the US-CN conflict is sufficiently high,

$Z > T$, then the US can only maximize its utility by maintaining P within the upper and lower limit. In other words, if TW is a lot more important or if the cost of the US-CN conflict is sufficiently low (low Z), then the US may be motivated to change the status quo.

To show that room for strategic ambiguity always exists, we need to prove that the upper limit is always higher than the lower limit, which is $\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} < \frac{C+I}{2UI}$. While $(C + I)(Z + 2U(T + I)) - 2UI(T + I) = CZ + 2CU(T + I) + IZ > 0$, so the upper limit is always higher than the lower limit. As a result, room for strategic ambiguity always exists, bounded by the upper and lower limits. Q.E.D.

Implication 4: The room for Strategic Ambiguity decreases with the increase of nationalism in TW and CN.

Proof: When $\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} < P < \frac{C+I}{2UI}$ and $> T$, TW and CN will choose to maintain the status quo, and the US will be relieved from making the commitment or not. However, when I increases, the difference between the upper and the lower limit will be $\lim_{I \rightarrow \infty} \left(\frac{C+I}{2UI} - \frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} \right) = \lim_{I \rightarrow \infty} \left(\frac{C+I}{2UI} \right) - \lim_{I \rightarrow \infty} \left(\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} \right) \rightarrow \frac{1}{2U} - \frac{1}{2U} \rightarrow 0$. Hence, with the increase in the utility of nationalism in the heart of both Chinese and Taiwanese people, US's room of maneuver in maintaining the strategic ambiguity will be smaller and smaller. Q.E.D.

To further illustrate the room for strategic ambiguity based on the change of nationalism, Figure 2 simulates the results derived from the strategic ambiguity model. The gray area indicates the range of P the US needed to maintain to keep the status quo. The upper region indicates that P is sufficiently high, so TW seeks independence regardless of the type of US, and as a result, US will get T-Z as the outcome, which is smaller than zero. The lower region indicates that P is

sufficiently low, so CN will attack anyway, and the US will receive $-T$ in the end, which is also smaller than zero. This figure shows that increasing nationalism will sharply decrease the room for maneuver to maintain the status quo. As was described by many observers, the United States will be less likely to maintain the status quo, and the chance of misjudgment by either Taiwan or China will be more and more likely (Mearsheimer 2014).

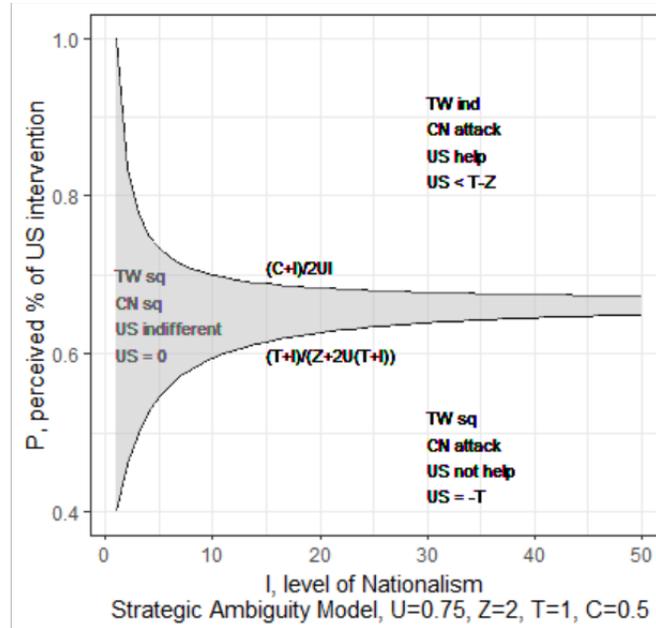


Figure 2. Change in the room of Strategic Ambiguity based on the level of Nationalism (I)

Implication 5: The room for Strategic Ambiguity decreases with the likelihood of the US winning in the US-CN conflict (U) being sufficiently low.

Proof: When $\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} < P < \frac{C+I}{2UI}$ and $> T$, TW and CN will choose to maintain the status quo,

and the US will be relieved from making the commitment or not. When U becomes smaller, both

$\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)}$ and $\frac{C+I}{2UI}$ will increase monotonously. However, P will be limited by the upper bound $P <$

1. After $\frac{C+I}{2UI} > 1$, the upper limit will be replaced with 1. In such a scenario, when the lower limit

$\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)}$ keeps increasing with the declining U, the room for Strategic Ambiguity will decrease.

Q.E.D.

To illustrate how the decrease of U influences the room of strategic ambiguity, Figure 2 shows the simulated results given similar parameters as Figure 1. In this figure, the gray area indicates the strategic ambiguity strategy, the X-axis is the value of U, and the Y-axis is the perceived likelihood of US intervention (P). When the US is less likely to win in the US-CN conflict, the US needs to raise P in the eyes of TW and CN to maintain the strategic ambiguity. Nevertheless, when U keeps declining, and when the upper limit is replaced with the limit of $P < 1$, the room for maintaining the strategic ambiguity becomes smaller. In Figure 2, China will attack anyway when U is smaller than 25%, regardless of the type of the US.

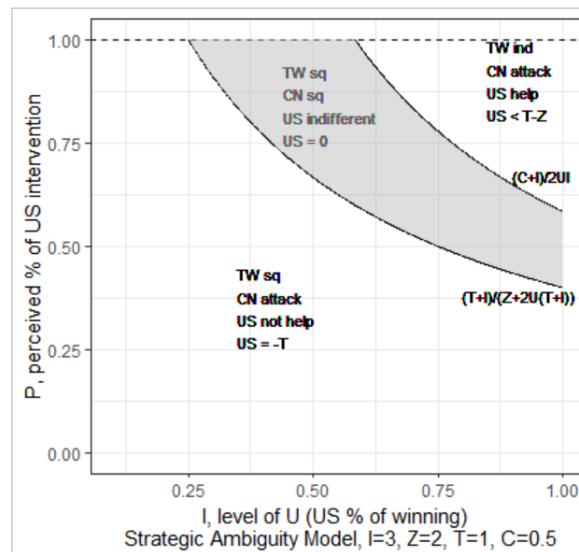


Figure 3. Change in the room of Strategic Ambiguity based on the likelihood of US winning in the US-CN conflict (U)

Implication 6: Dual Clarity has the same or more room for maintaining the status quo than Strategic Ambiguity.

Following previous discussions and literature, we define dual clarity as “*US commits to helping TW only if TW maintains the status quo, and the US will not help TW once TW declared independence.*” It is called dual clarity because (1) it is a form of *clarity* since P is no longer in the model – both TW and CN needs not to guess the value of P, so they will not misperceive the value of P. And (2) it is *dual* because both TW and CN now have complete information, and they can both be certain of US actions (will defend).

Once TW and US agree with this setting, the Strategic Ambiguity Model in Figure 1 will be reduced to the Dual Clarity model in Figure 4 below. There are three players in this model, and all players have complete and perfect information. US and TW will move jointly, and CN will react accordingly based on their joint decision. Assuming TW accepts such an arrangement made by the US (will discuss later), there are only three possible outcomes in this Dual Clarity model: 1) when TW maintains the status quo, the US promises to help; 2) CN can decide to either attack or not; 3) when TW declares independence, US will not help, and CN will attack.

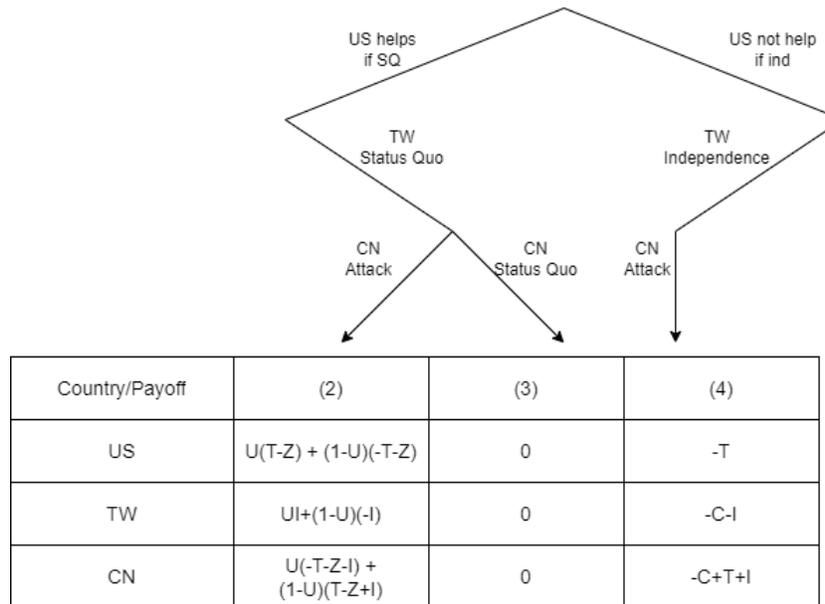


Figure 4. Dual Clarity Model (reduced from the Strategic Ambiguity Model)

Proof: Once again, backward induction is applied for finding the equilibrium. CN will attack only if the expected payoff of attack is higher than 0, indicating that $U(-T - Z - I) + (1 - U)(T - Z + I) > 0$. Therefore, CN will attack only if $\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} > 1$. Since CN will choose the status quo whenever $\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} < 1$, this boundary is the same as the lower bound of the strategic ambiguity model. In other words, whenever $\frac{T+I}{Z+2U(T+I)} < 1$ exists. The room for the US to reach the status quo under the Dual Clarity is no smaller than the room under the Strategic Ambiguity. Q.E.D.

Hypotheses for the Empirical Test

The major assumption of the Dual Clarity model is that TW is willing to accept the arrangement of not declaring independence in exchange for the US promise to help when CN attacks. But US may still face the moral hazard since TW may declare its independence once the US helps, as is predicted by Implication 2 in the Strategic Ambiguity model. This concern is established based on the rise of nationalism in Taiwan in recent years, driven by generational replacement (Wang 2017). There is also a positive correlation between the level of supporting independence and the belief that the US will ultimately help (Benson and Niou 2005). If such a psychological mechanism does not exist, the concern is unwarranted. Hence, the first hypothesis for the empirical test can be derived below:

H1: Taiwanese people will support the independence more when the United States will help defend the attack from China unconditionally (Strategic Clarity), compared to the status quo.

The same psychological mechanism should also work reversely to make the strategic ambiguity model works. When the United States signals P decreases, which means that the US is

less likely to help Taiwan, Taiwanese people will lower their support toward independence. This situation happens in the lower regions in Figures 2 and 3. Hence, the second hypothesis for the empirical test can be derived below:

H2: Taiwanese people will support the independence less when the United States is uncertain about defending the attack from China unconditionally (Strategic Ambiguity), compared to the status quo.

In the end, the assumption and the moral hazard of the Dual Clarity should be addressed empirically. Under the Dual Clarity Model, Taiwanese people accept the arrangement that they lower the level of support toward independence in exchange for the US's commitment for assistance. This hypothesis can be derived below:

H3: Taiwanese people will support the independence less when the United States promises to help defend Taiwan, but Taiwan must not declare independence (Dual Clarity), compared to the status quo.

Research Design

As mentioned earlier, there is a positive correlation between supporting independence and believing that the US will help, but we are unsure whether the perception is driven by social projection or not (Krosnick 1990). Our theory assumes that people will consider the commitment of the US and rationally calculate the utility of independence; social projection, on the other hand, suggests that people blindly believed in independence, and this belief drives them to further believe

that the United States will certainly and realize their dream. We tap into this effect, which is crucial for examining the causal relationship in the psychological mechanism of strategic ambiguity, strategic clarity, and dual clarity, by manipulating the perception of the US likelihood to help in an experimental setting.

To falsify the three hypotheses derived from the Strategic Ambiguity and Dual Clarity models, we designed and implemented a survey experiment in Taiwan in December 2021. Overall, 910 respondents were recruited and completed the survey by Pollcracylab,³ an online survey firm run by the National Chengchi University, between December 13 and 16, 2021. Pollcracylab compiles and maintains its sample pool through previous invitations in academic telephone and face-to-face surveys based on the house registration record from the Taiwanese government. Hence, the diversity in Pollcracylab's sample pool would be higher than other opted-in surveys such as MTurk. Moreover, all Pollcracylab respondents in Taiwan had been verified as real people, mitigating the problem of bot infestation in other established platforms (e.g., Chmielewski and Kucker 2020). The survey experiment was implemented right before four referendums in Taiwan on December 18, 2021, which we believed would pique citizens' attention and willingness to participate in this study in general; in other words, participants were not limited to those with extremely high political interest. The survey experiment has been approved by an IRB and has been pre-registered on a website before the implementation.

The socio-demographic background of the respondents is shown in Table 1. Compared to the Taiwanese population, Pollcracylab respondents include more males, younger, and highly educated citizens. Nevertheless, the results of political variables such as national identity and partisanship are similar to those from other representative telephone and face-to-face surveys

³ We requested 900 in the research design, but we received 910 responses because some respondents filled the survey at the same time.

conducted during the same period.⁴ Since the respondents will be randomly assigned into different groups during the experiment, we believe that the problem of sample bias can be mitigated. The robustness check section will examine the robustness of the results across different subgroups. In addition, it is worth mentioning that all socio-demographic variables, including party identification and national identity, were asked at the end of the whole survey experiment to avoid priming or even framing effects (Klar et al. 2020).

Table 1. Background of the Pollcracylab respondents (n=910)

<i>Gender</i>	Male	553 (60.8%)
	Female	357 (39.2%)
<i>Age</i>	20~29	158 (17.4%)
	30~39	280 (30.8%)
	40~49	247 (27.1%)
	50~59	171 (18.8%)
	60 up	54 (5.9%)
<i>Education</i>	Middle School	4 (0.4%)
	Senior High	52 (5.7%)
	Junior College	118 (13.0%)
	College	380 (41.8%)
	Graduate School	356 (39.1%)
<i>Taiwanese Identity</i>	Taiwanese	547 (60.1%)
	Both	348 (38.2%)
	Chinese	9 (1.0%)
	Others	6 (0.7%)
<i>Party Identification</i>	KMT	158 (17.4%)
	DPP	223 (24.5%)
	New Power Party	38 (4.2%)
	Taiwan People's Party	124 (13.6%)
	Taiwan Statebuilding Party	38 (4.2%)
	Other parties (< 4% each)	29 (3.2%)
	Non-Partisan	300 (33.0%)

All respondents received an innovation email from Pollcracylab, indicating that they were invited to participate in a survey titled “How do people discuss politics in daily life.” They were informed that there are at most 40 items, the survey had passed IRB, and they could skip any item,

⁴ For example, the poll from Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study: http://teds.nccu.edu.tw/teds_plan/item.php?cat_choose=69. Access: January 6 2021

but they must reach the last page to receive compensation (a gift card worth < 2 dollars) distributed by Pollcracylab directly.

All respondents were first asked a series of questions about their information consumption across different information sources, their preferences toward the four upcoming referendums, their evaluation of the country's economy, and their feeling thermometer toward China and the United States.

Before they were assigned into different groups, all subjects were asked the following pre-treatment question on preference toward independence "Q16. Do you support Taiwan's independence?" Their answers range from "Oppose very much" (coded as -2, 10.2% of respondents), "Oppose" (-1, 25.3%), "Support" (1, 44.4%), and "Support very much" (2, 19.5%).

After this pre-treatment question, all subjects were then randomly assigned into one of the three different groups below. Their option and coding of their answer are the same as the baseline question.

Q17-1 (Strategic Clarity): "If the US promises to send troops to protect Taiwan, do you still support Taiwan independence?" (n = 305, SC hereafter)

Q17-2 (Strategic Ambiguity): "If the US is uncertain about sending troops to protect Taiwan or not, do you still support Taiwan independence?" (n = 304, SA hereafter)

Q17-3 (Dual Clarity): "If the US promises to send troops to protect Taiwan, but Taiwan must not declare independence, do you still support Taiwan independence?" (n = 301, DC hereafter)

Comparing Q17-1 and Q16 can be used to examine *H1 Strategic Clarity*, the hypothesis that US commitment will change public perception of P and therefore increase the level of

independence support in Taiwan. Similarly, comparing Q17-2 and Q16 can be used to examine *H2 Strategic Ambiguity*. When the item reemphasizes that the US is uncertain to help or not, it should decrease perceived P among Taiwanese respondents, decreasing their level of support toward independence.

In the end, the Dual Clarity hypothesis *H3* can be examined by comparing the answers between Q16 and Q17-3. The description of Q17-3 illustrates the situation of strategic clarity in Figure 5, indicating that Taiwanese people must choose not to seek independence in exchange for help from the United States. Therefore, if respondents show a lower level of support toward independence in Q17-3 than Q16, it serves as evidence supporting the Dual Clarity hypothesis.

After Q17, all subjects were asked to answer some questions unrelated to this study. They were asked about their socio-demographic background before their debriefing and compensation.

Result

Randomization Check

A randomization check was applied to compare how respondents behaved across the three groups to examine if respondents in each group share a similar background and a similar prior level of independence support (measured by Q16). One-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in the level of independence support across the three groups ($F = 1.057$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.35$). Besides, ANOVA analysis also showed that the respondents in the three groups share similar political backgrounds, including the level of Taiwanese identity ($p = 0.27$), pan-blue ($p = 0.124$), and pan-green (0.523). In addition, the level of education across the three groups is also the same ($p = 0.756$). Unfortunately, gender ratio and age are significantly different across the three groups

($p = 0.03$ and $p < 0.05$, respectively). Hence, the analysis below will show both the descriptive and regression analysis to examine the effect of the three treatments.

Descriptive Analysis, ANOVA test, and Paired T-test

Pre-treatment support for independence in SC, SA, and DC are 0.375, 0.454, and 0.298 in the -2 to +2 scale, respectively. As mentioned above, ANOVA analysis yields a non-significant difference ($p = 0.35$). After the treatment, the levels in SC, SA, and DC are 0.485, 0.171, and 0.056, respectively. ANOVA analysis shows that the difference across groups is significant ($p < 0.001$).

Since we asked all respondents about their level of independence support before the treatment, we can use paired t-test to examine whether each group shifts its attitude significantly and toward which direction. Paired t-test shows that SC treatment significantly increases the level of independence support (mean of difference = 0.11, $df = 300$, $p < 0.001$), which supports *H1*. SA treatment significantly decreases the level of independence support (mean of diff = - 0.28, $df = 303$, $p < 0.001$), which supports *H2*. In the end, DC treatment also significantly decreases the level of independence support (mean of diff = - 0.24, $df=304$, $p < 0.001$), which supports *H3*. The results above are summarized in Figure 5. In this figure, the points are the mean value in each group, while the error bars indicate the 95% confidence interval of the mean values.

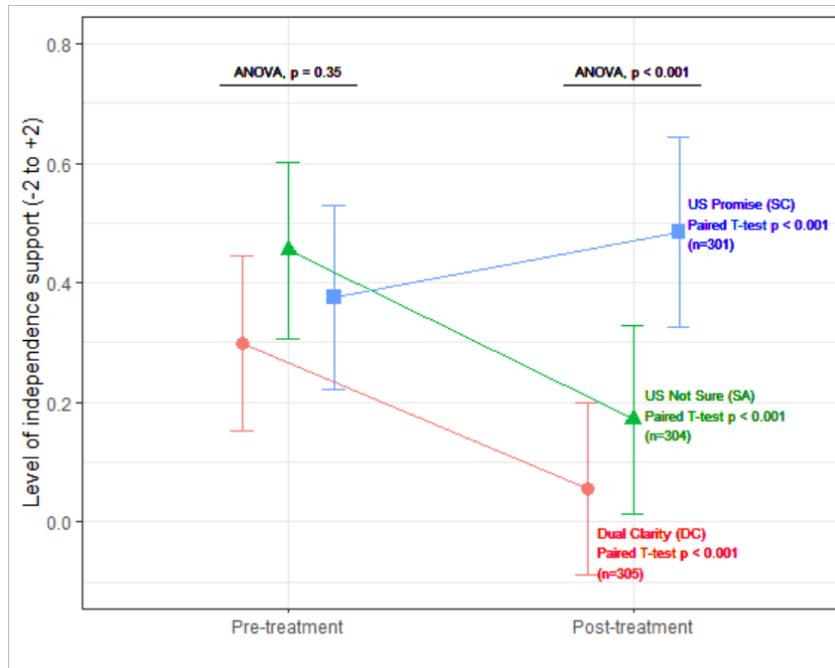


Figure 5. Levels of independence support across treatment groups (Pollcracylab, n = 910)

Overall, preliminary evidence from the survey experiment supports all three hypotheses induced by the Strategic Ambiguity and Dual Clarity Models in Figures 1 and 4. When Taiwanese people perceived that the US would certainly help, their level of independence support increased significantly (*H1*, SC group, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, when they were told that the US is uncertain to help, their level of independence support decreased significantly (*H2*, SA group, $p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, when Taiwanese people were rendered the option of strategic clarity, they agreed to lower their level of independence support in exchange for US protection (*H3*, DC group, $p < 0.001$).

Regression Analysis

The major drawback of the descriptive analysis is that the randomization check fails for gender and age. Therefore, regression analysis is used to estimate the treatment effect while

controlling all possible confounding variables to account for their potential bias. The result of four OLS regression models is shown in Table 2. The first model only includes the dummy variables for the two treatments, SA and DC, and SC is treated as the base group in this table. In Model 2, all respondents' pre-treatment attitude is controlled. Model 3 includes the socio-demographic variables, which the female and age were randomly assigned but were unevenly distributed in the randomization check. Finally, model 4 further includes political variables, including national identity and partisanship.

	DV: Supporting Independence (-2 to +2)			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model4
SA treatment	-0.429*** (0.110)	-0.360*** (0.054)	-0.356*** (0.054)	-0.361*** (0.054)
DC treatment	-0.314*** (0.111)	-0.384*** (0.054)	-0.373*** (0.055)	-0.385*** (0.054)
Pre-treatment Attitude (-2 ~ +2)		0.897*** (0.017)	0.895*** (0.017)	0.820*** (0.024)
Female (0-1)			-0.128*** (0.045)	-0.117*** (0.045)
Age (1-5)			0.004 (0.020)	0.009 (0.020)
Edu (1-5)			0.017 (0.026)	0.010 (0.026)
Taiwan Identity (0-1)				0.219*** (0.063)
Pan-blue Party (0-1)				-0.014 (0.056)
Pan-green Party (0-1)				0.107* (0.058)
Constant	0.485*** (0.078)	0.148*** (0.039)	0.096 (0.156)	-0.012 (0.160)
n	910	910	910	910
Adjusted-R2	0.015	0.763	0.765	0.769
F	8.079***	978.3***	493.6***	338.1***

*p<0.1, **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

After controlling for other confounding variables, Table 2 clearly illustrates the effect of strategic clarity. The estimated regression coefficient of the DC is significantly negative across all four models in Table 2, and the effect size is not smaller than the SA treatment. It is worth mentioning that the coefficient of either SA or DC is not the net effect but is the relative effect setting the SC as the base group. Nevertheless, since the three groups have the same pre-treatment attitude, the significantly negative results in SA and DC both show that the two conditions would successfully lower the independence support among Taiwanese respondents. Once again, Table 2 renders empirical support to all *H1*, *H2*, and *H3*. The results reveal the psychological mechanism among Taiwanese respondents in calculating the US-CN-TW interaction.

Among the control variables, it is not surprising that a respondent's pre-treatment attitude significantly correlates with their post-treatment attitude and largely boosts the R-square by 75% (from 1.5% to 76.3%). Since people use their pre-treatment attitude as an anchor and then adjust their attitude according to the treatments, the pre- and post-treatment attitudes should be positively correlated. Female citizens are less likely to support independence, while age and the level of education have no effect. Taiwanese respondents with Taiwan identity and pan-green party identification are much more likely to support independence. All confounding variables' coefficients are in the expected directions, which suggests that the sample used in this analysis is normal and has the potential for external validity in the context of Taiwan politics.

Robustness Check

Perceived Threat from China as the mediator

The psychological mechanism behind both the Strategic Ambiguity and Dual Clarity models is based on another implicit assumption about China's military threat to Taiwan. If

Taiwanese people do not perceive the military threat from China, they would not respond to either the promise, uncertainty, or the proposed exchange from the US. In other words, the perceived military threat from China should mediate the effect of three treatments in *H1*, *H2*, and *H3*.

We add a new variable perceived threat from China into the regression model, measured by Q14 before the treatment to test this hypothesis. The description of Q14 is “*Do you think the military threat from China is increasing, decreasing, or about the same compared with six months ago?*” Their answers are coded as 1 (increasing, 66.8%), 0 (about the same, 31.9%), and -1 (decreasing, 1.3%), indicating that the majority of Taiwanese people do perceive the military threat from China.

This variable is then added into Model 4 in Table 2 and interacted with the treatments, and the simulated result is shown in Figure 6 (the regression result can be found in Model 5, Table A1, in the Appendix). In this figure, those who did not perceive the military threat from China on the left side do not respond to the three treatments; meanwhile, those who did perceive the threat from China responded to the three treatments the most. This simulated result renders further evidence that the underlying psychological mechanism driving both the strategic ambiguity and dual clarity strategies relies on Taiwanese people’s perceived military threat from China.

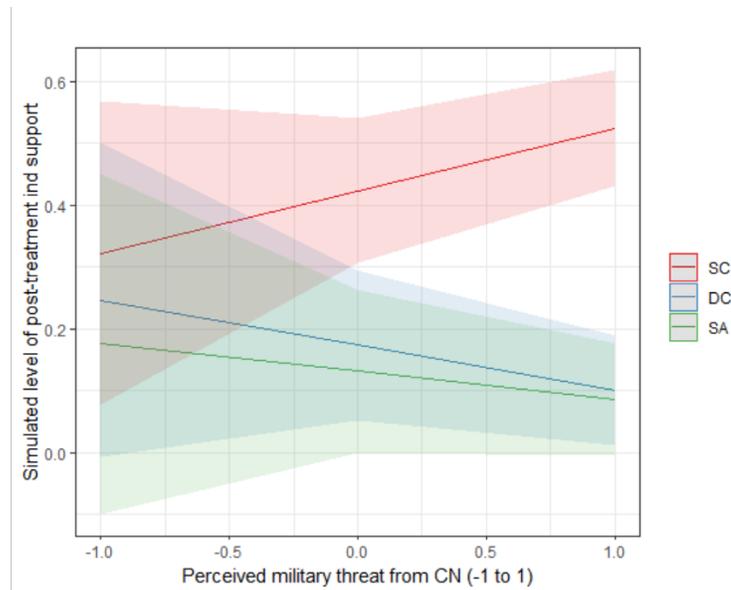


Figure 6. Levels of post-treatment independence support across treatment groups, mediated by the perceived threat from China

Trust toward the US as the mediator

Another mediator linking the three treatments and the level of independence support in the strategic ambiguity and clarity is how many Taiwanese people trust the commitment made by the United States. US commitment is effective only if Taiwanese people believe that it is real; if Taiwanese people do not believe that the US will help as promised, the three treatments in the experiment would be ineffective.

To test this hypothesis, we add another new variable, *Trust toward the US*, into the regression model, which is measured by Q11 before the treatment. Unfortunately, there is no direct measure of trust toward the US, and the only available measure in the survey experiment is the relative trust between China and the US. The description of Q11 is “*If one must choose to ally with either the US or China, if 0 means to ally with China while 10 means to ally with the US, where is your position?*” Their answers are coded as the value of the respondent’s answer.

This variable is added into Model 4 in Table 2 and interacts with the treatments, and the simulated result is shown in Figure 7 (the regression result can be found in Model 6, Table A1, in the Appendix). In this figure, those who did trust the United States (on the left side of the figure) do not respond to the three treatments; meanwhile, those who did believe in the United States responded to the three treatments the most. Once again, this simulated result renders further evidence that the underlying psychological mechanism driving both strategic ambiguity and dual clarity strategies relies on how many Taiwanese people regard the US commitment as credible.

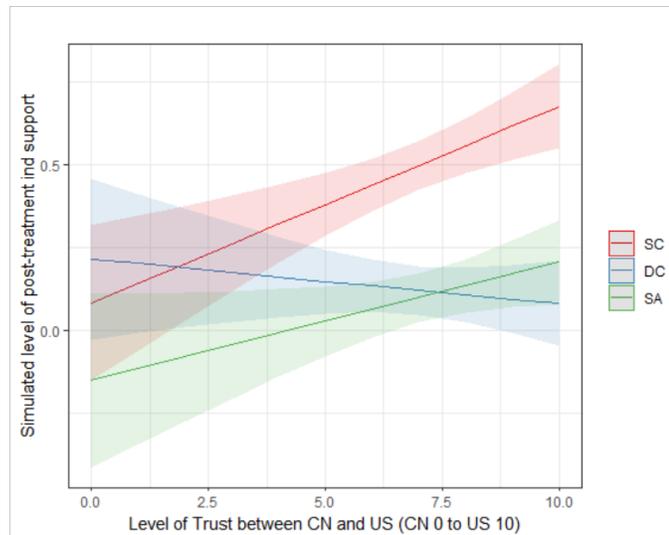


Figure 7. Levels of post-treatment independence support across treatment groups, mediated by the relative trust toward the US

Conclusion

This article introduces an innovative game-theoretical model to specify three specific conditions of the trilateral US-Taiwan-China relations: strategic ambiguity, strategic clarity, and dual clarity. The model improves upon literature by incorporating public opinion in Taiwan and China and nationalism as one important payoff which frames the negotiation between China and

Taiwan as a zero-sum game. Furthermore, our model successfully illustrates how the increasing nationalism will make the US maintaining the status quo less and less likely (Figure 2).

It is interesting both strategic ambiguity and dual clarity induce a similar effect by making citizens in Taiwan less supportive of pursuing independence. One might be prompted to ask, then, why advantages could be gained from considering switching a new policy, dual clarity, that offers identical policy prospects. We think that the policy of dual clarity could offer at least the following advantages.

First, miscalculation, incomplete information, and misperception about adversaries and foreign supporters could often increase the likelihood of war (Jervis 1976; Fearon 1995; Wagner 2005; Rathbun, 2007). With the increasing imbalances and alterations of the status quo in this trio, strategic ambiguity is increasing to face these problems. Dual clarity alleviates these concerns to a great extent by shrinking uncertainties among the three parties (Chang-Liao and Fang 2021).

In addition to reducing uncertainties, dual clarity also provides psychological benefits to the three parties involved. Behavioral research shows that people are generally risk-averse in the gaining domain (Kahneman and Tversky 1984). Since the status quo worked well and had provided largely acceptable outcomes to three parties, people will be motivated to stick to the status quo and will be wary especially when uncertainties are associated with the change, leading people to emphasize negative outcomes and discount positive ones (Crandall et al. 2009). Seen in this view, dual clarity has largely perpetuated the status quo that all sides could agree on.

In a nutshell, this article disagrees with the myths that the U.S. will face moral hazard problems in the Taiwan problems in scenarios of strategic ambiguity and dual clarity (Benson and Niou 2001, Pan 2003, Bensen 2012). In fact, dual clarity could be a viable alternative to ensure peace in the Taiwan Strait.

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Appendix

Table A1 – Robustness Check and Mediating perceived threat from CN and trust to US		
	DV: Supporting Independence (-2 to +2)	
	Model 5	Model 6
SA treatment	-0.292*** (0.090)	-0.356*** (0.054)
DC treatment	-0.250*** (0.085)	-0.373*** (0.055)
Perceived Threat from China (-1 ~ +1)	0.101 (0.074)	
Threat X SA	-0.146 (0.109)	
Threat X DC	-0.174* (0.104)	
Perceived Trust Toward the US (0 to 10)		0.059*** (0.017)
Trust X SA		-0.023 (0.021)
Trust X DC		-0.073*** (0.020)
Pre-treatment Attitude (-2 ~ +2)	0.822*** (0.024)	0.796*** (0.025)
Female (0-1)	-0.118*** (0.045)	-0.104*** (0.045)
Age (1-5)	0.010 (0.020)	0.010 (0.020)
Edu (1-5)	0.010 (0.026)	0.006 (0.025)
Taiwan Identity (0-1)	0.214*** (0.063)	0.190*** (0.065)
Pan-blue Party (0-1)	-0.010 (0.057)	-0.010 (0.056)
Pan-green Party (0-1)	0.108* (0.058)	0.080 (0.059)
Constant	0.485*** (0.078)	0.096 (0.156)
n	910	910
Adjusted-R2	0.770	0.773
F	253.9***	259.5***

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01