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Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, and the Security Balance in the Taiwan Strait

BRETT V. BENSON and EMERSON M. S. NIOU

The delicate security balance in the Taiwan Strait is threatened on several fronts. In Taiwan, democratization has placed Taiwan independence as one of the most salient issues in its domestic politics, and the rise of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party to power has created uncertainty regarding Taiwan's future policy on the Taiwan independence-unification issue. In this paper, we investigate whether external factors such as China's military threat and the United States' security commitment to Taiwan can affect the development of the Taiwan independence movement. An interesting finding from our analysis is approximately one-third of the people in Taiwan can agree simultaneously on two seemingly contradictory issues: to unite with China if China becomes democratic and to declare independence if China will not use force and peace can be maintained. Voters in Taiwan with conditional preferences create opportunities for China and the United States to formulate foreign policy that will restrain Taiwan's drive toward independence.

The emergence of a democratic government in Taiwan has given rise to a new, pro-independence voice that was previously kept silent. Since the establishment of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986, the independence-unification issue has been one of the primary issues by which political parties in Taiwan establish their identities and distinguish themselves from one another. The independence-unification issue, however, has consequences beyond Taiwan's domestic politics since China consistently

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vows to use military force against Taiwan if it announces formal independence. Since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait missile crisis,¹ the People's Republic of China (PRC) has kept a close eye on Taiwanese preferences regarding the independence-unification issue. Concern about an independence movement further intensified when DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian won Taiwan's 2000 presidential election.²

Given the importance of the independence-unification issue to Taiwan's domestic politics and to the security balance in the Taiwan Strait, surveys conducted regularly since the early 1990s track shifts in Taiwanese public sentiment on this issue. The standard approach to the survey design generally measured the independence-unification variable as one dimensional with preferences for unification or independence at the extremes and preservation of the status quo at the centrist position.³ Most analyses treated respondents' preferences on the independence-unification issue as an independent variable to explain, while controlling for other variables, vote choice and voter preferences over political parties. Voter preferences for independence consistently impacted vote choice: respondents who leaned toward independence were more likely to support the DPP candidates, and those leaning toward unification tended to support the Kuomintang (KMT).⁴

Studies that concentrated on the independence-unification issue as an independent variable contributed useful insights about Taiwan's electoral politics such as vote choice and party preferences. Unanswered, however, were findings addressing what factors affect individuals' movement along the independence-unification policy dimension. In this paper we examine public opinion in Taiwan to determine whether external factors such as the

¹ For a description and assessment of the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait missile crisis, see Suisheng Zhao, ed., *Across the Taiwan Strait: Mainland China, Taiwan and the 1995–96 Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

² In a survey conducted in 2000 by the National Taiwan University, 58 percent of the respondents believed that the DPP supports Taiwan independence, while only 7.6 percent and 3.4 percent believed that the Kuomintang and the People First Party were for Taiwan independence, respectively. Tensions between China and Taiwan increased after a comment made by President Chen Shui-bian on August 3, 2002 at the 29th annual meeting of the World Taiwan Fellow Townsmen Federation in Tokyo, Japan. He said that China and Taiwan were two separate countries, "one country on each side" of the Taiwan Strait. The most recent "provocation" made by President Chen Shui-bian was his call for a new Taiwan Constitution to be drafted in 2006. See Yunping Chang and Tailin Huang, *Taipei Times*, 29 September 2003, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2003/09/29/2003069686>.

³ See Shelley Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity: A Critique," *Pacific Affairs* 74, no. 4 (1999–2000) for an overview of the evolution of survey questions on the Taiwan independence-unification issue, 537–552.

⁴ A representative set of scholarly work on the issue of Taiwan independence in Taiwan's electoral politics include John Fuh-sheng Hsieh and Emerson M.S. Niou, "Salient Issues in Taiwan's Electoral Politics," *Electoral Studies* 15, no. 2 (1996): 219–30; Yun-han Chu, Melvin J. Hinich, and Tse-min Lin, "Conflict Displacement and Regime Transition in Taiwan: A Spatial Analysis," *World Politics* 48, no. 4 (1996): 453–481; Emerson M. S. Niou and Philip Paolino, "The Rise of the Opposition Party in Taiwan: Explaining Chen Shui-bian's Victory in the 2000 Presidential Election in Taiwan," *Electoral Studies* 22, no. 4 (2003); and Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 721–740.

foreign policies of the United States and China influence respondents' positions on the independence-unification issue. To discover how foreign policies of these countries influence Taiwanese public opinion, we utilize an innovative approach to disaggregate and interpret the consistently large group of respondents that express a preference for the status quo over either independence or unification. We then isolate and evaluate the conditions under which preferences on the independence-unification issue are likely to vary.

Our analysis makes key contributions in three areas: examination of literature, measurement of public opinion, and foreign policy implications. First, our study addresses the literature that examines the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. Researchers interested in public opinion and foreign policy have focused on understanding how public opinion in a country shapes that country's foreign policies.⁵ Rather than take issue with these studies, we examine the lesser-developed query addressing how foreign policies affect public opinion. We make the important and innovative discovery that public opinion in a given country directly hinges upon other countries' choices of foreign policies. This insight implies that there can be critical cross-level foreign policy links that are filtered through a state's public opinion, especially if existing research is correct in showing that public opinion in a country shapes that country's foreign policy in meaningful ways.

Second, our analysis augments the traditional understanding about how to measure opinion on the Taiwan independence-unification issue. We demonstrate how respondents' answers supporting both independence and unification are not mutually exclusive options. Our study provides a richer, more accurate view of individuals' preferences for independence-unification including how those preferences might change.

Finally, our research offers some insightful policy implications for the United States, China, and Taiwan as each struggles to develop and pursue strategies to cope with the precarious security balance in the Taiwan Strait. The results of the analysis demonstrate that the conditional preferences reveal ways in which China and the United States can formulate foreign policy to thwart Taiwan's drive toward independence.

The article is presented according to the following outline. In Section 1, we explore public opinion in Taiwan on the independence-unification issue.

⁵ Gabriel A. Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950). Almond pioneered the study of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. James N. Rosenau, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: An Operational Formulation*, (New York: Random House, 1961), provides a useful conceptual framework to understand the opinion-policy relations. V. O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1961), characterizes the opinion-policy relations as a system of dikes that demarcates the boundaries and channels the flow of foreign policy decisions. Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), has traced, where it exists, the parallel between public opinion and U.S. foreign intervention in Vietnam, Nicaragua, the Persian Gulf, and Bosnia to better understand how public opinion influences foreign policy decisions in the United States.

In Section 2, we explore the connection between Taiwan public opinion on the independence-unification issue and the foreign policies of the United States and China regarding the cross-strait dispute. The concluding section presents our findings about Taiwanese opinions toward the independence-unification issue that are inferred from the analyses in Sections 1 and 2.

PUBLIC OPINION IN TAIWAN ON THE INDEPENDENCE-UNIFICATION ISSUE

In trying to understand Taiwanese preferences on the independence-unification issue, the first and most obvious question is whether respondents favor independence or unification. The Workshop on Political System Change at the National Taiwan University Graduate Institute of Political Science conducted four surveys: one in 1993 right after the 1992 Legislative Yuan election, one in 1996 after the presidential election, one in 1999 after the 1998 Legislative Yuan election, and one in 2000 after the presidential election. Each of these surveys asked respondents to express their preferences on the independence-unification issue.⁶ The 1993 survey, however, omitted a variable found in the question of the subsequent surveys (see Appendix D). The 1993 question asked respondents whether they strongly or weakly supported Taiwan independence (13.1 percent) or unification (39.1 percent), but the question did not offer the status quo as a possible choice (see Table 1). Instead, the remainder of the respondents at 47.6 percent had to specify a choice for no answer, no opinion, or no idea.

In the other three surveys, a majority of the respondents preferred maintaining the status quo to moving either toward independence or unification. This indicated the public's consistently strong desire for the preservation of the status quo and near indifference to unification or independence. The omission of the status quo variable in the 1993 survey, therefore, precluded an interpretation of the collective preference for the status quo that accurately represented the public's preference for it over independence or unification.

TABLE 1 Preference Distribution on Taiwan Independence-Unification Issue

	Independence	Status Quo	Unification
1993	13.10%		39.1%
1996	23.38%	61%	16%
1998	26.40%	52.50%	20.40%
2000	24.96%	53.10%	21.94%

⁶ These surveys were conducted by the Workshop on Political System Change at the National Taiwan University Graduate Institute of Political Science. See Appendix 1 for detailed information about these surveys.

Research in recent years has been dedicated to making sense of the pro-status quo majority.⁷ One approach provided respondents with the option of expressing a preference for independence or unification now; status quo now, independence later; status quo now, unification later; status quo now, decide later; or status quo indefinitely.⁸ The design of this question attempted to tease out those in the status quo category who actually had a first preference for either independence or unification but for some unspecified reason, held reservations about the timing.

Another research method abandoned the assumption that respondents' positions were located somewhere along a one-dimensional policy space between independence and unification and included the possibility that respondents had conditional preferences.⁹ To explore this possibility, the survey gave respondents the option of considering two hypothetical cases: becoming independent while maintaining peaceful relations with China and unifying with a China that was compatible economically, socially and politically. When a series of surveys conducted over several years offered respondents the option of expressing preferences over conditional alternatives, the breakdown of public attitudes changed.¹⁰ In 1993 only 37.7 percent of respondents expressed a preference for independence if peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait could be maintained. After the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait missile crisis, that percentage surged to 62.8 percent. In a 1998 survey, the percentage decreased modestly to 54.09 percent, but once again increased over the 60 percent mark in the wake of the heated 2000 presidential election. These survey results indicate that although a majority of the respondents preferred the status quo, the Taiwan public, in subsequent years, expressed an increasing desire to be independent from China if the move did not provoke China to retaliate militarily.

While the general preference for conditional independence gains momentum in Taiwan, this does not imply that the Taiwanese are increasingly

⁷ See Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity," and Shelley Rigger, "Maintaining the Status Quo: What it Means, and Why the Taiwanese Prefer It," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2001): 115–23.

⁸ See John Fuh-sheng Hsieh and Emerson M. S. Niou, "Measuring Taiwanese Public Opinion on the Taiwan Independence Issue: A Methodological Note," *China Quarterly* 181, no. 1 (March 2005), for a review of how attitudes on Taiwan independence have been measured in surveys conducted in Taiwan, 158–168.

⁹ For more on conditional preferences, see Dean Lacy and Emerson M.S. Niou, "Nonseparable Preference and the Elections in Double-Member Districts," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 10, no. 1 (1998): 89–110; and Dean Lacy and Emerson M.S. Niou, "A Problem with Referendums," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 12, no. 1 (2000): 5–31.

¹⁰ Naitheh Wu, Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, who designed these questions for the surveys, made the earliest attempt to explore the conditions under which respondents would move away from the status quo and toward either independence or unification. See Naitheh Wu, "Liberalism and Ethnic Identity: Searching for the Ideological Foundation of the Taiwanese Nationalism," (in Chinese) *Taiwanese Political Science Review* 1 (1996): 5–40; "National Identity and Party Support: The Social Basis of Party Competition in Taiwan," (in Chinese) *Journal of the Institute of Ethnology* 74 (1993): 33–61.

TABLE 2 Do you agree that if peace can be maintained, Taiwan should be an independent country?

	Disagree	Agree	Don't know
1993	37.10%	37.70%	25.20%
1996	20.10%	62.80%	17.10%
1998	29.18%	54.09%	16.73%
2000	27.18%	60.89%	11.92%

less willing to consider the option of unification with mainland China. In the 2000 survey, 60.89 percent of the respondents agreed that Taiwan should be an independent country if peace can be maintained, while 56.07 percent agreed that the two sides should unite once the political, economic, and social systems in China and Taiwan became compatible. With the exception of the 1998 survey results, the percentage of respondents supporting unification conditional upon convergence of cross-strait systems remained fairly consistent between 1993 and 2000.

Tables 2 and 3 show that when asked to consider specific conditions, a sizeable group of Taiwanese people abandoned the status quo for either unification or independence. An interesting finding can be drawn from these survey results. With a majority of the respondents simultaneously supporting conditional independence and conditional unification, we discover some overlap in preferences. This result is not immediately obvious when analyzing the data one-dimensionally, strictly in terms of respondent preferences for unification or independence. The overlap suggests that support for both independence and unification are not mutually exclusive alternatives. When we conduct a cross-tabulation analysis of the responses on the conditions under which respondents agreed to independence or unification, we find about one-third of the respondents supporting both unification and independence (see Table 4a). We can thus classify respondents into four types: (1) those supporting independence (II and III), (2) those having conditional preferences (I), (3) those supporting unification (IV and VII), and (4) those who are undecided (V, VI, VIII, and IX) (see Table 4b). The higher the percentage of those who simultaneously support conditional preferences for

TABLE 3 If mainland China and Taiwan become politically, economically, and socially compatible, do you agree that the two sides should unite?

	Disagree	Agree	Don't know
1993	19.10%	57.00%	23.90%
1996	25.50%	59.00%	15.60%
1998	35.96%	48.49%	15.55%
2000	31.16%	56.07%	12.78%

TABLE 4a Conditional Independence and Conditional Unification 1993–2000 Unification If No Disparity

Independence if peace can be maintained				Total
	Agree	No Answer	Disagree	
Agree	I	II	III	
	25.4	2.0	10.3	37.7
	38.8	2.7	21.3	62.8
	28.8	2.4	22.8	63.2
No Answer	34.4	2.5	24.0	60.9
	IV	V	VI	
	4.0	19.9	1.3	25.2
	3.3	12.3	1.4	17.1
Disagree	3.2	11.3	2.1	12.7
	2.3	9.0	.6	11.9
	VII	VIII	IX	
	27.6	2.0	7.4	37.1
Total	16.9	.4	2.9	20.1
	16.4	1.2	11.0	24.1
	19.3	1.3	6.6	27.2
	57.0	23.9	19.1	100.0
	59.0	15.6	25.5	100.0
	56.6	13.8	29.7	100.0
	56.1	12.8	31.2	100.0

Note: Entries are the percentages of respondents for the 1993, 1996, 1998, and 2000 surveys respectively.

both unification and independence, the less polarization there is in society regarding this particular issue.

Tables 4a and 4b provide two important insights to our understanding of Taiwanese public opinion. First, high percentages of Taiwan's general public have conditional preferences concerning whether or not Taiwan should become independent or unite with China. We now know that one-dimensional analyses of the independence-unification issue over-simplify the situation: dual support of independence and unification are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives, and the failure to recognize this has prevented a discovery of the conditions that can cause voters to shift between independence, status quo, and unification.

Second, we now know the specific conditions under which respondents who previously chose the status quo but actually held a first preference for

TABLE 4b Conditional Preferences on Taiwan Independence-Unification Issue

	Independence	Conditional	Unification	Undecided
1993	12.3%	25.4%	31.6%	30.7%
1996	24.0%	38.8%	20.2%	17.0%
1998	25.3%	28.8%	19.7%	26.2%
2000	26.5%	34.4%	21.7%	17.4%

either independence or unification would move from the status quo to their first preference. Many would prefer independence from China if they can be assured that China will not attack; many more would prefer to unify if they can be assured that Taiwan's economic, political, and social situation will remain unchanged. That is, as respondents' fear of mainland China decreased, they were more willing to choose either independence or unification instead of the status quo.

CHINA AND U.S. POLICIES AND TAIWAN'S PUBLIC OPINION

With more than one-third of the people in Taiwan having conditional preferences on the independence-unification issue, mainland China is in a position to influence Taiwanese preferences. If China wants more people in Taiwan to support unification, it should undertake reforms to convince the Taiwanese of a move toward compatible political, economic, and social systems. Moreover, the data show, as demonstrated below, that public support for independence increases if the people believe that independence can be achieved without a military backlash from China. In other words, Beijing's policy can serve to entice unification by implementing reforms and to deter independence by maintaining a military threat.

China's policy toward Taiwan somewhat reflects its interest in achieving these goals. To prevent Taiwanese independence, Beijing refuses to renounce the use of force against Taiwan. Simultaneously, China continues to open its markets to Taiwanese businessmen and promote other cross-strait exchanges. As a result of China's economic policy with Taiwan, cross-strait commerce has exploded over the past decade. According to Taiwanese government statistics, bilateral trade between Taiwan and China in 2004 reached us\$70 billion, a 34.2 percent increase from 2003; and Taiwanese invested more than us\$100 billion in China over the past two decades. The continual growth of cross-strait commerce implies that people in Taiwan increasingly perceive mainland China as having an economic environment favorable to assimilation. More Taiwanese are also interested in integrating with the mainland to take advantage of such opportunities as work, education, and travel. In 2004 the total number of Taiwanese visiting the mainland reached 3.7 million, a 35 percent increase from 2003; currently, the total number of Taiwanese living and working in China is at least 300,000, while the estimated number of Taiwanese studying in China is about 5,000.¹¹

The Taiwanese continue to increase cross-strait exchanges indicates that perceptions of China are improving. Moreover, the conditional preferences

¹¹ The Associated Press, "Facts about Taiwanese tourism and trade with Mainland," 28 January 2005.

on the independence-unification issue imply that as China continues to improve the attractiveness of its economic, political and, social environment, a majority of the Taiwanese will increasingly favor unification.

In addition to its economic strategies, the Chinese government refuses to renounce the use of military force as a means to prevent Taiwan's separation and to compel Taiwan's reunification. Over the past decade, Beijing's military budget has grown with a significant military build-up occurring since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait missile crisis. During this time, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has emphasized the build-up of its short-range surface-to-surface missile force in China's Fujian province, which is situated across the strait from Taiwan. China's large-scale military exercises, missile deployments, and other improving military capabilities intend to deter Taiwanese independence and, if necessary, compel Taiwan to reunify. In February 2000, Beijing released a white paper on the Taiwan issue. Underscoring China's threat to retain a coercive option to achieve its goals with respect to Taiwan, the white paper spelled out China's position on the "one-China" principle and threatened the use of force if Taiwan became independent or resisted negotiations for unification indefinitely.¹² On 14 March 2005, the PRC 10th National People's Congress passed the Anti-Secession Law, which, according to PRC officials, provides legal justification for China's use of force to prevent Taiwan's secession and compel unification after all avenues for peaceful unification have been exhausted.¹³

Studies about China's ability and resolve to use force to threaten Taiwan tend, at least, to agree that Beijing poses some level of coercive threat to Taiwan, and the PLA is working to strengthen that threat. Michael O'Hanlon argues that China lacks the ability to conquer Taiwan.¹⁴ Accordingly, Taiwan's military capability and strategically advantageous position make it impossible for China to mount an amphibious attack on Taiwan that would enable it to occupy the island and wrest the reigns of power from the Taiwanese government. Although China cannot seize Taiwan, O'Hanlon admits that limited war scenarios, including Chinese retaliatory missile strikes or a naval blockade, could impose considerable harm on Taiwan's economy and inflict extensive damage to the island. If O'Hanlon is correct, the PRC is unable to compel unification, but its threat to use force may still deter Taiwan independence.

¹² Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council website, "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, 21 February 2000, <http://www.gwytb.gov.cn:8088/detail.asp?table=WhitePaper&title=White%20Papers%20On%20Taiwan%20Issue&m.id=4>.

¹³ For an explanation of China's draft Anti-Secession Law authorized by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, see Zhaoguo Wang, Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, "Explanations on Draft Anti-Secession Law," Third Session 10th National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 8 March 2005, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005lh/122118.htm>.

¹⁴ Michael O'Hanlon, "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 51–86.

Robert Ross focuses on the deterrent capability of China's threat to use force. According to Ross, a Chinese missile assault on Taiwan—and such a threat is credible should Taiwan declare independence—would devastate the island's economy and infrastructure: the political costs the PRC accrued would be too great if it chose not to retaliate, and the United States is helpless to protect Taiwan against Chinese missiles.¹⁵ Thus, the psychological impact of China's threat to use force is, at the very least, a deterring factor to Taiwanese independence.

The credibility of China's threat, however, is affected by the United States' security commitment to Taiwan. The level of U.S. commitment derives from the institutional framework configured by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, the 1978 Normalization Communiqué, and the 1982 Joint Communiqué. At its most basic level, the policy distilled from this framework states that the United States agrees that the Taiwan Strait dispute is a Chinese domestic issue to be resolved by Chinese on both sides of the Strait. However the dispute is resolved, the United States insists that it must be done so peacefully.¹⁶ This policy allows the United States mobility to intervene in the conflict but resists specifying the conditions under which United States will become involved. Consistent with this policy message, the United States sends contradictory signals by trying to convince China that coercion is a dangerous solution because the United States is likely to defend Taiwan while simultaneously trying to persuade Taiwan that formal independence is dangerous because the United States is not likely to defend it.¹⁷ The policy extends neither a high nor a low commitment. Instead, it is deliberately ambiguous, avoiding any assertion of explicit commitment. A U.S. commitment that is too high would risk emboldening Taiwan to move toward independence, thereby destabilizing the status quo by provoking China. A U.S. commitment that is too low would risk encouraging China to use direct force against Taiwan to compel unification. Existing U.S. policy, the policy referred to as strategic ambiguity, aims to achieve dual deterrence by purposely introducing uncertainty into the decision-making processes of both China and Taiwan.

U.S. public opinion toward the Taiwan-China conflict is not inconsistent with the U.S. strategic ambiguity policy.¹⁸ Americans are unclear in their

¹⁵ Robert Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (2002): 48–85.

¹⁶ Dennis V. Hickey, "America's Two-Point Policy and the Future of Taiwan," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 8 (1988): 881–896, explains in detail the background and implications of the U.S. policy that insists that the Taiwan Strait dispute be settled peacefully and domestically.

¹⁷ For more on US strategic ambiguity policy see, Brett V. Benson and Emerson M. S. Niou, "Keeping Them Guessing: A Theory of Strategic Ambiguity," unpublished manuscript, Duke University, 2004. See also, Dennis V. Hickey, *US-Taiwan Security Ties: From Cold War to Beyond Containment* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1994).

¹⁸ In 1999, the Opinion Dynamic Corporation conducted a public opinion survey to determine U.S. public opinion on certain Asia-related issues. One question reads as follows: "Both the People's Republic

support of Taiwanese independence. Many Americans support Taiwan as a democracy and hold China in disregard because of its poor human rights record and its unwillingness to democratize, but are reluctant to press for U.S. military intervention because China's growth as an economic and military power demands the United States engage with China.¹⁹ Insofar as U.S. public opinion does not contradict the United States' long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity, it does not pressure U.S. decision-makers to formulate a more transparent policy toward the Taiwan Strait conflict nor does it signal any definite preferences to China and Taiwan.

To study the relationship of U.S. security commitment to defend Taiwan and the Taiwan public's perceptions of China's military threat as well as their proclivity toward independence, we use the results of the 2000 survey. This survey contains a unique set of questions that allows us to undertake a more rigorous analysis. Respondents in the 2000 survey were asked whether they worry about China's increasing military preparation against Taiwan: 47.4 percent expressed that they worry about China's military threat while 52.6 percent said they do not worry. The survey also asks respondents if they

of China on the mainland and the Republic of China on Taiwan claim to be the legitimate government of all of China. What do you think the focus of U.S. policy should be on the China/Taiwan issue?" The respondents were given a choice between supporting a policy that would favor the PRC, one that would favor the ROC, and one that would instead "keep a low profile, and let the Chinese deal with the problem themselves." Between policies that would favor China or Taiwan, slightly more preferred giving the edge to Taiwan (26 percent) over China (21 percent). However, the highest number of respondents, almost half (47 percent), preferred the third alternative, "to keep a low profile, and let the Chinese deal with the problem themselves." See William Watts, "Americans Look at Asia: A Potomac Associates Policy Perspective" (analysis of a public opinion survey conducted by Opinion Dynamic Corporation, Cambridge, MA, October 1999), 37, http://www.hluce.org/images/usasia_report_1099.pdf.

¹⁹ For U.S. opinion toward China, see Gallup/CNN/USA Today, 1–4 February 2001; ABC News/Washington Post, 5 April 2001; Hart Research, 27 January 2000; Gallup/CNN/USA Today, 23 May 1999 and 1 June 1997; Gallup, 17–19 March 2000; Pew Research Center, 15–28 May 2001; Pew/Gallup, 28 May 2001; Princeton Survey Research Associates/Gallup, 28 May 2001; Pew Research Center, 15–28 May 2001; Louis Harris and Associates, 15–19 May 1998; Program on International Policy Attitudes, "U.S. Relations with China: General Attitudes Toward China," *PIPA Report*, Americans and the World website, http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional_issues/china/ch_summary.cfm. For U.S. perception of China as being important to U.S. interests, see Potomac Associates and Opinion Dynamics/Henry Luce Foundation, 16–28 June 1999; Hart and Teeter Research Companies/NBC News/Wall Street Journal, 24–26 July 1999. For U.S. opinion toward Taiwan, see Gallup/CNN/USA Today, 1–4 February 2001; Program on International Policy Attitudes, "U.S. Relations with China: Taiwan," *PIPA Report*, Americans and the World website; Louis Harris and Associates/Louis Harris International Taiwan, 22–29 February 1996; Mark Penn Democratic Leadership Council, 28–29 September 1999; Frederick Schneiders Research/Taiwan Research Institute, 13–17 March 1997; Louis Harris And Associates/ Louis Harris International Taiwan, 22–29 February 1996; Techno Metrica Institute of Policy and Politics, 6–10 April 2001; Gallup, 27 October 1997. For U.S. opinion of the use of the military to defend Taiwan, see Pew Research Center, 15–28 May 2001; Pew Research Center, 15–19 March 2000; Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, 15–19 March 2001; Hart and Teeter Research Companies/NBC News/Wall Street Journal, 16–19 June 1999 and 9–12 September 1999; Gallup/Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 15 October–10 November 1998; ABC News/Washington Post, 14–17 March 1996; Louis Harris and Associates/Louis Harris International Taiwan, 22–29 February 1996; ABC News.com Poll, 25–29 August 1999. See also, Program on International Policy Attitudes, "U.S. Relations with China: Defending Taiwan," *PIPA Report*, Americans and the World website.

TABLE 5a Perception of China Threat and Preferences on Taiwan Independence if *Confident* of U.S. Support

Preferences on Taiwan independence	Perception of China threat		
	No worry	Worry	Row total
Independence	177 37.5%	24 19.7%	201 33.8%
Conditional	193 40.9%	54 44.3%	247 41.6%
Unification	102 21.6	44 36.1	146 24.6
Column	472 79.5%	122 20.5%	594 100%
Ordinal Measures of Association: Gamma 0.344			

Note: Entries represent the actual count and percentages of cross-tabbed respondents.

worry about whether or not the United States will continue to support Taiwan: 45.9 percent of the respondents expressed that they worry about the U.S. security commitment and 54.1 percent indicated they do not worry.

We find several interesting correlations when we cross-tabulate respondents' level of worry about China's threat with their positions on the Taiwan independence-unification issue and control for the respondents' level of confidence in U.S. support. First, the survey data clearly indicate that Taiwanese concerns about China's threat vary as they grow more or less concerned about the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan: 79.5 percent of the respondents who have confidence in U.S. support do not worry about China's threat (see Table 5a), while 77.3 percent of the respondents who do not have confidence in U.S. support worry about China's threat (see Table 5b). Second, there exists a strong correlation between the perception of China's military threat and preferences on the independence-unification issue for respondents who

TABLE 5b Perception of China Threat and Preferences on Taiwan Independence if *Not Confident* of U.S. Support

Preferences on Taiwan Independence	Perception of China Threat		
	No worry	Worry	Row total
Independence	46 38.3%	112 27.5%	158 29.9%
Conditional	49 40.8%	179 43.9%	228 43.2%
Unification	25 20.8%	117 28.7%	142 26.9
Column	120 22.7%	408 77.3%	528 100%
Ordinal Measures of Association: Gamma 0.205			

Note: Entries represent the actual count and percentages of cross-tabbed respondents.

have confidence in U.S. support (Table 5a), but the correlation is less strong for those who have no confidence in U.S. support (Table 5b). These empirical findings lend some credibility to the proposition that as people become less worried about China's threat they tend to express independence as their first preference.

After reviewing these empirical results, we can begin to draw some preliminary conclusions. Tables 5a and 5b reveal that perceptions of China's threat are a function of what the people in Taiwan perceive the level of U.S. commitment to be and that Taiwanese support for unification or independence varies according to the degree of worry about China's threat. Thus, Taiwanese preferences for independence or unification depend in part upon the perceived level of U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan. Those who perceive the U.S. commitment level as high are more likely to be less concerned about China's threat and more likely to support independence. Conversely, those who worry about U.S. commitment to Taiwan tend to fear China's threat more and are less willing to support independence.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the Taiwan public's reluctance to attain independence can be explained by their uncertainty about the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan. This, in turn, gives reason for the Taiwanese to worry about China's threat to retaliate if Taiwan moves toward independence. By sustaining Taiwanese uncertainty, therefore, ambiguous U.S. policy plays a key role in deterring Taiwan independence. Moreover, because we assume that the PRC places high priority on its goal to unite Taiwan with the mainland and, if unrestrained, would act to bring about unification, we infer that the United States' strategic ambiguity policy has also been successful in deterring China from coercing Taiwan.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TAIWAN STRAIT SECURITY BALANCE

Several interesting points become apparent from our analysis of survey results on the relationships between China, Taiwan, and the United States. First, Taiwan public opinion on the independence-unification issue is related to U.S. willingness to protect Taiwan. Those Taiwanese who are more certain about the U.S. security commitment are also more supportive of independence. Taiwanese uncertainty is reinforced by U.S. foreign policy of strategic ambiguity, which intentionally obscures the true level of U.S. security commitment.

Second, China's threat to use force if Taiwan declares independence is an effective strategy to deter Taiwan independence. Unsure of U.S. commitment to defend it, Taiwan's general public tends to display a heightened level of sensitivity to the danger posed to it by China. Thus, given the risk of an undeterred China threat, many likely supporters of Taiwan independence actually prefer the status quo to a declaration of independence.

Third, the prospect for unification is dubious, but not hopeless. According to our analysis of survey data reported previously, one-third of the voters in Taiwan have conditional preferences on the independence-unification issue. Those voters would be willing to change their views and support an eventual unification with China if China and Taiwan become compatible politically, socially, and economically. When the conditional supporters of unification are combined with the 22 percent who support unification unconditionally, a slim majority of the Taiwan public is willing to unify with China. This implies that to encourage Taiwan toward unification, China needs to convince the Taiwanese that it is making genuine efforts to democratize.

In sum, analysis of public opinion in Taiwan reveals that opinions about Taiwanese independence can be affected by the policies and actions of other countries such as the U.S. security commitment to defend Taiwan and China's threat to use force if Taiwan declares independence. Both the United States' ambiguity and China's constant threat to use force restrain Taiwan from advancing toward independence. Moreover, Taiwanese willingness to unify with China largely depends upon China's willingness to democratize. The existing impasse in the Taiwan Strait, therefore, persists as Taiwan citizens refuse to be united with the current political system in China yet are too afraid to declare independence. The status quo in the Taiwan Strait is likely to continue until Taiwan changes its preferences or until either China or the United States alters its strategies.

The foregoing analysis of Taiwanese public opinion and the foreign policies of China and the United States illustrates that individuals can have conditional preferences on important political issues. The study further demonstrates that evaluations of links between public opinion and the foreign policies of other states are useful. This improves our understanding of the relationship between policy and public opinion because as we learn more about how public opinion influences political outcomes we can also begin to think about how and what factors affect public attitudes.

APPENDIX I

In this article our empirical analysis is based on data from four surveys conducted in Taiwan in 1993, 1996, 1998, and 2000, conducted by the Workshop on Political System Change at the National Taiwan University Graduate Institute of Political Science. Information regarding the sampling design and data access for the National Taiwan University surveys can be obtained from the following website: <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/as/survey/srda/english/>

1993 survey:

Changing Political System and Electoral Behavior: An Analysis of the 1992

Election of the Legislative Yuan

Principal Investigator: Te-yu Chen

Sample size: 1,400

1996 survey:

Democracy, Political Parties, and Taiwan's Mass Politics: Research on the Electorate in the 1996 Presidential Election

Principal Investigator: Ying-lung You

Sample size: 1,406

1998 survey:

Changing Political System and Electoral Behavior: An Analysis of the 1998 Election of the Legislative Yuan

Principal Investigator: Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu

Sample size: 1,357

2000 survey

Electoral Study of the 2000 Presidential Election in Taiwan

Principal Investigator: Shiow-Duan Hawang

Sample size: 1,409

A. Questions on Taiwan independence

1993 survey:

Have you heard of the debate between those who supported Taiwan independence and those who supported unification with China? What is your view on this issue?

1. strongly support Taiwan Independence
2. support Taiwan independence
3. strongly support unification
4. support unification
5. others

1996, 1999, and 2000 surveys:

In our country, Taiwan independence is a controversial issue. Some people believe that Taiwan should become an independent country in the future; others believe that Taiwan should unite with China. What is your view on this issue?

1. Taiwan independence
 - a. strongly support
 - b. support
2. unification with China
 - a. strongly support
 - b. support

3. maintain the status quo, but if the status quo cannot be maintained, then prefer
 - a. independence
 - b. unification
4. others

B. Questions on Conditional Preferences on Taiwan Independence

1. If Taiwan can maintain a peaceful relation with China after it declares independence, then Taiwan should become a new independent country.

- | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|----------------------|
| 1. strongly agree | 2. agree | 3. agree slightly |
| 4. strongly disagree | 5. disagree | 6. disagree slightly |
| 8. don't know | 9. no answer | |

2. If the mainland China and Taiwan become compatible economically, socially, and politically, then the two sides should unite.

- | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|----------------------|
| 1. strongly agree | 2. agree | 3. agree slightly |
| 4. strongly disagree | 5. disagree | 6. disagree slightly |
| 8. don't know | 9. no answer | |

C. Questions on China's Military Threat and the U.S. Security Commitment in the 2000 Survey

1. In the last couple of years, due to the changes across the Taiwan Strait, the Chinese communist government has strengthened its military preparation against Taiwan. Some people find the situation quite worrisome, but some people are not concerned about it. Do you worry about it?

- | | | | |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------------------|
| 1. worry very much | 2. worry | 3. not worry | 4. not worry at all |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------------------|

2. In the last couple of years, there have been many changes across the Taiwan Strait. Some people do not think the U.S. has changed its position, but some people worry that the U.S. may not continue to support Taiwan. Do you worry about the U.S. security commitment?

- | | | | |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------------------|
| 1. worry very much | 2. worry | 3. not worry | 4. not worry at all |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------------------|