

Taiwan Strait Conflict Management: Informal Deterrence (2022–2026)

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Abstract: This article examines how the United States maintained meaningful but conditional security support for Taiwan from 2022 through 22 April 2026 without a formal mutual-defense treaty. It develops informal deterrence as a middle-range framework organized around credibility signaling, ambiguity maintenance, and escalation management. Using theory-guided qualitative document analysis and structured, focused comparison of official US, Chinese, and Taiwan materials, the study traces presidential statements, policy clarifications, legislation, security assistance, force posture, and crisis communication across major policy episodes. The findings show that institutionalized security support was more durable than presidential rhetoric; as support became clearer and more institutionalized, policy uncertainty became concentrated in the conditions, scope, form, and timing of direct US military intervention; and escalation management remained relational and reversible because communication depended on reciprocal participation. Informal deterrence is therefore best understood not as a midpoint between strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity, but as an asymmetric and conditional policy configuration whose components differ in institutional durability and degree of unilateral control.

Keywords: Informal deterrence, Taiwan Strait, strategic ambiguity, conflict management, US-China relations.

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1. Introduction

The Taiwan Strait is one of the potential flashpoints in contemporary international politics with the greatest risk of escalation. The danger stems not only from US-China military competition, China's military pressure on Taiwan, or political developments in Taiwan in isolation, but also from the interaction of these factors in the absence of shared expectations about crisis boundaries. For the United States, the problem is especially complex: Washington must persuade Beijing that the use of force against Taiwan could carry higher costs while continuing to avoid an automatically applicable mutual-defense obligation (United States Congress, 1979; Ye, 2022). Taiwan Strait security is therefore not only a problem of deterrence, but also one of managing stronger security support without allowing commitments, misperception, and escalation risks to become uncontrolled (Huth, 1988; Harris & McKinney, 2024; Swaine, 2026).

Since 2022, this problem has become more pronounced. Changes in presidential statements on Taiwan, high-level political interactions, security assistance, regional military posture, and US-China crisis communication have renewed debate over whether the United States is moving from strategic ambiguity toward strategic clarity. Yet placing these developments on a simple ambiguity-clarity continuum obscures a more basic conflict-management problem: formal defense commitments are not the only way security support acquires political effect, and stronger deterrent signals do not necessarily produce more stable crisis relations. Existing research has shown that commitment clarity, military credibility, and crisis stability are not linked in a simple linear relationship (Ye, 2022; Wang et al., 2024; Chan, 2026).

This article therefore shifts attention from whether US policy toward Taiwan should be labeled "ambiguous" or "clear" to how security commitments operate without a formal alliance. It uses informal deterrence as a middle-range analytical concept. The aim is not to predict what the United States would necessarily do in a future war, but to explain how security support acquires a credible basis while direct military intervention remains conditional, and how such an arrangement confronts escalation pressures generated by multiple signals and crisis interactions.

This perspective makes two contributions. First, it separates the practical strength of support for Taiwan from the degree of formal legal commitment, avoiding the assumption that an explicit defense guarantee is the only meaningful measure of a security relationship. Second, it treats the Taiwan Strait as an interactive conflict-management environment rather than a policy space in which the United States alone designs and transmits deterrent signals. Signal effects depend on how different audiences interpret and respond to them, leaving an element between policy design and crisis outcomes that the sender cannot fully control (Jervis, 1976; Huth, 1988).

The article thus poses a narrower but more concrete question for Taiwan Strait conflict research: as security competition deepens in the absence of a formal alliance, how does the United States maintain meaningful but conditional third-party security support?

Addressing this question helps reinterpret US policy since 2022 and shows why deterrence credibility and conflict management cannot be treated as separate policy tasks in highly sensitive international disputes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Strategic Ambiguity and Strategic Clarity

Debate over strategic ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait draws on broader theories of deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and crisis signaling. Schelling (1960, 1966) conceptualizes deterrence as a bargaining process in which threats, commitments, and the manipulation of risk shape an adversary's expectations. Military capability does not automatically generate a deterrent effect; it matters politically only when translated into a perceived possibility of intervention and expected costs. Nor must a deterring state fully specify its future actions. Some uncertainty can preserve policy flexibility while forcing an adversary to consider a wider range of risks. George and Smoke (1974) likewise argue that deterrence outcomes depend on the specific crisis context, political objectives, capabilities, and the adversary's interpretation of signals, rather than simply on whether threats are sufficiently explicit.

This tradition provides a foundation for understanding US strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan. Strategic ambiguity is commonly treated as a form of "dual deterrence" directed at both Beijing and Taipei. The United States does not rule out intervention in a Taiwan Strait conflict, leaving Beijing uncertain about whether the use of force would trigger a US response and at what cost. At the same time, Washington does not offer Taiwan an unconditional defense guarantee, reducing incentives for Taipei to alter the status quo on the assumption of automatic US support. Strategic ambiguity is therefore more than a refusal to state publicly whether the United States would defend Taiwan; it is a triadic security arrangement that combines deterrent and restraining signals (Ye, 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship has moved beyond the question of whether the United States should simply retain strategic ambiguity. It increasingly asks whether ambiguity can still deter, restrain, and manage conflict amid shifts in the US-China balance of power, growing Chinese military pressure on Taiwan, and more complex crisis signaling. Ye (2022) argues that US Taiwan policy has not evolved along a single trajectory from ambiguity to clarity, but reflects changes in broader US China strategy, Taiwan's policy toward the United States, and the cross-Strait security environment. Wang et al. (2024) propose "dual clarity": clearer warnings to Beijing against the use of force combined with clearer opposition to unilateral changes by Taiwan. Ambiguity and clarity may therefore coexist in different forms rather than constitute mutually exclusive policy choices.

Arguments for greater strategic clarity focus primarily on declining deterrence credibility and changes in the military balance. Roi and Lyon (2024) emphasize capability,

commitment, and communication, arguing that deterring a large-scale Chinese attack requires more credible US capacity and political willingness to intervene. Cote (2022), however, distinguishes a full-scale invasion from limited coercion: the United States may be able to signal more clearly against a major attack than against blockades, gray-zone operations, or other coercion below the threshold of war. The effects of strategic clarity must therefore be assessed against specific crisis types.

This debate also intersects with extended-deterrence theory. Huth (1988) conceptualizes extended deterrence as a triadic relationship among the deterring state, the protected party, and a potential challenger. Its effectiveness depends not only on aggregate capabilities but also on the local military balance, prior crisis experience, diplomacy, and crisis communication. His analysis suggests that credible commitments need not be unconditional and that retaining room for adjustment may, under some conditions, help reconcile credibility with crisis stability. US commitments to Taiwan should therefore be evaluated not only by whether Washington explicitly promises to fight, but also by the capabilities, signals, and political boundaries relevant to different crisis scenarios.

2.2 Deterrence, Reassurance, and Escalation Management

A second body of research argues that clearer security commitments do not necessarily stabilize the Taiwan Strait and may instead intensify security dilemmas, misperception, and escalation. Jervis (1976) shows that states do not interpret threats and assurances mechanically according to the sender's intent; signals are filtered through prior beliefs, historical experience, and cognitive biases. His security-dilemma framework further explains how military measures intended to improve one state's security can be read by another as preparation for attack, producing mutually reinforcing hostility (Jervis, 1978). In the Taiwan Strait, US arms sales, deployments, or alliance coordination described in Washington as defensive may be interpreted in Beijing as evidence that the United States is changing the status quo or supporting permanent separation (Harris & McKinney, 2024; Bai & Yoder, 2026).

Harris and McKinney (2024) challenge the linear assumption that more capability, greater credibility, and faster action necessarily improve deterrence. Under power transition and deepening mutual suspicion, greater certainty, severity, and immediacy of threats may be interpreted as preparations for attack, increasing the risks of miscalculation and preventive action. Drawing on extended deterrence and historical cases, Chan (2026) similarly argues that neither strategic ambiguity nor strategic clarity automatically eliminates war risk; clarity can stabilize only under particular military, communicative, and political conditions. Wang (2025) likewise views strategic ambiguity as an important component of Taiwan Strait stability but calls for recalibration in response to changes in Chinese capabilities, intentions, and coercive methods. The central issue is therefore not whether commitments should simply become clearer, but what forms of clarity can strengthen deterrence without creating new escalation pressures.

This critique has encouraged a shift from deterrence alone toward conflict-management frameworks that combine deterrence with reassurance. Bai and Yoder (2026) argue that stronger US military deployments can improve denial capabilities while also encouraging Chinese leaders to conclude that the window for peaceful unification is closing, thereby increasing incentives for preventive action. They therefore advocate pairing military strengthening with reassurance and limited reintegration: dispersed and survivable denial capabilities should be accompanied by reaffirmation of the one-China policy and avoidance of language suggesting a permanent strategy to prevent unification. Swaine (2026) similarly emphasizes misperception control, crisis communication, and escalation-management mechanisms in assessing pathways to stability.

Fearon's (1997) distinction among costly signals provides a further tool for analyzing US policy. States can "tie hands" through public commitments, legislation, and domestic political statements that make later retreat costly, or incur sunk costs through deployments, arms transfers, and resource commitments. Applied to the Taiwan Strait, this suggests a cumulative interpretation: political statements, congressional support, arms transfers, and regional military presence may strengthen the observable basis of security support and potential intervention even without a formal defense treaty. Higher costs, however, do not necessarily produce greater stability, because the same signals may be interpreted by an adversary as evidence of a long-term strategic shift.

Lee (2022) further shows that Taiwan Strait security is shaped simultaneously by nuclear deterrence, conventional military power, and gray-zone coercion. Nuclear deterrence may constrain large-scale war without preventing conventional pressure, non-military coercion, or incremental action below the nuclear threshold. Taken together, this literature indicates that Taiwan Strait stability must be examined through deterrence, reassurance, and escalation restraint rather than reduced to whether the United States publicly promises to defend Taiwan.

2.3 Signaling and Triadic Audience Effects

Changes in military technology, the information environment, and coercive practices have made signaling in the Taiwan Strait increasingly complex. Classical signaling theory generally focuses on how states communicate capabilities and resolve to an adversary (Fearon, 1997; Jervis, 1976). In the Taiwan Strait, however, the same signal reaches Beijing, Taipei, and wider domestic and international audiences. Greater US military presence or more explicit political statements may deter Beijing while raising expectations in Taiwan about US intervention; Chinese military exercises may be intended to punish Taiwan's authorities and warn the United States while also heightening threat perceptions within Taiwan (Wu et al., 2023; Wang & Cheng, 2024).

Recent research shows that military actions can perform several functions at once, including punishment, mobilization, reassurance, and cognitive shaping. Lin and Chiu's (2026)

analysis of four large-scale People's Liberation Army (PLA) exercises from 2022 to 2024 finds that the exercises projected military capability while also targeting Taiwan's public, political elites, and social psychology. Chen and Tzeng's (2026) longitudinal analysis of nearly 2,000 People's Daily articles links Chinese security signaling toward Taiwan to nationalist narratives and assessments of shifts in international power, while showing that different narrative components do not produce uniform escalation effects. Deterrence in the Taiwan Strait therefore cannot be inferred from deployments, exercise frequency, or weapons quantities alone; it also requires attention to narrative context, audience structure, and divergent interpretations.

Public responses in Taiwan constitute another layer of the signaling process. Wu et al. (2023) find that Taiwan respondents reacted relatively little to information about Chinese military presence, but exposure to US military-aircraft activity increased expectations of US assistance and support for *de jure* independence. Stronger US security signals may therefore increase deterrent credibility toward Beijing while also changing risk perceptions in Taiwan and creating moral-hazard concerns. Wang and Cheng (2024) examine the relationship between strategic clarity and public confidence in US security commitments, while Son and Lee (2025) connect US foreign policy to public support for independence in Taiwan.

Strategic ambiguity should therefore be assessed not only by whether the United States deters China, but also by how the same signals affect Beijing and Taipei and thereby shape triadic interaction and crisis stability.

2.4 Research Gap

Classical deterrence theory explains how threats, commitments, bargaining, costly signals, and misperception shape crisis outcomes. Recent Taiwan Strait research has added debates over strategic ambiguity and clarity, US military capacity, Chinese coercive signaling, nuclear-conventional escalation, and public responses in Taiwan. Yet these theoretical traditions have not been systematically integrated with policy developments since 2022, leaving three problems insufficiently explained.

First, most studies still center on whether the United States should explicitly commit to defending Taiwan. Less attention has been paid to how security support acquires a durable credible basis in the absence of such a commitment. Political statements, arms transfers, deployments, and congressional support are often examined separately, but their cumulative effects across events and years—and which of these signals provide a stronger observable basis for potential US intervention—remain underexplored.

Second, scholarship increasingly recognizes that stronger deterrence must be combined with reassurance and escalation management, but offers less systematic empirical explanation of how these functions operate together without a formal defense treaty. It remains unclear when stronger security support and intervention signals narrow policy ambiguity, how

reassurance limits such spillover, and whether crisis communication can remain effective as deterrent signals intensify. The issue is therefore not whether these three dimensions exist separately, but how they complement, constrain, or unbalance one another in specific policy episodes.

Third, although existing studies recognize the triadic audience effects of Taiwan Strait signaling, few systematically compare how the same policy episode is transmitted, publicly interpreted, and answered across the United States, mainland China, and Taiwan. The conflict-management effects of US policy depend not only on Washington's design but also on how Beijing and Taipei publicly define those signals and what actions follow.

Accordingly, this article shifts the research question from whether the United States has abandoned strategic ambiguity to the following: between 2022 and 2026, how did the United States maintain credible security support and signal potential intervention without a formal mutual-defense treaty, while preserving the boundaries of conditional commitment and managing escalation risks in the Taiwan Strait? The next section conceptualizes informal deterrence as a conflict-management arrangement that simultaneously addresses credibility, commitment boundaries, and escalation risk.

3. Theory and Analytical Framework: Informal Deterrence

3.1 Theoretical Synthesis and Analytical Logic

Under non-treaty conditions, deterrence requires credible third-party support without converting that support into a predetermined defense obligation, while stronger signals must be accompanied by measures that limit misperception and escalation risk (Huth, 1988; Jervis, 1978; Fearon, 1997; Swaine, 2026).

This article therefore uses informal deterrence as a middle-range analytical concept and organizes non-allied security relationships around three interrelated dimensions: credibility signaling, ambiguity maintenance, and escalation management. The framework starts from the premise that stronger security support and intervention signals can narrow policy ambiguity, while reassurance and crisis management can in turn constrain deterrent signaling. It therefore examines how the three dimensions complement, strain, or displace one another in specific episodes rather than assuming that they naturally align.

3.2 Conceptualizing Informal Deterrence

This article defines informal deterrence as a condition in which, absent a formal mutual-defense treaty or an explicit institutionalized defense commitment, a state uses conditional political support, demonstrations of military capability, institutional investment, and strategic communication to raise the expected costs of force for a potential challenger while retaining policy flexibility over the conditions, scope, form, and timing of intervention.

The phrase “informal deterrence” has appeared in other security contexts, but the purpose here is not to introduce a wholly new term. It is to systematize the concept as a middle-range framework for explaining non-treaty third-party security support and to distinguish three dimensions: credibility signaling, ambiguity maintenance, and escalation management (Kapur, 2013).

Conceptually, informal deterrence is not a substitute for extended deterrence. It can instead be understood as a non-treaty form through which extended deterrence may operate when formal alliance commitments are absent. Extended deterrence describes the basic function of a third party seeking to prevent a potential challenger from harming another political entity; a formal alliance is one institutional form through which that function may be performed. Informal deterrence focuses on how cumulative policy signals sustain conditional security support when an explicit defense treaty, pre-agreed mutual-defense obligation, and institutionalized alliance arrangement are absent (Huth, 1988).

Informal deterrence is also not interchangeable with strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity describes a commitment strategy in which the United States does not specify in advance whether or how it would intervene in a Taiwan Strait conflict. Informal deterrence instead explains how observable security support and potential intervention signals operate within that environment of conditional commitment. In US Taiwan policy, the former preserves uncertainty while the latter captures how that uncertainty coexists with observable political, military, and institutional support (Ye, 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

Nor is informal deterrence equivalent to strategic clarity. Strategic clarity reduces uncertainty by specifying intervention conditions more explicitly. Informal deterrence does not seek to eliminate uncertainty. Instead, political, military, and institutional support makes security support and potential intervention more observable without converting those actions into an explicit treaty-based defense obligation. Its defining feature is therefore the coexistence of more observable security support and retained formal commitment boundaries (Chan, 2026; Wang, 2025).

Informal deterrence is thus treated as a middle-range analytical concept rather than a general theory that has already been broadly validated.

3.3 Analytical Dimensions

The framework operationalizes informal deterrence through three theoretically derived dimensions: credibility signaling, ambiguity maintenance, and escalation management. These dimensions guide source selection, evidence presentation, and cross-period comparison. They are not mutually exclusive, because a single policy may simultaneously deter, constrain, and manage escalation.

The dimensions may overlap within the same policy action. Their analytical significance therefore lies in the functions they perform and the tensions among them rather than in mutually exclusive classification.

3.3.1 Credibility signaling

Credibility signaling refers to observable political, military, and institutional actions that bear on expectations of sustained US support or possible intervention. The analysis distinguishes two related but separate forms of credibility. Support credibility refers to the observable basis for expecting the United States to continue providing security support over time. Intervention credibility concerns signals of US capability and willingness to conduct its own military action. Both are assessed through the persistence, material cost, specificity, institutional support, and mutual reinforcement of relevant signals.

Evidence includes presidential and senior-official statements, arms transfers and military assistance, Taiwan-related legislation and budgetary support, Indo-Pacific force posture, allied security coordination, and institutional support for Taiwan's defense capacity. Public commitments may raise the domestic political cost of retreat, while deployments and resource commitments can indicate more direct material preparation (Fearon, 1997).

3.3.2 Ambiguity maintenance

Ambiguity maintenance refers to the preservation of policy discretion over the extent and implications of US security commitments even as security support and potential intervention signals become stronger. A central indicator is whether the conditions, scope, form, and timing of direct US military intervention remain unspecified.

The analysis examines whether the United States continues to uphold the one-China policy, reiterate that it does not support Taiwan independence, oppose unilateral changes to the status quo, and avoid an explicit defense commitment applicable to all crisis scenarios. It also considers whether the administration clarifies unusually explicit presidential statements, continues to distinguish support for Taiwan's self-defense from recognition of Taiwan as a state, and avoids converting military and institutional support into a formal alliance.

3.3.3 Escalation management

Escalation management refers to reassurance, policy clarification, and crisis contacts used alongside stronger deterrent signals to preserve communication and de-escalation while limiting the risk that US actions are publicly interpreted in China as preparation for attack or a permanent change to the status quo. Indicators include reassurance that the United States does not seek Taiwan independence or a formal change in Taiwan's political status, continued diplomatic and military communication, policy clarification, and restraining signals toward Taipei.

Reassurance, policy clarification, and crisis contacts are not the opposite of deterrence; they are mechanisms for limiting its spillover risks (Harris & McKinney, 2024; Bai & Yoder, 2026; Swaine, 2026).

The three dimensions contain inherent tensions. Weak credibility may undermine deterrence; insufficient ambiguity may raise expectations of US support in Taiwan and increase the risk that China interprets US policy as changing the status quo; weak escalation management may make defensive measures easier to read as preparation for attack. Conversely, excessive ambiguity, reassurance, or restraint may reduce the visibility of support and intervention signals. Informal deterrence is therefore not the simple sum of three dimensions, but a configuration that requires continuing adjustment.

The empirical analysis examines how these dimensions complemented or conflicted with one another from 2022 to 2026 without presuming that the arrangement necessarily produced stability.

4. Research Design and Methods

4.1 Research Design

The study combines qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) with structured, focused comparison across policy episodes (George & Bennett, 2005). The framework developed in Section 3 guides evidence organization and interpretation. The analysis focuses on observable US policy behavior and public interpretations in the United States, China, and Taiwan.

The principal unit of analysis is not the individual document but the strategically significant policy signal or crisis episode. An analytical unit may consist of presidential or senior-official statements, policy clarifications, legislation, arms transfers, security assistance, military deployments, or diplomatic communication. In major crises, it may also include the US action, China's public response, and Taiwan's official interpretation. Grouping related materials within the same policy or crisis context makes it possible to assess how signals reinforce, delimit, or strain one another.

4.2 Documentary Corpus and Selection Principles

The study relies primarily on policy and legal documents, official statements, military and security-assistance materials, and records of crisis communication issued by governments and public institutions in the United States, mainland China, and Taiwan. Where necessary, authoritative media sources are used when they directly record public statements by senior political leaders or official policy clarifications. The study covers 2022 through 22 April 2026, a period encompassing more explicit senior US statements on Taiwan, continued security assistance and regional military adjustments, the crisis following Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit, US-China presidential meetings, the restoration of military communication, and a change of US administration.

Earlier documents are used only to establish the policy baseline, including the three Joint Communiqués between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC),

the Taiwan Relations Act, and the Six Assurances. They are not treated as independent observations of policy change during 2022–2026, but as benchmarks for judging whether later signals represented continuity, recalibration, or substantive change.

Documents were selected purposively according to policy relevance, source authority, signal diversity, and the inclusion of counterexamples and contradictory evidence. The resulting corpus consists of authoritative node documents that reveal continuity, adjustment, and internal tension. Policy clarifications, commitment limitations, communication breakdowns, strong Chinese countermeasures, and other evidence of escalation pressure were retained to avoid assuming that the three dimensions of informal deterrence were necessarily well coordinated. Appendix A lists the full core corpus and item-level inclusion rationales; Appendix B provides the detailed selection criteria.

Additional official statements, arms-transfer notifications, legislative materials, and military-communication records were consulted to verify policy continuity, but entered the core analysis only when they changed the interpretation of a major policy signal or crisis episode.

4.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows the three theoretically derived dimensions specified in Section 3.3: credibility signaling, ambiguity maintenance, and escalation management. Their operational indicators follow the definitions already established there and are not repeated as separate coding rules. The dimensions organize, compare, and interpret evidence rather than serving as mutually exclusive line-by-line codes; a single policy action may contribute to more than one dimension.

Each major policy signal or crisis episode is examined through the same five-step procedure. First, the relevant US action and its political, military, or institutional character are identified and located against the existing policy baseline. Second, the analysis asks whether the action primarily strengthens support credibility or the observable capability and willingness basis of potential US intervention. Third, it assesses whether the conditions, scope, form, and timing of intervention remain limited and whether the action avoids conversion into a formal defense obligation, thereby preserving ambiguity. Fourth, it identifies reassurance, policy clarification, crisis contacts, or other measures that retain space for de-escalation. Fifth, where evidence permits, official Chinese and Taiwan responses are incorporated into the same analytical unit to compare public interpretations and the tensions generated by the signal.

The procedure emphasizes combinations of evidence rather than treating any single statement, arms transfer, or deployment as sufficient proof of an analytical dimension. High-level political statements are interpreted alongside later clarification, institutional investment, or capability development; stronger military or institutional support is likewise assessed together with contemporaneous commitment boundaries and crisis

communication. The empirical analysis therefore asks how the three dimensions operate jointly and when they complement, shift away from, or conflict with one another.

4.4 Cross-Episode Comparison and Source Triangulation

After each policy signal or crisis episode is analyzed, the same five-step procedure is applied in the same order across episodes and periods. This structured comparison identifies changes in the configuration of credibility signaling, ambiguity maintenance, and escalation management.

Source triangulation is used to strengthen interpretive robustness. US official materials establish policy content, institutional arrangements, and publicly stated positions; Chinese official materials identify how Beijing publicly interprets US actions and defines political red lines; Taiwan official materials show how the protected party publicly understands US support and Chinese coercion. For major interactions such as US-China presidential meetings, the analysis compares both governments' official accounts wherever possible to identify convergence, divergence, and persistent disagreement rather than relying on a single narrative.

Triangulation compares publicly stated policy boundaries and signal interpretations to show how the same policy action enters the interaction among credibility signaling, ambiguity maintenance, and escalation management.

4.5 Scope and Limitations

The research design has three main limitations.

First, because the study relies on public policy documents and official statements, it can analyze observable signals, institutional behavior, and public interpretations but not the private beliefs or internal decision-making of US, Chinese, or Taiwan leaders. Public statements are therefore not used to infer private psychological states.

Second, purposive sampling is appropriate for identifying high-salience policy nodes but cannot support claims about the overall frequency or quantitative distribution of US Taiwan-policy statements. Because data collection ends on 22 April 2026, the 2026 material represents only a partial year and is not treated as a complete annual basis for frequency or volume comparisons.

Third, the article analyzes how informal deterrence operates as a policy arrangement rather than testing deterrence success through counterfactual causal inference. The absence of large-scale war during the observation period does not by itself demonstrate successful US deterrence, because Chinese decisions may also reflect military capabilities, economic costs, domestic politics, and other international factors. The inferences are therefore limited to identifying how the three dimensions operate, complement one another, and generate tension across policy signals and crisis episodes.

5. Informal Deterrence in Practice: US Taiwan Strait Policy, 2022–2026

5.1 Policy Baseline: Conditional Security Support under Strategic Ambiguity

The three US-PRC Joint Communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act, and the Six Assurances provide the historical and institutional baseline for assessing post-2022 change. The Communiqués established the diplomatic framework for the Taiwan issue; the Taiwan Relations Act provided a domestic legal basis for supporting Taiwan's self-defense without restoring a treaty-based defense obligation; and the Six Assurances constrained unilateral US concessions to Beijing on arms sales and cross-Strait negotiations (People's Republic of China & United States of America, 1972, 1978, 1982; United States Congress, 1979; United States Government, 1982). The study period therefore began without a formal defense obligation but with an established security relationship.

The central feature of this arrangement was relatively clear security support alongside unspecified terms of direct US intervention. The 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy situated Taiwan Strait stability within wider regional security and alliance coordination, while the 2022 National Security Strategy reaffirmed the one-China policy, opposition to Taiwan independence and unilateral changes to the status quo, and support for Taiwan's self-defense under the Taiwan Relations Act (White House, 2022a, 2022b). The baseline was therefore a two-level structure: institutional and material support for Taiwan's self-defense alongside continuing uncertainty over direct US military intervention.

This structure also operated within a broader military-strategic environment. The 2022 National Defense Strategy identified China as the pacing challenge for US defense planning and emphasized integrated deterrence, campaigning, and building enduring advantages. Its significance was not to create a new treaty guarantee for Taiwan, but to improve the visibility and availability of US capabilities in Indo-Pacific crises (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). At the same time, China's 2022 white paper on Taiwan continued to identify external interference as a central security concern and did not renounce the use of force under specified conditions. The study period thus began within an interactive structure in which US security support persisted alongside Beijing's continuing opposition to external intervention (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council & State Council Information Office, 2022).

5.2 Presidential Signaling in 2022:

Strengthening Credibility without Ending Ambiguity

The US-Japan joint press conference in Tokyo on 23 May 2022 produced the first presidential signal in the study period that clearly departed from the administration's normally cautious wording. Asked directly whether the United States would be willing to become militarily involved to defend Taiwan, President Biden answered affirmatively and linked that response to opposition to changing Taiwan's status quo by force. The signal

mattered because of its source and specificity: it was a public presidential response directly addressing the possibility of US military intervention, not a general statement of support by a legislator or mid-level official (White House, 2022c). Its presidential level, publicity, and specificity increased the observability of possible intervention, but did not create an automatic defense obligation.

The next day, the Department of State stated that policy had “not changed,” reaffirming the one-China policy, the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances and emphasizing support for Taiwan’s self-defense rather than a new mutual-defense arrangement (U.S. Department of State, 2022a). The clarification did not erase the president’s public signal, but limited its formal policy meaning. The May episode therefore paired a more salient intervention signal with continued policy discretion.

The September 60 Minutes interview reproduced the same pattern. Biden again said US forces would defend Taiwan in an “unprecedented attack,” including when asked specifically about US personnel, while reaffirming the one-China policy and stating that the United States did not encourage Taiwan independence. White House officials again said that policy had not changed and did not predetermine whether US forces would defend Taiwan (Biden, 2022; CBS News, 2022).

Taken together, the repeated statements are difficult to dismiss as a single verbal lapse, yet each was followed by policy clarification and neither produced a mutual-defense treaty, automatic intervention clause, or commitment covering all crisis scenarios. The political salience of potential intervention increased while its terms remained uncertain.

Official Chinese and Taiwan responses also show divergent public audience effects. On 23 May, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed “strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition,” urged the United States to handle the Taiwan issue prudently, and warned against sending the wrong signal to “Taiwan independence” forces. Beijing thus publicly treated the presidential statement as relevant to whether Washington was crossing established policy boundaries rather than as inconsequential rhetoric (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2022a). Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by contrast, welcomed and thanked Biden and the US government for reiterating a security commitment to Taiwan, linking the statement to stronger self-defense and closer cooperation with the United States and Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 2022a).

These responses do not reveal private expectations in Beijing or Taipei, but they show divergent public interpretations: Beijing emphasized policy transgression and risks to cross-strait stability, while Taipei framed the statement as evidence of stronger US support.

5.3 The Pelosi Visit Crisis:

Political Signaling and the Limits of Escalation Management

Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit differed institutionally from presidential signaling. As a congressional rather than executive action, it did not constitute a new defense commitment, but its senior level and publicity made it a highly visible signal of political support. Pelosi described the visit as demonstrating that the United States stood with Taiwan, while Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs characterized it as evidence of "firm support" (Pelosi, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 2022b). The Department of State stressed that congressional travel reflected an independent, coequal branch and reaffirmed the one-China policy, opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo, and non-support for Taiwan independence, thereby separating congressional interaction from formal US policy boundaries (U.S. Department of State, 2022b).

That distinction did not prevent Beijing from assigning the visit broader strategic meaning. On 2 August, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the visit as seriously undermining the political foundation of US-China relations, damaging Chinese sovereignty and Taiwan Strait stability, and sending a wrong signal to "Taiwan independence" forces (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b). Chinese countermeasures went beyond diplomatic protest and included the suspension or cancellation of selected bilateral communication and cooperation mechanisms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022c). For escalation management, the most important observable change was the weakening of channels that could otherwise clarify intentions and limit crisis spillover.

The Pelosi crisis shows that formal policy continuity does not guarantee continuity in crisis management. US clarification could delimit Washington's official interpretation of the visit, but it could neither ensure Beijing's acceptance nor unilaterally preserve communication channels. Political-support visibility increased as parts of US-China communication were weakened, making their later restoration an issue for high-level diplomacy.

5.4 From Rhetoric to Institutionalized Support Credibility:

Legislation, Security Assistance, and Denial Capacity

Legislation, appropriations, security assistance, and capability development from 2022 to 2024 moved US support beyond presidential rhetoric into more durable institutional and resource commitments. The Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act within the fiscal year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act placed defense modernization, military education and training, multiyear planning, arms-delivery issues, and other support within a more durable congressional authorization framework (United States Congress, 2022).

Institutionalization was then implemented through several resource channels. In July 2023, the president authorized up to \$345 million in defense articles, services, and military

education and training for Taiwan from US stocks under Section 506(a)(3) of the Foreign Assistance Act. Unlike conventional arms sales, this mechanism allowed the United States to commit existing national resources directly rather than relying solely on Taiwan's purchases (White House, 2023a). The 2024 Indo-Pacific Security Supplemental Appropriations Act further placed Taiwan security within a wider regional allocation of security resources, linking congressional authorization, funding, and executive implementation in a more continuous institutional chain (United States Congress, 2024).

Weapons and capability support also broadened across defense functions. Harpoon Block II strengthened maritime denial; the 2024 Switchblade 300 package added mobile, dispersed strike capacity together with training and logistics; and command, control, communications, and computers (C4) modernization extended support to tactical data links, communications, and multiplatform integration (U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). Together with military education and direct drawdown assistance, these measures show a shift from individual weapons transfers toward a broader portfolio of denial, sustainment, networking, training, and institutional capacity, giving support credibility greater material cost and bureaucratic continuity than a single political statement.

Regional US force posture added another layer. In 2024 congressional testimony, US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Commander Admiral John Aquilino identified persistent forward presence, distributed force posture, and operations with allies and partners as important components of deterrence, stressing survivability, responsiveness, and presidential options in crisis (Aquilino, 2024). On Taiwan, the same testimony linked support for self-defense under the Taiwan Relations Act with the three Joint Communiqués and Six Assurances within the established one-China policy framework (Aquilino, 2024).

By the end of 2024, legislation, resource commitments, arms transfers, and regional force posture had given support for Taiwan's self-defense a more durable institutional and material basis than presidential rhetoric and made capabilities relevant to potential intervention more visible. These measures did not predetermine direct US military action: sustained security support, not an automatic obligation to fight, was what became most clearly institutionalized.

5.5 Reassurance and the Restoration of Communication after Crisis: Bali, Woodside, and Lima

The Bali (2022), Woodside (2023), and Lima (2024) meetings trace the restoration and maintenance of US-China communication after the August 2022 crisis despite persistent disagreement over Taiwan.

At Bali, leader-level contact resumed. The US readout paired continued competition with a commitment to prevent competition from becoming conflict and keep communication open; Biden also reaffirmed the one-China policy and opposition to unilateral changes

while criticizing Chinese coercion (White House, 2022d). China's account called Taiwan the "core of China's core interests" and the "first red line that must not be crossed," while urging Washington to translate its opposition to Taiwan independence into action (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022d). The meeting restored direct high-level communication without narrowing the underlying disagreement over Taiwan.

Woodside extended restoration to more operational channels, including senior military dialogue, defense policy coordination, maritime military-security consultations, and theater-command contacts; both governments confirmed the resumption while maintaining their positions on Taiwan (White House, 2023b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023b). Lima then reviewed the restored channels and affirmed their continuation. China likewise acknowledged the reestablished mechanisms while political differences over Taiwan remained (White House, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). The sequence was therefore one of leader-level contact restoration, operational military-channel restoration, and subsequent institutional persistence, without corresponding convergence over Taiwan.

5.6 Triadic Signaling under Pressure: Political Interaction and Coercive Responses, 2023–2024

Tsai Ing-wen's 2023 transit through the United States and meeting with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and bipartisan members of Congress again demonstrated that political-support signals toward Taiwan do not originate only in the executive branch. Taiwan's Presidential Office placed the meeting within the long-standing relationship shaped by the Taiwan Relations Act and Six Assurances and stated that bipartisan congressional support made people in Taiwan feel that they were "not isolated." Tsai also emphasized preserving the peaceful status quo and treated stronger self-defense as a condition for maintaining peace (Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2023).

Beijing publicly assigned a different meaning to the interaction. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described Tsai's transit and McCarthy meeting as an effort to upgrade substantive relations and conduct official contacts, arguing that it violated the one-China principle and the Joint Communiqués (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023a). As during the Pelosi crisis, Taipei framed the event as continuity in an established partnership and congressional support, whereas Beijing framed it as further erosion of existing political boundaries.

Events in 2024 further increased the importance of Taiwan's own political signaling. In his 20 May inaugural address, Lai Ching-te stated that the new administration would maintain the status quo without submission or provocation and called for dialogue rather than confrontation and exchange rather than containment. He also urged China to end political and military intimidation of Taiwan and emphasized defense, economic security,

and cooperation with democratic partners. The address cited the recently enacted 2024 Indo-Pacific Security Supplemental Appropriations Act as part of external support for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait (Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2024).

Three days later, the PLA Eastern Theater Command launched Joint Sword-2024A, announcing sea-air combat-readiness patrols, seizure of comprehensive battlefield control, and joint precision strikes against key targets. It described the exercise as both punishment for “Taiwan independence” activities and a warning against external interference (People’s Liberation Army Eastern Theater Command, 2024). Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense monitored and publicly responded to the operation as coercive pressure on the security environment (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 2024).

These materials do not establish a single causal chain in which Lai’s speech or US support directly caused the exercise. What can be identified more securely is divergent public interpretation of the same political environment: Taipei emphasized the status quo, stronger self-defense, and wider international cooperation, whereas Beijing publicly framed Joint Sword-2024A as punishment and warning directed at “Taiwan independence” and external interference. Even stable US policy boundaries cannot determine the specific political language used in Taiwan or Beijing’s military response. These episodes show that political signaling from Taiwan and coercive responses from Beijing continually reshape the environment the United States seeks to manage.

5.7 Cross-Administration Continuity and Recalibration, 2025–2026

The 2025 National Security Strategy discussed Taiwan more explicitly than its 2022 predecessor in terms of military balance and the First Island Chain. It treated deterring conflict over Taiwan as a priority, emphasized a favorable conventional military balance and denial capabilities along the First Island Chain, and called on allies and partners to increase defense spending and support US regional access. At the same time, it stated that the United States would maintain its long-standing declaratory policy on Taiwan and oppose unilateral changes to the status quo (White House, 2025). The clearest shift from 2022 was therefore greater emphasis on denial, military advantage, allied burden sharing, and access rather than an automatic intervention commitment.

Material support also continued after the change of administration. In November 2025, the Department of State approved an estimated \$330 million package of non-standard spare and repair parts covering F-16s, C-130s, and other existing aircraft; in December it approved a major M109A7 self-propelled howitzer package (U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2025a, 2025b). The first measure focused on long-term availability, maintenance, and sustainment of existing systems, while the second added conventional ground firepower and supporting equipment. Compared with Harpoon, Switchblade, C4

modernization, and direct drawdown assistance in 2022–2024, the 2025 cases show that the material basis of security support did not disappear with the transition.

Admiral Samuel Paparo’s 2026 congressional testimony likewise placed security assistance alongside established policy boundaries. Paparo situated US-Taiwan relations within the framework of the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances while stating that INDOPACOM continued to support a “credible, resilient, asymmetric, distributed, and cost-effective” self-defense capability for Taiwan (Paparo, 2026). This closely resembled Aquilino’s 2024 testimony: capability development continued while the documents defining the established US policy framework were reaffirmed.

Alliance coordination also displayed continuity and strengthening. A March 2026 US-Japan alliance fact sheet announced further deployment of advanced US capabilities in Japan to support a stronger denial-oriented defense posture and expanded bilateral defense cooperation. The two governments again described peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as important to regional security, supported peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues, and opposed unilateral changes through force or coercion (White House, 2026). Regional denial and alliance coordination therefore gained prominence after the transition without producing a formal mutual-defense obligation toward Taiwan.

Taken together, the cross-administration evidence supports continuity of architecture with recalibration of emphasis rather than institutional rupture. Security assistance and regional denial capabilities continued, established commitment boundaries remained, and the principal change lay in the greater rhetorical weight placed on military advantage, denial, burden sharing, and regional access.

6. Discussion: How Informal Deterrence Works

6.1 Institutionalized Security Support Is More Durable than Rhetorical Signaling

Across the episodes examined, institutionalized security support proved more persistent than presidential signaling, including across the observed change of administration. Presidential statements were highly visible but episodic and bounded by clarification, whereas institutionalized measures showed greater bureaucratic continuity, resource commitment, and cross-year persistence.

This difference parallels Fearon’s (1997) distinction between public commitments and sunk costs. Public statements can raise the political cost of later retreat, whereas investments embedded in legislation, budgets, military planning, and capability development create costs that are harder to reverse quickly. The distinction supports separating support credibility from intervention credibility. Between 2022 and 2026, the former acquired clearer institutional backing, while the latter continued to depend on presidential signals, regional military capabilities, and the specific crisis context. The capabilities and

commitments emphasized in extended-deterrence research therefore cannot be inferred from a single statement (Huth, 1988). Institutionalization primarily strengthened the durability of security support, not the predictability of direct US intervention. The latter remained conditional and constitutes the continuing locus of strategic ambiguity.

6.2 The Changing Location of Strategic Ambiguity

The second finding is not that strategic ambiguity simply persisted or disappeared. As security support became more institutionalized, the relative center of policy uncertainty shifted further toward direct US military intervention. Support for Taiwan's self-defense already had a clear legal and policy basis at the beginning of the period; legislation, security assistance, capability development, and regional denial investments from 2022 to 2026 made that support more observable and durable. Whether the United States would continue supporting Taiwan's self-defense therefore became less central to policy uncertainty.

What remained open were the conditions, scope, form, and timing of direct US military intervention. Neither the 2022 presidential statements nor subsequent military and institutional investments converted stronger support into predetermined responses across crisis scenarios.

This pattern is consistent with Ye's (2022) argument that US policy has not moved along a single path from ambiguity to clarity, and it extends discussions of "dual clarity" (Wang et al., 2024) and recalibrated strategic ambiguity (Wang, 2025). The period did not produce a uniform increase in clarity across all policy domains. Instead, greater certainty on the support side concentrated ambiguity more heavily around direct military intervention and political-status commitments. In the US-Taiwan policy examined here, strategic ambiguity is therefore better understood as layered uncertainty whose relative location can change, rather than as a uniform property of the entire policy.

6.3 Escalation Management as a Relational and Reversible Mechanism

The breakdown and later restoration of US-China communication show that escalation management was more context-dependent and reversible than institutionalized support or declaratory policy boundaries. The difference is not simply that escalation management is weaker, but that it has a different institutional character and degree of unilateral control. Legislation, budgets, security assistance, and military planning can largely be advanced by the United States, while formal policy boundaries are primarily defined by Washington itself. Crisis communication requires the other side to remain engaged. Even if the United States continues reassurance and policy clarification, whether the channels function depends on reciprocal participation. Security support and institutional investment are therefore more susceptible to unilateral US control; escalation management is inherently relational.

This relational character also explains its greater reversibility. Policy boundaries can remain in place during a crisis while communication may be interrupted rapidly after a major political event; communication can likewise be restored when political conditions permit. Escalation management is therefore not a fixed arrangement that, once established, persists automatically, but an interactive process requiring repeated maintenance.

This finding reinforces the qualifications raised by Harris and McKinney (2024), Bai and Yoder (2026), and Swaine (2026) to strategies centered on stronger deterrence alone. Greater military capability and stronger political signals do not automatically generate matching mechanisms of crisis stability. Reassurance, clarification, and crisis communication depend on specific interactive conditions; continuity in long-term commitment boundaries cannot be assumed to produce equally stable short-term crisis management.

6.4 Informal Deterrence as an Asymmetric and Conditional Policy Configuration

Taken together, the three findings show that informal deterrence is neither a midpoint between strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity nor a stable equilibrium among its dimensions. It is a policy configuration whose components differ in institutional durability and degree of unilateral control. These are cross-episode properties of the three existing dimensions, not additional dimensions.

Triadic interaction adds a further constraint: signals generated in Washington or Taipei can acquire meanings in Beijing that differ from those intended or publicly assigned by their senders. Extended deterrence is inherently triadic, and signal meaning is not fully controlled by the sender (Huth, 1988; Jervis, 1976). Public and official interpretations in Taiwan can also produce independent political effects (Wu et al., 2023; Wang & Cheng, 2024).

The operation of informal deterrence therefore depends not only on Washington's signals but also on public interpretation and subsequent action in Beijing and Taipei. US clarification can delimit the formal meaning of its own actions but cannot ensure that other actors accept that interpretation, while restored communication can expand space for de-escalation without resolving the underlying political dispute.

Informal deterrence therefore depends not on maximizing any single dimension, but on coordinating components that differ in institutional durability, unilateral control, and audience effects. This asymmetry, rather than the simple juxtaposition of three dimensions, constitutes the article's principal theoretical contribution beyond the binary debate over strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity.

7. Conclusion

This article examined how the United States maintained security support for Taiwan and signaled potential intervention from 2022 to 2026 without a formal mutual-defense treaty while managing escalation risk. The evidence points not to a linear shift from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity, but to an asymmetric configuration: institutionalized support proved more persistent than presidential signaling and continued across the observed change of administration; as support became clearer, uncertainty concentrated in the conditions, scope, form, and timing of direct US military intervention; and escalation management remained relational and reversible because effective communication required reciprocal participation.

Informal deterrence therefore redirects analysis from whether a commitment is “ambiguous” or “clear” toward how security support, intervention boundaries, and escalation management differ in institutional durability and degree of unilateral control. The absence of a treaty obligation need not imply weak or short-lived support, but durable support does not by itself establish crisis stability.

These conclusions are limited to public policy signals, institutional behavior, and public interpretations by government actors; they do not identify private decision-making beliefs or establish deterrence success through counterfactual causal inference. Future research should test the framework over longer periods and in other non-treaty security relationships, using evidence on internal decision-making to compare public signals, policy choices, and crisis behavior.

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