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Ambiguity as Certainty: Taiwan and US Military Aid

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Abstract. This article explores assertions as to the consequences of ambiguous versus unambiguous political communication.

Some political pundits maintain that United States (US) President George W. Bush blundered in a recent television interview wherein he stated that the US Government (USG) would do "whatever it took" to help Taiwan defend itself, including the use of military force. These pundits maintain that, by subverting a carefully nurtured ambiguity concerning USG intentions, the US president may have increased the probability that Taiwan's government may publicly announce or overtly seek its independence and that the government of the People's Republic of China would then launch a military attack against Taiwan. The US president's own representatives seem to be supporting the pundits' views of the alleged consequences of jettisoning ambiguity for a muscular certainty by "spinning" and engaging in "damage control" so that the US president might be seen as having in no way jettisoned ambiguity for a muscular certainty. What has been lost in the various controversies is a clear look at the political power of ambiguity versus certainty.

A rational and logical analysis might lead to the following. Ambiguous communication facilitates the action of others to engage in what they truly intend by increasing the number of behavioral options deemed supported by the communication. This allows others to engage in a more comprehensive calculation of what is truly in their interests and hopefully to come up with what can be covered by the ambiguous communication. This also allows others to more easily do what they wanted to do all along, regardless of analysis by using the ambiguous communication as a cover. Ambiguous communication also might constrain the action of others who might feel inhibited from acting without a communication of certainty. This inhibition might relate to fear of punishment for acting without a communication of certainty, a desire for reward if one only acts with a communication of certainty, a predilection to comply only with a communication of certitude, or other predilections bearing on the rightness and wrongness of acting with or without such communications.

However, communications of certainty also might facilitate or constrain the action of others based on similar or dissimilar hypothesized moderator, modifying, and other intervening phenomena. As well, communications of ambiguity and certainty might lead to various consequences dependent on the beliefs that the actors and observers involved might have about the putative consequences of these very communication modes. Another complicating factor would be beliefs of the actors and observers that the communications are intended to be truthful or deceptive.

Empirically validated psychological research suggests yet further complications. For example, Antony (2001) maintains that consciousness itself is multiply ambiguous. Bruene (2001) maintains that the systematic evaluation of social cognition (and by extension its interaction with various communication modes) is itself ambiguous. Suls (1999) and Crawford (1973) maintain that there is an inherent ambiguity of personality traits and attributes that affect social inference (including that from various communication modes.) Chang (1999) has maintained that--given well-defined role relationship systems of Chinese people--ambiguous verbal discourse may be preferred in protecting and serving the needs of

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various social participants while concurrently integrating what is the greater good of society. And Fobian and Christensen-Szalanski (1993) maintain that ambiguity in negotiation can make the potential for a settlement less contingent on parties having significantly different perspectives of their chances for getting what they want.

What seems to be certain is that the political pundits' and USG representatives' certainty about ambiguity and certainty needs to be less than certain if one believes in political action based on rational, logical, and empirical analysis. (See Antony, M.V. (2001). Is 'consciousness' ambiguous? *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, 19-44; Bruene, M. (2001). Social cognition and psychopathology in an evolutionary perspective. *Psychopathology*, 34, 85-94; Chang, H-C. (1999). The "well-defined" is "ambiguous": Indeterminacy in Chinese conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 535-556; Crawford, T.J. (1973). The effects of source characteristics upon the perception of ambiguous messages. *Journal of Personality*, 41, 151-162; Fobian, C.S., & Christensen-Szalanski, J.J. (1993). Ambiguity and liability negotiations: The effects of the negotiators' role and the sensitivity zone. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 54, 277-298; O'Hanlon, M. (April 27, 2001). A need for ambiguity. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Suls, J. (1999). The importance of the question in motivated cognition and social comparison. *Psychological Inquiry*, 10, 73-75.)(Keywords: Ambiguity, Communication, People's Republic of China, Taiwan.)