

A Coach's Notes¹

Everett Rutan

Connecticut Debate Association

ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

Connecticut Debate Association

New Canaan High School and Warde High School

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THBT the US should not defend Taiwan militarily.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the January 2025, CDA tournament and topic. Previous year's editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site.

Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Warde High School, presented in two formats, transcript, and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed,

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reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. If you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

About Fiat

Fiat is the Government team's right to call a policy motion into being without having to show that actors in the real world would actually enact it. We want to discuss a hypothetical even if it is unlikely to be realized. Fiat prevents the debate from being distracted by arguments over what current decision-makers will or will not do based on considerations unrelated to the motion, like getting re-elected.

Fiat is limited by the terms of the motion. Gov can propose a reasonable plan or model that is a realization of the motion and additional actions necessary to that realization. Think of this as debate's version of the "necessary and proper clause" in the Constitution. However, Gov cannot fiat actions outside the motion, and Gov can only fiat acts, not results. Without limits, nothing would prevent Gov from either assuming the impacts they should be required to justify, or introducing matters totally unrelated to the motion.

With this motion Gov can fiat that the US will not use military force to defend Taiwan. Gov can explain what this means, perhaps no "boots on the ground" but continued military aid and weapons sales. Gov can describe how this will happen (more on this below). But Gov cannot fiat a diplomatic agreement or spending on new microchip factories because these not in the scope of the motion nor are these necessary to implement the motion.

It is reasonable to expect that if the US eschews military action it will turn to diplomacy and, given the importance of TSMC semiconductor fabs on Taiwan, that the US will attempt to secure chip supplies. Gov can provide arguments as to why diplomacy and US factories are likely consequences of the military policy choice, but Gov has to justify these with persuasive arguments as it would any other significant point in the round. But Gov cannot make these part of the plan or simply assume they will occur.

The final round at Warde was confused on this point. Gov presents a diplomatic agreement and new chip factories as part of its "plan", which in debate terms means Gov is bringing them into existence by fiat. Opp does not argue Gov exceeds its powers of fiat but provides arguments as to why diplomacy will fail, and why new factories will take a very long time to build. Gov at some points responds to Opp's refutation, but at others claims that because these are part of the plan they can be assumed to occur. I felt the tone of the debate was such that diplomacy and factories were primarily argued as possible consequences of the motion not as fiat and judged the round on that basis. But clarity on this sort of issue from the two teams is always preferred.

Describing a World

The diplomatic argument is potentially a very good one for Gov. In an ideal world most would prefer a peaceful solution that preserves the rights of the people of Taiwan, China,

and the US, and, incidentally, the world economy. Most countries look to diplomacy before taking military action.

Here neither side tells us enough about the world of the motion to seriously make arguments about diplomacy. The Gov definition of “defend Taiwan militarily” seems to be “boots on the ground” in the event of an invasion by the PRC. That is insufficient. We don’t know how the policy is implemented.

One way would be for the US to publicly announce that the US would not send its forces to counter an invasion. This might include banning military aid and arms sales to Taiwan, or it might include increasing those dramatically so Taiwan could defend itself. US negotiating leverage would be affected by the choice.

Alternatively, the US might not declare the policy publicly. The US might make the policy one of many strategic war plans that are kept top secret and, ideally, disclosed to no one. The US might or might not notify its close allies, say South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, in order to reassure them. Notifying them could increase the risk of public disclosure, or of China finding out through covert means (spying). US negotiating leverage would be affected differently than with the first choice above.

Finally, Gov could propose continued “strategic ambiguity”, similar to the current policy (though compromised somewhat by Biden’s comments that we would defend Taiwan) where military action is one of many options. The US might continue to maintain or even strengthen its military position in the Western Pacific so it has the capability to intervene effectively in order to deter China and to have leverage in any negotiation. Gov might pose the debate as occurring in the White House at 3AM when the President has been awakened with news of Chinese military action and must decide how to respond.

All are possible settings for the debate.

Scenario Analysis

The details of the Gov plan or model describing the world of the motion is just the setting for argument. Just as many different things might happen in the real world, so also many different things might happen if the motion is implemented.

Each scenario will affect China’s thinking and course of action. What if China doesn’t invade but engages in a “bear hug” strategy, interfering in Taiwan’s air and sea lanes until the island is cut off and has no choice but surrender? Will the US provide a maritime escort short of actual combat? Mistakes happen. What if there is an accident and someone starts shooting?

And each scenario has different implications for US, Taiwanese and Chinese leverage in diplomatic negotiations. Each scenario also has different implications for how much incentive each of the parties to negotiate at all. Each scenario also has different implications for how the US is perceived by other allies and foes around the world, so ramifications for US (and others) policies beyond Taiwan.

Considering different scenarios is another way to increase the number and to improve the quality of your arguments.

Things Debaters Should Know

Debaters should stay up to date on current events. Debaters who follow the news should have already known much of the following.

Microchips

TSMC on Taiwan produces the most advanced microchips in the world using machines by the Dutch firm ASML (which has at least one Barlow alum as an employee!) which rely on materials, components, software, and designs from many countries and companies. Aware of this risk, there are currently major efforts to duplicate this technology elsewhere. The Biden administration's infrastructure act includes tens of billions in subsidies for chip factories in the US, some being built by TSMC. Europe is following suit, as are Japan and South Korea. US factories are expected to come online this year or the next, others later. There are also competitors to TSMC such as Intel, AMD, and Samsung, with production facilities in various places around the world. They may not match TSMC at the highest levels, but they are not negligible.

Military Dependence

The US military would collapse—as would our economy—without semiconductors. If Taiwan disappeared tomorrow the world economy would suffer. But Taiwan is not the only source of advanced semiconductors. And in the event of war the US military likely would get priority, and likely more than enough as military demand is a small fraction of civilian use. Look at Russia and Ukraine. Consumers, on the other hand, might see shortages or price increases.

Taiwan

The US does not have normal diplomatic relations with Taiwan as a result of Nixon's and Carter's decision to recognize the PRC as the legitimate government of China. But even after that change in policy in the 1970's we continued to have unofficial relations with Taiwan, military aid and cooperation with Taiwan, trade with Taiwan, travel to and from Taiwan, and a policy of strategic ambiguity as to what we would do if the PRC decided to forcefully change Taiwan's status. Taiwan has been a major concern of US policy since the PRC took over the mainland in 1949.

The argument “why should we defend Taiwan when we don't even recognize it as a country” is not just wrong but it broadcasts a lack of knowledge. Even if many Americans have no idea where Taiwan is and would agree with you, they are not debaters.

RFD

This is an edited version of my RFD for the final round at Warde.

The weakness in the Government case is that Gov obtains most of its impacts not from a US decision not to defend Taiwan militarily, but rather from a diplomatic agreement that sounds like the “one country, two systems” deal Britain negotiated for Hong Kong. Opp has three replies: China quickly broke the agreement over Hong Kong; China has no incentive to negotiate if the US has no military leverage; and, war would indicate diplomacy had failed. Gov never answers the first and most effective reply. Gov suggests China’s incentive to negotiate is the potential cost of war, which doesn’t seem to exist if Gov’s adopts the motion.

Opp notes a possible contradiction as Gov argues the US cannot win such a war. If China also believes this, it would further lessen the US’ negotiating power. Gov never answers this third point, but it never comes up in the debate after Opp’s brief mention in the LOC

The economic arguments by both sides are almost exclusively about access to microchips. (There is some note of the potential costs of a US-China war but this is only mentioned in the PMC and PMR and is not considered in the major lines arguments made by either side.) Gov argues continued access will follow from the diplomatic agreement. But the weight of the diplomacy arguments above allows Opp to conclude that this will not maintain the same access as in the status quo.

Gov argues—probably correctly—that war will result in significant damage to the chip plants in Taiwan. Opp counters that Chinese control permits them to blackmail the world, but especially the US. The Opp arguments about the military’s dependency on chips—which Gov does not deny—give China reason to do so. Gov’s plan includes using the savings on the US military expenditures to build new chip plants in the US. Opp counters that repairing damaged factories is faster than building new ones, but repairing factories in Taiwan depends on US deterrence or victory, an argument Opp does not make. I didn’t see an advantage to either side here but agree with Opp that continued access to the output of Taiwan’s factories is problematic in either scenario.

There is a third line of argument that starts with Gov claiming it isn’t worth protecting Taiwan since we don’t even recognize it as a country. Opp counters this with a “moral imperative” argument about preserving human rights and preventing genocide. Again, Gov’s positive outcome depends on an effective diplomatic solution, which Opp effectively refutes.

Opp wins because they show diplomacy is unlikely to be effective, either because no agreement is concluded, or because any agreement is quickly broken. Gov cannot secure Taiwan or access to chips, so has no solvency. Neither side really investigates the “cost of war” argument other than for Gov to say war would be expensive and unwinnable, and Opp to say some wars are worth fighting.