Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper analyzes how the US policy on Taiwan is gradually evolving from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. First, I would like to analyze China’s Taiwan policy in terms of the core interests of the Communist Party of China. Second, I would like to specify why the US policy on Taiwan is evolving from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. Third, in the event of the Taiwan contingency, the security threat to the Korean Peninsula is identified and policy alternatives are proposed.

**Method:** This paper delves into the US policy on Taiwan with the Balance of Interest theory of Randall Schweller. A neoclassical realist suggests that national foreign policy is indirect and complex and must be reinterpreted through a parameter unit of domestic factors. According to Neo-Classic realists, the parameters that affect a country’s foreign policy are such as domestic interest groups and the political leader’s ideology and identity.

**Results:** The main parameters of the US policy shift towards Taiwan from the perspectives of Neo-classical Realism are as follows. First, it is Biden’s identity of value diplomacy which prioritizes democracy and human rights. Second, Xi Jinping’s military threats to annex Taiwan, and the pursuit of a gray zone strategy are driving factors for the US Policy shift from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. Third, the US policy shift to Taiwan was initiated by curbing China’s rise through the control of the Indo-Pacific maritime control and global supply chain.

**Conclusion:** The contingency in the Taiwan Strait is closely linked to security on the Korean Peninsula due to the US’ strategic flexibility. Currently, tensions between the US and China are rising in the Indo-Pacific region as the US military support for Taiwan’s self-defense. The ROK should be wary of being involved in the unintended Taiwan crisis. To build a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific, strategic communication between the US and China should be strengthened while respecting the "one China" principle.

**Keywords:** Neo-Classical Realism, US Foreign Policy, Value Diplomacy, Gray Zone Strategy, Taiwan Contingency

1. Introduction

Tensions between China and Taiwan are escalating as Xi Jinping ordered preparations for an invasion of Taiwan by 2027 after his third consecutive term. The US has maintained the status quo of cross-strait relations and has advocated maintaining strategic ambiguity about Taiwan. But The US shifted to a policy of keeping China in check as China challenged the established order of the US against the backdrop of economic power and military buildup. The US ostensibly agrees with the "one China" principle, but recognizes Taiwan's independent existence, drawing strong opposition from China. The Taiwan issue is impossible to make mutual concessions or agreements between the US and China. This is because of the maritime rights of the Indo-Pacific region, which is the national strategic interest of the US However, from China’s point of view,
Taiwan is China's own territory and the core interest among its national interests. Taiwan is the only territory claimed by Beijing that maintains its independence from the CHINA. Many sinologists have accepted that the Chinese are unlikely to grant self-determination to Taiwan, which they regard as a province[1]. The US’ rhetoric and political behaviors directly impact the cross-strait balance of rivalry[2].

The US has expressed its opposition to China's attempt to change in status quo against Taiwan, selling a large number of defense high-tech weapons to Taiwan, and dispatching more than 100 military instructors to guide Taiwanese military training. President Biden has mentioned three times that if China invades Taiwan by force, it will defend Taiwan. The US has been criticized by China for a series of political activities that seem to deny ‘one China’, including enacting the Taiwan Travel Act, allowing high-ranking US officials to visit Taiwan.

This paper delves into the US policy on Taiwan with the Balance of Interest Theory of Randall Schweller, a neoclassical realist. First, I would like to analyze China’s Taiwan policy in terms of the core interests of the Communist Party of China. Second, I would like to specify why the US policy on Taiwan is evolving from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. Third, in the event of the Taiwan contingency, the security threat to the Korean Peninsula is identified and policy alternatives are proposed.

2. Neo-Classical Realism

According to the neoclassical realist Randall Schweller’s Balance of Interest Theory, the driver of the state’s action is profit, and the state decides to maintain the status quo or break the status quo by comparing the benefits of maintaining the current state. Neoclassical realists believe that a country's foreign policy is chosen by the international system and the country's relative material capabilities, while neo-classical realists believe that its impact on foreign policy is indirect and complex and must be reinterpreted through a parameter unit of domestic factors[3]. It is a Neo-realist view that defines the relationship of the state through the complementary action between structural realism and domestic reality[4]. According to Neo-Classic realists, the parameters that affect a country's foreign policy are such as domestic interest groups and the political leader’s ideology and identity.

In Neo-classical realism, the distribution of power alone cannot fully explain a state’s foreign policy, it is translated through domestic drivers and the leader’s perception and ideology. These domestic parameters interact with the relationship between relative material power between the US and China in the process of making foreign policies[5].

In analyzing the US policy on Taiwan, the dependent variables are the international system, interactive factors between China and Taiwan, and domestic politics in the cross-strait relations. As a domestic factor, it encompasses China’s leader’s assertiveness against Taiwan and Taiwan’s leader-level independence tendency against China. I would like to suggest that the power balance and strategic interdependence between the US and China are international system factors. Biden administration’s value diplomacy that cherishes democracy and human rights are parameters of domestic factors that affect US policy toward Taiwan. In addition, the US strategic interest in shifting the global supply chain, and safeguarding the US’ maritime control of the Indo-Pacific region are also domestic parameters of the US foreign policy.

From a neoclassical realism perspective, I am going to analyze China’s Taiwan policy by setting independent variables as political and diplomatic aspects of US-China hegemony competition and dependent variables as conflict patterns and find out why the US Taiwan policy evolves from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. In conclusion, I would like to identify the security threat to the Korean Peninsula in case of the Taiwan contingency and overture policy alternatives. The
US’ strategic clarity triggers the CHINA’s aggressive sabotage of the US interest around the world. The US has no intention to go to war with China at the moment if the status quo is maintained. Therefore, the US superficially articulating its strategic ambiguity to Taiwan to cool down growing tensions at the Taiwan Straits[6].

3. China’s Policy towards Taiwan

The Communist Party of China has set the Taiwan annexation as the Communist Party’s prime goal and ordered preparations for the invasion of Taiwan by 2027. China recognizes Taiwan as a core national interest, and the US think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies(CSIS), warns that China will invade Taiwan around 2026 in the scenario of the war game.

In a speech marking the 110th anniversary of the Shinhae Revolution, President Xi Jinping declared that "the unification of the fatherland will be achieved." Xi also vowed that China would never abandon mobilizing force to achieve reunification[7].

The Communist Party of China has set a goal to have the capacity to unify the two sides by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army in 2027 [8][9]. Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said that "Taiwan has long been China's indigenous territory, and Taiwan's return to China has been part of the international order since World War II, and it is written in the 'Cairo Declaration' and the 'Potsdam Declaration'." He urged the West to stop meddling with China's domestic affairs by opposing its initiative to change the status quo. At the same time, he issued a strong message, saying, "In Taiwan, Those who play with fire will surely burn themselves to death.” In a speech at the opening ceremony of the Lanting Forum held in Shanghai on April 21, 2023, Chinese Foreign Minister Chin Kang stressed that the Taiwan issue is "the core of China's core national interests." China's policy toward Taiwan is promoting exchanges under the "92 formula" that recognizes 'one China'. The '92 formula' recognizes one China, but the expression of the two states is at its convenience.

3.1. Set the red line for the use of force

The CHINA's long-standing coherent policy has been to unify the mainland with Taiwan to complete its territorial integration. In response to Taiwan's independence movement, the Chinese Communist Party enacted the "anti-national division law" and curbed Taiwan's independence. Article 8 of China's "anti-state division law" is, First, China will use forces when Taiwan's independent forces create Taiwan's division in any name and manner. If the Taiwanese government abandons its "one China" policy, declares independence, and holds a referendum, it will use force. Second, it is a case where a major situation has occurred in which Taiwan can independent from China. In that case, China will use legal force when foreign troops are stationed in Taiwan or foreign forces intervene in Taiwan's internal affairs. Currently, as tensions have risen since President Tsai Ing-wen visited the US, the US has dispatched more than 100 active army instructors to Taiwan and plans to send 200 more troops in the future. Chinese Foreign Minister Chin Kang warns that US interference in Taiwan is beyond the red line. Third, if the possibility of peaceful unification is completely lost, it is officially declared that force will be used. China enacted the National Unification Act in March 2022 to focus on promoting unification. From China's point of view, if Taiwan delays peaceful unification and completely loses the possibility of peaceful unification, China will use force to promote unification.

Taiwan's foreign minister, Wu Zhaoxie, predicted that China's invasion of Taiwan could be in 2027. The reason is that 2027 will be the fourth term of Chinese President Xi Jinping, and if Xi's performance is limited in his previous three terms, such as internal turmoil, economic recession caused by COVID-19, and unemployment, he may try to invade Taiwan for his political achievement. Taiwan remains at the forefront of China's economic and military coercion as the CHINA will not give up the use of force to thwart Taiwan's independence[10].
3.2. Pursuing a gray zone strategy

Currently, the US deterrence against China’s invasion of Taiwan is maintained. In the contingency of a US-China conflict over Taiwan, the US, and China have no choice but to endure enormous damage rather than overwhelming victory by either side, therefore military clashes are being suppressed. China may begin any aggression against Taiwan with deniable operations or low levels of gray-zone tactics[11].

China is pursuing a grand strategy to become a maritime power to project power into “far seas.” China is pursuing a layered approach to achieve this status. The first layer includes the defense of China’s “near sea”-the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas to deter the US. China is building naval capability to project power into the Western Pacific during Taiwan Contingency[12]. Yet China is doing so without the use of violence. China has adopted “gray zone” approaches to alter the status quo while shunning military combat between uniformed military. The CHINA has depended upon ambiguity, asymmetric capabilities, and incrementalism to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait while avoiding outright war. The incremental “Salami slicing” has enabled China to achieve much of its political territorial agenda without a military response from the US. Preventing Taiwan’s independence is one of the CHINA’s prime naval tasks along with “enforcing Beijing’s claims in the East and South China Seas, presence on the global scene, and defending China’s economic interests”.

The best alternative to China’s reunification of Taiwan is the application of the gray zone strategy. The gray zone strategy refers to strategies that attempt to escape significant retaliation by staying under a key threshold. As characteristics of gray zone tactics, spreading false information, social system confusion, coercion using economic dependence, and threats through military exercise near the border are employed[13]. This way can be effective to block US intervention. China attempts to transform the Taiwanese regime into pro-China through tailored coercion through military threats, economic sanctions, and information distortion. By doing so, China can create a favorable environment for united front tactics to realize territorial integrity. There will be a presidential election in Taiwan in January 2024. China has invited former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou to emphasize the cooperation of the Chinese people to empower Taiwan’s pro-China Kuomintang. China is expected to join hands with Taiwan’s pro-China Kuomintang to carry out a hybrid united front strategy. Because of the US pledge to support Taiwan, China’s armed attack on Taiwan can cause enormous losses to China’s economic growth, so it is expected that China will adopt a strategy to absorb Taiwan by establishing a pro-China government in Taiwan by pursuing a gray zone strategy. The CHINA views Tsai’s Democratic Progressive Party(DPP) as radically pro-independence[14]. Since the DPP’s victory in 2016, cross-strait relations have entered uncharted waters and tension has dramatically escalated[15].

There may be a high degree of political stability in Taiwan if the Kuomintang(KMT) scores a major victory in the upcoming presidential election in January 2024[16]. Many mainland Chinese believes that Taiwan would be peacefully drawn back into China’s orbit if China offers carrots. China also needs time to cope with many domestic problems such as unemployment and corruption and military modernization before deciding on outright war with Taiwan[17].

4. The Policy Shift of the US and the Threat of Taiwan Contingency to the Korean Peninsula

4.1. Significance of Taiwan’s strategic geography as an unsinkable aircraft carrier

The US and China are at stake in the India-Pacific region, while Taiwan is an important strategic hub for the US Taiwan is the gateway to march the west pacific for China. As Taiwan’s independent identification increases, the prospect of conflict over Taiwan raises[18]. If Taiwan is handed
over to China, the US is likely to lose maritime control of the Indo-Pacific region and lose credibility in its regional security commitment.

If Taiwan is unified with China by any means, first, it would make it easier for China to repel US forces from its maritime periphery, and second, to threaten US military bases in Northeast Asia including USFK and US forces in Japan[19]. It may undermine the US’ forward deployment and presence in the region.

This may allow North Korea to boldly launch provocations against the South. Taiwan’s strategic importance can be summarized in three ways. First, the Taiwan Strait is geographically part of Korea, Japan, and the US Maritime Transportation Route(SLOC). According to the Bloomberg News Agency, the Taiwan Strait is the busiest shipping channel in the world and 88% of the world’s trade is transported through the Taiwan Strait. Second, Taiwan is a strategic base that can ensure regional stability and the superior status of the United States by serving as a forward base for the US military in the region. The Taiwan crisis is closely linked to the security of the Korean Peninsula in connection with the strategic flexibility of the US Army. Thirdly, Taiwan will be the yardstick for evaluating the United States’ commitment to security in East Asia. If the US fails to manage the security crisis in the region, it could undermine the credibility of the US security pledge and trigger a shift in security order.

**4.2. Control of Taiwan semiconductors in shifting global supply chain**

Taiwan has a complicated political, economic, and military relationship with both the United States and the CHINA[20]. As China exercises military hegemony in Taiwan and the South China Sea and promotes the revival of a great China, the US attempts to exclude China from the global supply chain by using the Chip 4 alliance(Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the US). Taiwan occupies more than 70 percent of the global semiconductor market in the foundry sector.

The United States is trying to develop this semiconductor economic alliance into a security alliance in the Indo-Pacific. As a means of suppressing China, the United States intends to curb China by blocking the supply of semiconductors, which are essential parts for the development of cutting-edge industrial and military technologies. To this end, the US needs Taiwan’s participation.

**4.3. Value diplomacy in the Biden administration**

Taiwan is a strategic base for democratization of the mainland China in terms of the US’ democracy expansion policy. Taiwan is a democratic region that shares values with the United States. The US House Foreign Affairs Committee passed eight bills in support of Taiwan, which defy Chinese threats. The Taiwan Assurance Act requires the State Department to regularly review its guidelines for involvement in Taiwan and submit a report to Congress every two years to strengthen the supervision of government agencies on US relations with Taiwan. In addition, the Taiwan Guarantee Act includes ensuring that any policy change in the US will deepen and strengthen bilateral relations between the US and Taiwan. The traditional US policy toward Taiwan includes providing weapons to Taiwan to ensure its safety and support its defensive strength and promising not to set a deadline for the conclusion of arms sales to Taiwan and refraining from amending the Taiwan Relations Act[21]. Recently, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee also passed the "Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act" and the "Underwater Cable Control Act" against China. Those bills are a measure to assure the US defense commitment against Taiwan.

As the US is recently pushing to enact another Taiwan-related law, the "Taiwan Policy Act," which is pending in the Senate, is waiting for a vote. Proposed by Bob Menendes, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of the Democratic Party, the main focus is to designate Taiwan as a major ally among countries that are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and plans to provide $3.5 billion over the next four years. If the bill is passed, it is a
clear sign that the US policy on Taiwan will legally shift from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity, which means that the US’ awareness of Taiwan may evolve from strategic interests to core national interests. Biden’s Taiwan policy includes the US’ firm military stance and its commitment to enhancing Taiwan’s ability to defend itself[22].

4.4. Threats to the Korean peninsula in case of Taiwan contingency

Were the CHINA to attempt to use military forces to topple the government of Taiwan and occupy the island, the outcome of the US-led military operation to defend Taiwan could spark the third world war[23]. In the case of Taiwan’s Contingency, South Korea could face a military vacuum in its forces against North Korea. In the Wargame(virtual war simulation), which assumes that China invades Taiwan, announced by the US think tank CSIS, half of the US Air Force forces in Korea will move to Okinawa to participate in the Taiwan War. Former Commander of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command, Abrams said the US could send the USFK to Taiwan contingency. Bennett, a US military expert, argued that even if the US intervenes militarily in Taiwan, its ally South Korea "does not automatically intervene under the Korea-US alliance, but if China attacks the US, it is obligated to join." Bruce Klingner, a senior researcher at the Heritage Foundation, argued that US troops deployed in the region are likely to be redeployed to Taiwan in case of emergency. If the US reinforcements are blocked by China's long-range anti-ship missiles in the Pacific Ocean, a substantial power vacuum could occur on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea may not rule out the possibility of using it as an opportunity to provoke.

If the US and China collide over Taiwan, South Korea will automatically be involved in the war if China preemptively strikes the US Forces in Korea, Japan, and the US bases in the Philippines with missiles. After all, ROK's involvement may be inevitable[24][25]. This is because THAAD missiles deployed in South Korea that detect Chinese missiles and 28,000 US troops in South Korea that can reach China could be China’s military targets. If China invades Taiwan by force, the security threat to the ROK follows. First, it starts with a war involving the US and Japan, which are interested in Taiwan, but if China strikes support forces in the war, the possibility of the ROK’s involvement in the war will be obvious. Second, if China preemptively strikes US bases in Northeast Asia with missiles and North Korea makes simultaneous provocations, it is highly likely to expand to World War III. This is because North Korea, China, and Russia, as well as US allies and NATO, can join this warfighting. If China is ready to invade Taiwan by 2027, China could be more aggressive against South Korea. If a pro-China government is established in Taiwan and cooperation is achieved, China’s next target could be South Korea and Japan in the mid-to-long term perspective.

The ROK's response strategy in the event of a contingency in Taiwan can be divided into follows. First, it is necessary to strengthen the security alliance with NATO, AUKUS, and QUAD based on a strong Korea-US alliance. Through this, China’s provocation can be suppressed. Second, maintaining both the Korea-US alliance and strategic cooperation with China. However, it may be difficult to maintain the status quo through balanced diplomacy in the event of a military confrontation between the US and China. Third, it may pursue the realization of transcendental diplomacy by strengthening relative autonomy from both the US and China while respecting China's core national interests in Taiwan. There are still many uncertainties regarding the US’ ability to defend Taiwan against China's tailored coercion[26]. The ROK should be wary of being involved in the unintended Taiwan crisis.

5. Conclusion

The US awareness of Taiwan is evolving from a strategic interest to a national core interest perspective and the Taiwan Intervention Act is being revised accordingly. This paper tried to specify why the US policy on Taiwan is evolving from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. The
US is reevaluating Taiwan as a national core interest as Taiwan’s strategic value is increasing as a major strategic base in the Indo-Pacific maritime control. The main parameters of the US policy shift towards Taiwan from the perspectives of Neo-classical Realism are as follows.

First, it is Biden’s identity of value diplomacy which prioritizes democracy and human rights. Second, Xi Jinping’s military threats to annex Taiwan, and the pursuit of a gray zone strategy are driving factors for the US Policy shift from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity.

Third, the US policy shift to Taiwan was initiated by curbing China’s rise through the control of the Indo-Pacific maritime control and reshuffling global supply chain on semiconductor.

The contingency in the Taiwan Strait is closely linked to security on the Korean Peninsula due to the US’s strategic flexibility. Currently, tensions between the US and China are rising in the Indo-Pacific region as the US military support for Taiwan's self-defense. To build a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific, strategic communication between the US and China should be strengthened while respecting the "one China" principle. For the maintenance of the status quo in the cross-strait issues, strengthening US deterrence cannot be the best alternative. This is because frustration over the reunification of Taiwan may eventually lead to China’s armed provocation.

6. References

6.1. Journal articles


7. Appendix

7.1. Author’s contribution

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