

*The Russo-Ukraine War and the Perceived Global Power Shift: Factors Influencing U.S. Taiwan Policy Change**

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Abstract

This article examines U.S. Taiwan policy change since the escalation of the Russo-Ukraine conflict in late February 2022 from a neoclassical realist perspective. The Ukraine war has made a significant impact on the United States, exacerbating Americans' perceptions of an imminent China threat due to its potential use of force in the Taiwan Strait and providing fresh impetus for Washington to revise its Taiwan policy. This article argues, however, that within a three-level theoretical framework guided by neoclassical realism, the war has just accelerated the pace of U.S. Taiwan policy change initiated during the Trump presidency. President Trump brought a drastic transformation in U.S. China policy, mainly due to America's perceived shift in the power distribution between the U.S. and China, along with mounting concerns about China's national governance system and its approach to foreign policy. As the perceived shift in power distribution and escalating threat concerns persist, Washington is expected to play the "Taiwan card" more assertively and reinforce the trend of "Ukrainization" in its

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Taiwan policy in the near future. The Ukraine war would continue to influence the evolution of Washington's policy trajectories on Taiwan. However, the repercussions of the war would still be limited in the light of the systemic pressures facing U.S. Taiwan policy.

On July 28, 2023, U.S. President Joe Biden delegated to Secretary of State Antony Blinken the authority to “direct the drawdown of up to US\$345 million in defense articles and services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training, to provide assistance to Taiwan.”¹ This marks the first time a U.S. President has utilized the Presidential Drawdown Authority, which enables the United States to withdraw weapons and other military supplies directly from Defense Department stockpiles, expediting the transfer of inventory to Taiwan through a channel similar to the one that Washington has used for arming Ukraine.² The Presidential Drawdown Authority, authorized by the public law *James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023* (NDAA 2023), serves as the U.S. government's “most responsive tool to rapidly transfer U.S. military and other equipment in an unanticipated emergency that cannot be addressed by other means.”³ The authority is granted to the President to address what the law defines as “regional contingency” in the Taiwan Strait.⁴

The United States has been ramping up its efforts to support Kiev after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” against Ukraine on February 24, 2022.⁵ Recognizing that closer military cooperation and increased security assistance to Ukraine help in its defense of Russia's assault, Washington has become more determined to strengthen military ties with Taipei. This is aimed at preventing and responding to an “unanticipated emergency” in the Taiwan Strait triggered by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Judging from the fact that only Ukraine and Taiwan are receiving large amount of aid from existing U.S. stockpiles, along with senior American officials' frequent comparisons of “contingencies” in Kiev and across the Strait, we can therefore conclude that the United States is not only closely watching the Ukrainian battlefield, but more significantly wielding its successful experience there to the Strait—what the authors term as the “Ukrainization” of U.S. Taiwan policy.

So, the key questions are why, how, and to what extent the Ukraine war changed U.S. policy towards Taiwan in less than two years? This

article examines the change in U.S. Taiwan policy using a three-level neoclassical realist framework. It argues that the change of U.S. policy on cross-Taiwan Strait affairs is an outcome of interactions between Washington's perceived shift in U.S.-China power distribution at the international system level and specific factors at the domestic level, as well as the influence of U.S. President at the individual level. Within the framework, we contend that the ongoing Ukraine war has accelerated U.S. Taiwan policy changes but has not fundamentally reshaped Washington's calculations regarding Taiwan. To explore the correlation between U.S. policy changes and the war factor, we have conducted a descriptive analysis of original data and used content analysis on government documents and congressional legislative proposals.

1. Changing U.S. Perceptions of Taiwan after the Ukraine War

The Russo-Ukraine war has had a great impact on U.S. perceptions of the Taiwan issue. This section examines how the war changed the perceptions of American government officials and strategic analysts regarding Taiwan, paving the way for U.S. policy changes on cross-Taiwan Strait affairs.

a. Impact on U.S. Government Officials

The Ukraine war had a direct and significant impact on the Biden administration. The first notable case is President Biden's controversial remarks in May and September 2022, stating that U.S. forces would defend Taiwan militarily in the event of an attack by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In Biden's words, it would be "a burden that's even stronger" to Washington than "what happened in Ukraine."⁶ Although the White House officials later "walked back" the President's argument of U.S. military defense of Taiwan and reiterated no "policy change," they failed to prevent the rarely seen argument from hitting the headlines and becoming a hot topic among American officials and policy analysts.

Senior officials of the Biden administration overstated the Chinese military threat, warning that they would adopt measures, military means included, to respond to the potential use of force by the PLA against Taipei. Their embrace of more open discussions about U.S. military defense of Taiwan indicates the possibility that Washington might abandon the long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity and instead

adopt strategic clarity.⁷ Asked by whether it was U.S. official government policy to defend Taiwan, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan responded that the White House's policy is that "we are going to take every step we possibly can to ensure that never happens."⁸ Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the administration would be prepared to use all its sanction tools—that it has already used against Moscow—against Beijing should it move aggressively toward Taipei.⁹ The war also intensified uneasiness among senior Pentagon officials over the PLA's military actions against Taiwan. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Charles Richard, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, among other active-duty officers, highlighted the gravity of the China threat and stated on public occasions that "Ukraine crisis ... is just the warmup," warning that the "big one" with China as the adversary of the next conflict in the Strait is coming while U.S. "level of deterrence against China ... is slowly sinking."¹⁰ They called for increase in military budget to enhance U.S. deterrence capabilities. Although Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, CIA Director Bill Burns, and Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency Scott Berrier and other intelligence community (IC) leadership did not believe that Moscow's actions have sped up Beijing's timeline, they argued that the war could affect its "calculation about how and when" it would take actions against Taiwan.¹¹

Although there are subtle differences in assessing the PRC's Taiwan policy by the White House, Pentagon, the IC, among other executive departments, they all keep eyes open on the situation in the Taiwan Strait against the changing dynamics in the Ukrainian battlefield and reached some basic agreements on how to address the situation in the Strait. For example, they urged Taiwan to watch the war in Europe closely and draw lessons from it, and suggested Taipei to extend compulsory military service, improve wartime mobilization capability, increase cooperation between the military and civilian institutions, etc.¹²

Compared with the executive branch, the U.S. Congress reacted much strongly to the situation in the Strait in the shadow of the Ukraine war. More Democratic lawmakers accepted the once radical proposal of U.S. military defense of Taiwan. For example, Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, echoed Biden's controversial argument by tweeting that "[C]redible deterrence requires both courage and clarity—and Taiwan's vibrant democracy deserves our full support."¹³ Along with Jim Risch, Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Menendez led their 50 Senate

colleagues in penning a letter to Biden to urge the administration's inclusion of Taiwan as a partner in the proposed Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) on May 18, 2022, two days before the IPEF was formally issued. "Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows the value of tangible economic support ... and the same is true for Taiwan," they warned without naming China.¹⁴ Republican legislators made no secret of their dissatisfaction with the long-standing U.S. policy regarding Taiwan, with some of them calling on the Democratic administration to completely abandon strategic ambiguity and the "one China" policy framework, and advocating firmer U.S. military intervention in conflict scenario in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁵ In the eyes of a majority of Republicans on Capitol Hill, the PRC is destined to use force against Taiwan just as Russia invaded Ukraine, and Washington would have to act soon to prevent the island from becoming the next "Ukraine."¹⁶

b. Impact on U.S. Strategic Community

The Ukraine war had varying effects on U.S. strategic community. The war has further reinforced the position of those advocating U.S. military defense of Taiwan (Taiwan defenders hereafter), one of the two schools backing policy of strategic clarity— another one is Taiwan abandoners, who call for the strategic abandonment of Taiwan by the United States.¹⁷ Taiwan defenders highlighted the impact of the Ukraine war on Taiwan, asserting that the PRC is more likely to use force against Taiwan and urging U.S. consideration of all means to "protect" Taiwan given that the strategic importance of Taipei to Washington is much more significant than that of Ukraine.¹⁸ Some other strategic analysts who are inclined to defend Taiwan also drew an analogy between Ukraine and Taiwan, claiming that the Ukraine war has changed Chinese mainland's strategic thinking concerning Taiwan and that Biden's "Taiwan 'gaffe'" is a "smart strategy" to deter Beijing from using force. They suggested, in that case, that Washington should shore up the strength of U.S. conventional deterrence, equip Taiwan with offensive weapons systems, and enhance U.S.-Taiwan cooperation on defense with a view to increase U.S. deterrence capabilities against the PLA forces and maintain its capacity of military intervention in conflict should it erupt.¹⁹

Policy suggestions proposed by Taiwan defenders are confronted with an angry backlash from the third school of U.S. strategic community dedicated to maintaining a generally peaceful cross-Taiwan Strait *status quo*

(*status quo* maintainers), which has long been advocating U.S. official policy. *Status quo* maintainers urged both sides across the Strait not to change the *status quo* and highlighted the importance of U.S. adherence to its “one China” policy. They explicitly oppose the simple, invalid analogy between the Ukraine crisis and the tense cross-Taiwan Strait situation, asserting that both cases are fundamentally different and calling for careful assessment of the impact of the Ukraine war on the prospect of the Taiwan issue. As Michael D. Swaine and J. Stapleton Roy put it, “The Ukraine and Taiwan situations are in most respects apples and oranges.”²⁰ Convinced that the PRC remains extremely firm in its will to achieve national reunification with Taiwan and will not alter this strategic goal merely because of the Ukraine war, the school of *status quo* maintainers criticized Taiwan defenders’ inflation of the China threat by taking advantage of the war and refuted Biden’s argument, blaming that they would “risk[s] conveying that the United States is degrading the long-standing policies that have underpinned the bilateral relationship and preserved peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”²¹ They argue that a conflict in the Strait would be more likely, provided that Beijing concludes that Washington grows only more determined to defend Taipei and the PRC’s efforts no longer suffice to stop Taiwan from drifting toward independence.²² Some scholars are concerned that neither does Washington possess the ability to deter China nor could it persuade its regional allies into joining it in a potential conflict with the PLA, questioning advice like military defense of Taiwan.²³ That being said, *status quo* maintainers hold the view that both Washington and Taipei should closely watch and learn lessons from the Ukraine war, and partly apply them to the Taiwan Strait. They also propose some policy advice for the United States and Taiwan, including closer U.S.-Taiwan military cooperative ties, development of additional basing access in the region, intelligence cooperation with U.S. allies, Taiwan’s investment in enhanced asymmetric defensive capabilities, more training for Taiwan’s active and reserve forces.²⁴

2. Major Trends of U.S. Taiwan Policy after the Ukraine War

There is little doubt that the Ukraine war has set a new context for American government officials and strategic analysts to debate over U.S. Taiwan policy, contributing to a growing voice of Taiwan defenders from both strategic studies community and political circles.²⁵ This has provided more fresh impetus for Washington to alter its policy on Taiwan.

a. Moving Faster Toward Dual Clarification of Its Taiwan Policy

Washington has hastened its policy change by clarifying the long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity and tactical ambiguity. The Biden administration has been taking multiple measures to promote strategic clarity. For example, President Biden sent a high-level delegation of five ex-defense officials to Taiwan on March 1, 2022, five days after the Ukraine war erupted, to convey his strong support with clarity for a reassurance of Taiwan and other allies in the Western Pacific given the difficulty to send Cabinet officials to the island.²⁶ Moreover, Biden frequently talked about the impact of the war, and repeatedly made remarks such as that the Chinese mainland is more inclined to use force against Taiwan and that U.S. armed forces shall be more determined to defend the island, reflecting a tendency to embrace strategic clarity after Moscow's war against Kiev. It also demonstrates that he tries to learn a lesson from his failure to deter Russia from using force and attempts to prevent from a similar scenario in the Taiwan Strait.²⁷

In the meantime, the Biden administration is pushing for tactical clarity. Tactical clarity refers to how the United States would, militarily and non-militarily, defend Taiwan in response to a potential conflict.²⁸ Except for its regular arms sales to Taiwan for the sake of maintaining the island's self-defense capabilities, however, U.S. government had refrained from elaborating how it would respond to conflict in the Strait in order not to tie its hands. But the Ukraine war made it break away from the long-held tradition. A growing number of senior U.S. government officials, both from the executive and legislative branches, are now more willing to reveal tactics Washington likely to adopt so as to enhance credible U.S. deterrence of preventing the mainland from using force to solve the Taiwan issue. More significantly, they tend to employ the concept of "integrated deterrence" under the guidance of the whole-of-government approach by adopting military, economic, and diplomatic measures, and simultaneously by deepening cooperation in all fields with U.S. allies and partners in the region. As mentioned above, Sullivan, Yellen, Milley, Austin, Haines, among other officials, indicated the possibility of Biden administration's multiple measures to intervene in a potential Taiwan Strait conflict with multiple tools. In the view of the United States, these signals of tactical clarity are aimed at not only tying the hands of the Chinese mainland before it decides to use force against Taiwan, but also upgrading the readiness of Washington to take various

means to effectively step in once a conflict occurs, blunting a PLA's "fait accompli" in the Strait.²⁹

b. Enhancing Military Cooperation with Taiwan

The United States has long attached importance to enhancing military and security cooperation with Taiwan, considering building credible self-defense capabilities for the island a key to the deterrence against the Chinese mainland. Since the Ukraine war, Washington had been more anxious about a potential cross-Strait crisis. This is further aggravated after the PLA's live-fire military drills encircling the island and some other fierce reactions from the Chinese mainland in response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit in August 2022.³⁰ In order to resist a potential "blockade" and "invasion" by the PLA, U.S. government has sped up delivery and deployment of more weapons to Taiwan, turning the island into a "giant weapons depot."³¹ Meanwhile, it doubles down efforts to enhance Taiwan's self-defense capabilities through a strengthening military cooperative relationship.

The United States adjusted its arms sales policy to support Taiwan's asymmetric defense capabilities *vis-à-vis* the Chinese mainland. On the one hand, the Biden administration continues to conduct regular military sales to Taiwan. As of August 2023, the United States has sold military articles to the island for 12 times, and 7 of them were made quickly after the Ukraine war. With the staggering US\$1.1 billion arms sales in early September 2022, the total amount has reached around US\$4 billion since Biden's inauguration.³² On the other hand, the Biden administration revised arms sales policy in the light of lessons learned from the Ukraine war. It is now conducting a stricter review of military sales, rejecting Taiwan's request to purchase high-price peacetime weapons but selling only weapons designed to effectively prevent the PLA from launching an "all-out D-day style invasion" of Taiwan.³³

Some other recent trends are worth noting as well. Firstly, the United States has diversified and extended channels to help defend Taiwan. The White House announced on July 28, 2023 that the United States would supply the island with US\$345 million military aid, including defense articles and military education and training,³⁴ conveying a monumental signal of U.S. determination to build credible deterrence across the Taiwan Strait. Secondly, it is actively promoting the National Guard-led State Partnership Program that is able to

substantially broaden and strengthen U.S.-Taiwan security cooperation and thus help Taiwan build a comprehensive defense system without sensitively involving U.S. federal government.³⁵ Moreover, the United States is also encouraging Taipei to invest in smaller, mobile weapon systems. Weapons like drone swarms, anti-tank Stinger missiles, and man-portable anti-aircraft Javelin missiles are less vulnerable when encountered with the PLA's advanced weapons.³⁶ Lastly, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are urging the executive branch to draw U.S. allies to form closer security ties with Taiwan.³⁷

c. Strengthening Policy Coordination with Its Allies and Partners

In the wake of the Ukraine war, the Biden administration adopted integrated deterrence and established closer cooperative ties with U.S. allies and partners, who are viewed as an essential tool to deter the Chinese mainland from using force against Taiwan.³⁸ As Blinken pointed out in his speech on China policy, the United States is bolstering policy coordination with its allies and partners on Taiwan, and regarding the maintenance of peace and stability in the Strait not only as a U.S. interest but also as a matter of "international concern."³⁹

Indeed, the United States is increasingly embedding its Taiwan policy in relations with its treaty allies and partners including Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and member states in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Biden and his senior aides have been shuttling through Asia and Europe, inviting leaders of U.S. allies to visit Washington, and frequently underscoring "the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" in bilateral leaders' meetings. In their joint statement between the United States and South Korea, for example, President Biden and President Yoon Suk Yeol reiterated the "importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the region."⁴⁰ Some same wording appeared in the joint statement after Biden's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in January 2023.⁴¹ As some recent research suggests, the United States has achieved the so-called "multilateralization" of its Taiwan policy within Washington-led intelligence and military frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between the United States, Japan, India and Australia, the AUKUS between the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation, and NATO.⁴² The 2022 NATO

Summit in Madrid and 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius reaffirmed the world's largest military alliance's willingness to find "global solutions" to cope with "global challenges" posed by the PRC, including its activities "threatening Taiwan."⁴³ It can be seen that the "Ukrainization" of U.S. Taiwan policy has spilled over and, to varying extent, affected its allies' policy stance on Taiwan.

3. Explaining U.S. Taiwan Policy Change: A Theory and Policy Nexus

How should we explain U.S. Taiwan policy change after the Ukraine war? We argue that the war *per se* has not shaped U.S. policy on cross-Strait affairs. Rather, as an external factor it functions as a catalyst for change of U.S. Taiwan policy by inducing change of Americans' thinking of the Taiwan issue. It is their perceived shift in U.S.-China power distribution in the international system and growing concerns about China's governance model, including Beijing's increasing assertiveness in the Strait, that have fundamentally reshaped U.S. policy trajectories on Taiwan. We will elaborate our arguments in this section by examining relevant theories and U.S. policy practices.

a. A Three-level Theoretical Framework of U.S. Taiwan Policy Change

To understand the evolution of U.S. Taiwan policy, we have to examine the context, both internal and external, in which how the United States formulates its policy. The existing research, mainly inspired from international relations (IR) theories, indicates factors on three levels influencing U.S. policy on cross-Strait issues.

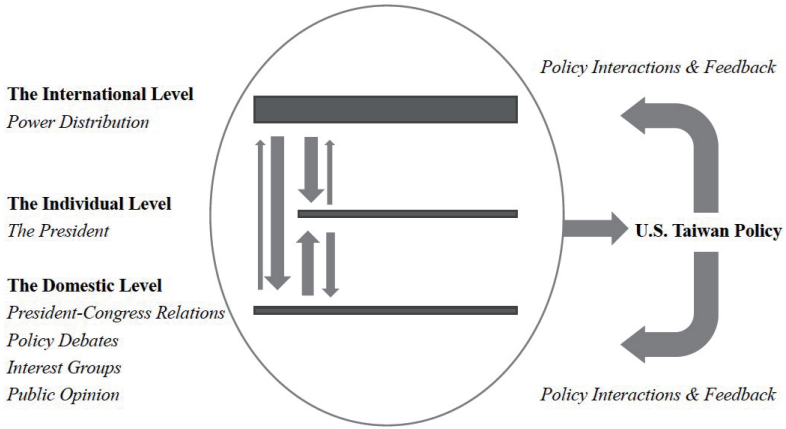
The first level gains most popularity among IR realists, who concentrate on the impact of the nature of the international system.⁴⁴ In the light of relative power distribution among major states in the system, realists introduced several world order such as unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity.⁴⁵ Their arguments are straightforward — "world order determines U.S. Taiwan policy" and the United States changed its policy regarding Taiwan "at every turn of world order transformation."⁴⁶ The second level pays due attention to a state's domestic variables involving political, economic and social elements, touching more upon pluralism and liberalism of IR theories. Scholars point out four main factors—President-Congress relationship (aka executive-legislative relationship),

interest groups (think tanks included), policy debates and public opinion—that contribute to the evolution of U.S. Taiwan policy.⁴⁷ The third level draws on the micro-foundation of political psychology in IR with a focus on personality and preferences of policy makers, notably the President, that involve in U.S. policy making.⁴⁸

Factors on the three levels have merits in discovering dynamics of Washington's Taiwan policy. A brief survey of the evolving U.S. policy trajectories on Taiwan since the late 1940s suggests that a comprehensive understanding of America's trendlines regarding Taiwan requires to synthesize all factors on the three levels. During the confrontational Cold War era when world politics was dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, Washington first treated Taiwan as a strategic asset by arming it before the late 1960s and then forsook it in exchange for Chinese mainland's cooperation to deter the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. After the end of the Cold War, however, the United States as the sole superpower began to play the Taiwan card cautiously against the mainland in varying degrees mainly depending on its demand for strategic cooperation with Beijing.⁴⁹ It is obvious that the changing power distribution in international system plays the most significant role in guiding U.S. policy on Taiwan particularly during the Cold War. Nonetheless, some other factors such as personality and preferences of U.S. President and Americans' perceptions of China also shed light on U.S. policy making concerning Taiwan in the post-Cold War era.

Informed by neoclassical realism of IR, we treat the international system-level variable (U.S.-China relative power distribution) as the sole and most decisive independent variable, and domestic-level variables (President-Congress relationship, policy debates, interest groups, and public opinion) and individual-level variable (the President) as important intervening variables.⁵⁰ These variables on the three levels form a theoretical framework of U.S. Taiwan policy change as shown in Figure 1. Under this framework, we argue that U.S. Taiwan policy change is the output of a policy interactive process involving defined variables on the three levels. While the shift in power distribution exerts greatest systemic pressures on domestic-level variables, it is the individual-level President who makes Taiwan policy while navigating pressures from the other two levels. In addition to the vertical policy interactions, U.S. tendency to adjust its Taiwan policy could also be affected by horizontal interactions with particularly the PRC and Taiwan as well as with some U.S. allies in the system. We will not elaborate this argument due to limited space.

Figure 1: A Three-level Theoretical Framework of U.S. Taiwan Policy Change



Source: The authors.

Note: The degree of thickness indicates the size of acting force.

In terms of relative material power capabilities that IR realists apply to measure the nature of the international system, the current world order is still in the unipolar moment defined by the United States as a dominant power (aka *status quo* power) and China as a major rising power. While it remains debatable whether China could continue its rapid rise given the fact that the country's economic growth falls short of expectations in the post COVID-19 era, the past decade has witnessed China's rise to the world's second-largest economy and, more significantly, the world's second largest defense spender.⁵¹ The seeming shift in relative power distribution between the United States and China has fueled the debate on power transition theory, which contends that the former is doomed to contain the latter as power transition enters a new stage.⁵² Although we acknowledge the validity of the power transition theory in interpreting the transformation of U.S. China policy, we argue that mounting U.S. concerns about China's national governance system and its approach to foreign policy, particularly Beijing's growing assertiveness on the Taiwan question, also play significant role in Washington's strategic thinking on China. As one American strategic studies expert points out, China's increasingly confident posture toward the West in the past decade amplified a "change in international dynamics from patterns of multilateral cooperation towards a pattern

of competition.”⁵³ What has been most frequently and severely criticized is Beijing’s policy toward Taipei. According to some American scholars’ observations, China’s increasingly confident posture and its aggressive actions in the Taiwan Strait particularly after Xi Jinping’s inauguration in 2012 has resulted in a much tense relationship across the Strait, necessitating a more active U.S. role in the Taiwan issue.⁵⁴ This is evidenced by a sequence of policy documents and speeches by the Trump administration since 2018 and particularly since March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the United States.⁵⁵ To address the alleged Chinese “repressive regime” with an unique national governance system including the “whole-of-society MCF [Military-Civil Fusion] strategy,” Washington adopted “whole-of-government approach” internally and externally to safeguard U.S. national interest.⁵⁶ In a word, increasing U.S. anxiety over the overestimated power distribution tilting toward China and its growing concerns about Beijing’s domestic and foreign behaviors embedded in Chinese governance style pushed U.S.-China strategic competition to a new high and significantly transformed Washington’s China policy. Judging from some key policy speeches and strategic documents, we could conclude that the Biden administration inherited much of policy regarding China from its predecessor.⁵⁷

As illustrated above, as the demand for strategic cooperation with China waned rapidly, U.S. government is more willing to play the Taiwan card. Therefore, U.S. strategic calculation on Taiwan remains unchanged from the Trump to Biden administration. So do their policy on cross-Strait affairs. But that’s quite another matter during the Barack Obama administration. Soon after a ten-year honeymoon thanks to U.S.-China strategic cooperation on global antiterrorism was over, the Obama administration released its “Asia Rebalancing” strategy in 2011, seeking to “rebalance” China’s rising influence in the region. The U.S. government did not substantially change its China policy, nevertheless. This indicates the important role of the domestic-level variables and the President’s perceptions of China in explaining U.S. policy thinking on China. During his two terms, President Obama repeatedly expressed that U.S. government welcomed the rise of China.⁵⁸ Americans held negative views of China, but still far better than that after the Trump presidency.⁵⁹ In short, the Obama presidency maintained a cooperative relationship with Beijing and, equally importantly, did not hype up China threat in spite of Beijing’s ascending influence in the system. U.S.-Taiwan ties of course have become an increasingly important factor in U.S. policy toward Taiwan and thus have an impact on

Washington's policy toward Beijing. There is little doubt that under the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Taipei has become more compliant than ever with Washington. An active response to U.S. push for U.S.-made chips, the DPP authorities even "gifted" the world's most valuable semiconductor producer—Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC)—to the United States.⁶⁰ Indeed, Taiwan's attitude becomes more crucial in U.S. decision making on the cross-Straits affairs as both sides have been strengthening their bilateral ties. One may argue that, if the DPP authorities appreciated Pelosi's support but dissuaded her from visiting Taiwan merely because it was not a good idea for her to do so at a time when cross-Straits and U.S.-China relations were highly strained, the so-called fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis could then be avoided.⁶¹ There is little doubt that the Ukraine war unprecedentedly intensified Washington's anxiety over an imminent threat posed by a powerful China, fearing that the PLA would use force against Taiwan as Russia did to Ukraine—as revealed in the first section of this article. More importantly, Americans' concerns and uneasiness have been amplified by Beijing's foreign policy approach, notably its "no-limits" partnership with Moscow.⁶² We will apply this theoretical framework to the policy analysis to show that the Ukraine war has accelerated U.S. Taiwan policy change initiated since the Trump presidency.

b. Continuity of U.S. Taiwan Policy since the Trump Presidency

Guided by its strategic competitive policy against China, the United States started to rapidly and dramatically change Taiwan policy under the Trump presidency.⁶³ Given the limited space, some major trendlines will be simply reviewed here.

The first relates to U.S. efforts to substantially improve its military and security partnership with Taiwan to the extent that the trend may be called as *quasi*-alignment. The Trump administration had normalized arms sales to the island, hitting a record high both in terms of frequency (11 times) and total value (more than US\$18 billion).⁶⁴ The second major change shows a *quasi*-official relationship between Washington and Taipei with regard to their political contacts. Two years after President Trump signed the *Taiwan Travel Act* into law in March 2018, Keith Krach, Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, was delegated to visit Taiwan in September 2020, making the most senior U.S. cabinet member to visit Taipei since Washington's severance of diplomatic relations with the island. An effort to fundamentally "normalize" U.S.-Taiwan

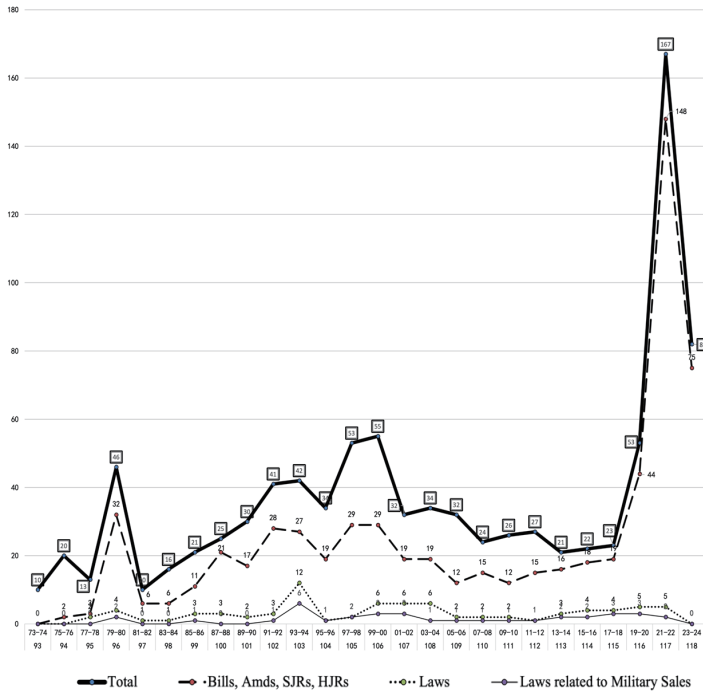
relations, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced to lift all “self-imposed restrictions” on the bilateral ties on January 9, 2021.⁶⁵ As the Department of State no longer acts as a “gatekeeper” more concerned with avoiding offending the Chinese mainland too much and thus restricting relations with Taiwan,⁶⁶ the Trump presidency witnessed an unprecedentedly active role of Congress in U.S. Taiwan policy. Capitol Hill introduced a huge number of legislative proposals related to Taiwan in the four years. As shown in the following Figure 2, the 115th Congress (17–18) and 116th Congress (19–20) proposed 23 and 53 legislative cases regarding Taiwan, respectively, in which four and five bills became laws. Compared with previous Congress, the four years under the Trump presidency have set rare trends in terms of lawmakers’ Taiwan-related legislative activities. These trends include, for example, introduction of more legally binding bills *vis-à-vis* non-binding resolutions, enactment of more public laws, and concentration on more military and security cooperation with Taiwan.⁶⁷

Comparatively, the Biden administration has indeed adopted some new policy measures regarding Taiwan, notably its much emphasis on democracy and value, and on policy coordination with U.S. allies and partners. By any measure, however, the Democratic administration has inherited most of policy options on Taiwan from its Republican predecessor as the above section illustrates. It reaffirms U.S. commitment to Taiwan’s defense capabilities by regular arms sales, ramps up efforts to strengthen U.S.-Taiwan relations by more cooperation with Capitol Hill, and emphasizes the strategic role of Taiwan by embedding the island in its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy. In consideration of Americans’ aggravating perceptions of a powerful China and their intensified anxiety about the threat triggered by the Ukraine war, we argue that the war accelerated the pace of U.S. Taiwan policy change that was initiated by the Trump presidency. We will use method of descriptive analysis and content analysis to show how the war has accelerated U.S. policy change on Taiwan.

Figure 2 presents an overall trend of Taiwan-related legislative proposals introduced by members of Congress in the past five decades from 1973 to 2023, demonstrating the ups and downs of congressional activism in U.S. Taiwan policy making. Lawmakers introduced record 167 Taiwan-related pieces of legislation in the two sessions (one year per session) of the 117th Congress (2021–22), making it the most active Congress on cross-Strait affairs in history. Among these legislative cases, 148 are legally binding bills, amendments, and joint resolutions (BAJs hereafter) and nearly 70 are proposed after the Ukraine war. Our content analysis of these legislation

indicates that even some of those cases introduced before the war are stimulated more or less by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine since 2014. A majority of cases are designed to build a strengthening U.S.-Taiwan military partnership and increase deterrence against the Chinese mainland, with more than one fourth (nearly 40) of the total number of legislation relates to arms sales. The 118th Congress, which convened on January 3, 2023 and will end on January 3, 2025, even has already proposed 82 Taiwan-related pieces of legislation (including 75 BAJs and 20 of them contain arms sales-related items) in less than seven months (as of August 1, 2023). This suggests that more pieces of Taiwan-related legislation should be expected to be proposed in this Congress than the previous one. If looking into details of some legislation, we could find more evidence of lawmakers' growing enthusiasm in the Taiwan issue is correlated with the Ukraine war. "Taiwan" has been mentioned more than 470 times in the 1772-page yearly must-pass act NDAA 2023, while it was merely mentioned 82 times in the 910-page NDAA 2022 that became effective in December 2021.⁶⁸

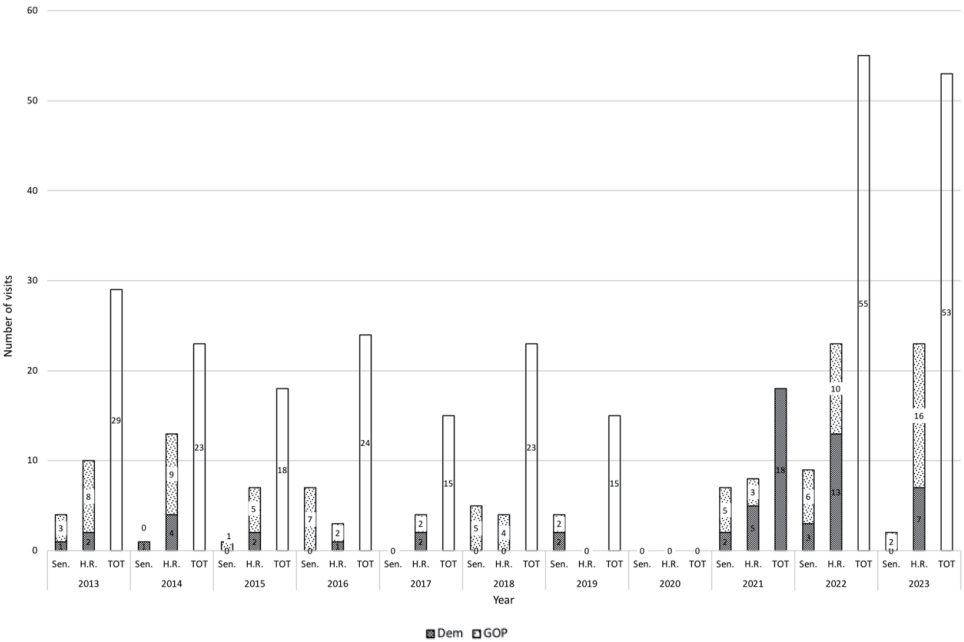
Figure 2: Taiwan-Related Legislative Proposals in U.S. Congress, 1973–2023



Source: Compiled by the authors from <https://www.congress.gov/> (updated as of 1 August 2023).

Since it is difficult for the Biden administration to send cabinet-level officials to visit Taiwan, we could otherwise observe visits by lawmakers. Figure 3 shows the trend of visits by member of Congress and their aids and advisors in the past ten years (no visit in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), which is significantly correlated with the Ukraine war factor because all the record number of 55 visits in 2022 occurred after 24 February 2022 when the Ukraine crisis escalated. Adding to the number of visits in 2023, the number in the past two years has exploded, reaching to more than 100 (57 lawmakers included) while the number in the past eight years (2013–2021) is 147 (78 lawmakers included). The rest four months in this year will see more visits by lawmakers as the war in Europe turns into a protracted one.

Figure 3: Visits to Taiwan by U.S. Lawmakers and Their Aides and Advisors, 2013–2023



Source: Compiled by the authors from <https://www.congress.gov/> (updated as of 1 August 2023).

Note: TOT refers to the total number of lawmakers and their aids and advisors visited Taiwan in a given year.

4. Prospect of U.S. Taiwan Policy in the Post-Ukraine War Era

The Ukraine war is expected to accelerate U.S. alteration of Taiwan policy in the near future. Besides this, there are some other key driving factors and constraints we need to take into account when looking forward to the prospect of U.S. Taiwan policy in the post-Ukraine war era.

a. Driving Factors of U.S. Taiwan Policy

According to the three-level theoretical framework we construct, U.S. Taiwan policy is an output of interactions among defined variables on the systemic level (U.S.-China power distribution), the domestic level (President-Congress relationship, interest groups, policy debates, public opinion), and individual level (U.S. President). In this sense, the change of U.S. policy on cross-Strait issues should be viewed as a historical process that evolves continuously as U.S.-China power distribution changes. As the most decisive driving factor fundamentally shaping U.S. Taiwan policy, the changing world order featured by power distribution between the United States and China functions mainly through intervening variables on domestic and individual levels – through particularly the President, political elites and the public's perceptions of China threat. Factors on the two levels could also be driving factors, by accelerating or delaying, the evolution of U.S. policy toward Taiwan in varying degrees and during different historical periods.

Today's world order is still in a state of unipolarity, with the United States being the dominant power in terms of its relative material power capabilities *vis-à-vis* any other major states in the system. Nonetheless, China's resurgence with growing material power capabilities brings about impetus for change of the system and therefore affects the way it is interacting with and is perceived by the United States. As power distribution tilts more toward China's favor, the willingness of U.S. government to use Taiwan as a strategic asset is expected to be stronger. This traditional wisdom held by Western realists particularly indicates how the systemic pressures would shape Washington's strategic thinking on China, including the Taiwan issue. Perhaps more crucial is that Americans are now exaggerating the threat posed by China due to its seemingly rapid rise *vis-à-vis* the United States. This leads to the conclusion shared by a growing number of American pundits and experts that "avoiding

U.S.-China competition is futile,” claiming that the best option is to manage U.S.-China strategic rivalry before the two world’s largest defense spenders would meet on the battleground.⁶⁹

Historically, the changing power distribution—either real or perceived—between major states and the ensuing transformation of world order provides more incentives for variables on the domestic and individual levels to alter U.S. policy on Taiwan. This is precisely why the past around two years have seen the unprecedented enthusiasm of administration officials, members of Congress, policy experts, among others, to participate in U.S. Taiwan policy-making process. More specifically, a less restrained administration on the Taiwan issue encouraged an unprecedented activism of Congress on the issue, hinting at cooperation between the executive and legislative branches to play the Taiwan card amid U.S. strategic competition against China. Institutionally, this new context encourages members of Congress to reclaim their roles in policy-making process relating to Taiwan. Lawmakers from both chambers are competing for proposing Taiwan-related legislation and practicing congressional diplomacy pertaining to Taiwan. Under Secretary of State Krach and Speaker Pelosi’s visits to Taiwan in 2018 and 2022, respectively, created some new precedents for American government officials’ visits to the island in the past decades. While U.S. strategic community is heatedly debating U.S. policy toward Taiwan, interest groups and the public become more likely to voice their concerns about the escalating tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Consequently, both of American elites and the public’s perceptions of U.S. Taiwan policy are changing, becoming increasingly anxious to the imminent yet exaggerated threat posed by a seemingly powerful China and its potential use of force in the Strait.⁷⁰ All these efforts by domestic and individual levels combined contributed to a faster pace for Washington to change its Taiwan policy in recent years.

Given the decisive role of the systemic pressures as well as U.S. perceptions of China’s relative power distribution in the system, we may even argue that even if the European war were not involving Russia and Ukraine—perhaps a war anywhere relating to Taiwan in some way—Washington’s policy on Taiwan could still be profoundly affected. In other words, with or without the Ukraine war, systemic pressures will continue to function through U.S. perceptions of—and their policy measures to address—the China threat that looms large because of U.S. perceived shift in distribution of U.S.-China relative power and its growing concerns about China’s governance model as well as Beijing’s

foreign policy approach. Taiwan could also play a more critical role in U.S. decision-making process concerning the Taiwan issue as its compliance with Washington grows. In the meantime, domestic and individual factors could also play a role in affecting—most probably accelerating—U.S. Taiwan policy change in the post-Ukraine war era.

b. Constraints on U.S. Taiwan Policy

By the same token, the United States is confronted with various constraints when making policy regarding Taiwan. We are not proposing that power transition is happening despite the fact that the balance of power between the United States and China keeps dynamically changing. However, whether confirm or deny it, the United States is virtually in a mutually, albeit asymmetrical, vulnerable relationship with China in view of the PLA's much bigger and much faster buildup of nuclear weapons. This shows the necessity for Washington to engage Beijing on strategic stability to address challenges in ways that minimize the likelihood of a catastrophic war most likely in the Taiwan Strait.⁷¹ Some other closely intertwined challenges just indicate the urgency for American elites to cautiously deal with the Taiwan issue in case of provoking China. U.S. world's highest yet still growing national debt has led to yearslong U.S. military underinvestment and this has "left the US dangerously unprepared for war with China."⁷² The decline of somewhat American military primacy had a direct impact on U.S. public confidence in the military as well. According to a latest poll by Gallup in 2023, Americans' confidence in U.S. military hits a 20-year low.⁷³ Besides, it remains unknown to what extent U.S. allies would involve themselves in a real armed conflict scenario against China in the Strait. Furthermore, some recent war games conducted by U.S. Congress and research institutions revealed U.S. failure to stop the PLA from taking Taiwan.⁷⁴ Similarly, U.S.-China economic relations are so interdependent that they could be described as mutual assured economic destruction, suggesting that "the economic and social impact on each would almost certainly outweigh any benefits that war could achieve" should it occur.⁷⁵ Although the U.S. government indicated that it would use all tools within the integrated deterrence to deny and punish the Chinese mainland if it were to attack Taiwan, it has to cautiously deal with the systemic pressures and present challenges it is confronted when making any Taiwan-related policy.

The different logic to deal with the structural dilemma—whether or not and to what extent to play the Taiwan card to deter the looming China threat on the one hand, and to prevent the Chinese mainland from using force against Taiwan and therefore maintain U.S. interest in the Strait on the other—is demonstrated in the three schools in U.S. strategic community and government officials. While the school of Taiwan defenders is seemingly rising to a favorable position due mainly to the Ukraine war factor, the position of the school of *status quo* maintainers that has long been the mainstream and still has the majority of advocates is secure. According to *status quo* maintainers, Taiwan is neither a strategic asset nor a strategic liability. Instead of playing the Taiwan card, they argue that the Taiwan issue should be solved in a peaceful manner and that the United States should do what it could to maintain the *status quo*. The increasingly marginalized school of Taiwan abandoners goes even further than the moderate *status quo* maintainers, calling for U.S. withdrawal from cross-Strait affairs. The differences between the three schools reflect the function of and their different reactions to the systemic pressures, revealing the structural constraint on U.S. Taiwan policy change. It also displays that U.S. policy on Taiwan is still and will continue to be constrained by its “one China” policy, no matter how hollow it is.

5. Conclusion

The era of great-power competition has spotlighted the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war ever since the two countries’ nearly decade long conflict escalated in the spring of 2022. The war did not fundamentally reshape U.S. calculation on Taiwan. But it has accelerated the pace of U.S. policy change by amplifying Americans’ anxiety about the imminent threat posed by a seemingly powerful China and the PLA’s use of force against Taiwan. The current U.S. Taiwan policy change should be thought as continuity of that under the Trump presidency, which had started to revise U.S. policy on Taiwan since around 2018. But in the shadow of the Ukraine war, the United States has sped up the pace of policy adjustments and resulted to the “Ukrainization” of its Taiwan policy. In order to investigate the rationale behind Washington’s strategic calculation on Taiwan, we construct a three-level theoretical framework. We argue that it is world order characterized mainly by relative power distribution between the United States and China on the systemic level that

fundamentally shapes the trajectories of U.S. Taiwan policy. Historically, the United States would have an about-face on Taiwan if the world order reached a turning point. It armed Taiwan militarily throughout the 1950s and 1960s and abandoned the island in the 1970s and 1980s. In the post-Cold War era when the United States remains to be the sole superpower, Washington's Taiwan policy mainly depends on its strategic demand for cooperation with China. As China's rise gains momentum due to its unique national governance system, the United States believes power transition is occurring and perceives China as "systemic challenge" and "existential threat." U.S. perceived shift in power distribution encourages more domestic factors to participate in U.S. Taiwan policy making, contributing to faster policy adjustments regarding Taiwan.

In the foreseeable future, we should expect that, as U.S. perceived power shift and its spiral of China threat perception continue, the United States is more determined to alter its policy on Taiwan to its own advantage and the trend of "Ukrainization" of U.S. Taiwan policy is to be reinforced for the sake of its national interest. This would continue to inject more uncertainties into the deteriorating U.S.-China relations and tense cross-Taiwan Strait ties. At the same time, the systemic pressures would also constrain U.S. strategic calculation on Taiwan given U.S. and the PRC's mutually vulnerable relationship and their consensus on no war in the Strait, indicating the limits of the Ukraine war factor on U.S. Taiwan policy. In brief, to navigate through the uncharted waters in the Taiwan Strait, a stable U.S.-China relationship based on U.S. accurate perception of China's relative power capabilities, its national governance model as well as its diplomatic approach will be indispensable.

Notes

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