

# Domestic Coalitions and U.S. Security Interests: How Nationalist Hawks and Competitive Engagers Have Recalibrated Strategic Ambiguity on Taiwan and China

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Dean P. Chen, Ph.D.  
Professor of Political Science  
Ramapo College of New Jersey  
[dchen@ramapo.edu](mailto:dchen@ramapo.edu)

**Paper abstract:** *Under both the Donald Trump and Joe Biden Administrations, the United States has heightened its strategic, economic and high-tech rivalry with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The emergence and consolidation of two security coalitions within the U.S. foreign policymaking apparatus have further bolstered the national interest understanding of identifying China as America's greatest geopolitical challenge and threat, and with that, the imperative of deepening Washington's support for Taiwan are also enacted across all levels. Many seminal works have already covered these developments in detail, so this paper will focus more specifically on the attributes of these two major U.S. domestic security factions—the (1) nationalist hawks and (2) competitive engagers—their similarities and differences, and how they've shaped U.S. policy towards both China and Taiwan. The decades-old U.S. strategic ambiguity framework hasn't been overturned yet, though indeed is being revamped with the formal inclusion of Reagan's Six Assurances to the "one China" formula as well as the Biden administration's reinterpretation of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), leading to the president's repeated pledges to defend the self-governing democracy should Beijing mount a military attack. The author's key argument: once a policy institution is being reinforced with a more hardened approach, especially in the realm of national security affairs, it's unlikely to be rescinded by a successor administration because the latter wouldn't want to be criticized as being soft on America's adversary. A case in point—despite their divergent visions and political stances, Biden, for instance, hasn't reversed Trump's tariffs on China. If anything, President Biden has only doubled down on his GOP predecessor's protectionist and restrictive measures on the PRC. In a similar vein, whoever prevails from the Harris-Trump contest for the 2024 U.S. presidential race, the next White House occupant is unlikely to unwind the refurbished Taiwan Strait articulation and equilibrium put in place by both the 45<sup>th</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> presidents.*

## I. Revisiting State-Centered Realism: The Executive Dominance over U.S. Foreign Policy

1. This paper puts forward an analysis of how the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s increasingly coercive and belligerent behaviors on Taiwan and stepped-up strategic/economic competitions with Washington have fostered an American-centric nationalist consensus within the United States that unites both the Democratic and

- Republican foreign policy elites within the executive and legislative branches to push back on Beijing. They have agreed that the liberal engagement approach, implemented since Nixon, was ineffective in the US bid to transform Communist China (deLisle & Goldstein 2021; Doshi 2021). Thus, both the Trump and Biden administrations, unlike their post-Nixon predecessors who opted for conciliatory interactions with China and treaded cautiously on America's Taiwan policy, are prompted to harden their stances on the PRC while warming up Washington's relations with Taipei.
2. Nevertheless, despite the constraining influences of domestic politics and nationalist determinants, the United States foreign policy and national interest interpretations remain to fall under the sole prerogatives of the central executive branch departments and officials (namely the White House, National Security Council, the Departments of State, Defense, Treasury, Commerce, the CIA, etc.) responsible for handling national security affairs (Krasner 1978; Zakaria 1998).
  3. These top foreign policy decision-makers, headed by the US president, have identified the PRC as the most consequential "revisionist power" and "geopolitical test" for the United States in the twenty-first century. This existential threat or foreign crisis has given Washington's central policymakers a rare opportunity to rise above domestic partisan fray, mobilize national resources, marshal like-minded international allies and partners, and refashion America's strategic approach to compete and balance against Beijing. As Stephen Krasner defined for a state-centered realist perspective: "[It] treats the state as a unified actor that must confront internal as well as external constraints.... However, in its pursuit of the national interest, the state may also have to overcome resistance from domestic groups. This vision, in which the state stands against both external and internal opponents, has its historical antecedents in the writings of the early analysts of state building" (Krasner 1919, 79). In a similar vein, Jeff Frieden examined how the international crises of the 1930s had provided the FDR administration with a more objective and consolidated executive power, authority, and autonomy to supplant many of the long entrenched domestic economic and political interests that "kept policy stalemated and allowed a new group of political leaders to reconstitute a more coherent set of [foreign economic] policies." (Frieden, 1988, 62).
  4. Notwithstanding their heightened hostility towards China, US leaders, however, do not desire a complete breakdown of US-Chinese relations, which would be unpalatable to America's national interest given the many transnational issue areas requiring from the PRC, including climate change and nuclear non-proliferations. On the Taiwan Strait, the US government has strived to put forward a balanced strategy, combing both a continuation of strategic ambiguity albeit with greater clarity to signal America's robust support of Taiwan, even with a possible US military involvement, in case China escalates and launches a military invasion of the island democracy (Haass and Sacks 2020; Sacks 2023; Yeh et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024).

## II. Coalition Groups in the US Foreign Policy Decision-Makers

1. The first group is the nationalist or “Jacksonian” hawks, represented by many officials and policy analysts from the first Trump administration (Chen 2019) as well as congressional members who focus on the China challenge and zero-sum strategic and economic contest with the United States (Sutter 2023; Pottinger & Gallagher 2024). Many may serve in a second Trump administration. They’ve emphasized “peace through strength” (O’Brien 2024), a stronger military defense and deterrence capacity to prevent Beijing from taking military moves, including turning the Taiwan Strait into a “boiling moat” (Pottinger 2024) and preparing for a “strategy of denial” (Colby 2022), asking partners and allies to enhance their own defense expenditures and resolve, and using economic protectionist measures like tariffs to rectify trade imbalances (Lighthizer 2024).
2. The second group is the competitive engagers, represented by policy elites in or affiliated with the Biden administration and would also likely be on the team of a Harris administration (Campbell & Sullivan 2019; Lissner & Rapp-Hooper 2020; Doshi 2021, 2024; Medeiros 2024). This group’s strategic approach with China can be summarized, in three words: “invest, align, and compete” as noted in a speech delivered by the Secretary of State Antony Blinken in May 2022. They’ve stressed that they would compete with China intensely but would also maintain open communication and guardrails to avoid their rivalry from veering into greater conflicts. The US has bolstered its own industrial policies, such as the CHIPS and Science Act, Inflation Reduction Act, etc., to reinforce its economic innovation and resilience.

## III. The Emergence of a Nationalist America under Trump and Biden<sup>1</sup>

1. In the decades after 1979 and especially in the post-Cold War era up until Donald Trump’s inauguration as the US 45<sup>th</sup> president in January 2017, successive US administrations (whether Republicans or Democrats) had endorsed a liberal constructive engagement with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The US policy was “rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the postwar international order would liberalize [and democratize] China.”<sup>2</sup>
2. To avoid provoking the Chinese on an issue deemed highly sensitive to their conception of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the US had mostly shown deference to the PRC on the Taiwan issue, lest a more explicit standup for the ROC would risk damaging the broader Sino-American cooperative relations (Chen 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> This section is updated, revised and expanded from this author’s previous work: Dean P. Chen, “Competitions and Coalitions: An Emerging U.S. Domestic Nationalist Consensus, Executive Branch Prerogatives, and the Taiwan Strait Tensions,” in Wei-chin Lee, ed., *Protests, Pandemic, and Security Predicaments: Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and the U.S. in the 2020s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 347-396.

<sup>2</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 18, 2017), 25, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. Accessed August 21, 2022.

- The Trump administration underscored the ineffectiveness of that longstanding conciliatory approach (Pompeo 2020), contending America’s commercial and diplomatic engagement with the PRC has not “transformed Communist China’s authoritarian state into a free and open society that respects private property, the rule of law, and international rules of commerce.”<sup>3</sup>
3. Instead, China, under President Xi, has become more of a “personality-centered dictatorship.” Chinese digital autocratic capacity has been accelerated by its “rapid advances in technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, facial recognition, and social credit scores,” providing Beijing with the means for a high-tech totalitarian society (Economy 2018; Wright 2020; Dickson 2022).
  4. The 20<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress in October 2022 not only gave Xi a norm-breaking third-term as China’s core leader but also enhanced his Marxist-Leninist visions to consolidate the party-state control domestically and wage “struggles” against the U.S.-led international order (Rudd 2024).
  5. Meanwhile, the US has also recognized the irrationality of how a desire to placate China based on a lofty idealism has led to a longtime unfair treatment and banishment of democratic Taiwan from the international community. Xi’s heightened authoritarianism and concentration of political power have appeared unrelenting and focused on strategically displacing Washington’s influence in the Indo-Pacific region and Europe. Beijing’s reticence and tacit support of Putin’s military aggressions on Ukraine since February 2022 further eroded mutual trust with Washington and its like-minded democratic allies and partners.
  6. With Taiwan, the Xi government has taken a harsher approach—using various “sharp power” means (including disinformation, united-front, subversive, cognitive warfare) campaigns on top of the usual military intimidations, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation—to pressure Taiwan, dismissing Taipei’s pledge for keeping the cross-strait status quo. The Tsai administration (2016-24), in the opinions of many, was doing their best to satisfy Beijing’s demands, without undermining Taiwan’s democracy and security (Bush 2021), and it was Beijing which was acting intransigently and creating unnecessary obstacles to stymie meaningful cross-strait interactions. By the same token, the current Lai administration has encountered very similar and, perhaps worse, treatment from China as Beijing views the new administration with more heightened skepticism and mistrust.
  7. Given these circumstances and with rising domestic discontent about economic globalization, free trade, and liberal internationalism, a strong inward-looking/protectionist sentiment and public preference has paved the way for the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Schwaller 2018) and, arguably, forcing the more globalist Biden to adjust his administration’s economic and strategic approaches toward China and Taiwan with a more nationalist and mercantilist bent (Haass 2021; Mathews 2024). Biden has kept Trump-era tariffs in place and even increased them on Chinese EVs, solar cells, and other industrial and high-tech imports. At the same

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<sup>3</sup> The White House, “Remarks by Vice President Pence at the Frederic V. Malek Memorial Lecture,” October 24, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-frederic-v-malek-memorial-lecture/>. Accessed August 21, 2022.

time, the Biden officials have promoted a “small yard, high fence” strategy to “de-risk” from the PRC.

#### IV. Congressional Actions

1. In the Trump era, Capitol Hill promoted many pro-Taiwan legislations at an “unusually fast pace,” knowing the president would most likely sign-off on them amid spats with China over trade and geopolitics.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act (2018), TAIPEI Act (2020), and the Taiwan Assurance Act (2020), which called for an enhancement of official contact between American and Taiwan government officials, the strengthening of Taiwan’s international participation, and the fending off of Beijing’s coercive attempts to interfere with the ROC’s democratic governance.<sup>5</sup> These were in addition to the annual National Defense Authorization (NDAA) Acts signed off by the president that included provisions to reinforce US military and security cooperation and coordination with the island democracy.
2. Likewise, Biden signed the NDAA for FYS 2022 in December 2021 that also contained provisions supporting a deeper US-Taiwan military collaboration for the island’s self-defense. In May 2022, Biden signed legislation that directs the secretary of state to help Taiwan regain observer status at the World Health Assembly (WHA), from which the island was excluded due to Beijing’s firm opposition since 2017.<sup>6</sup> As of this writing, there are many other Taiwan-specific bills in the pipeline of the US Congress, including the Taiwan Policy Act, Taiwan Symbols of Sovereignty Act, Taiwan Defense Act, Taiwan Fellowship Act, Taiwan Relations Reinforcement Act, Taiwan Diplomatic Review Act, Taiwan International Solidarity Act, and Taiwan Peace and Stability Act, to name just a few.<sup>7</sup>

#### V. The White House and the National Interest Prerogatives

1. In addition, the US president/executive branch has also fine-tuned the US One-China/strategic ambiguity policy framework to update it with the changing strategic circumstances across the Taiwan Strait, in particularly by declassifying and formally including the Reagan era Six Assurances into the policy matrix starting with the Trump administration (Stilwell 2020) and continued onward with the Biden White House. The addition of the assurances has vastly expanded the scope and latitude of Washington’s relations with Taipei in strategic, diplomatic, security, and economic dimensions (Chen 2022).
2. The Trump administration has liberalized contacts and interactions between American and Taiwan government officials. President Trump’s signing statements on

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Jennings, “Why U.S. Lawmakers Introduce Bill after Bill to Help Taiwan,” *Voice of America*, August 4, 2020, accessed August 4, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/why-us-lawmakers-introduce-bill-after-bill-help-taiwan>.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Lohman, “On Taiwan: A Congressional Update,” The Heritage Foundation, December 9, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/taiwan-congressional-update>. Accessed August 21, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> “Biden Signs Bill to Help Taiwan Regain WHA Observer Status,” *Focus Taiwan News*, May 14, 2022, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202205140004>. Accessed August 21, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Taiwan Watch, *Why and How the U.S. Matters* (Taipei: Linking Publishers, 2021), chapters 7-8.

- a series of NDAA during his administration provided qualifications with respect to Taiwan.
3. Frequent high-ranking officials and presidential envoys visiting Taiwan.
  4. Taiwan's cutting edge manufacturing capacity of advanced semiconductor chips have deepened a techno-democratic relationship with Washington and other democratic partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.
  5. Both Trump and Biden officials have consistently and explicitly noted the differences between the US One-China policy and the PRC's One-China principle (Chen & Yeh 2025).
  6. Biden's repeated assertions (at least five times) that the US military would be dispatched to help Taiwan if attacked were qualified by officials. But they argued that the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) did not exclude Washington from militarily intervening in a Taiwan Strait crisis and President Biden didn't provide any specific details regarding how those military involvement, if any, would be carried out (Chen 2024).
  7. Arms sales and deepening US-Taiwan military cooperation.
  8. Trump vs. Harris in November 2024—both candidates have not been straightforward with respect to how their respective administration would deal with a Taiwan Strait military conflict. With Trump, fears have risen not only from Taiwan but also from America's longstanding allies and partners around the world that if the former president is reelected, abandonment or an ask for higher payment may be expected of their strategic ties with/dependence on American defense.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Trump mentioned to *The Wall Street Journal* that he would impose an additional 150 to 200 percent tariffs on China if it were to "go into Taiwan." Trump added as well that he and Xi had a "very strong relationship." The latter "respects" him so wouldn't pursue a military blockade of the island democracy.<sup>9</sup>
  9. Kamala Harris, in contrast, has reiterated the standard US One-China mantra of the Biden administration while refraining from providing any substantive details. In a recent interview with the CBS, she didn't respond directly whether the US, under her administration, would use military force to defend Taiwan but stressed, "I'm not going to get into hypotheticals. But listen, we need to make sure that we maintain a 'One China' policy, but that includes supporting Taiwan's ability to defend itself, including what we need to do to ensure the freedom of the Taiwan Strait."<sup>10</sup>
  10. These ambiguities aside, either Trump or Harris will continue forward with upholding America's national strategic interest regarding China and Taiwan.

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<sup>8</sup> "Trump's Interview" *Bloomberg Businessweek* (August 1, 2024), [https://www.bloomberg.com/magazine/businessweek/24\\_15](https://www.bloomberg.com/magazine/businessweek/24_15). See also David Sacks, "Would Trump Abandon Taiwan?" *Asia Unbound* (October 16, 2024), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/would-trump-abandon-taiwan>.

<sup>9</sup> James Taranto, "Weekend Interview: Trump Tangles with the Journal's Editors," *The Wall Street Journal* (October 18, 2024), [https://www.wsj.com/opinion/donald-trump-the-bully-with-a-heart-of-gold-2024-presidential-election-dd922dd6?mod=opinion\\_lead\\_pos5](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/donald-trump-the-bully-with-a-heart-of-gold-2024-presidential-election-dd922dd6?mod=opinion_lead_pos5).

<sup>10</sup> "Kamala Harris and Tim Walz: More from Their 60 Minutes Interviews," CBS News (October 7, 2024), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kamala-harris-and-tim-walz-more-from-their-60-minutes-interviews/>.