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Strategic Ambiguity in US-Taiwan Relations During the Donald Trump Administration

Abstract: Strategic ambiguity, or the deliberate policy of uncertainty as to whether the United States would use force to defend Taiwan against an invasion by the People's Republic of China, has been the centrepiece of US policy towards the Taiwan issue for decades. This paper discusses the factors driving the redefinition of strategic ambiguity and its recalibration throughout Donald Trump's presidency (2017–2021). The fundamental driver of this change was to balance the rising power of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The paper applied offensive realism as a theoretical framework for its analysis. Under President Donald Trump, Washington modified its policy of strategic ambiguity, explicitly framing relations with Taiwan within a broader Indo-Pacific strategy. While the US retained key elements of strategic ambiguity, including the 'One China' policy, it added new features to deploy it offensively against Beijing's growing regional hegemony. The increased dynamism and unpredictability of relations with Taiwan were matched by a welcoming attitude towards strengthening Taiwanese identity and highlighting the systemic differences between communist China and democratic Taiwan. America stepped up arms sales and encouraged Taiwan to build its self-defence capabilities. Washington engaged in countering Chinese attempts to isolate Taiwan internationally and included it in restructuring global supply chains. Although the United States has not formally revised the boundaries of the 'One China' policy, the modification of strategic ambiguity increased Taiwan's prominence in US-China power competition and pushed back the prospect of peaceful unification.

Keywords: *Taiwan, China, United States, strategic ambiguity, Indo-Pacific, realism, Trump, deterrence, war, balance of power*

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Successive US administrations over the decades have used the concept of strategic ambiguity as the axis of US policy regarding the Taiwan issue. The essence of strategic ambiguity is the active management of perceptions in international relations to influence states' policies

(Jervis, 1976). This policy is also known as deliberate ambiguity and is closely related to the security dilemma concept. It derives from the Cold War policy of deterrence as described by T. Schelling (1966), in which corresponding guarantees accompany the threat of the use of force. The possibility of harming another state motivates it to avoid conflict. This theory was further developed by T. Christensen and used to analyse US policy towards Taiwan and China (Christensen, 2002). In a narrower sense, strategic ambiguity is understood as a policy of dual deterrence, pursued by the US in parallel towards both China and Taiwan (Bush, 2004).

In US policy towards Taiwan, strategic ambiguity meant deliberate uncertainty as to whether the US would use force to defend the island in case of an invasion by the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Antonowicz, 1997; Łukasiewicz, 2016). At the same time, however, Washington deliberately allowed for the possibility that the US would not intervene militarily, especially if a conflict were to be triggered by Taipei's actions in going too far to gain independence. On the one hand, the policy of strategic ambiguity restrained Beijing's temptations to resolve the Taiwan issue through invasion, while on the other hand, curtailed Taipei's pro-independence moves. This policy had a stabilising effect on the region's *status quo* and security. It forced China to exercise self-restraint in its policy towards Taiwan to avoid war with the United States. It also forced Taiwan to restrain its independence ambitions, as the cost could be that its greatest ally would abandon it.

While Washington has pursued a policy of strategic ambiguity since the shift of diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, its origins date back to China's civil war in 1940s. Washington formalised its alliance with Taipei by concluding the Mutual Defence Treaty between the US and the Republic of China in 1954 (Mutual Defence Treaty between the US and the Republic of China). The treaty gave the United States flexibility over the decision whether to activate its alliance obligations and was limited in its territorial scope (it did not cover the islands of Quemoy and Matsu off the coast of China). Tensions across the Taiwan Strait in 1954–1955, 1958, 1995–1996 and 2003–2006 resulted in near-war escalation between China and Taiwan with US involvement. However, America's supremacy resulted in both sides resolving to maintain the status quo (Chen, 2012).

The normalisation of relations with the PRC, triggered by the need to contain the Soviet Union, and the severance of diplomatic ties with the Republic of China on Taiwan opened a period of strategic ambiguity in US policy on the Taiwan issue (Grabowski, 2007). The US and China reached an agreement on three successive Joint Communiqués in 1972, 1979, and 1982 to assure Beijing that Washington would not support Taiwan's sovereignty (Tucker, 2005; 2009). For its part, the US, directly following its formal establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC, passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979 to reassure Taipei that Washington had no intention to abandon Taiwan. The US acknowledged the 'One China' policy and recognised that the Chinese themselves should peacefully resolve the Taiwan issue. At the same time, Washington continued to sell arms to Taiwan. The US offered "Six Assurances" to Taiwan in 1982, including its intention to continue supplying arms (Halizak, 2007).

The collapse of the Soviet empire, the events in Tiananmen Square and the internal changes in Taiwan (end of martial law on the island and rapid democratisation) affected US policy towards Taiwan, introducing an element of values into the relationship. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 led Washington to turn to China in the global fight against terrorism. Moreover, the pro-independence policies of President Chen Shui-bian caused Washington to restore balance in its strategic ambiguity policy (Sutter, 2006). On the one hand, US aircraft carriers near Taiwan constituted the largest show of force in Asia since the Vietnam War and deterred China from escalating the conflict during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995–1996). On the other hand, in order to curb Taiwan’s independence ambitions, the United States pursued a “Three no’s” policy, under which it pledged not to support Taiwan’s independence, not to support a “two China” or “one China and one Taiwan” policy, and not to support Taiwan’s membership in international organisations where sovereignty is a condition of membership (Kau, 1999).

In order to facilitate recovery from the 2008–2009 financial crisis, President Obama emphasised economic relations with China. Washington favoured consolidation of the *status quo* between China and Taiwan based on the 1992 consensus¹ and President Ma Ying-jeou’s declaration that during his term there would be no reunification, declaration of Taiwan’s independence or war (Chen, 2017). The Obama administration avoided direct references to Taiwan in its “pivoting towards Asia” strategy.

The outline of President Trump’s predecessors’ use of strategic ambiguity shows that it effectively protected Washington’s interests in East Asia and prevented a war in the Taiwan Strait. It proved to be a flexible instrument for maintaining a status quo favourable to the United States. It stabilised the regional security system and helped de-escalate potentially dangerous tensions. Successive American administrations have consistently and deliberately kept Beijing and Taipei uncertain about the limits of this policy (Pan, 2003).

Due to the topic’s actuality and the unavailability of recently declassified documents, strategic ambiguity during President Trump’s administration lacks comprehensive analysis. A literature review revealed a relatively high number of sources and historical studies on the concept of strategic ambiguity, its origins and evolution under successive US administrations. Of particular note are works by D. P. Chen, Su Chi, J. F. Copper, R. Jervis, T. J. Christensen, R. Bush, N. Bernkopf Tucker, and B. Glaser. Among Polish researchers, it is worth noting the contributions of E. Haliżak, M. Grabowski, and B. Góralczyk, who focused mainly on the consequences of the rise of China’s power, or L. Antonowicz, who studied the issue of Taiwan’s international legal recognition.

¹ The 1992 Consensus is a term referring to a meeting between PRC and Taiwan representatives held in November 1992 in Hong Kong. During the meeting, different interpretations of the one-China principle by neighbours on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait were said to have been agreed upon. The term was only introduced by Su Chi, Secretary-General of the National Security Council of Taiwan, in 2000. The main political forces in Taiwan differ in their assessment of the 1992 consensus.

In analysing President Trump's period in office, the most valuable original documents were those previously unavailable to researchers, including the US Indo-Pacific Strategy that was partially declassified in January 2021. Also noteworthy are the numerous interpretations of Donald Trump's policies published during his term in office, such as the joint work of Hoo Tiang Boon and H. E. Sworn (Boon H. T., 2020), articles by Chinese researcher Zuo Xiyang (2019) or analyses by J. F. Copper (2017), as well as the book *Dangerous Decade* by B. Taylor (2019). An important point of reference was the article by R. Haass and D. Sacks of the Council on Foreign Relations, calling for the abandonment of ambiguity in favour of unequivocal support for Taiwan (Haass, 2020). The counter-arguments in this debate were collected by Ch. L. Glaser, taking the position that the US should focus on real priorities (Glaser, 2021). Worth mentioning is also a collection of articles by Taiwanese authors published in Chinese by the Institute for National Defence and Security Research entitled *Debating on the Strategy Towards Taiwan Strait: Strategic Clarity or Strategic Ambiguity* (Wang, 2020).

This article aims to address the question of whether the policy of strategic ambiguity was redefined during Donald Trump's presidency and, if so, what were the rationales for it. The article attempts to analyse the manifestations of this policy during the period in question, i.e., from the presidential election in November 2016 to the end Donald Trump's term in January 2021. In addition, the article examines the permanent and new elements of strategic ambiguity introduced by President Trump.

The author intends to verify the argument that President Trump's administration maintained strategic ambiguity as a fundamental policy tool towards the Taiwan issue. However, it made far-reaching changes resulting from balancing the rise of China's power. Thus, the United States has used the strengthening of relations with Taiwan as an offensive tool to balance the power of the People's Republic of China.

The theoretical framework used to analyse strategic ambiguity during the presidency of Donald Trump is offensive realism. This choice was determined by its descriptive qualities and its usefulness in understanding the changes in strategic ambiguity introduced to balance the rise of China's power. The analysis uses the concept of offensive realism, developed by John Mearsheimer in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer, 2018). According to offensive realism, the rise of China must provoke a response from the United States and an attempt to contain it. As the US-Chinese rivalry is inevitable, Taiwan will play a key role in the struggle for hegemony.

Offensive realism follows in the footsteps of scholars such as E. H. Carr (1962), H. Morgenthau (1973), and K. Waltz (1979). The underlying base assumption is the constant tendency of states to increase their power at the expense of their rivals. Other assumptions are: (1) Anarchy is a cornerstone of the international system, which pushes states to act to increase their own power and weaken their rivals'. No state, except the hegemon, is interested in the status quo. (2) Every state has a certain offensive military potential. (3) No state is

confident about the intentions of other states. (4) The main objective of any state is survival. (5) States behave rationally.

According to offensive realism, a hegemon is a state powerful enough to dominate all other states in its system. According to Mearsheimer, global hegemony is practically impossible. The emergence of a competitive regional hegemon in another part of the world is disadvantageous for the existing powers. When a potential hegemon appears among the states of a given region, it may be stopped by local powers. The distant hegemon may then employ an offshore balancing strategy. When an exceptionally strong and aggressive potential hegemon appears on the scene and is difficult to contain, the powers have two strategies to choose from: balancing and buck-passing. Mearsheimer also points to the usefulness of creating security problems for a rival regional power to hinder its freedom of action on other continents.

Offensive realism is a useful concept to examine how the United States used strategic ambiguity and relations with Taiwan to balance China's rise (Mearsheimer, 2014). It explains the motivation to counter China's growing regional hegemony, as well as the essence of the changes made by President Trump to US policy towards the Taiwan issue.

The Rationale for Redefining Strategic Ambiguity

The United States' involvement in Taiwan over the past 70 years has been driven by the importance of Taiwan in controlling East Asian sea routes and by its reputation and credibility in Asia (Tucker & Glaser, 2011). The following factors influenced the redefinition of strategic ambiguity towards the Taiwan issue during Donald Trump's presidency: (1) An attempt to rebalance its power rivalry with China; (2) An attempt to alter America's model of global leadership; (3) A change of ruling camp in Taiwan and a consequent shift in policy towards China; and (4) A change in presidential decision-making and communication style under Trump. The confluence of these four factors led to some adaptation in the policy of strategic ambiguity.

The electoral campaign ahead of the 2016 US presidential election highlighted the growing US-China rivalry. Policy towards China emerged as one of the main topics of debate. Presidential candidate Donald Trump advocated a transactional approach to international relations, placing values such as human rights, the rule of law and democracy at the back of his mind.

The main driving factor behind the redefinition of strategic ambiguity under Trump's presidency was **an attempt to rebalance the power rivalry with China** (Hung-jun Chen, 2020). The beginning of the second decade of the 21st century was marked by significant shifts in the global balance of power between the US and China. These changes were gradual rather than revolutionary and can be traced back to China's opening-up policy of the late 1970s, particularly China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 (Halizak, 2005). It was fostered by the doctrine of 韬光养晦 (tāo guāng yǎng huì – to conceal one's

capabilities and intentions), initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s (Góralczyk, 2017). The fifth generation of PRC leaders, led by President Xi Jinping, moved away from this policy, exercising assertiveness and setting ambitious foreign policy goals. China became an active actor in Africa and Latin America, challenging the development aid model delivered by the international community. The Belt and Road Initiative provided it with a global platform for deploying economic power to build political influence. China effectively used existing multilateral organisations and created its own alternative multilateral structures (e.g., Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – AIIB). The “Made in China 2025” strategy envisaged that China would gain a competitive advantage over the rest of the world by 2025. Clearly, China’s main competitor became the United States.

In 2015, just before D. Trump came to power, the Chinese economy amounted to 61% of the US economy (GDP). By comparison, in 1980, China’s GDP was only 7% of US GDP. In 2015, China’s foreign exchange reserves were 3140% of the value of US reserves, and its exports were 51% larger than those of the US. The 2008 financial crisis caused a slowdown in US economic growth but did not fundamentally disrupt the growth rate of the Chinese economy. It accelerated China’s “catch-up” with the US economy. China in 2015 surpassed the United States in the production of ships, steel, aluminium, furniture, clothing, textiles, mobile phones, computers and cars (Allison, 2017). Its GDP measured in purchasing power parity had already overtaken the US in 2013 (Bank, 2019). The above data show a clear shift in the previous strategic advantage to the detriment of the US (Mahbubani, 2020).

From a military perspective, the RAND Corporation’s 2015 US–China Military Scorecard revealed the decline in the US military dominance over China. The report indicated that by 2017 China would outperform or equal the United States in 6 out of 9 areas of conventional force capability. The report discussed the scenario of a conflict around Taiwan: while the US had dominated China in 1996, the forecast for 2017, without prejudging the outcome, indicated a loss of unequivocal US supremacy (Heginbotham, 2017). China began to accentuate its claim to territorial sovereignty over the South China Sea and the East China Sea, rapidly expanding its navy.

The above overview of political, economic, and military factors indicates disruption of Asia’s existing balance of power. The ability of the United States to pursue a policy of containment in the Taiwan Strait has declined. It has been accompanied by uncertainty about Beijing’s intentions and fear of a rapidly rising new power, factors identified by proponents of offensive realism as key motivators of states’ actions. Therefore, a redefinition of strategic ambiguity towards the Taiwan issue was necessary to curb China’s claim to regional hegemony.

The second factor in redefining strategic ambiguity was **Donald Trump’s attempt to change the American model of global leadership**. Trump’s electoral victory reflected a change in the dominant approach to promoting American interests in the world. The Republican election platform rejected the concept of American leadership in the global liberal order (Stokes, 2018). The America First policy overshadowed the previous dogma of

the permanence of alliances. A redefinition of American national interest introduced uncertainty about the limits of American involvement in East Asia, including in the Taiwan Strait. That, in turn, raised concerns about whether the US would be ready to defend Taiwanese democracy against Chinese pressure at the risk of losing economic benefits in its relations with the PRC. In the first year of the Trump presidency, it seemed that Washington could use Taiwan as a bargaining chip to get Beijing to cooperate in neutralising the threat from North Korea (Lee, 2017).

As the perception of China changed and it was increasingly perceived as a rival of the United States, the instrumentalisation of the Taiwan issue in Washington's policy towards Beijing progressed. An increase in Beijing's restrictive and deterrent measures against Taipei gave Washington an opportunity to reassert its support for Taiwan. In line with the offensive realism paradigm, Washington's primary objective was to use the Taiwan issue to curb the hegemonic ambitions of the US's main global competitor.

Third, the modification of the previous US policy towards the Taiwan issue was also marked by **a change in political leadership in Taiwan**. The election of Tsai Ing-wen as president in January 2016 ended the period of cross-strait bridge-building that had lasted through President Ma Ying-jeou's term, i.e., since 2008. While emphasising her democratic credentials, President Tsai Ing-wen refused to accept the 1992 consensus, which implied different interpretations of the "one China" principle by both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Although the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) avoided an explicit declaration of Taiwan independence, in the PRC's view, President Tsai Ing-wen shattered the status quo. The prevailing view among mainland Chinese scholars is that Taiwan's new president upset the cross-strait balance and created tensions, forcing Beijing to take a range of restraining measures, going from restrictions on passenger traffic to military pressure. That, in turn, has increased a sense of insecurity in Taiwan and concerns in Washington (Zuo, 2019). Thus, political changes in Taiwan triggered a reaction from the PRC, which affected the redefinition of US policy towards China and Taiwan. China's aspirations to become a regional hegemon, aiming to expand its control over its immediate neighbourhood, were within the logic of offensive realism.

The fourth factor was **a change in the top leadership in the US, notably manifested in the decision-making and communication style of the new president**. Donald Trump adopted a transactional approach to foreign policy, taking a business-like attitude to diplomacy. The beginning of President Trump's term was characterised by frequent policy changes towards Taiwan. J. F. Cooper (2017) describes these changes as moving from a 'hot' phase, beneficial to Taiwan, to a 'cold' phase, harmful to the island. It demonstrated that Taiwan was being played instrumentally in the game with China. President Trump developed his own style of direct, emotional communication, bypassing the administration's formal filters, via Twitter. The political signals sent by President Trump surprised not only Beijing and Taipei, but also the State Department's strategists and diplomats. A direct approach to foreign policy, exacerbated by frequent personnel changes in the administration, added a new

dimension to the ambiguity of the policy towards Taiwan. For this reason, the characteristics of Donald Trump's strong leadership are considered in this article as one of the factors of the redefinition of strategic ambiguity.

The above overview shows how complex the American approach to the Taiwan issue was at the time. Certainly, the predominant reason for recalibration of strategic ambiguity was the desire to constrain China's claim to become a regional hegemon. The three remaining factors were enablers of change. They had a decisive impact on the choice of specific instruments used by the US to adjust the policy of strategic ambiguity.

Signs of Recalibration of Strategic Ambiguity

Under Trump, the United States maintained strategic ambiguity in its policy regarding the Taiwan issue. At its core, it remained a dual containment: of China from invading Taiwan and Taiwan from declaring independence. Washington also avoided legally binding declarations of alliance with Taipei. Significantly, however, the factors listed above have influenced the redefinition of this policy. It can be asserted that during the Trump presidency, relations with Taiwan became more important for Washington and the US applied strategic ambiguity more offensively than in the past. The intended recipient of the political message was Beijing. Deliberate US actions, such as political statements or visits to the island, increased uncertainty about Washington's intentions. They provoked a response from Beijing that exceeded the verbal layer, translating into increased tensions across the Strait and in US-China relations (Lee & Sheu, 2020).

The Taiwan issue already dominated the very launch of Trump's presidency. President-elect Trump received a congratulatory phone call from President Tsai Ing-wen on 2 December 2016 (Duchatel, 2017). This unprecedented ten-minute conversation provoked a strong reaction in Beijing. Donald Trump, in response, announced that China would not be dictating to him what he could do. Additionally, in an interview with Fox News, he stated that he saw no reason why the „One China” policy should bind the US. It was taken in Taiwan as a sign of unequivocal support. However, just two months later, on February 9, 2017, the newly sworn-in President Trump, in a telephone conversation with President Xi Jinping, reaffirmed that the US would continue to pursue the „One China” policy. Additionally, in early April, he invited Chairman Xi to visit the US. The leaders flaunted personal cordial relations during their meeting at Trump's residence in Mar-a-Lago, Florida.

There were fears in Taipei that President Trump was about to abandon Taiwan in exchange for opening the Chinese market to US beef, allowing US financial institutions into the Chinese market and a promise to balance the trade deficit. Meanwhile, however, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in a written response to a question from Senator Ben Cardin, stated that the three joint communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and the „Six Assurances”, form the basis of US policy towards Taiwan and China. He added that the US should continue to pursue a „One China” policy and support a peaceful, mutually acceptable solution to the

Taiwan issue (Copper, 2017). President Trump thus used the Taiwan issue in the diplomatic game with China without changing the *status quo*.

An indication of Taiwan's growing importance in US foreign policy was its inclusion in key strategic documents such as the 2017 National Security Strategy, the 2018 National Defence Strategy and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy adopted in February 2018.

The 2017 National Security Strategy described China as a strategic competitor of the US and a revisionist state, expanding its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others (National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017). On the Taiwan issue, the Strategy indicated that the US would maintain strong ties with Taiwan under the 'One China' policy, including commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), to provide for Taiwan's legitimate defence needs and deter coercion. The National Defence Strategy adopted in 2018 described the relationship with China similarly. According to this document, China, being a strategic competitor to America, was using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours while militarising features in the South China Sea (Summary of the 2018 National Defence Strategy of The United States of America, 2018).

Taiwan was also explicitly included in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy adopted in February 2018 (U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, 2021). President Trump's outgoing administration declassified the document entitled the US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific in January 2021, immediately before handing over power to Joe Biden's team. According to the strategy, the primary security challenge for the United States was to maintain American strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific and promote a liberal economic order, preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence. A shift in the regional balance of power would further generate security competition, and the loss of US pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific would weaken the ability to pursue American interests globally. Therefore, the authors of the strategy concluded that the security of the United States depends on freedom of access to the Indo-Pacific region, which is the engine of US, regional and global economic growth.

In this context, the explicit references to Taiwan are particularly interesting. The document predicts that China will take increasingly assertive measures to compel unification with Taiwan as part of the strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing. The Indo-Pacific strategy does not include an explicit pledge to defend Taiwan in the event of an attack by China. Instead, it aims to enable Taiwan to develop an effective asymmetric defence strategy and capabilities that will help ensure its security, freedom from coercion, resilience and ability to engage China on its own terms.

The strategy also describes the importance of the maritime zone delimited by the 'first chain of islands'. This concept refers to archipelagos from the Kuril Islands in the north, through Japan and Taiwan to the northern Philippines and Borneo. The document envisages developing a future defence strategy that would deny China sustained air and sea dominance in a conflict inside the first island chain zone. This future strategy would also be capable of, but not limited to, defending the first island chain nations, including

Taiwan (explicitly mentioned), and dominating all domains outside the first island chain. This carefully drafted document is another example of an innovative policy approach to strategic ambiguity. Admittedly, the US did not use the word 'state' in relation to Taiwan, so it has not violated the 'One China' policy at a formal level. Nor did the US formulate binding provisions or explicit statements of action in Taiwan's defence. Nevertheless, the strategy signalled a special treatment of Taiwan as part of the check on Chinese expansionism and was a step towards greater clarity on the Taiwan issue.

Strengthening relations with Taiwan won support across the political spectrum in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Many legislative initiatives have followed. Among others, in 2018 Congress passed the Taiwan Travel Act opening up the possibility for high-level US officials to visit Taiwan. In 2019 it adopted the Taiwan Assurance Act, calling for countering Chinese efforts to exclude Taiwan from cooperation in international organisations. In 2020, Congress approved the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, which featured steps to discourage Taiwan's diplomatic allies from severing relations with Taiwan in favour of the PRC. The act aimed to prevent a further exodus of diplomatic allies from Taiwan and support Taiwan's international participation. The TAIPEI Act, by engaging in global containment of Chinese diplomatic expansion against Taiwan, is an example of a reinterpretation of strategic ambiguity. However, the effectiveness of these measures was limited, as 7 countries have terminated diplomatic relations with Taiwan since 2016; by early 2021 Taiwan was recognised by 15 countries and by the end of 2021 by only 14 countries (Nicaragua switched recognition in December 2021)

During President Trump's term in office, the United States intensified its political contacts with Taiwan. With Washington's approval, President Tsai visited Los Angeles in August 2018, formally on a stopover en route to Latin America, echoing similar trips by President Chen Shui-bian. A year later, in July 2019, President Tsai made a 4-day visit to New York and Denver. The timing of the visit coincided with the peak of the US-China trade war, immediately following Washington's approval of a US\$2 billion arms sale to Taiwan (Gladstone, 2019).

The highest-ranking US official to visit Taiwan during President Trump's term was Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar (in August 2020). He was the most senior US official to visit the island since 1979. The visit was justified by the signing of a memorandum of understanding on health cooperation. The United States highlighted Taiwan's achievements in the fight against the COVID-19, contrasting them with China's policies. Another highly publicised visit was Undersecretary of State Keith Krach's attendance at the funeral ceremonies of President Lee Teng-hui in September 2020. Beijing responded to both visits by stepping up military operations near the island and the South China Sea. In 2020, Chinese military aircraft infringed Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) more than 380 times, the highest number since 1996 (Xie, 2021).

The United States proactively supported Taiwan's efforts to participate in multilateral cooperation. Due to the lack of broad international recognition, Taiwan does not belong to international organisations requiring statehood. It applies to all organisations of the

United Nations system. However, President Trump's vision of American global leadership impeded the US ability to support Taiwan. When President Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the World Health Organisation in May 2020, Taiwan's position seeking participation in the World Health Assembly was weakened. Therefore, the US engaged in promoting the Global Cooperation & Training Framework (GCTF), a trilateral platform linking the US, Japan and Taiwan, established in 2015. The GCTF aimed to engage Taiwan in global cooperation in health, the rule of law and human rights, disaster relief, energy cooperation, the digital economy, and cyber security. Open to third country participation, the GCTF platform was a way to circumvent China's veto on Taiwan's participation in institutionalised multilateral cooperation. The United States also used the GCTF to position Taiwan as an example of the rule of law and democracy for countries in the region (AIT, American Institute in Taiwan, 2021).

In line with balancing the rise of China's power, Washington has stepped up cooperation with Taipei on security policy. In 2017, President Trump's first year in office, the US announced the sale of a \$1.4 billion arms package to Taiwan. During President Trump's term, arms sales to Taiwan amounted to \$18.2 billion, including a deal to sell 66 F-16v aircraft (DSCA, 2021). The US has stepped up cooperation with Taiwan on intelligence and military training. China strongly opposed a visit to Taiwan by rear admiral Michael Studeman, the Director of Intelligence of the US Indo-Pacific Command in November 2020. Washington supported Taiwan's Overall Defence Concept, emphasising asymmetric operations. It was in line with the approach to support Taiwan's build-up of capabilities to effectively repel China's attack. The US continued regular passages of warships through the Taiwan Strait, invoking the principle of freedom of navigation, and increased the frequency of military operations in the South China Sea (Power, 2020).

On the economic relationship front, one axis of the US-China power rivalry in 2018–2020 has become the semiconductor industry. Under President Trump, the US identified semiconductors as China's Achilles heel. In 2019, China imported US\$304 billion worth of semiconductors, which was more than the value of its oil imports and more than the total imports from the PRC's largest trading partner, the European Union (Duchatel, Policy Paper, 2021). Only 15.7% of the semiconductors used in China were manufactured in the country. It showed China's dependence on foreign suppliers and threatened China's position in global supply chains, opening a way for the US to exploit this vulnerability.

Taiwan was the second largest semiconductor producer in 2020 with a 17% share of the global market (behind the US, which held 44% and ahead of Korea with 15.5% of the market). Taiwan has built a unique position by investing in advanced technologies, leveraging globalised supply chains, and shipping semiconductors to both the US and China. President Trump's administration used the semiconductors in its trade war with China by introducing restrictive export control measures. In June 2020, the US published a list of „ Communist Chinese military enterprises” and in the following months further expanded the list of sanctioned entities (Babones, 2020). At the same time, the US man-

aged to convince Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturing giant TSMC to establish a \$12 billion factory in Arizona. US officials have repeatedly stressed the importance of Taiwan in building a new architecture for global supply chains that bypass China (AIT, American institute in Taiwan, 2020).

It is worth noting that the new dynamic in the relationship between the superpowers had implications for the political climate in Taiwan. According to the Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS) – conducted in October 2020 – the number of people convinced that Washington would support Taiwan militarily if it declared independence has increased. The survey further indicated that most Taiwanese were happy with the status quo and opposed an immediate declaration of independence (Hickey, 2020).

Conclusions: New Elements of Strategic Ambiguity

The above review of US policy instruments towards Taiwan shows that, while the Trump administration maintained strategic ambiguity as a tool for sustaining peace in the Taiwan Strait, it made some substantive adjustments. President Trump did not change the formal basis of US relations with China and Taiwan during his term. The three Joint Communiques and the „One China” policy remained in force. Relations with Taiwan were still defined by the Taiwan Relations Act and the „Six Assurances”. However, the perception of China and the fundamental objectives of the United States towards China changed (Bandow, 2021). China’s comprehensive rise accelerated the emergence of a bipolar balance of power, and the designation of the PRC as the main global rival of the United States entailed a redefinition of the status quo. Due to a rapid expansion of Chinese military power, the ability of the United States to pursue an effective containment policy in East Asia declined. The main objective of the US became to restore the balance of power and counter the entrenchment of a new hegemon that could threaten the global position of the US. In this context, the policy of strategic ambiguity also had to be adjusted (Wang, 2020).

To sum up, the main **constant elements of strategic ambiguity** organising US policy towards the Taiwan issue since the transfer of diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing have included:

1. deliberate active management of the perception of US policy to influence Chinese and Taiwanese actions,
2. creating uncertainty as to whether the US would actually intervene militarily to defend Taiwan,
3. using the special relationship with Taiwan to underscore the American presence in the Pacific and stabilise the regional security *status quo*,
4. pursuing a „One China” policy and avoiding Washington formally crossing the legal boundaries of recognising Taiwan’s statehood,
5. continued arms sales to Taiwan,
6. support for Taiwan in the international arena.

President Trump's administration has maintained the above features of strategic ambiguity in its policy towards Taiwan. The **new elements** included:

1. offensive handling of the policy of strategic ambiguity, embedded in the concept of comprehensive containment of the rise of China's power, as part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy,
2. increased intensity and unpredictability of US actions in the region (also due to President Trump's style of conducting politics),
3. leveraging Taiwan to restructure global supply chains to exclude China,
4. expansion of arms sales programmes to Taiwan, support of Taiwan's Overall Defence Concept, expansion of military and intelligence cooperation,
5. active involvement in countering Chinese efforts to limit Taiwan's international space (TAIPEI Act, support in international organisations),
6. emphasising the distinctiveness of Taiwan's political system, based on values such as human rights, the rule of law and democracy, as opposed to the PRC system. Support for the process of forming and consolidating a Taiwanese identity separate from that of mainland China.

This non-exhaustive summary only signals complex trends and processes. It points, however, to answers to the questions contained in the introduction of the article. It is clear that the United States, guided by the need to balance the rise of China, made far-reaching adjustments to the policy of strategic ambiguity.

China's rapid rise became a reason of concern for Washington. The US unequivocally identified China as the main adversary and gave more prominence to the relationship with Taiwan². Greater American engagement in Taiwan resulted in a reduced sense of security and predictability in Beijing. In China's view, it distorted the balance in the Taiwan Strait to China's disadvantage. In the interpretation of Chinese scholar Zuo Xiying, the consensus that has underpinned US-China relations for the past half-century has been upset. Both the US and China have begun to doubt the sustainability of the status quo (Lin, 2020).

In US policy under President Trump, Taiwan became instrumental in containing China's expansion and balancing its rise. The inclusion of Taiwan in key US strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy, the National Defence Strategy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy shows that the US has moved from considering Taiwan as a liability to viewing it as an asset in the hegemonic war against China. The US deepened its military, intelligence, political and economic relations with Taiwan, highlighting its importance in containing China. Washington supported Taiwan in building its own identity and independent capabilities to pursue policies free from PRC pressure, both in the security and economic spheres. Consequently, this has pushed back the prospect of a peaceful unification with China.

² In an interview with Fox News in August 2020, President D. Trump, when asked if the US would allow China to invade Taiwan, recapped the policy of strategic ambiguity: „China knows what I'm gonna do. China knows" (Liao, 2020).

The United States, fearing the consequences of China's rapid rise as a regional hegemon, has intensified relations with Taiwan. While not formally breaking the status quo, Washington has nevertheless provoked a reaction from China. Beijing's increasingly belligerent rhetoric was accompanied by an increase in its naval and air presence in the South China Sea and the vicinity of Taiwan. It has negatively impacted regional security, increasing the risk of an outbreak of armed conflict. The new offensive use of strategic ambiguity was an unambiguous signal of Taiwan's growing importance in US politics and, at the same time, in the great powers' rivalry.

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