

US–China policy amid a persistent strategy: is conflict over Taiwan inevitable?

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Received 9 May 2023
Revised 13 October 2023
Accepted 25 October 2023

Abstract

Purpose – This research aims to examine the US–China policy shift from Obama to Biden emphasizing the centrality of Taiwan question in the geostrategic competition with Beijing and its prospect if the US strategy remains unchanged.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual framework is outlined, illustrating how the US grand strategy is driven by the ideological foundation of Exceptionalism. The paper highlights the associated US policy changes that evolved from Obama to Trump and then Biden to advance Washington’s strategic interests in its rivalry with China over Taiwan.

Findings – Biden’s policy led to an escalating geopolitical competition with Beijing over Taiwan to maintain US supremacy. The Biden administration is more stringent than the previous administrations on the Taiwan question and there is the conviction that the USA must not back down on Taiwan because the alternative will be a retraction of US world primacy to Beijing. With Washington’s persistent hegemonic strategy, the US–China confrontation over Taiwan seems inevitable.

Originality/value – The research highlights how the Biden administration managed a perpetuated Ukraine crisis and forged unprecedented high-level ties with Taiwan, indicating the administration’s determination to exacerbate contentions with Beijing over Taiwan rather than de-escalate.

Keywords Grand strategy, Exceptionalism, US–China, Taiwan, Ukraine–Russia

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The Sino-US rivalry is rapidly expanding the security concept past military and into the economic and technological realms, especially with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated competition between both powers rather than fostering multilateralism in combating the pandemic. The paper questions the grand strategy of the USA within the framework of the world order that revolves around US primacy and examines the shift in US–China policy from Obama to Trump and then to Biden, highlighting the geostrategic competition with Beijing over Taiwan and its future prospect if the US grand strategy remains the same. The paper asserts that the US fostered its grand strategy by toughening up its policy on Taiwan to curtail China’s assertiveness and thereby escalating its geopolitical competition with China over Taiwan. If the US hegemonic strategy persists, even with a possible return to economic openness and collaboration with Beijing under the Biden administration, the struggle for winning the Taiwan battle is likely to intensify, leading to a confrontation with China to maintain US superiority.

The research provides first a conceptual understanding of grand strategy centering on Exceptionalism as the ideological driver of US grand strategy, reflecting on related US foreign policy decisions. The research then discusses China’s assertiveness and Taiwan

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question as major challenges to US global primacy and then examines the shifts of the US–China Policy from Obama to Trump that metamorphosed between multilateral controlled and unilateral confrontational policies. The research elaborates further on how the US rivalry with China over Taiwan under Biden is likely to aggravate conflict if the US grand strategy remains the same, concluding that US policy may entail a return to multilateralism in the economic sphere, however, competition with China to win the Taiwan battle is likely to intensify leading eventually to confrontation between both rivals.

2. Myth of US exceptionalism: the ideological driver of US grand strategy

Most of the works on grand strategy focus on the broader dimensions of states' national security in terms of means and ends that define it as an evolution away from a narrow focus on victory in war toward a much broader and long-term vision that is essentially political in nature (Baylis *et al.*, 2010, p. 300). Military strategies and more broadly national security strategies, as depicted in various scholarly works, are related to states grand strategies. Grand strategy is therefore understood in the most explicit term as the use of power to secure the state, in which the state should have a clear understanding of the nature of the international environment, its higher goals within that environment, the primary threats to those goals and accordingly the capacity to mobilize resources (Hooker, 2014, p. 1; Baylis *et al.*, 2010, p. 301).

Edward Earl in the 1940s noted that grand strategy is the highest type of strategy which integrates the policies and armaments of the nation, that the resort to war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with the maximum chance of victory (Baylis *et al.*, 2010, p. 300). Kennedy (1991, pp. 4–5) similarly suggested that the essence of grand strategy is in proper balancing of the priorities of the state by coordinating the ends and the means and although security remains central, grand strategy is not limited to military strategy, as it draws on all instruments at the state's disposal. Therefore, policy makers should employ all means of power in long-term planning to achieve desired interests. Furthermore, as argued by Murray; grand strategy is a matter that involves great states alone that have a wide range of global interests and possess the relevant capabilities to fulfill their interests, including the use of force (Baylis *et al.*, 2010, p. 301).

Additionally, the traditional view on strategy has been challenged by the new emerging conception of threats that views national security not only from a military perspective. Waltz (1979) emphasized the role of power politics in shaping states' behavior which is directed by an anarchic international structure and the distribution of capabilities. Thereby, the main focus is on the nexus between the international system and the behavior of the state within the anarchic system (Waltz, 1990, pp. 29–30). Fjäder (2014, p. 117), for example, argued that the spectrum of new emerging threats that have evolved into the national security agenda of states encompass principally non-military threats such as international terrorism, organized crime, pandemics, natural disasters, drug trafficking and people trafficking. Biswas (2011, pp. 19–20) and Allenby (2000, pp. 5–6) emphasized the rise of service and knowledge-based economy which impacted income distribution regionally and globally and, more importantly, generated economic activity at a geographic scale beyond the national state. Within this context, national security expanded beyond direct military confrontation and into the economic, social and technological realms.

The US national security paradigm derives from a grand strategy that has evolved and maintained persistence throughout time with the aim of achieving four major strategic objectives: expansion, global economic hegemony associated with dominance over resources, debt elimination and weakening direct and potential rivals. Nevertheless, the USA is still striving to maintain its global primacy and sustaining the entirety of its strategic objectives. Owing to its long-standing grand strategy, the ideological orientation of American

exceptionalism that views America as superior to other nations, guided the foreign policy approach of the successive US administrations post WWI from Wilson to Trump and later Biden, enabling successive US leaders to believe that the USA should establish a new world order and judge the behavior of other states in spite of existing international norms (Hao and Hou, 2009, p. 139). For example, based on this ideological foundation, Woodrow Wilson exerted effort to establish the League of Nations to establish a so-called world democracy. Franklin Roosevelt, initiated the early foundations of the United Nations to reshape world order after WWII. Later, the idea of exceptionalism served as the basis for the neo-conservatism of George W. Bush and his administration (Hao and Hou, 2009, p. 139). However, the means of intervention varied, depending on the changing nature of the international sphere. For instance, since the Vietnam War, the USA shifted its policy orientation from direct intervention to proxy wars, in order to avoid another Vietnam swamp that lasted for almost 20 years while simultaneously weakening its direct and potential rivals (Hooker, 2014, pp. 9–10). In Afghanistan, the Regan administration recruited Afghani Mujahedeen to fight against the former Soviet Union on behalf of the USA during the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the US administration waged a war over the same Mujahedeen who supported the USA against the Soviets (Fox News, 2010).

Furthermore, in the Korean Peninsula, the USA supported South Korea against North Korea, to ignite a deeper rift in the Korean peninsula. In Asia, the USA implanted the seeds of rift amongst Pakistan and India over Kashmir. During the reign of the neo-conservatives, the USA managed to create a long-run political rift in Iraq between the Sunnis and the Shiites that expanded quickly across the Middle East region under the pretext “war on terror,” to seize economic resources of wealthy Iraq and avoid the scenarios of failed direct interventions in Vietnam. Later, with Trump in power, the USA managed to grab power in Syria and seize control of oil reserves in the country, with Trump declaring before the reporters in the White house that the USA has “taken control of the oil in the Middle East” (The Straits Times, 2019).

Nevertheless, in spite of its expanding global preeminence as the world’s superpower, the USA has for long viewed China’s rise and its assertiveness in the Asia–Pacific region as a threat to its global dominance. Nye (2022) argues, that if Taiwan were not a subject of discussion, the relationship between the USA and China could be reduced to managed strategic competition, but failure to manage the Taiwan question could lead to a broader existential confrontation. However, the classical view of American policy makers has been constantly oriented by US preeminence, perceiving the future either in terms of US global dominance, or a new Cold War with China with its incredibly competing power and its persistent endeavors to annex Taiwan (Khanna, 2021, p. 216). This “either-or” perspective requires a revisit with the rapid new realities the world is facing which require multilateralism to face the emerging challenges rather than exclusivity.

Khanna (2021, p. 214) contends that US grand strategy postulates US ability to shape the global scene while remaining geographically bereft and secured and that to move beyond past grand strategy failure, the US policy making structure should endorse the novel multi-alignment global system which is seeking balance and equilibrium. Furthermore, while Layne (2017) argues that the USA should rethink its deep engagement strategy, which has placed the USA at odds with China, to offshore balancing or restraint, he elaborates that the USA is unlikely to be able to accommodate China’s rise peacefully, due to the establishment’s foreign policy discursive practices that resist such a strategic adjustment, in order to ensure that US grand strategy reflects America’s global leadership.

These arguments are indicative because reiterating the Cold War model would not play out as favorably for the USA as the last one with the former Soviet Union. China’s soft power is already incredibly enormous. Whereas for the USA, it is the world’s largest debtor nation, additionally, its former European allies have intertwined interests with China and do not necessarily trust the USA to lead a consensus-based global coalition. Promoting a strategic

elite consensus on US liberal hegemony has been subject to increasing scrutiny in academic discourse (Thompson, 2023).

3. China's assertiveness, the Taiwan question and US primacy

China's national security paradigm goes beyond narrow defense boundaries and revolves around three important pillars; economic growth, sovereign technological competence and military preparedness that is based on a robust and indigenous defence capability. Therefore, China pursued a long-term strategy that took into consideration economic rise and sovereign defense-industrial competence, through which economic development was the key to military advancement and adopted an "Open-door policy" which emphasized self-sufficiency and simultaneously international engagement (RUSI, 2005). This trilogy coupled with Beijing's strategic aspirations in the South China Sea especially over Taiwan, composed a major challenge to US successive policy makers and leading to a growing geopolitical competition at least over the last two decades. More recently, with Beijing's political ascendance into resolving conflicts in the Middle East; a region that used to be exclusively managed by the USA, which is anticipated to reshape the political landscape in the region and beyond (Ignatious, 2023), China has signaled to the Americans that it is engaged on many levels and the global scene is no more dictated by terms of a single power even it was the USA.

Economically, Beijing's economic upgrade has been remarkable throughout the last two decades; not only did it succeed to engage globally, more importantly, it managed successful alliances with old US strategic rivals such as Russia to challenge US hegemony. Crucially, with the signs of a global economic crisis underway in the 2000s, China and Russia recognized the USA was on the brink of an economic downturn and sought to undermine its East Asian rivals to withstand its economic decline. Hence, major economic powers in the East formed a strong alliance, primarily led by China and Russia, which was later expanded to include Brazil, India and South Africa under the "BRICS" group, which together comprise 40% of the world's population and 20% of its gross domestic product (GDP) (Lieber, 2014, p. 140; Allison, 2017, p. 34). Notably, the rise of the BRICS was welcomed by globalist scholars as a sign of institutional change, giving BRICS more influence and challenging US primacy. With significant foreign currency reserves accounting for around 40% of the world's total, the alliance is expected to dominate the global economy with an iron fist (Lieber, 2014, p. 141; Lowe, 2016, pp. 50–53). Furthermore, China launched the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2014 and 2015 to counter the US's liberal hegemony and promote a robust financial body, aiming to reshape the international financial architecture (Zhao, 2021, p. 237).

On the technological and military fronts, since the collapse of the former Soviet Union the process of global engagement bided well with China's strategy of achieving defence-industrial sovereignty; enabling China to create local technological capacity facilitated by its participation in global technology networks, thereby achieving economic and technological self-reliance which remains a crucial thrust of China's security framework (RUSI, 2005). This strategy, however, coupled with China's efforts to establish maritime superiority in the South China Sea has raised concerns in the USA as to what extent China's strategy and its associated policies could challenge and moreover threaten the US global dominance and its strategic influence (Khanna, 2021, p. 218). The USA has been thoroughly concerned with the rise of a regional hegemon in Asia such as China that could take the region within few years, as did the USA with the Western hemisphere after Second World War. The USA hence, sought to prevent China from duplicating its fate (Mearsheimer, 2006). China has been staking out territorial claims over Taiwan in the South China Sea, to secure the acquisition of advanced chip technologies of strategic use and secure maritime shipping routes as well as potential energy sources, in addition to investing heavily in building capable maritime forces to operate globally in the deep waters (BA, 2011, p. 270). Considering Beijing's enormous

military upgrading in the last two decades which is considered a fundamental force supporting its geopolitical position; therefore, China's technological advancement poses a major challenge to the USA in terms of America's geopolitical competition with China (Yao, 2021, p. 28). From the Chinese perspective, policymakers in Beijing perceive the USA tenacious efforts to interfere in the Asian sea region particularly as the biggest obstacle to China's reunification with Taiwan (Bolt and Gray, 2007, p. 2).

The Sino-US struggle over Taiwan requires a careful assessment of the strategic significance of the island to Beijing and Washington. First, the Chinese government considers Taiwan inalienable to its national security and sovereignty; Chinese strategists contend that regaining control of Taiwan is crucial for Beijing's protection against historical invaders. In modern history, for example, when Japan attempted to invade China during Second World War, it launched its attack from Taiwan. Similarly, after the Chinese Civil War broke out from 1946 to 1949, the defeated nationalists who escaped to Taiwan used it as a base to fight against China (Allison, 2017 p. 113). Second, the island occupies a strategic position in the Pacific, situated between the East China Sea and the South China Sea and controls the Taiwan Strait which connects both seas. Consequently, the strait is a strategic conduit for shipments, oil, energy and trade; whoever controls Taiwan controls the strait. China's control of the island would allow it to control both seas and the strait, allowing it to control energy supplies to Japan and South Korea, two of Beijing's enemies and USA important allies in the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, this would enable China to expel the Americans from East Asia, after dismantling their military bases from the Indo-Pacific region, and resolve border disputes in the South China Sea. From the American perspective, this would mark a decisive step in the rise of China as a global power and the waning of the US global influence.

Third, the strategic importance of Taiwan is crucially derived by its technological superiority in advanced chips. Taiwan is home to some of the world's most significant factories producing advanced technologies in the fields of communications, computers and semiconductors that are extremely important and influential in the military and civilian industries. Hence, who rules Taiwan commands the world's most sophisticated technologies and in the event that China gains control of the island, it will be able to exponentially boost its technology and industrial capabilities, enhancing its status as a superpower. Recognizing the significant contribution of such technologies to the modernization of defense systems, China's policy-makers fostered the production of semiconductors to enhance indigenous defense industrialization where the Chinese government stepped up aggressively its semiconductor production (RUSI, 2005). Although Beijing enticed experts from Taiwan to work in China's semiconductor plants and bolster China's chip industry, yet, China still relies on Taiwan's most advanced semiconductor chips to assemble high-technology products that are essential in enhancing its defense industrialization, which is a major concern for US policy makers (Perlez *et al.*, 2022). Hence, the China–US struggle heightened over technological firms producing those microchips, of increasing global demand such as ASE Technology, AU Optronics and more importantly, Taiwan's largest semiconductor manufacturing company (TSMC).

The significance of TSMC is that it is the world's largest chipmaker of almost all advanced chips technologies ranging from phone chips to aircraft engines and high-end weapons chips; it makes chips for major automakers across the USA, Europe and Asia and US F-35 fighter jets (Sharma and Mehra, 2021). Furthermore, it controls 50% of the global chip market, with the capacity of producing up to 5 nm chips which is superior to the US Intel chips and allows access to high-speed computing data for military use and scientific research. Therefore, this dominance in the chip industry allowed Taiwan to leverage its increased strategic importance, being reliant on China for economic growth and the USA for national security even with no official diplomatic ties with Washington (Sharma and Mehra, 2021).

In light of this, Beijing's unwavering position on Taiwan is that the island should eventually return to mainland China, whether peacefully or through force. For decades, China

has preferred for Taiwan reunification to happen through non-military means, one of which was to build strong economic relations with Taipei for more than 20 years, and despite efforts to diversify, Taiwan's outbound foreign investment particularly in technology remain in mainland China (Bown and Wang, 2023). Beijing aimed to create a situation that would eventually result in Taiwan's dissolution into mainland China; however, if this policy failed, invasion would be the only viable alternative. To Washington, and in contrast to some analysis, the USA does not take an ambivalent stance toward Taiwan; rather it has a consistent stance. Although the USA recognizes Taiwan as part of China as per the one China policy in 1971, the USA on the ground has supported Taiwan's secession since Congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979 by pitting it against Beijing and undertaking to intervene in case China attempts to forcefully change the status quo.

Hence, two critical questions keep wandering viciously: When will China decide to invade Taiwan? And what will the USA do if Beijing takes this step? China's invasion of Taiwan is a delayed step due to the fear of a military response from the USA and from Taiwan which is heavily armed with American weapons; however, these fears have receded in recent years with Beijing's unprecedented surge in military capability and analysts believe this step will eventually take place, but timing cannot be anticipated. A good lesson the Chinese learned from the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis is to avoid the humiliation they experienced when the USA under President Clinton deployed two aircraft carriers to the area in the largest deployment of US military power in Asia since the Vietnam War, forcing Beijing to retreat from the region after it threatened the commercial shipping route on which Taiwan's economy depends (Allison, 2017, pp. 127–128). Today, despite calls from pro-Taiwan members in US Congress urging the White House to dispatch aircraft carriers to assist Taiwan, like Bill Clinton did in the 1990s, Washington is aware that Chinese anti-ship ballistic missiles could put any American vessels entering the area in peril (Allison, 2017, pp. 166–167). Hence, the response of the USA, as put forward by Nye (2022) is uncertain; it cannot decide when China will attempt to take over Taiwan, yet it is confident that if China succeeds in its endeavor, it will prompt a drastic shift in the balance of power of global affairs and create an advantage for China while diminishing the strength of the USA and its allies in the Pacific region.

Consequently, the USA seeks to strengthen its allied-coalitions in the Indo-pacific, a strategy that is likely to fuel the security competition with Beijing. Mearsheimer (2006) argues that the US strategy of preventing China from dominating other regions will exacerbate competition with Beijing. While China aims to maximize the power gap with neighboring USA allies as Japan, South Korea, India and the Philippines, USA allies are concerned about China's ascendancy and may seek logistical cooperation with the USA in the event of escalation over Taiwan.

4. From Obama to Trump: how the US managed the China–Taiwan intricate dilemma

From a realist perspective, since the end of the Cold War, the USA maintained a strategic approach to contain China's rise, based on an engagement policy aiming at absorbing China and drawing it further within the US sphere. In Clinton's and Bush's administrations, engagement policies toward China centered on the belief that the USA would bring China into the US-managed world system (Yao, 2021, p. 22). Nevertheless, since the election of Barack Obama in 2008, there has been a growing perception among US policy makers that the US preeminence is jeopardized due to the rising Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea coupled with Russia's willingness to achieve political interests in Ukraine (Clarke and Ricketts, 2017, p. 479).

Consequently, the USA pursued a more focused pivot toward Asia, where at the time of Obama Washington advocated a policy based on offshore balancing to counter China's rise. Having inherited an economy in recession, in addition to two wars overseas in Iraq and

Afghanistan, and a host of challenges in the Asia–Pacific region, Obama’s priorities centered on saving the US economy from a devastating financial crisis and facing China’s assertiveness (Fong, 2022). Obama pursued a “leading from behind policy” to contain China, by gradually withdrawing US troops from both regions and adopting a more multilateral approach to issues such as terrorism, climate change while readjusting to China (Hallams, 2011, p. 10; De Castro, 2013, p. 342). Obama’s rebalancing policy was interpreted by some scholars as evidence of disinclination to engage globally; nevertheless, this approach was to rebalance to Asia, which is consistent with US longstanding strategy that has worked diligently to secure its strategic interests by curbing the increasing Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea (Baylis *et al.*, 2010, p. 308). In order to pivot to China, it was crucial from the perspective of Obama’s administration to buttress its constraint policy on China through a gradual redeployment of American forces from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia–Pacific region (De Castro, 2013, p. 345). Obama had to disengage militarily by passing the buck to regional powers to counter rising threats, while continuing economic intercourse. The challenge, however to Obama was to manage an efficient offshore balancing by relying on regional powers as the first line of defense to counter China’s rise while maintaining a robust military presence in East Asia for countervailing coordination and at the same time pursuing a tranquil relationship with Beijing (Walt, 2018, p. 15). This entailed a careful orchestrated policy toward Taiwan to avoid an unwanted confrontation with China while his administration developed cross-strait relations with Beijing.

This may explain why Obama’s Taiwan Policy was not primarily confrontational; Obama kept the geopolitical competition with China over Taiwan within controlled peaceful limits by welcoming the peaceful development of the cross-strait relationship allowing more collaboration specifically in the economic sphere. As much as the Obama administration pledged its support for its ally, it also advocated for Taipei to strengthen its multiplier economic ties with China on the premise that closer economic integration would provide additional incentives for both sides to avoid armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait (Singh, 2012, p. 158). The dilemma however to Washington as noted by Singh (2012, pp. 158–159) was that as China grew more confident, it concentrated ever greater military forces at the Taiwan Strait, where the Chinese leadership remains irritated. Additionally, Obama’s engagement policy did not reverse Taiwan’s uneasy slide into relative international isolation; a more confident and engaged Taipei may prevent it from taking sudden initiatives to reaffirm its sovereignty against what it perceives as an affront.

While accepting a peaceful cross-strait relation, Obama still maintained the long-standing US strategic position with Taiwan but at a low profile ensuring unwavering control over China’s technological advancement and its military assertiveness in the Pacific region. Hence, during his presidency, Obama was determined to remain low profile on the issue of Taiwan’s defense capabilities to prevent any actions that would irritate China. Rather than frequently irritating a much-needed multilateral alliance on international issues, Obama aimed to foster a relationship of strategic cooperation with China by bundling arms sales to Taiwan (Fong, 2022). Remarkably, over the course of his two-term presidency, only three arms sales to Taiwan were announced between 2010 and 2015, and his mentions of Taiwan were made in reassurance to Beijing that the USA would continue to adhere to the One China policy (Fong, 2022).

On the technological front, Obama pursued a technological blockade over China to undermine its technological capabilities after the election of Taiwan’s pro-US presidency in 2016 Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), who leans toward secession from China. With a direct order from the USA, AMD and NVidia ceased sale of advanced computing chips to China that are used for artificial intelligence, machine learning and military purposes (Asia Financial, 2022a). It is likely that the ban will impact China’s critical research facilities working on artificial intelligence as well as the National University of Defense and Technology, and hi-tech Chinese firms (Asia Financial, 2022b). However, despite these sanctions and despite

the continued arms sale to Taipei, the US administration refrained from direct provocation over Taiwan and the US secretaries of state and defense avoided visiting Taiwan, while Taiwanese officials' visits to the USA remained tightly restricted (Singh, 2012, p. 159).

Upon the ascendance of Donald Trump to power and to ensure the longevity of US primacy, Washington expanded its hegemonic strategy by escalating the economic war with China from the prism of unilateralism while resuming technological blockade over China and heightening the tension over Taiwan. Trump's policy toward China was based on the "America First" ideology that informed his overall foreign policy approach (Kuehn, 2021, p. 3). Some scholars depicted the US policies toward China under Trump as "decline-denial," by which Trump ascended to power with a clear nationalist discourse that was witnessed during his presidential campaign and was equated by some to amount to the end of American exceptionalism (Clarke and Ricketts, 2017, p. 493). While Obama pursued multilateralism to secure US strategic interests, Trump asserted unilateralism in preserving US strategic interests in the global arena and especially in the Asian context. His assertiveness was denoted in his presidential bid, when he warned from China's economic policies and growing military capabilities:

Our country is in serious trouble . . . When was the last time anybody saw us beating . . . China in a trade deal? They're devaluing their currency . . . Now they're building a military island in the middle of the South China sea . . . to a point that is very scary (The Washington Post, 2015).

After assuming office in 2017, Trump has cut US commitments to essential multinational agreements on trade, climate change, regional security and arms control, to save money for economic and military growth and to significantly fight China; criticizing Obama's multilateral framework as harming US interests. Hence, he did not hesitate to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which was the centerpiece of Obama's strategic pivot to Asia, arguing that the agreement undermines the US economy and would accelerate US decline in manufacturing (Zhao, 2021, pp. 234–235; McBride and Chatkzy, 2021). Both administrations pursued different policy decisions in preserving US grand strategy; Obama has foreseen an opportunity in the agreement to boost US exports through lowering tariffs on US products and increasing market access to US products; thereby, ensuring that the USA does not leave the global economy at the hands of other countries led by China and simultaneously strengthen US alliances across the Pacific region (McBride and Chatkzy, 2021). Conversely, Trump criticized the agreement on the basis that it would push more manufacturing jobs overseas and increase the US trade deficit, and he made confronting China's rise a centerpiece of his agenda.

Amid the outbreak of COVID-19, some scholarly debate heralded that with the emergence of the pandemic, a new pattern of links based on collaboration will eventually emerge by which states recognize there is a "common fate" (Jaworsky and Qiaoan, 2021, p. 297, 313). Nonetheless, COVID-19 aggravated the ensuing tense relationship between Beijing and Washington instead of fostering collaboration, and negotiations between both major powers became more complex as a result of the engagement of both sides in a bunch of former disputes (deLisle, 2021, p. 55). More precisely, two main factors intertwined with one another contributed to this pattern of development during the pandemic phase: the rise of nationalism in the political narrative of both sides, accompanied by secondly, the assertiveness to dominate the global political sphere through managing the pandemic crisis. China on one side sought to advance its dominance in South China Sea, while the USA strived not to leave the scene at the hands of assertive China.

While the Trump administration was inadequately prepared to deal with the pandemic and was rather focused on blaming China and attributing the US COVID-related harms to China's sway over the WHO (Rogers *et al.*, 2021; Zhao, 2021, p. 233), on the geopolitical front however, Taiwan was more prominently featured in Trump's policy toward China and the Taiwan policy became part of Trump's confrontational approach to the US-China

relationship, along with harsh narrative and tariffs (Kuehn, 2021, p. 3). While Obama refrained from further provoking China over Taiwan and stuck to confined limits of the geopolitical competition, Trump's policy over Taiwan was more confrontational, politically, economically and technologically in the ascending competition with Beijing. Trump still maintained technological blockade over China, strengthened US naval presence in the South China Sea through the activities of the "freedom of navigation" and passed the Taiwan Travel Act, which allowed for high-ranking officials from both the USA and Taiwan to travel between the two countries; an upgrade that was escalatory from the Chinese perspective but still beyond a red flag and only prompting Beijing's official denunciation (Yao, 2021, p. 30; Kuehn, 2021, p. 3; Office of the Chargé d'Affaires of the PRC, 2020).

In terms of arms sales to Taiwan, Trump discontinued Obama's policy of bundling arms sales to Taiwan; during his four years in office, Trump announced 11 separate arms sales announcements to Taiwan (Fong, 2022). Additionally, Trump's administration tightened the technological blockade over Beijing by prohibiting TSMC and Samsung from manufacturing advanced chips for Chinese companies on the entity list, including Huawei (Tzi-cker, 2023). Nevertheless, despite the sanctions and blockade, China's economy has grown by 2.3% in 2020, one of the few major economies to maintain positive growth during the pandemic, especially with a 4% increase in FDI flowing to China at a time when the global FDI inflows fell by 42% the same year as indicated by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. In fact, American technological bans only prompted Beijing to accelerate advanced technology development autonomously (UNCTAD, 2020; Yao, 2021, p. 28).

5. Biden's progressive selectiveness and the escalation over Taiwan

In the post pandemic phase and with the rise of President Biden to power, the USA aggravated its strategy to undermine China by returning to multilateralism in selected spheres, while remotely aggravating geopolitical competition. Therefore, despite collaboration with Beijing in spheres of common interest, like trade and climate change, the geopolitical competition with China over Taiwan escalated after Biden's administration barred US technological companies that receive federal funding amounting to USD50 billion aimed at building up the local semiconductor industry in the USA, from building advanced technology facilities in China for 10 years (The White House, 2022c). On the one hand, China seeks to annex Taiwan to monopolize advanced chips technologies produced by TSMC, which would give the Chinese strategic advantage over the Americans, economically, technologically, as well as militarily. On the other hand, the USA fears a Chinese invasion of Taiwan that would leave the world's most advanced chips in the hands of Beijing (Deutch *et al.*, 2022), and Biden threatened that the USA would respond militarily should China invade Taiwan (Restuccia *et al.*, 2022). A report at the US Army War College, suggested a "broken nest" strategy to deter China from invading Taiwan without threatening a great-power war by tailoring a deterrence package that renders Taiwan unattractive if ever seized by force and simultaneously ineffective economically. Both McKinney and Harris (2021, pp. 29–30) suggested that Taiwan should threaten to destroy TSMC chip-making facilities; China's most important supplier so that China's high-tech industries would be immobilized should it invade. This is arguably a good reason that explains China's wariness and prudence not to invade Taiwan despite the rising contention with Washington.

Nevertheless, the struggle for chips acquisition is only a delayed confrontation with China. In other words, the fight over Taiwan chips to undermine China can wave confrontation with Beijing but it would not prevent collision eventually. The Biden administration diligently managed to escalate the chips struggle – in attempt to motivate China to invade the island – by transferring TSMC scientists in the research and development department to the USA after Congress approved the Chips and Science Act of 2022 to build the Taiwanese chip factory in the USA (Congress, 2022). Although China recognizes the US attempts to

undermine its military technological industries, however, it is unable to take this step due to its serious implications, and despite the US sanctions, Beijing resorted to diplomacy but to no avail, hence it responded diversely by waging economic war on the USA using the pandemic to pressure the US economy and imposed a siege on the island.

The US fierce competition with China over Taiwan is likely to aggravate. It is unlikely that the Biden administration will give up its “unsinkable aircraft carrier” in reference to Taiwan’s undoubted strategic value as noted by [MacArthur \(1950\)](#) which was part of the US containment policy during the Cold War era. Geopolitics is key for preserving US primacy, while China regards Taiwan as an inalienable part of mainland China that should return to China’s sovereignty, hence it will not relinquish its military presence in this strategic region. Hence, competition between both sides will aggravate, owing to the fact that this would eventually determine which side should win the geopolitical competition ([Yao, 2021](#), p. 30).

Economically, however, Biden is likely to retrieve the multilateral approach in managing trade relations with China that was severed by Trump, administering a more pragmatic approach in managing common economic concerns, while still employing economic pressure to reinforce the US political position. There is hope for a more progressive approach toward China in the economic sphere, especially with Biden’s administration willingness to advocate a more rational dialogue with Beijing and its reservations on Trump’s unilateral policies that impacted China but have hurt the USA more significantly ([Clarke and Ricketts, 2017](#), p. 493). Moreover, progressiveness can entail collaboration on global complex security concerns including among others, climate change; especially if we know that the USA and China are the world’s top emitters of carbon dioxide. Biden has already rejoined the Paris accords that Trump has severed, while China aspires a net zero carbon emission by 2060, and the call for multilateralism by Wang Yi, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs at the 56th Munich Security Conference, is perhaps a promising step along the way for mutual collaboration ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, 2020](#)). All these are indicators of a possible future collaboration in the trade and climate change files. Nevertheless, as argued earlier the geopolitical competition is ascending, if the US hegemonic strategy persists to maintain superiority, and despite cooperation in selective spheres with Beijing, confrontation seems inevitable in a complex international environment that is rapidly expanding. The USA is seemingly looking to escalate the tension over Taiwan instead of de-escalating. The following are two indicators of this scenario:

5.1 Administering a perpetuated Ukraine crisis

With the Ukraine file, the US administration succeeded in advancing its grand strategy, which increased pressure on Russia and enhanced NATO’s power in Europe. Ukraine is part of the old East-West rivalry, and Russia has long envisioned the necessity of regaining Soviet hegemony through uniting with Ukraine. President Putin’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 was part of this vision, which took place following the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich after ensuing protests in Ukraine calling for independence. Such development as argued by [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) provided a pretext for Putin’s decision to seize part of Ukraine, which has since led to escalating tensions between Russia and the West, especially after the defeat of former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko of Russian allegiance, in 2019 elections to President Zelenskyy of Western loyalty. Tensions further hiked with NATO’s continuous enlargement attempts toward the east. [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) contends that Russia’s actions in Ukraine have been long derived from western intervention and USA attempts to expand NATO eastward, especially after the annexation of the Central Eastern Europe countries that were once part of the former Warsaw pact except for Ukraine, hence growing the Western alliance from 16 countries in 1990 to 30 in 2022, which added to Russia’s wary of this enlargement as Russia would become firmly besieged by [NATO \(2022a\)](#). With

Biden in power, the NATO Communique at Brussels reiterated the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Ukraine would become a member of the alliance with the Membership Action Plan (NATO, 2021). The main purpose of these moves was to forge a firm Western alliance against Russian rising interests in Ukraine, even if Putin avoided confrontation, the loss of Ukraine and the siege of NATO would leave the Russian regime with limited alternatives; either back down or escalate.

Russia is China's main source of energy imports and advanced military equipment and its biggest ally in a future US–China confrontation. Hence, US interests are further enhanced when Russia gets involved in the Ukrainian conflict. The Biden administration vehemently declared the need to arm Ukraine that appeared to be fragile and devoid of arms, while the European allies were advised not to provoke Russia. When Putin announced military operation in Ukraine and the war began, the USA was well prepared and military aid poured down on Ukraine in the form of Javelins, anti-tank and anti-air weapons, coastal defense systems, the USA alone excluding the European Allies sent more than USD 3 billion in security assistance to Ukraine to strengthen their defenses (The White House, 2022b), while the European countries stepped up their financial and military support to Ukraine under the European Peace Facility (European Commission, n.d).

As Russia became more involved in the Ukrainian war, US interests were further enhanced; First, the Western alliance was further enhanced through NATO expansion, with accession talks accomplished between Finland, Sweden and NATO, and accession protocols awaiting ratification to annex both countries to the western alliance (NATO, 2022b). Second, Russia's energy sector and its advanced military capacity which are Moscow's main exports to China were compromised. The Russian economy has been put under immense pressure as a result of western sanctions imposed on Moscow following the invasion of Ukraine; and the impact of sanctions on the Russian currency, equity market and sovereign credit and debt conditions has also been acute (OECD, 2022, pp. 13–18). Beijing's reliance on Russian energy sources and advanced armament is well known in Washington as Russia is highly advanced in armaments that challenge the US military capacity and on which China relies heavily, hence it was crucial to undermine Beijing's main supporter and ally, and the scene has become set to a more focused pivot to China, the US main strategic rival.

5.2 Forging unprecedented ties over Taiwan

There has been growing American support for Taiwan in recent months including increased official visits from the highest-ranking US government officials and senior politicians to Taiwan that have not been witnessed even at the time of Trump, which provoked Beijing as it views foreign government visits to the island as an actual recognition of its independence and a challenge to Chinese sovereignty (Hass, 2022, p. 4). As Beijing sees it, Washington is becoming increasingly active in its support of Taiwan, and this has led China to respond more aggressively, lest the USA conclude that it is able to establish more official relations with Taiwan without penalty and set an example for other states (Hass, 2022, p. 5). No doubt the Biden administration is aware of the possible consequences of such policies and despite that, it worked on provoking Beijing. To elaborate further, the Sino-US rivalry escalated with the announcement of the speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. A few days after Pelosi announced her intention to visit Taiwan with the aim of supporting the US allies, President Biden stated that "the military thinks it's not a good idea right now" (Kim, 2022). Obviously, the statement was made after China threatened to take resolute and strong measures should Pelosi proceed with the visit (Kim, 2022). In terms of its purpose, the announcement and its subsequent criticism could be viewed as giving the Chinese green light to advance on Taiwan. Nevertheless, China resorted to diplomacy signaling to the Americans that the Chinese understood the game. The main purpose of the visit was to achieve two goals:

assert US hegemony as the sole global power (Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 160) while demoralizing China globally and more importantly provoke the Chinese to invade Taiwan. The USA knew ahead that China would not shoot down Pelosi's plane, and that the most that the Chinese can do to respond will be a higher tempo of air and maritime activities closer to Taiwan (US Department of Defense, 2022).

Hence, the Department of Defense had anticipated China's response, after Pelosi's plane landed in Taiwan, as China started live military maneuvers and missile exercises that besieged the island and increased the pace of naval and air activities in the Taiwan strait instead of invading (US Department of Defense, 2022). The dilemma, however, is still present, even by only besieging Taiwan; the USA would still have an opportunity to intervene in order to lift the blockade on its allies, therefore dragging China further toward an escalation. The argument that there is no public enthusiasm in the USA for a military conflict and that China is more likely looking to win without resorting to force (Hass, 2022, p. 7) is seemingly utopian because there is no guarantee that China's pursuit for unification with Taiwan will not lead to violent confrontation, and simultaneously there is no indication of a change in US-China policy over Taiwan; Biden will continue to take a firm foreign policy stand on Taiwan, a key question of the US geostrategic rivalry with China.

There is a current revival of thinking among scholars about the future US grand strategy which faces a different scenario from that of the Cold War in an international environment with expanding complexities (Layne, 2017). In light of this revival, calls for a new grand strategy for the USA have arisen precisely because of this complexity contending that the USA should adapt to new complex realities that indicate that China will outlast the USA in the South China Sea region (Baylis *et al.*, 2010, p. 310). Consequently, there are demands to assess the advantage to the USA of staying in a position of power in the Indo-Pacific and whether America would be responsible for preventing China from reclaiming Taiwan (Allison, 2017, p. 220). Furthermore, the USA will need to reconsider the position of its allies in the Indo-Pacific in a hypothetical US-China confrontation, which may not be completely consensual with the USA when it comes to conflict over Taiwan (Thompson, 2023). According to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022, the Biden administration, emphasized the centrality of the Indo-Pacific region in US strategy, putting forth an action plan based on reinforcing deterrence and ensuring a more enduring role for the USA in the region, which can deal with China's mounting challenge more effectively (the White House, 2022a). This is likely to fuel tensions in the Indo-Pacific by focusing on fostering the region's capacities and enhancing coordination between the USA and its Allies.

The Indo-Pacific connections make a very complex network. Although US allies fear China's enormous expansion in the region, they however, tend to have no genuine interest in fighting with the USA against China over Taiwan. Most states in the Indo-Pacific try to avoid the dominance of great powers in the region (Kratiuk, 2023, pp. 254–255). They can, at most, provide logistical support to the USA if conflict over the island arise. The Philippines, for example, may grant the US access to military bases at Palawan close to Taiwan for collective defense. Japan, may also provide the US access to its military base in Okinawa (Scott, 2018, p. 23) and advance interoperability with Washington. Participation with troops however may jeopardize Japan's security, because Tokyo may become a nuclear target in a conflict between Washington and Beijing. Australia could be a hub for troops resupply and securing sea lanes in the region. As for South Korea, it is most likely to avoid full participation in a potential conflict over Taiwan, for one, it will become vulnerable to its main rival North Korea, and two, it has interests in China and fears Beijing's retaliation (Sachdeva, 2023, p. 162).

Eventually, the US main allies in the Indo-Pacific do not have the luxury of remaining neutral as tensions in the region hike. They are bounded by strong alignments and partnerships with the USA, which they need to address (Kratiuk, 2023, pp. 256–260). While the allies would mostly lean with Washington through logistical support, they will likely

refrain from full engagement in conflict against China as they also fear Beijing's retaliation which may severely impact their intertwined interests in the region.

US–China
policy amid a
persistent
strategy

6. Conclusion

The US–China confrontation over Taiwan is inevitable. The developments in the Ukraine crisis worked to the benefit of the USA, enabling the Biden administration to escalate against China in the Pacific region. Beijing has responded cautiously but also expressed its determination to defend its sovereignty. In its biggest military maneuvers targeting Taiwan in decades, China sent fighter jets, warships and military submarines regularly across the median line of the Taiwan Strait and fired missiles over Taiwan itself that ended up landing in Japan's exclusive economic zone. Furthermore, as a result of growing US provocation, in April 2023, Beijing increased the pace of military drills around Taiwan and raised the bar by simulating hitting key targets on the island.

While the USA as advised by Hoffman (2021, pp. 42–44), should have a broader national security strategy that balances domestic needs and international interests, it has yet to realize that destroying alternative power centers in the hope that this would give it impetus to start a second hegemony as it did post Second World War would not necessarily guarantee a world free from competition. Today's facts are different; China is more powerful and capable, has a wide range of global interests and is determined to return Taiwan to the mainland peacefully or by force. Despite uncertainties in Washington over how to deal with the Taiwan question, eventually the USA cannot relinquish its longstanding position as the sole hegemon for China.

The Biden administration faces a dilemma as China has shown more defiance toward American escalatory measures, threatening Washington through verbal and physical means. At the time of Obama and Trump, there was growing competition with China over Taiwan but still within confined limits beyond war. However, during Biden, direct provocation dominated the scene. The hawkish hub in the Biden administration is more stringent on the Taiwan question due to its strategic importance, and there is constant concern about when China will restore Taiwan.

The USA has two options: intervene or back down on Taiwan. Further intervention would eventually lead to confrontation with Beijing, which some American politicians believe can be very difficult for the USA to confront today given its enormous capability and readiness. However, the Biden administration believes that the USA must confront China and send a clear message that it will not back down. Failure to defend Taiwan could result in China dominating the Pacific region, expelling the USA from this strategic area and implying the USA inability to be a reliable ally. With this dominant opinion in the US administration, it could only be a matter of time before the world witnesses a long-anticipated confrontation between the two powers.

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