

The Shift in U.S. Strategic Ambiguity toward Taiwan: A Foreign Policy Change Approach from Trump to Biden

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*Pergeseran Ambiguitas Strategis
AS terhadap Taiwan: Pendekatan
Perubahan Kebijakan Luar Negeri dari
Trump ke Biden*

Ria Agustina Larasati¹ , Larasati² 

¹ Universitas Bali Internasional, Bali, Indonesia

² Universitas Sriwijaya, Palembang, Indonesia

Corresponding author:

Ria Agustina Larasati, Universitas Bali Internasional, Jalan Seroja Gang Jeruk No. 9A, Kelurahan Tonja, Denpasar, Bali, 80234, Indonesia. E-mail: riaagustina@unbi.ac.id

Abstract

This article examines the shift of U.S. foreign policy toward Taiwan (2017–2024) amid intensifying strategic competition with China. Addressing a key research gap, it systematically links the U.S. strategy of strategic ambiguity with internal and external dynamics across two administrations that adopted differing approaches to Taiwan. Using the qualitative descriptive method and the Foreign Policy Change framework, the study analyzes three main drivers of policy adjustment: international political shifts, global economic interdependence, and domestic pressures. The findings show that although strategic ambiguity is officially retained, U.S. policy has shifted toward a more managed form of strategic clarity. This transition is shaped by contrasting leadership styles: Trump’s symbolic and transactional posture versus Biden’s more structured approach embedded in a rules-based international order. These changes have heightened tensions in U.S.–China strategic relations. Overall, the article contributes to the foreign

policy theory by explaining how major powers recalibrate policy amid evolving global rivalry.

Keywords

Foreign policy change; Strategic ambiguity; Taiwan; US–China; US foreign policy

Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis pergeseran kebijakan luar negeri Amerika Serikat terhadap Taiwan (2017–2024) di tengah meningkatnya kompetisi strategis dengan Tiongkok. Studi ini menjawab *gap* penelitian dengan menjelaskan keterkaitan antara kebijakan ambiguitas strategis AS dan dinamika internal maupun eksternal pada dua pemerintahan yang memiliki pendekatan berbeda terhadap Tiongkok. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan kerangka perubahan kebijakan luar negeri, penelitian ini menyoroti tiga faktor utama yang mendorong penyesuaian kebijakan yaitu dinamika politik internasional, keterikatan ekonomi global, dan tekanan domestik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun ambiguitas strategis dipertahankan, arah kebijakan AS bergerak menuju kejelasan strategis yang lebih terkelola. Perubahan ini dipengaruhi oleh perbedaan gaya kepemimpinan, di mana pendekatan simbolik dan transaksional Trump berbeda dengan pendekatan Biden yang lebih sistematis dan berorientasi pada tatanan internasional berbasis aturan. Pergeseran tersebut turut meningkatkan ketegangan dalam hubungan strategis AS–Tiongkok. Temuan ini juga memperkaya pemahaman tentang cara kekuatan besar menyesuaikan kebijakan dalam dinamika rivalitas global yang terus berkembang kini.

Kata Kunci

Ambiguitas strategi; AS–Tiongkok; Perubahan kebijakan luar negeri; Kebijakan luar negeri AS; Taiwan

Introduction

The political upheaval associated with Donald Trump’s return to office has catalyzed changes in U.S.-Taiwan relations, contributing to a redefinition of the strategic dynamics between the United States and China. The ties between the United States and Taiwan remain a strategic issue that significantly influences security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Their relationship is regulated in *three joint communiqués* reached with China in 1972, 1979, and 1982. Moreover, the Taiwan Relations Act, enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1979, includes the “Six Assurances” that President Reagan conveyed to the government in Taipei during the 1980s (Congress, 2024). Taken together, this series of documents sets out the overall policy of what the US government often used as a strategic ambiguity policy toward Taiwan.

The implication of adopting this strategic ambiguity approach is that the US acknowledges the principle of the *One China Policy*, although this does not necessarily mean it supports it. Meanwhile, the United States signaled that it was open to assisting in the search for a peaceful resolution to the tensions between China and Taiwan. The US also emphasized that with the

arms trade relationship between the US and Taiwan, Washington is committed to the *Taiwan Relations Act*, which states, ‘maintain the capacity... to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan’ (Congress, 1979). The strategy of ambiguity has been a key element in regulating US foreign policy and maintaining informal relations with Taiwan for decades. On the other side, this policy also plays a role in balancing US relations with China.

However, since 2017, US-China relations under the Trump administration have shown signs of changing toward strategic competition amid the strengthening of *America First* promoted by Trump and the rise of China’s economic and military influence. In previous studies, there have been several studies that discussed the dynamics of US policy towards Taiwan in the context of trilateral relations between the US-China-Taiwan. For example, Grzegorzewski highlighted that during the Trump administration, the ambiguity strategy was formally maintained, but used more offensively as part of a balancing strategy against the rise of China. This is demonstrated through the intensification of arms sales, increased diplomatic contacts, and strengthened defense cooperation with Taiwan (Grzegorzewski, 2022). Meanwhile, Hollihan & Riley (2024) highlighted the issue of Biden’s policy, which presents a new dilemma between maintaining ambiguity or moving towards strategic clarity, given the increasing military threat from China and domestic pressure to take a more assertive stance against Taipei.

This paper aims to address a crucial research gap in the lack of systematic analysis linking strategic ambiguity policy with internal and external dynamics within the framework of Foreign Policy Change (FPC), particularly during the transition period between two governments with differing approaches to China. Thus, the purpose of this study is to critically analyze the shift in US foreign policy towards Taiwan during 2017–2024 through the foreign policy change approach and to explain how the ambiguity strategy was developed in response to the dynamics of US-China strategic competition. This study utilizes the foreign policy change approach to analyze how strategic ambiguity was implemented and adjusted under two distinct leadership patterns. The research relies on the FPC framework because, historically, the main task of a foreign policy analyst has been to explain how states attempt to change, or succeed in changing, the behavior of other states. Thus, analyzing foreign policy is considered tantamount to explaining foreign policy change (Modelska, 1962).

Foreign policy analysis emphasizes that explaining foreign policy behavior requires understanding the dynamics of policy change, which stem from shifts in the international environment, leaders’ psychological orientations, and the natural evolution of policy components over time (Snyder & Richard, 1962). The contrasting approaches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden toward Taiwan illustrate how leadership philosophy ambiguity use, diplomatic/political support, military/security support, economic engagement, and global orientation shape policy direction (De Rivera, 1968; Morgan, 1991). These factors interact to shape how decision-makers interpret threats, opportunities, and strategic priorities. The contrasting approaches of Donald

Trump and Joe Biden toward Taiwan vividly illustrate this dynamic. Trump's more transactional and ambiguity-driven leadership style, combined with his emphasis on unilateral action, produced a policy posture marked by assertive diplomatic signaling, expanded arms sales, and confrontational economic measures aimed at countering China's influence. In contrast, Biden's leadership reflects a more multilateral and alliance-focused orientation, channeling support for Taiwan through coordinated diplomatic efforts, sustained security commitments, and deeper economic and technological cooperation. Taken together, these differences demonstrate that changes in leadership philosophy, methods of employing ambiguity, variations in political and military support, economic engagement strategies, and broader global orientations collectively determine the direction and character of foreign policy. While both administrations formally maintained the ambiguity framework, the research finds a noticeable shift toward a more explicitly managed strategic clarity. This transformation contributed to increasing tensions in US-China strategic relations. Therefore, this research provides theoretical contributions to foreign policy studies, especially in explaining changes in major countries' policies in the global rivalry landscape.

Methods

This research was conducted using the qualitative descriptive methods. The qualitative approach is chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of policy narratives, institutional dynamics, and decision-making processes that cannot be fully captured through quantitative data alone. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical design, aiming to describe and interpret the key changes in U.S. foreign policy across two administrations, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, while examining the underlying political, economic, and strategic factors that influenced these changes. The study focuses on the period from 2017 to 2024, specifically analyzing the transformation or shift in US foreign policy towards Taiwan under the administrations of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The analysis examines how the US strategic ambiguity strategy has adapted and developed in response to the dynamics of US-China strategic competition. The factors considered for analysis include international political dynamics, global economic interdependence, and domestic pressures within the US.

The qualitative data analysis in this study follows the framework proposed by Miles & Huberman (1994) which consists of three key stages, which are data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Subsequently, the analysis involves a systematic process of organizing, selecting, categorizing, and synthesizing information derived from transcripts, relevant documents, and field notes that pertain to the research topic. The types of data collected include documents that are often considered primary source material or policy-based documents in policy studies. The types of data sources used in this study, which can be used to strengthen primary/policy-based data references, include official government documents and policy papers, public speeches and statements by key U.S. officials, news articles, expert commentary

from leading media outlets, academic journals, and policy research from think tanks.

The primary analytical framework used is the Foreign Policy Change approach, which focuses on identifying the drivers, processes, and outcomes of shifts in a country's foreign policy orientation. In this context, the concept of strategic ambiguity and its evolution into a form of managed strategic clarity becomes central to the analysis. This article argues that US foreign policy towards Taiwan, through strategic ambiguity, has differences in its implementation. This is influenced by differences in leadership patterns in managing trilateral relations between the US-Taiwan-China.

According to Hermann's framework on foreign policy change, such change comprises two principal dimensions. The first involves alterations stemming from regime transitions or fundamental transformations within the state, while the second refers to changes that arise when an incumbent government chooses to pursue a different foreign policy orientation (Hermann, 1990). Employing this analytical lens enables the study to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of U.S. foreign policy and its relationship to broader theories of foreign policy change. The analytical framework is operationalized using Hermann's (1990) Foreign Policy Change approach, which identifies four gradations of change based on qualitative differences. These levels are: Adjustment changes (quantitative shifts in effort level without altering objectives or methods); Change in the program (changes in methods but maintaining objectives, such as the shift from 'America First' to 'America is Back'); Change in objectives; and the fundamental Shift in the entire orientation (simultaneous changes across many policies, exemplified by the move from Trump's unilateral direction to Biden's focus on multilateralism). Additionally, the framework considers shifts resulting from regime change (like the transition from Trump to Biden) or when the existing government intentionally promotes a different policy.

This study integrates three key variables influencing policy change, which are international political dynamics, global economic interdependence, and domestic pressures (such as shifts in political elites and the dynamics of the US domestic bureaucracy). By employing this comprehensive analytical framework, the study aims to generate a deeper and more holistic understanding of the dynamics of U.S. foreign policy and its connection to broader theories of foreign policy change. Overall, the findings indicate that the shift in US policy toward Taiwan is moving from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity gradually, reinforced by the US's return to a rules-based leadership of the international order.

Results and Discussion

U.S. Strategic Ambiguity Towards Taiwan: Managing Trilateral Relations

The relationship between the United States (US) and Taiwan is characterized by close cooperation that directly affects China's strategic environment. As Taiwan's principal partner, the United States functions as a key balancer of power and provides essential support to Taipei

in responding to both diplomatic and military pressures from China. The Republic of China (ROC) was founded on the Chinese mainland in 1912, with the United States serving as one of its principal supporters during and after the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949), a conflict between the ROC and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). After the Chinese Communist Party's triumph in 1949, the Republic of China (ROC) government, along with its supporters, relocated to Taiwan, whereas the CCP established the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland. The US refused to recognize the new communist government, so this event became an important historical basis for the formation of strategic relations between the US and Taiwan to this day (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

This bilateral relationship was formalized through the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqués of 1972, 1979, and 1982, alongside the enactment of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979. Additionally, the “Six Assurances” issued during President Ronald Reagan's administration reinforced the continuity of U.S. support for Taiwan. These documents form the foundation of the US policy of strategic ambiguity, in which Washington acknowledges the One China principle without explicitly supporting it, while deliberately maintaining uncertainty about whether it would intervene militarily in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait (Kuo, 2023). This strategic ambiguity serves as a form of *dual deterrence*, on the one hand preventing China from invading Taiwan, and on the other hand, preventing Taiwan from declaring independence, which could trigger open conflict (Bush, 2006). This approach, according to the US government, has succeeded in maintaining stability and preventing direct military involvement for decades. The US also reaffirmed its commitment to seeking a peaceful solution for China and Taiwan, while at the same time continuing to sell arms to Taiwan as stipulated in the *Taiwan Relations Act* (1979).

However, the strategic ambiguity has never been implemented uniformly. Its interpretation and application vary depending on the administration in power. The presidencies of Donald Trump and Joe Biden reflect contrasting approaches to intelligence messaging, military interactions, and diplomatic engagement with Taiwan, even though the underlying framework of ambiguity remained intact. Since the late 1990s, US commitments have shifted from pure ambiguity toward a more explicit form of dual deterrence, signaling to China that Washington could intervene in the event of coercion while warning Taiwan not to unilaterally alter the status quo (Lin, 2022; Lin & Denny, 2011). This shift reflects the increasing centrality of Taiwan in the broader US-China rivalry.

For China, Taiwan is a symbol of nationalism and an inseparable part of national sovereignty. Conversely, for the US, Taiwan represents a commitment to democratic values and regional stability. The strategic interests of both countries towards Taiwan are non-negotiable. China seeks to prevent Taiwan from becoming a platform for external interference, while the US aims to preserve the status quo to protect its credibility and balance against China's rise (Glaser, 2015). Nathan (2021) notes that China's long-term strategy of attracting Taiwan through

economic and political incentives has lost its effectiveness as Taiwanese identity increasingly diverges from Chinese identity.

Under these conditions, the US peace strategy can be interpreted as a *de facto* separation of Taiwan from China, which for Beijing is a reason to consider military options. Therefore, China's current strategy seems to focus on increasing its military advantage in the Taiwan Strait to the point where US intervention becomes ineffective and pressuring Taiwan to surrender without direct resistance. However, the US also faces a dilemma. Although its support for Taiwan is strong politically and morally, it is not always enough to contain China's military reunification ambitions. Therefore, strategic measures are needed to maintain a form of 'armed peace' in the region (CSIS, 2024).

Recent developments show growing Chinese military aggression toward Taiwan, including surprise exercises, in response to strengthened U.S.–Taiwan relations (Chen, Ou, Yang, & Shih, 2024). These actions risk escalating into open conflict, potentially involving a direct U.S.–China confrontation. In this tense environment, strategic ambiguity functions as a crucial balancing tool, allowing the U.S. to support Taiwan without overtly provoking China. This balance is reinforced by bipartisan backing in Washington, demonstrated by the reintroduction of the Taiwan Relations Reinforcement Act by Senators John Curtis and Jeff Merkley (Wang, 2024).

The shift in the United States' foreign policy towards Taiwan during the period 2017 to 2024 is analyzed using Hermann's (1990) Foreign Policy Change approach, which provides a theoretical structure for analyzing how states attempt to change the behavior of other states and explaining the phenomenon of foreign policy change. The framework identifies that shifts in foreign policy occur either due to regime change or transformation, or when an existing government chooses to redirect its policy. Hermann distinguishes four qualitative gradations of change: the least fundamental is Adjustment Changes, representing quantitative shifts in effort level without changing methods or objectives; next is Change in the Program, involving alterations in methods while maintaining the policy's objectives, such as the overall shift from 'America First' to 'America is Back'; the third level, Change in Objectives, implies a fundamental change in the goals, although this study found the objective of maintaining global security stability remained consistent; and the most fundamental is the Shift in the Entire Orientation, which involves simultaneous changes across multiple policies and reflects a complete change in the actor's direction toward world affairs, exemplified by the move from Trump's unilateral orientation to Biden's focus on multilateralism. Applying this theoretical categorization to the relationship between the US and Taiwan shows a transformation where strategic ambiguity has evolved towards a more explicit form of managed strategic clarity in response to regional dynamics.

This study makes important theoretical contributions. The findings demonstrate that strategic ambiguity is not a static policy, but rather an instrument that is highly dependent on the dynamics of political leadership, external pressures from great power rivalry, and evolving

domestic conditions. The analyzed transformation indicates a movement from traditional strategic ambiguity to managed strategic clarity, a flexible yet controlled form of ambiguity designed to adjust strategic calculations amidst rising regional tensions. Significant to the literature on Foreign Policy Change, the application of Hermann's framework successfully categorizes the complexity of US policy shifts toward Taiwan. The study's results strengthen the hypothesis that policy changes are driven by the configuration of ruling elites, international political pressures, and global economic dynamics, providing a comprehensive insight into the dynamics of US foreign policy in a landscape of global rivalry.

Foreign Policy Shift: The difference in Approach from Trump to Biden

This understanding of strategic ambiguity policy is shaped by how the US has managed relations with Taiwan over time while also maintaining relations with China. Therefore, it is important to examine further the shifting and evolving implementation of the US strategic ambiguity policy towards Taiwan from Trump to Biden. Regional experts and foreign policy experts have varying views on US–Taiwan relations and their implications for China. For example, a survey conducted by the *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS) of experts from the US and Taiwan showed that most respondents considered China currently more likely to blockade or quarantine Taiwan than launch a direct military invasion in the next five years. Although China continues to enhance its military capabilities, many experts believe that a full invasion still faces significant logistical and political challenges (CSIS, 2024).

Despite the prospect of a study conducted by the *US Army War College* stating that strengthening relations with Taiwan is the best strategy for the US to maintain the liberal international order in Asia and enhance its security against China. Taiwan's integration into US-led multilateral institutions and regional networks is considered essential to reducing the risk of conflict and strengthening regional stability (Al-Banna, 2024). From the research of these two regional experts, we can understand that, although the trilateral relationship to date has been relatively minimal in terms of escalation leading to conflict, there is still room for an opportunity for China to invade if the US takes the wrong steps in its support for Taiwan.

In analyzing this relationship, the perspective of foreign policy change is employed, emphasizing that U.S. policy toward Taiwan is characterized by strategic ambiguity and varies in implementation depending on the administration. As observed by Bush and Hass, former President Trump consistently expressed skepticism regarding the advantages of supporting Taiwan, whereas several officials within his administration during the first term demonstrated a stronger inclination to support the island. Generally, in matters of foreign policy, Trump often prioritizes a transactional approach. He consistently seeks sources to obtain negotiation channels. His focus tended to be on quantifiable factors, including trade balances, the defense expenditure of partner nations, and the level of inward investment from these countries (Bush & Hass, 2024).

In contrast, the Biden-Harris administration approaches the strategic ambiguity policy with a more systematic and structured orientation toward foreign affairs. The administration places significant emphasis on safeguarding the credibility of U.S. security commitments to allies and partners, as well as upholding international norms, including the prohibition of using force to acquire territory. Under the Biden-Harris administration, the United States has adopted a more comprehensive approach toward Taiwan, encompassing the deepening of economic relations, the reinforcement of security cooperation, and the promotion of Taiwan's international standing. However, forecasting the future direction of the administration's policy toward Taiwan remains inherently speculative, given the limited public statements made by the vice president on the matter (Bush & Hass, 2024).

Although they both appear to use a strategic ambiguity approach in managing relations with Taiwan, Trump and Biden have different directions in using their policies. The common commitment that may be found in both leaders is how they want to maintain a safe and controlled relationship with China, so that the direction of this policy plays an important role in determining future US-Taiwan relations. In his early days in office, Trump gave a signal that the US would create a new space or strategy for cooperation with Taiwan in the future. According to media reports, Trump had a telephone conversation with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen. This interaction was the first time for a US leader or president-elect to speak directly with a Taiwanese leader since 1979 (Shankelman, 2016).

In March 2017, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited China and stated that bilateral relations between the US and China were '*guided by an understanding of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation*' (Winkler, 2023). Using the old guidelines for regulating engagement with Taiwan, namely the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances. Trump also approved several pro-Taiwan pieces of legislation, which Congress had passed in February 2018 and December 2020, reaffirming a shared commitment to strengthening political, security, and economic ties with Taiwan and safeguarding it from China's increasingly assertive actions (Huang, 2021). Important U.S. legislative actions consist of the Taiwan Travel Act, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (2018), the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act (2019), and the Taiwan Assurance Act (2020).

Taiwan has long been a hot-button issue in relations between China and the US during the Trump period. Not only that, but Taiwan is a high-level issue that requires a new framework in setting the agenda for US-China relations. The magnitude and scope of US support for Taiwan under the Trump administration surpassed that of its predecessor. During the first two years of President Trump's tenure (2017–2018), arms sales to Taiwan amounted to approximately \$1 billion in 2017 and \$330 million in 2018, followed by \$11 billion in 2019 and \$6 billion in 2020. Cumulatively, Taiwan received over \$18 billion in arms sales throughout the Trump administration (Pan, 2023). US relations with Taiwan during the Trump era can be said to be stable, although there were several points of conflict involving US relations with China. The

interaction between the US and Taiwan during this period was dominated by state visits by several US officials to Taiwan.

In 2018, the United States allocated \$256 million to support the modernization of the American Institute in Taiwan. The inauguration ceremony was attended by President Tsai, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Representative Marie Royce, and Congressman Mark Harper. In response to the visit, China protested against the US through a statement from Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang (Dwyer, 2018). He made open statement:

“I must point out that the US, by sending officials to Taiwan under whatever pretext, severely violates the one-China principle and three China-US joint communiques, interferes in China’s internal affairs, and exerts a negative impact on China-US relations.”

In 2020, the Trump administration intensified official exchanges with Taiwan, escalating tensions with China. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar visited Taipei in August, the highest-level U.S. visit since 2014, which Beijing viewed as a symbolic show of support (Chung, 2020). A month later, Undersecretary of State Keith Krach also traveled to Taiwan for a memorial service, prompting China to strongly protest and respond by sending two ASW aircraft into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (Shattuck, 2022). In late 2020, the Trump administration continued high-level contacts with Taiwan, including an unannounced visit by Michael Studeman, a senior U.S. military intelligence official. In January 2021, UN Ambassador Kelly Craft was also scheduled to visit, a move interpreted as Trump’s effort to solidify a hard-line China policy before Biden took office (Nichols & Pamuk, 2021). Although the visit was ultimately canceled during the transition period, these repeated engagements signaled Trump’s intent to demonstrate strong U.S. resolve toward China’s rise and ended his term with notable appreciation from the Taiwanese government and public (Jarvis, 2021).

As a domino effect of Trump’s America First policy, which influenced his decision-making regarding the ambiguity of strategy toward Taiwan. During this period, the US seemed to be trapped in a situation that was both advantageous and challenging, both domestically and internationally. Although Trump himself was unusually hostile towards Taiwan, his administration pushed US-Taiwan relations during 2017-2021. Upon the conclusion of President Trump’s term, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen conveyed her gratitude for the strengthening of U.S.-Taiwan relations, particularly highlighting the robust military support and public assurances provided by the United States amid rising pressure from China. (Hale, 2020).

US relations with Taiwan face new challenges that the Biden administration will need to address. Despite increased arms sales and closer ties with Taiwan, the Trump administration left much to be desired regarding potential escalation in US tensions with China. Biden began his support for Taiwan by inviting the Taiwanese envoy to the US, Bihim Hsiao, to attend his inauguration. This was the first time a Taiwanese representative had formally attended a presidential inauguration since the US severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 1979. In

response, Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin outlined the meaning of US support for Taiwan during their Senate hearings (Imran & Javed, 2024). According to Blinken, America's commitment is to support Taiwan through whatever means necessary to defend the country from imminent attack. Blinken described the State Department's policy on meetings between US officials and Taiwan as an effort to create more space for cooperation.

In response to Biden administration officials' statements of support, China responded by sending aircraft into Taiwan's air defense identification zone shortly after Biden took office. The US State Department expressed concern about China's intimidating actions against Taiwan (U.S. Department of State, 2021). In addition, the US government also urged China to stop diplomatic, military, and economic pressure by offering engagement through proactive dialogue with Taiwanese representatives. In April 2021, at President Biden's personal request, the United States sent an informal delegation of three former officials, Senator Chris Dodd, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and James Steinberg, to visit Taiwan. The White House characterized this visit as a "personal signal" of the U.S. president's commitment to Taiwan (Bao, 2023).

In the same month, the State Department introduced new guidelines to ease restrictions on interactions between U.S. officials and Taiwan, aiming to deepen unofficial relations. Spokesman Ned Price noted that while engagement would be expanded, the guidelines still prohibited actions, such as attending major Taiwanese holiday events, that could complicate the U.S. One China policy (Chen, 2025). In addition to support through official visits, Biden also expressed support for Taiwan on the sidelines of international conferences in speeches and in front of the mass media. One of them was seen in Biden's statement on May 24, 2022, which triggered various responses from China and academics.

In Tokyo, Biden stated that the U.S. would militarily defend Taiwan if China acted aggressively, though he hoped conflict could be avoided. China strongly opposed this, with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin urging the U.S. to respect the One-China principle, avoid supporting Taiwanese independence, and act cautiously to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). At the Quad Leaders' Summit, Biden clarified that U.S. policy on Taiwan remained unchanged, signaling continuity despite public concern from China. Tensions further rose due to visits by Biden officials, culminating in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2, 2022, her first as a top U.S. official in 25 years, which she framed as a strong statement of U.S. support for Taiwan while reaffirming adherence to the One-China policy (Washington Post, 2022).

After Pelosi's visit, China held a large-scale military exercise around Taiwan that triggered a security crisis in East Asia. Pelosi's visit drew pros and cons from researchers because China unilaterally tried to change the status quo by conducting military exercises and repeatedly crossing the '*middle line*' agreed upon with Taiwan. How Biden will maintain alliance partners while managing competition with China is something to anticipate (Fong, 2022). In addition

to conducting large-scale military exercises, China also canceled several high-level dialogues with the US through a notice on August 5, 2022.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it would halt or cancel eight joint meetings and cooperative programs with the United States. These affected initiatives included the China-U.S. Theater Commanders' Talks, the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), Defense Policy Coordination Talks (DPCT), cooperation on the return of illegal immigrants, legal assistance in criminal cases, joint efforts against transnational crime, anti-narcotics collaboration, and climate change discussions. The cancellation and suspension were called by the Chinese Foreign Ministry as a response to the US's attitude of '*ignoring China's strong opposition and serious representation*' (Tiezzi, 2022). Biden's actions reflect the *America is Back* policy, which focuses on strengthening alliances and upholding a rules-based international order, creating a dilemma in balancing relations between the US and China while prioritizing alliances with like-minded countries.

China's aggressive stance complicates U.S. efforts to maintain influence in the Taiwan region. To ensure regional and global stability, the U.S. continues to support Taiwan's self-defense under the Taiwan Relations Act, guided by the Third Joint Communiqué and the Six Assurances, while countering coercive actions against Taiwan (The White House Washington, 2022). According to the US, this support is important to strengthen and provide deterrence efforts by helping Taiwan defend its territory. In addition, the Biden administration also issued a three-tier policy, *namely competitive, cooperative, and adversarial*, in regulating relations with Taiwan and China to always open up space for cooperation between the two countries (Cheng, 2021). Nevertheless, Biden emphasized a clear position on Taiwan's sovereignty and stated that there was no change in the one-China policy recognized by the US.

In contrast to the Trump administration, the Biden administration has actively pursued the expansion of U.S.-Taiwan economic relations. In June 2023, both parties concluded the first agreement under the U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade (Office of the USTR, 2024). The agreement aims to promote deeper trade and economic engagement by simplifying regulations and reducing bureaucratic barriers to bilateral trade and investment. Negotiations for a second agreement are ongoing, focusing on agriculture, labor, and environmental issues. Additionally, the two countries are advancing cooperation through the Technology Trade and Investment Collaboration (TTIC) framework, which facilitates bilateral trade between U.S. and Taiwanese firms in sectors such as 5G, electric vehicles, energy, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and cybersecurity (Setiawan, Subagyo, & Akbar, 2025). The Biden administration has introduced two additional policy initiatives to strengthen U.S.-Taiwan relations. The first involves promoting subnational engagement by encouraging interactions between American governors and mayors and their Taiwanese counterparts. To date, eighteen U.S. states have either established or plan to establish offices in Taiwan to facilitate trade, tourism, investment, and travel, thereby enhancing the resilience of bilateral relations through grassroots

connections. The second initiative emphasizes shared values as a foundation for deepening ties. Leaders from both countries have highlighted their mutual commitment to democracy, the rule of law, the protection of individual rights, and opposition to authoritarianism, exemplified by their joint participation in the Summit for Democracy (Bush & Hass, 2024).

Trump's approach to Taiwan was unpredictable and influenced by his appointees rather than ideological principles. In contrast, Biden's administration has taken a more systematic and consistent approach, rarely making abrupt statements but maintaining steady foreign policy thinking. This contrast highlights the shift in U.S. strategic ambiguity policy between the two administrations.

Table 1. Comparison of Trump vs Biden's foreign policy approaches

Policy Aspect	Donald Trump (Transactional & Symbolic)	Joe Biden (Systematic & Structured)
Core Philosophy	Primarily transactional; skepticism about the benefits of supporting Taiwan; unencumbered by ideological principles; focus on measurable factors like trade balance and partner defense spending.	Systematic thinker; highlights the importance of safeguarding the credibility of the United States' security commitments to its allies and partners; upholds global principles and the rules-based international order.
Ambiguity Use	Used more offensively as part of a balancing strategy against China. Policy was often "hard to predict."	Shifted toward managed strategic clarity; systematic structuring of policy.
Diplomatic/ Political Support	Emphasized symbolic gestures (e.g., first direct phone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen since 1979). Signed several pro-Taiwan bills (e.g., Taiwan Travel Act, TAIPEI Act of 2019). Conducted high-level civilian state visits (e.g., Azar, Krach) interpreted by China as a highly symbolic show of support.	A holistic approach toward Taiwan, including enhancing its international status. Liberalized guidelines for meetings to encourage further engagement. Emphasized shared values (e.g., joint participation in the Summit for Democracy).
Military/ Security Support	Characterized by a high volume and magnitude of arms sales, totaling over \$18 billion during his term.	Focused on rhetorical clarity, with President Biden publicly stating the U.S. would be willing to defend Taiwan militarily, although later clarified to align with the One China policy. Reaffirmed commitments under the TRA to support self-defense measures.

Economic Engagement	Focus primarily on trade balance as a transactional factor.	Actively expanding ties (e.g., finalized the first agreement under the U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade), encouraging subnational engagement (governors and mayors) to deepen ties from the bottom up.
Global Orientation	Directed the U.S. toward a unilateral relationship, framed by the “America First” policy.	Focused on strengthening alliances through multilateralism, framed by the “America is back” foreign policy.

Source: Author’s own work.

The relationship between the US and Taiwan influences how China view threats and responds strategically in trilateral relations. The output produced by using the foreign policy change approach to US-Taiwan policy, as stated by Hermann (1990), distinguishes the gradation of this approach, which is based on qualitative differences. The first level of change is the existence of adjustment changes, quantitative changes in the level of effort that do not change the objectives or methods of policy. This aspect is evident in the distribution of trade transactions carried out by the two leaders, who also experienced changes. Then, at the second level is a change in the program, which refers to changes in methods but not the objectives of foreign policy. Where the method mentioned is related to the US foreign policy that is carried out, namely, from America First to America is Back. Third, a change in objectives implies a change in foreign policy objectives.

In this aspect, it is found that the goal remains consistent, to maintaining global security stability, even though it differs in how to achieve that goal. The fourth and most fundamental form of change relates to the shift in the entire orientation of actors towards world affairs, which involves simultaneous changes in many policies. In this last aspect, it is clarified by how the two leaders bring the direction of US foreign policy as a whole. This is already seen to be different in terms of vision and mission, where Trump is directing the US towards a unilateral relationship, which is completely different from Biden, who focuses on strengthening alliances through multilateralism. Overall, aspects such as international political dynamics, global economic interdependence, and domestic pressures formed by the Trump and Biden administrations have different patterns in emphasizing their strategic ambiguity strategies.

The findings from this article are that, referring to the foreign policy change approach, the shift in US foreign policy towards Taiwan during this period experienced a movement from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity gradually, with the US returning to the leadership axis based on the *international rules-based order*. Nevertheless, the ambiguity strategy is not a static policy, but rather a reflection of internal and external dynamics and changes in the orientation of actors in foreign policy. This finding strengthens the hypothesis that the ambiguity strategy is adjusted to the configuration of the ruling elite, international pressure, and global political-economic dynamics. Therefore, this strategy becomes an arena for the articulation of the

paradigm shift of US foreign policy towards Taiwan and China.

Conclusion

The United States' foreign policy toward Taiwan during the 2017–2024 period, analyzed through the foreign policy change framework, has shifted from traditional strategic ambiguity towards managed strategic clarity. This transformation directly addresses the objective of analyzing the shift in US policy toward Taiwan in response to US-China strategic competition. Specifically, the ambiguity strategy was reconfigured differently under the two administrations: the Trump administration employed a more symbolic and transactional approach, while the Biden administration utilized a more systematic and structured strategy, integrating it into the framework of a rules-based international order. This shift confirms that the strategic ambiguity policy is highly dependent on political leadership dynamics, external pressures, and evolving domestic conditions.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to foreign policy studies by demonstrating that strategic ambiguity is not a static policy but a flexible instrument reflecting internal and external dynamics and changes in actor orientation. This analysis of its evolution into managed strategic clarity broadens the understanding of its application within the US–Taiwan–China trilateral relationship. A limitation of this descriptive study is its scope, which prioritizes the roles of high-level leadership and macro dynamics (international political and global economic factors). We acknowledge a lack of in-depth exploration into the intricate roles played by all domestic actors in policy formation. Consequently, future research is recommended to explore the specific functions of domestic actors in policy formation and to examine the detailed interaction between institutional dynamics and elite perceptions in formulating US foreign policy toward Taiwan.

ORCID ID

Ria Agustina Larasati <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3587-2163>

Larasati <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8377-2397>

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