

# Analyzing the Impact of U.S. Strategy in East Asia on Sino-Japanese Relations

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With the rise of China and the intensification of strategic competition between China and the United States, the U.S.-Japan alliance continues to serve as a vital cornerstone for peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States views itself as the sole hegemonic power in the current global order and perceives China's ascent as a fundamental challenge and threat to its global position. This perception has prompted the U.S. to pursue a policy of coalition-building with regional countries and support for Taiwan's independence as a response to China's growing power. Structural realism, as an evolved realist theory, emphasizes external and strategic interactions by focusing on systemic variables. Structural realism assumes that states prioritize security as their primary objective. While maximizing security represents the extreme form of this view, a more balanced and moderate focus on security remains central to realism. The Taiwan issue, depending on the framework of interaction between China and Japan, continues to influence the outcomes of cooperation between these two major Asian powers. At the same time, the number of scenarios where the interactions between China and Japan are unaffected by the Taiwan issue is increasing. Taiwan's unique status creates a seemingly intractable security situation among countries that ought to be partners: a scenario where the most prudent course of action appears to be inaction. Currently, Sino-Japanese relations are, at best, unstable. Territorial disputes and grievances—both real and perceived—over unresolved issues from World War II disrupt a relationship essential for regional stability, further complicated by the presence of Taiwan. Historically, Taiwan has always been a significant strategic factor in the interactions between China and the United States, but Japan also appears to have developed an interest in Taiwan. This association with Taiwan could negatively impact Sino-Japanese relations. Since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, China's foreign policy regarding Taiwan and East Asia has undergone significant changes. This study seeks to address the following question: How has the U.S. strategy in East Asia affected Sino-Japanese relations? In response, this study hypothesizes, based on the theory of structural realism, that the United States, in its efforts to counter and contain China and establish a new balance in the region, has adopted a grand strategy of securitizing China's surrounding environment. This strategy includes strengthening fleets around China, intervening in border disputes, creating tensions in China's allied countries, supporting Taiwan, aligning with Japan, forming coalitions, and expanding multilateral engagements against Beijing. These actions have resulted in the reduction of China's political and economic influence, increased competition between Tokyo and Beijing, and heightened tensions in East Asia.

**Keywords:** China, United States, Sino-American relations, Taiwan, structural realism.

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## 1. Introduction

The international system has undergone significant changes and transformations since the end of the Cold War. Among the most notable effects of this shift has been the emergence and growing power of new actors in the international system, including China and Japan.

The end of the Cold War, coupled with countries' shifting security priorities, increased focus on the economy in global politics, the rise of new actors, and the growing importance of non-governmental individuals and organizations, has compelled nations to adopt new tools and methods in addition to traditional approaches to safeguard their national interests. One of the most prominent of these tools is public diplomacy. East Asia is one of the regions where countries actively compete for influence and dominance.

East Asia is one of the world's most pivotal economic regions and is poised to become the cornerstone of the international economic system in the near future. This significance is heightened by the presence of major powers such as China, Japan, and the extra-regional United States, as well as the existence of nuclear weapons, which underscores the importance of peace and stability in the region. Structural realism emphasizes the causal roots of "security issues."

Structural realism seeks to demonstrate that great powers aim to increase their relative power and stresses that endless competition for power exists. However, what drives this competition is not human beings' intrinsic desire for power but rather the need to achieve security, which arises from the anarchic structure of the international system. In circumstances where all states possess the capabilities to inflict harm on one another, they strive to reach a level of power sufficient to protect themselves against potential attacks (Ye, 2022).

China, Japan, and the United States are the most critical current and future powers in East Asia. Their relationships form the foundation of peace and stability in the region, yet they could also become the basis for major regional conflicts. The present and future of this region in the coming decades are deeply intertwined with the dynamics of these three nations' interactions.

Until 1972, the Taiwan issue was the primary factor of tension in Sino-Japanese relations. The Taiwan issue has re-emerged as a new focal point of conflict. Following

China's missile tests in the Taiwan Strait in early 1996, Japan pledged to provide logistical support for U.S. military operations in the Taiwan Strait under revised U.S.-Japan security cooperation guidelines (Yu-Pin Chang & Wei-Lun Chiang, 2022, p. 233).

Sino-Taiwanese relations remain one of the most turbulent international political issues in the post-Cold War era and a potential flashpoint in U.S.-China affairs. Consequently, the United States has sought to isolate and contain Beijing by establishing extensive security and military relationships with East Asian countries, thereby shaping the region's power dynamics and security arrangements to align with the interests and objectives of the U.S. and its allies (Xin, 2022). Structural realism theorizes that the only way to achieve meaningful security is through the perpetual accumulation of power, allowing states to attain relative security by gaining relative power.

The U.S. strategy to prevent China from emerging as a regional hegemon in East Asia involves supporting powers like Japan and India to act as balancing forces, ensuring sustained American presence in the region. The U.S. has formed a strategic alliance with Japan, encouraging it to strengthen its military capabilities and play a more active role in international affairs to balance its power with China. U.S. security alliances and extensive military ties with countries surrounding China, such as Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and the Philippines, are part of this broader effort (Stosunki, 2023).

According to Stephen Walt's perspective within structural realism, there is a tendency to reduce conflicts between states. However, in a competitive international environment, states carefully monitor each other's actions and have a strong incentive to imitate effective measures. Waltz and Niebuhr argue that close ties between nations, while potentially beneficial, can simultaneously lead to significant problems. Hence, major states shaping the international system strive to limit their interactions to minimize risks and vulnerabilities.

Japan has articulated its goal of linking two continents to create a stable and prosperous region as a cohesive and unified whole. These objectives can be categorized into two domains: security and economy. On the security front, Japan faces challenges from the rise of China and its expansionist actions in the South China Sea, as well as

Japan's small and insular nature and its security dependence on the United States.

The U.S. presence in the South China Sea and its numerous military exercises under the pretext of combating terrorism and ensuring maritime security have escalated tensions between China and the U.S. over Taiwan, turning this region into a gray zone of contention (Chen & Chen, 2022).

Christina Lai (2020), in her article *Imaginary Brotherhood: Rhetorical Frameworks and Prospects for Sino-Taiwanese Relations*, explores the rhetorical framework of brotherhood for Sino-Taiwanese relations, offering guidelines for establishing common rhetorical ground. This familial framework could transform Sino-Taiwanese relations into an "imaginary brotherhood." The article provides political implications for Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to actively participate in political dialogues with Beijing while preserving rhetorical maneuverability, highlighting how China and Taiwan could forge healthy relations despite fundamental disagreements on many key issues (Lai, 2022).

Liff (2022), in *Japan, Taiwan, and the 'One China' Framework After 50 Years*, underscores the distinctions between Beijing's "One China Principle" and Japan's ambiguous official stance. He evaluates the gradual yet significant evolution of Japan-Taiwan relations over the past five decades (Liff, 2022).

The literature specifically examining the impact of the Taiwan issue on Sino-Japanese relations is limited, despite East Asia's growing prominence in shaping global developments. As China and Japan play a pivotal role in this region, this study seeks to address the theoretical and scientific gap in existing research by innovatively exploring the question: How has the U.S. strategy in East Asia impacted Sino-Japanese relations?

Drawing upon structural realism, the study hypothesizes that the United States, in its efforts to counter and contain China and establish a new regional balance, has pursued strategies such as securitizing China's surrounding environment, strengthening naval deployments around China, intervening in border disputes, creating tensions among China's allies, supporting Taiwan, aligning with Japan, forming coalitions, and expanding multilateral relations against Beijing. These measures have diminished China's political and economic influence, heightened

competition between Tokyo and Beijing, and escalated tensions in East Asia.

Several factors have contributed to Taiwan's increasing significance in the region's political landscape, influencing its role in China's foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

All countries and states interact with the international structure based on one or several theories, which assist in creating mental order, distinguishing significant variables from less critical ones, and shaping their international behavior. In this study, the theoretical framework is based on structural realism.

The phenomenon of neorealism or structural realism is the result of theoretical efforts by Kenneth Waltz in his work *Theory of International Politics* (1979) and John Mearsheimer in his book *The Tragedy of Great Powers* (2001). These works also serve as foundational theoretical sources for the neorealism model. Waltz and Mearsheimer are considered intellectual representatives of defensive and offensive realism, respectively. In his book, Waltz meticulously outlines the principles of neorealist theory in international relations.

Both classical and structural realists agree that "power" is the most crucial element in international relations. Power determines the position and influence of states, the primary actors in the international arena. States compete in this transnational space to acquire and enhance power or, at the very least, to sustain and ensure their survival.

However, there are distinctions between classical and structural realism. For instance, classical realists argue that human nature drives individuals to seek power, while structural realists study the global system rather than the micro-level analysis of individuals. Classical realists are viewed as power-seekers, whereas structural realists pursue security through power. Despite these differences, both perspectives emphasize the importance of concepts such as security, sovereignty, domestic independence, and national interests (Chen, 2023).

Neorealism emerged as a competitor to classical realism, prioritizing scientific development and distancing itself from the historical and behavioral analysis of states. Kenneth Waltz criticized realists for their reductionist approach, which led them to examine international

issues from an individual or domestic analytical perspective. Waltz emphasized the significance of systemic analysis, arguing that individual-level analysis alone cannot explain the functioning of the international system. In his first book, *Man, the State, and War* (1959), Waltz introduced three levels of analysis: individual, domestic, and international (Azzara & Sholeh, 2022).

Under neorealism, state efforts can be divided into two general approaches: first, domestic efforts to enhance economic and military capabilities and advance strategic policies; second, external efforts to strengthen alliances with aligned partners or weaken rival coalitions. States' capabilities determine their rank within the system, while the distribution of capabilities defines the framework and structure of the system. Neorealism focuses on relative advantage, meaning states measure their gains relative to the benefits and profits of their rivals or enemies. This perspective allows for the possibility of cooperation within the neorealism paradigm (Yu, 2023).

Neorealism continues to view the state as the primary actor on the stage of international politics, while also identifying power as the core of international politics. Neorealists believe in the absence of a central authority in the international system, recommending states to accumulate power to ensure their survival and protection. In this perspective, ethical principles have no place in creating a unified approach or pursuing essential interests. According to Waltz, the behavior and reaction of any state must necessarily be guided and governed by its interests. Neorealism acknowledges that international cooperation is only possible when states enhance their capacities. Waltz posits that states should only engage in cooperation if it leads to increased military power aligned with protecting their interests. Waltz characterizes the structure of international relations as inherently anarchic, signifying the absence of a public authority or central power to enforce laws and maintain order in the international system.

Neorealism analyzes the nature, possibility, and likelihood of international cooperation based on the anarchic structure of the international system. The anarchic nature of the system creates two obstacles to international cooperation, making it highly challenging. First, the pervasive distrust in international relations causes states to be cautious about beginning or continuing cooperation with others due to fears of

exploitation or deceit. To avoid the security dilemma, states often engage in economic diplomacy as the initial step and a basic level of cooperation, signaling to the other parties the costs of threats (e.g., lost economic opportunities). If mutual cooperation is achieved, a transition to a second level occurs, characterized by power competition and survival strategies.

In summary, the fundamental assumptions of neorealism can be defined by two main components: (1) states are the units of the international system, and (2) states strive for survival in an anarchic environment, justifying self-help behavior.

By centering the theory of neorealism and the anarchy derived from the international system's nature, which justifies self-help, states work to preserve their existence and pursue their interests. Based on neorealism, it can be explained that China and Japan conflict and disagree on certain issues, competing politically, economically, and militarily, and prioritizing their interests in any arising matter.

However, considering that Japan and the United States share a common rival in China—fearing its influence in other regions—both countries find developing relations with Taiwan and supporting the island critical. This highlights their opportunism and the importance of national interests and security for each (Mochizuki, 2022).

Defensive realism argues that the anarchic structure of the international system encourages states to adopt moderate and conciliatory policies to enhance their security. Defensive realists do not deny the reality of differences or states' motives for expansionism but consider such states exceptions. From the perspective of defensive realism, the primary goal of states is survival and maintaining security. Defensive realists view a unipolar world as highly unstable, with other states balancing against the dominant power (hegemon). Due to the power gap between the hegemon and other states, the risk of balancing efforts is high, leading to instances where states may engage in soft balancing rather than hard balancing.

### 3. The United States and East Asia

The U.S. entry into the East Asian arena dates back to the era of Japan's isolation when the U.S. secured trading privileges at Japanese ports, ending Japan's isolationist period. However, America's emergence as a significant

regional actor occurred after World War II. Following the Cold War, the U.S. and China were the only major powers in the region, while Japan failed to regain its former status as a leading power, tying its security to the U.S. After the Cold War, the United States solidified its presence in East Asia, enhancing its military capabilities (Klingner, 2022).

In the past decades, China-Japan relations have oscillated between periods of relative cordiality and significant tensions. Since 1995, Beijing has perceived Tokyo's intensified attitudes as contradicting long-term friendly relations with the People's Republic of China. This perspective is mirrored in Tokyo, where China's behavior is increasingly viewed as provocative. Political orientations in both countries appear to have diverged further. Periodic partial freezes in relations, despite numerous joint projects, challenge resolution and suggest some issues may be unsolvable. Weak leadership in both nations may embolden extremists in each to adopt more assertive stances (Xin, 2022).

Japan-China relations in the 2000s experienced significant tensions, particularly during Junichiro Koizumi's tenure, followed by notable improvement in the post-Koizumi era. Structural changes and shifting power balances in East Asia have led to strategic divergences and the emergence of security dilemmas in bilateral relations. Additionally, rising conservatism in Japan under Koizumi and China's use of the "history card" exacerbated mutual distrust, straining relations in the early 2000s. Although bilateral ties stabilized in the post-Koizumi period due to both nations' leaders emphasizing mutual engagement and reducing the security dilemma, the "cooling-off period" is unlikely to lead to long-term stability. The lack of strategic trust between Tokyo and Beijing, coupled with the importance of the U.S. factor in bilateral security interactions, highlights the fragile nature of the current Japan-China relationship (Chen, 2023).

Japan and China are both critical East Asian powers, making their bilateral relations pivotal not only for the two nations but also for peace and stability in East Asia and globally.

China's grand strategy following the Cold War, based on maintaining the status quo, promoting collective security, and fostering multipolarity through the UN system, does not apply effectively in East Asia. China's definition of its interests in East Asia contrasts with

those promoted by the U.S.-led alliance system, with no shared political framework encouraging Beijing and Washington to adopt globally accepted norms of state behavior. Scholars and policymakers often base their analyses of East Asia's strategic uncertainty on the assumption that China applies its grand strategy in the region similarly to elsewhere, but regional conditions complicate its successful implementation. China has persuaded the international community that East Asia is a region where unique rules apply, justifying its policies toward Taiwan, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula as exceptions to the principles underlying its global grand strategy.

The Japan-U.S. alliance is a product of the Cold War. With the Cold War's conclusion, the increasing globalization of the economy and the strengthening of political multipolarity have gradually altered the alliance's role and nature, demonstrating a trend of increased strength. Adjustments to the alliance post-Cold War have posed significant challenges to China's diplomatic strategy, threatening its peaceful development. Furthermore, the alliance's implications for Taiwan interfere with China's sovereignty and hinder peaceful reunification efforts. In response, China must incorporate "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation" as core elements of its new security concept within its diplomatic strategy, fostering greater shared interests with Japan and the U.S. while strengthening interdependence. China will appropriately manage the Taiwan issue, safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and pursue a "partner" strategy to advance its diplomatic framework. Additionally, China should steadfastly uphold peaceful development, enhance its comprehensive national power, and cultivate a positive international image.

Due to the southernmost Japanese islands' proximity to Taiwan and Japan's hosting of a substantial U.S. military presence in Okinawa, the region is likely to be central to any U.S. support for Taiwan's defense. Any conflict over Taiwan would pose significant challenges and implications for Japan's security. Thus, one of the most concerning flashpoints in East Asia's contemporary regional order is undoubtedly the sovereignty dispute over the Diaoyu/Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands. Tokyo faces difficult decisions regarding cooperation between Japanese and U.S. forces in response to such crises. Specifically, Japan's role would likely involve two distinct actions: supporting U.S. operations and ensuring the Self-

Defense Forces can effectively defend Japanese territory during a conflict (Hilpert et al., 2022).

Sino-Japanese relations remain precarious at best. Disputes over territory and unresolved grievances from World War II disrupt a relationship essential for regional stability, with Taiwan's presence further complicating matters. Historically, Taiwan has been a significant strategic factor between China and the U.S., but Japan also appears increasingly interested in Taiwan. This connection with Taiwan could negatively affect Sino-Japanese relations. A Taiwan crisis could derail Japan-China relations, creating a scenario beneficial to no one. While conflict is unlikely, tensions remain consistently high.

In the 1980s, the U.S. recognized that understanding Japan's international dynamics was essential to grasping its economic and foreign policy.

The Japan-U.S. alliance, a Cold War product, has evolved post-Cold War with increasing globalization and political multipolarity, demonstrating greater strength. This evolution has posed challenges to China's diplomatic strategy and threatened its peaceful development. Furthermore, the alliance's implications for Taiwan undermine China's sovereignty and obstruct peaceful reunification. In response, China must emphasize "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation" in its diplomatic strategy, create more shared interests with Japan and the U.S., and reinforce interdependence. China must properly manage the Taiwan issue, safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and adopt a partnership strategy to advance its diplomatic objectives. Additionally, it must maintain peaceful development, strengthen comprehensive national power, and build a favorable international image.

Japan has struggled to exercise autonomy in its overarching security policies and dealings with China since World War II. It seeks greater independence from the U.S., though its political culture, constitution, and U.S. relations still limit it. Japan's Taiwan policy, too, is contingent on its ties with the U.S.

For China, the goal is straightforward: prevent Taiwan's independence and counter policies promoting it. Taiwan, however, faces a more complex reality, involving efforts to enhance its international standing, preserve its prosperity, and nurture its nascent democracy. For the U.S., China-Taiwan relations represent a core dilemma in its Asian strategy.

Japan itself does not see Taiwan as a direct problem but reacts to U.S. demands. Taiwan's significance in shaping China's regional strategy rests on two pillars: Taiwan as a barrier against China's expansion in the South China Sea and a severe limitation on China's military balancing capabilities against the U.S. and its regional allies. Taiwan is not only a critical emotional issue for China but also its most sensitive security concern.

Beijing views Taipei as a primary rival or, at the very least, a serious security threat. Supporting Taiwan is rooted in three main arguments: (1) ensuring the future of political freedom globally, (2) maintaining global power balance, and (3) preserving the global economy. Together, these create a compelling rationale for keeping Taiwan beyond Beijing's reach.

China and Japan share common interests in regional security, but China's broader and deeper presence intensifies the challenge. Central Asian governments are highly sensitive about maintaining internal security and keen to enhance their military capabilities. Japan, constrained by constitutional limitations on arms sales and military cooperation, is largely absent in this arena, heightening Japan's security concerns regarding China.

#### 4. U.S. Perspective on Taiwan Independence Forces

Neoclassicists emphasize the influence of systemic levels on a country's foreign policy, arguing that the more transparent the international environment, the easier decision-making becomes, and the clearer the impact of the international system on a country's foreign policy behavior will be. Under the U.S. Constitution, foreign policy is the result of intense bargaining between the executive and legislative branches. When negotiating with the U.S., foreign governments effectively face a group of interest groups represented in Congress. These groups may support or oppose specific issues, with the outcome dependent on their power to influence political processes. Therefore, when China negotiates with the U.S., it must allocate significant time and resources to secure Congressional support (Liptake et al., 2022).

Neoclassicists add domestic factors as intermediary variables between the systemic level and foreign policy behavior, distinguishing this theory from its predecessors. This approach aids in explaining the differing responses of leaders under similar circumstances. They argue that political factors, leaders' perceptions and interpretations of threats, and the

ability to consolidate domestic resources and influential groups significantly affect a state's foreign policy. For instance, the U.S.'s political and economic structure, along with its presidential system, contributes to its practice of strategic ambiguity.

The dynamics of U.S.-China-Taiwan relations demonstrate that states have no permanent enemies, only permanent national interests. Consequently, the future of their interactions will be determined by their respective national interests.

After the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, China and the U.S. partially lost their foundation for cooperation. However, numerous events, especially after September 11, 2001, proved this assumption incorrect. The two countries share extensive common interests in various fields. For example, the events of September 11 provided an opportunity for China and the U.S. to explore new shared security interests and collaborate in combating terrorism.

Historically, U.S. policy toward China follows a pattern: a new administration often adopts a hardline stance at the outset, eventually shifting to a pragmatic and rational approach. For instance, when George W. Bush became president in 2001, his administration initially pursued a hardline China policy and supported Taiwan. Bush's administration intensified military cooperation with Taiwan, weakening the tradition of defensive arms sales to the island. On April 24, 2001, President Bush stated that the U.S. would "do whatever it takes to help Taiwan defend itself" in the event of a Chinese attack (Krickel-Choi & Chen, 2023). This position was favorable for Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), representing pro-independence forces. Consequently, tensions between China and the U.S. escalated.

After September 11, some Bush administration officials believed the U.S.'s counterterrorism campaign necessitated strengthening cooperative relations with East Asian allies and improving ties with China (Keegan & Churchman, 2022). In October 2001, despite domestic tensions, Bush attended informal APEC economic leaders' meetings in Shanghai, where he held bilateral talks with Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Both leaders expressed a willingness to foster constructive U.S.-China relations. In May 2002, when Vice President Dick Cheney met Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao, he clarified that the U.S. did not support Taiwan's independence or the pro-independence forces.

During Jiang Zemin's October 2002 visit to the U.S., Bush reiterated that the "One China Policy" required peaceful resolution and clarified U.S. opposition to Taiwan's independence.

After September 2003, Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian initiated a constitutional referendum that could be seen as a timeline for Taiwan's independence, exacerbating tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing formally requested that Washington curb any support for Taiwan's independence. In response, the Bush administration sent Michael Green, senior director for East Asian affairs at the U.S. National Security Council, along with a letter from President Bush, to pressure Chen Shui-bian. The failure to dissuade Taiwan's independence movement led the U.S. to increase its pressure on Chen. Richard Boucher, U.S. State Department spokesperson, stated that Washington opposed any referendum that altered Taiwan's status or pushed toward independence (Bultrini, 2022).

The 2008 and 2012 presidential victories of Kuomintang candidate Ma Ying-jeou reduced cross-strait tensions. These developments highlight the U.S.-China dialogue mechanism for managing crises, ensuring timely communication during critical issues like Taiwan. This mechanism reflects the ability of both nations to handle controlled friction.

While some U.S. actions positively impact Taiwan Strait stability and U.S.-China relations, incremental adjustments in U.S. Taiwan policy do not indicate a shift in fundamental principles. On one hand, the U.S. seeks to limit Taiwan's independence movement, preventing excessive separatist actions by Taiwanese authorities. On the other, the U.S. continues to sell arms to and support Taiwan. By strengthening its military alliance with Japan, the U.S. aims to include Taiwan within its strategic framework.

U.S. actions regarding Taiwan are partially motivated by concerns about an undemocratic China. This approach reflects the continuity of U.S. policy on Taiwan (Chen & Chen, 2022).

## 5. Adjustment of U.S. Global Strategic Objectives

The concept of structure and balance of power are fundamental elements of neorealism. Kenneth Waltz, after critiquing reductionist theories, emphasized the importance of systemic theories and the structural nature of the international system. Structural realists

agree that the primary motivation for states prioritizing national security is the anarchic structure of the international system, which compels them to pursue power. States are deeply sensitive to the balance of power and their relative strength compared to others, resulting in intense competition to gain power, often at the expense of rivals or at least ensuring the preservation of existing power.

This fierce competition stems from the anarchic nature of the international system, which limits alternative options for states seeking survival and security. However, structural realists differ in their views on the necessary level of power for achieving national security, dividing them into defensive and offensive camps. Furthermore, they disagree on states' rational behavior and the relationship between international political theory and foreign policy. Despite these differences, all neorealists consider the anarchic nature of the international system as their starting point.

According to structural realism, anarchy leads to aggression and conflict, making security a scarce commodity. This scarcity fuels international competition and exacerbates the security dilemma among states, increasing the likelihood of war. States adopt offensive strategies to ensure their security, provoking reactions from other states and intensifying insecurity and the security dilemma. According to realists, international relations fundamentally revolve around power and security in interactions among states. Power is deemed the most critical tool for achieving security, while insecurity is viewed as the central issue in international politics, with war as its most evident manifestation (Glaser, 2022).

The United States, China, and Japan form the most significant trilateral relationship in the Asia-Pacific region. However, these three nation-states have pursued different developmental paths throughout history. The bilateral relationships within this triangle involve various topics, challenges, and prospects. For instance, trade, human rights, and Taiwan dominate U.S.-China relations, while Japan-China relations are complicated by differing historical interpretations and nationalist sentiments.

The fundamental structure of this trilateral relationship hinges on how the U.S.-Japan alliance addresses China's uncertain and assertive rise. China's economic, military, and political advancements are among the most critical

indicators and uncertainties in evaluating the future trajectory of trilateral relations, as well as the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. Maritime issues, such as the South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and regional institutions like the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, are key areas for understanding the region's geopolitical and strategic landscape.

In systemic theory, Waltz establishes a relationship between the international system's anarchic structure and the balance of power. This relationship posits that the balance of power principle prevents the significant disruption of power distribution among states, serving as the primary mechanism for stability in the anarchic international system. Structural realism analyzes the nature and likelihood of international cooperation based on this anarchic structure.

Focusing on neorealism and the self-help principle derived from the anarchic international environment, states strive for survival and pursue their interests. Wherever their interests align, states engage in cooperation. Consequently, both the U.S. and Japan view China as a shared adversary due to its expanding influence in other regions, emphasizing the importance of national interests for both nations (Lee, 2023).

According to traditional international relations theories like structural realism, the presence of minimal conditions such as international anarchy and the existence of states prioritizing their survival leads to a predetermined outcome of balance of power dynamics. U.S. policy toward Taiwan is an extension of its broader China policy, forming a significant component of its global strategy. After the Zhenbao Island Incident, the Soviet Union's overall policy toward China involved condemnation, criticism, threats, and denigration. In response, Beijing and Washington, united by shared interests in countering the Soviet Union as a common adversary, set aside their differences and established a foundation for strategic cooperation.

However, after the Cold War, the absence of a mutual need to confront a common enemy altered U.S.-China relations. Some U.S. officials considered China a potential strategic adversary (Carothers, 2023). Certain anti-China forces in the U.S. recognized Taiwan's strategic value and sought to contain China by leveraging the Taiwan issue.



Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the U.S. swiftly adjusted its global strategy, prioritizing counterterrorism as its central objective. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) became the primary threat to U.S. survival and security. The potential acquisition of such weapons by terrorist groups was deemed catastrophic, making counterterrorism and non-proliferation key U.S. interests. To achieve these goals, the U.S. required China's cooperation in various areas, with counterterrorism efforts positively impacting U.S.-China relations.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan triggered anti-American protests in the Islamic world. The U.S. hoped China would play a greater role in addressing North Korea and Iran's nuclear issues. Thus, the adjustment of U.S. global strategic objectives and increased reliance on China strengthened their bilateral relations.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the U.S. in 1972, Taiwan-U.S. relations have been contingent upon U.S.-China relations. Any U.S. policy shift regarding Taiwan necessitates careful consideration of its relations with China. According to Robert S. Ross, during the Afghanistan War, the U.S. minimized NATO allies' involvement and showed limited interest in cooperation with Taiwan in the event of a U.S.-China war over the Taiwan Strait (Lyu & Zhou, 2023).

The anarchic structure of the international system, as emphasized by neorealism, fosters mistrust among states, perpetuating concerns about war and driving states to maximize power. For the U.S., creating a balance of power through support for its East Asian allies is a means to counter China's regional ascendance.

The U.S. foreign policy outcomes depend on intermediary variables shaped by elite perceptions and interpretations of the broader international system. Domestic interest groups further influence these intermediary variables (Lai, 2022).

Structural realism seeks to resolve the security dilemma by positing that the only path to meaningful security lies in constant power accumulation, enabling states to achieve relative security through relative power. Accordingly, China has increasingly sought to enhance its power. Recognizing the world's transition toward multipolarity, Chinese leaders have adopted a multilateral strategy to counterbalance the U.S.

China's actions carry significant implications for neighboring states. Japan, deeply affected by China's growing power and influence, finds its relations with the U.S. and China particularly consequential. These dynamics encourage closer alignment between Japan and the U.S. against China, emphasizing shared interests in countering potential threats posed by China's expanding influence and power (Stosic, 2023).

## 6. The Rise of China and Adjustments in U.S. Strategy

As the global superpower in the post-Cold War era, the United States pursues its national interests on a global scale, with Taiwan emerging as a critical factor enabling the U.S. to achieve strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. factor influences China-Japan relations through four dimensions: (1) U.S. perspectives on Taiwan independence forces, (2) adjustment of U.S. global strategic objectives, (3) the rise of China and U.S. strategic adjustments, and (4) Taiwan's impact on the shared interests model between China and the U.S. (Jing-Dong Yuan, 2022, p. 212).

The U.S. has recognized that the tectonic plates of power that defined Asia for half a century are shifting and that China may be returning to its traditional role as a central actor in the region. While current U.S.-China relations appear stable, the U.S. cannot yet consider China a true ally, partly due to ideological differences. However, as Chen et al. (2022) argues, ideology plays a diminishing role in China's foreign relations (Chen & Chen, 2022).

Another significant factor is the rise of China. Understanding China as a growing global power presents a complex challenge for the U.S., with fears in the West and Asia of a potential "China threat" stemming from the assumption that China's continued economic growth will eventually support significant military power. Uncertainty about how China might wield this power in the future heightens U.S. concerns over China's developmental trajectory. Some U.S. officials, adopting a realist perspective, view China as a direct challenge to America's position in Asia and globally (Liptake et al., 2022).

The potential threat from China prompted President George W. Bush to enhance military coordination capabilities with U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The U.S. considered its alliance with Japan a cornerstone of its strategic position in the Asia-Pacific. In February 2005,

the U.S. declared that Taiwan would be included within U.S.-Japan security cooperation and expanded its missile defense system to cover Taiwan. After a one-day consultation, the U.S. and Japan issued a joint statement advocating for the peaceful resolution of Taiwan Strait issues through dialogue (Yu, 2023). In response, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson expressed strong opposition to any U.S.-Japan statements involving Taiwan, viewing them as interference in China's internal affairs and a violation of its sovereignty (Hass et al., 2023).

To counter China's rise, U.S. President Barack Obama proposed the "Pivot to Asia" strategy during a November 17, 2011, speech to the Australian Parliament. Obama emphasized the U.S.'s comprehensive commitment to the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century (Glaser, 2022). Although Obama did not explicitly mention Taiwan, Taiwan occupies a significant position in the geopolitical considerations underlying the strategy, inevitably affecting U.S.-China relations.

In an era of globalization, both China and the U.S. share extensive common interests in regional issues, global security, and bilateral relations, making cooperation both possible and necessary. China's importance within U.S. global strategy, particularly in economic contexts, is rising significantly. Simplistically framing China as a strategic competitor overlooks the complexity and significance of U.S.-China relations. The U.S. recognizes China's potential to help prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and combat global terrorism, despite China's capability to challenge U.S. global standing.

Robert B. Zoellick, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, stated that "we must encourage China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system" (Stosic, 2023; Stosunki, 2023). This indicates that China and the U.S. are constructing a new framework for their relationship, characterized by mutual efforts and safeguards. However, as the U.S. encourages China to become a responsible member of the international community, it must honor its commitment not to support Taiwan's independence (Huang, 2023).

If U.S. strategy toward China includes containment, Taiwan remains its trump card. However, Taiwan's influence must align with U.S. global strategic goals and is constrained by the evolution of U.S.-China relations. The trajectory of U.S.-China relations fundamentally

shapes the Taiwan issue and U.S. policy toward it. While conflicts and differences persist between China and the U.S., evidence suggests that cooperation is the dominant trend in their relations.

As China rises, both nations are expanding cooperation and enhancing coordination, creating further opportunities for collaboration in the future. China's growing military power has multifaceted implications for Asia-Pacific states, directly impacting its neighbors, particularly Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines. This development also strengthens alliances and agreements among other nations, such as the U.S.-Japan alliance, which views China as its most challenging adversary (Hilpert et al., 2022).

## 7. Factors Influencing Taiwan's Role in the U.S.-China Shared Interests Model

The Taiwan issue is a historical problem stemming from China's civil war. The Chinese government asserts that Taiwan is a domestic matter, yet it cannot eliminate direct or indirect foreign interference. Both the Cairo Declaration issued by China, the United States, and the United Kingdom in December 1943, and the Potsdam Declaration signed by China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union in 1945, proclaimed that all territories, including Taiwan, occupied by Japan before the end of World War II must be returned to China. On October 25, 1945, Japan formally restored Taiwan's sovereignty to China. Hence, Taiwan is an inseparable part of China, a claim historically affirmed.

However, political behavior is not always dominated by rationality; in many cases, it is shaped by irrational national interests. This dynamic is a critical reason why the Taiwan issue can serve as leverage in U.S.-China relations.

As a global superpower in the post-Cold War era, the United States pursues its national interests on a global scale, with Taiwan emerging as a key factor supporting U.S. strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. In the framework of national interests, the hierarchy of priorities for states is not immutable. Over time, shifting international conditions influence the primary interests of nations. For China, Taiwan is a core interest, and Chinese leaders regard reunification as a historical mission.

China aims to strengthen its comprehensive power, actively engage in international affairs, integrate into the global community, and foster friendly and cooperative relations with other nations across various domains. Therefore, China is likely to continue its current foreign policy, characterized by general caution, pragmatism, and an emphasis on maintaining a peaceful regional environment to ensure the success of its modernization agenda (Hass, 2022; Hass et al., 2023).

U.S.-China relations rank among the most significant bilateral relationships globally. To enhance their ties, both nations must refrain from challenging each other's core interests. Should the U.S. government persist in undermining China's primary interests, particularly concerning Taiwan, and fail to uphold the "One China Policy," U.S.-China relations will inevitably deteriorate. Efforts to peacefully reunify Taiwan align with the interests of China, the U.S., and other Asia-Pacific countries. The Chinese public opposes any catastrophic scenario requiring conflict with compatriots across the Taiwan Strait. Similarly, Beijing's leaders, preoccupied with domestic challenges, seek to avoid tensions that could disrupt their domestic agenda (Chen & Chen, 2022). A stable regional environment and U.S.-China relations are vital for China's development and modernization.

From Taiwan's perspective, war would mean absolute and total devastation, undermining its post-1949 efforts following China's civil war. For Asia-Pacific countries, maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait and ensuring East Asia's security represent shared aspirations. From the U.S. perspective, a potential conflict across the Taiwan Strait would impose significant costs on Washington and its allies.

The peaceful rise of China and the diminishing international space for Taiwan continue to expand shared U.S.-China interests while reducing U.S.-Taiwan shared interests. If China achieves economic development and democratization, a divided Taiwan may hold insufficient strategic value for the United States. Maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait aligns with U.S.-China shared interests; therefore, Washington must avoid sending mixed signals to Taiwan's independence forces.

If China sustains its open policy and promotes democratization, the U.S. is likely to maintain its current policy toward China for an extended period. Under

present international conditions, this policy has proven effective in fostering peaceful and stable U.S.-China relations, making it a pragmatic approach. The U.S. must recognize that as long as Beijing refrains from using force and works peacefully to shape the future international system, the destabilizing impacts of China's growing power can be minimized (Usman & Khalid, 2021).

Neither China nor the United States prefers military means to resolve the Taiwan issue. Although U.S.-China relations feature overlapping interests in many areas, Washington must avoid challenging China's core interests.

Since the establishment of formal U.S.-China diplomatic relations in 1979, both sides have explored various ways to advance their bilateral ties. These efforts have yielded fruitful results in multiple fields of cooperation, fostering mutual understanding of the Taiwan issue. They have reached consensus in many areas based on shared strategies and interests, promoting global peace, regional development in the Asia-Pacific, economic cooperation, and mutual prosperity.

In the 2000s, Japan-China relations experienced significant tensions, particularly during Junichiro Koizumi's tenure, followed by notable improvement in the post-Koizumi period. Domestic and international factors in both nations shaped the political and security dimensions of their bilateral relations. The extent of fundamental tensions and prospects for long-term stability in China-Japan relations depend on the dynamics of U.S.-Japan support for Taiwan.

This study also argues that structural changes and shifting power balances in East Asia have led to strategic divergence and intensified the security dilemma in bilateral relations. Rising conservatism in Japan during Koizumi's tenure and China's use of the "history card" exacerbated mutual distrust, straining relations in the early 2000s. While post-Koizumi bilateral ties stabilized through political leaders' emphasis on mutual engagement and mitigating the security dilemma, the "cooling-off period" is unlikely to yield long-term stability. Strategic distrust and the U.S. factor in bilateral security interactions underline the fragility of current China-Japan relations.

Taiwan's relationship with mainland China has undergone numerous changes since the 17th century, beginning with Dutch colonization. In 1949, Taiwan separated from mainland China. Three key factors

influence China-Japan relations: Taiwan's strategic maritime position, its role in global trade networks, and the fear of its use as a base against mainland China.

The U.S.-Japan alliance, a Cold War product, has evolved post-Cold War with increasing economic globalization and political multipolarity, demonstrating greater strength. This alliance poses challenges to China's diplomatic strategy and threatens its peaceful development. Furthermore, the alliance's implications for Taiwan interfere with China's sovereignty and hinder peaceful reunification efforts.

To address these challenges, China must adopt "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation" as the core principles of its diplomatic security strategy, fostering shared interests and interdependence with Japan and the U.S. China must manage the Taiwan issue effectively, safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and pursue a partnership strategy to enhance its diplomatic framework. Additionally, China should maintain peaceful development, strengthen its comprehensive national power, and cultivate a positive international image (Stosunki, 2023; Usman & Khalid, 2021).

## 8. Conclusion

Structural realism aims to demonstrate that great powers seek to increase their relative power and emphasizes that endless competition for power exists. However, what drives this competition is not a primal human desire for power but the need to attain security, a consequence of the anarchic structure of the international system. In conditions where all states possess the capability to harm one another, they strive to achieve sufficient power to safeguard themselves against potential threats. Structural realism attempts to address the security dilemma by positing that the only way to achieve convincing security is through a continuous increase in power, enabling states to achieve relative security through relative power.

The factors influencing states' foreign policy decisions must be understood within the complex interplay of systemic, regional, and domestic variables. The United States, China, and Japan form one of the most significant trilateral relationships in the Asia-Pacific region. However, these three nations have pursued different developmental paths throughout history. East Asia is a crucial region for U.S. foreign policy due to its role in the

global economy, the presence of U.S. allies, and the rise of China in recent years, underscoring its pivotal importance in 21st-century global politics.

At the macro level, neorealists focus on increasing relative power, maximizing security, and balancing both interests and power. States consistently seek to expand their relative power to influence their surrounding environment and beyond, aiming to shape other states' decisions in line with their interests. This often leads to the creation of a regional security environment aligned with the dominant state's interests.

Since the Cold War, the United States has played an active role in East Asia through its economic and military systems and interactions with nations like Japan, South Korea, and Australia. However, China's rising power poses the greatest challenge to the U.S. in this region, prompting concerns in Washington. The U.S. seeks to maintain a military and political presence in East Asia to balance China's rise and prevent its regional expansion.

To counter China's influence, the U.S. has fostered military dependencies among regional nations by deploying military capabilities and forming alliances. Recent years have seen Washington deepen ties with Japan across economic, political, and particularly military domains. These efforts place Tokyo firmly within the Western security framework and significantly impact the regional power structure, shifting the Asia-Pacific balance of power against Beijing.

The U.S. has also leveraged China's rise as a threat narrative to justify its military presence in Japan and maintain regional bases. As China grows stronger, countries in East and Southeast Asia are likely to engage in arms races or align themselves with stronger external powers. The U.S.'s immediate foreign policy objectives remain maximizing its freedom of action and influence in the international system.

Japan openly expresses concerns over China's rapid ascent, a fear that structural realism deems rational. Neorealists highlight the influence of systemic variables on foreign policy, asserting that greater international transparency simplifies decision-making and clarifies how systemic forces shape foreign policy behavior.

U.S. strategy is shaped by systemic power distribution but also influenced by domestic factors. As China's economic and military power grows and its role in the Asia-Pacific expands, the U.S. has increasingly emphasized Taiwan as a lever to pressure China, escalate

regional tensions, and distract Beijing from its global ambitions. Taiwan's importance lies in two core factors: as a key link in the chain of U.S.-aligned islands in the South China Sea, acting as a barrier against Chinese expansion; and as a factor that significantly limits China's military balancing capabilities against the U.S. and its regional allies.

The Taiwan issue is inextricably linked to U.S.-China relations. From Washington's perspective, Taiwan is a vital area for ensuring regional stability. The U.S. push for a stronger presence in the Asia-Pacific has been welcomed by Taiwan, while Beijing seeks to isolate Taiwan politically and militarily. Consequently, U.S.-Taiwan economic and security cooperation has intensified, driving a new wave of arms races in East Asia, particularly in missile technology, which poses risks to regional and global peace and security.

The Taiwan issue presents a significant challenge to stable China-Japan relations, resulting from China's rapid international ascent and Taiwan's democratization. Japan's new security commitments under revised guidelines place Tokyo in a difficult position between maintaining its U.S. alliance and preserving stable relations with China.

The Taiwan Strait and cross-strait relations are of fundamental interest to China, essential for peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific, and a key concern for major players like the U.S. and Japan.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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