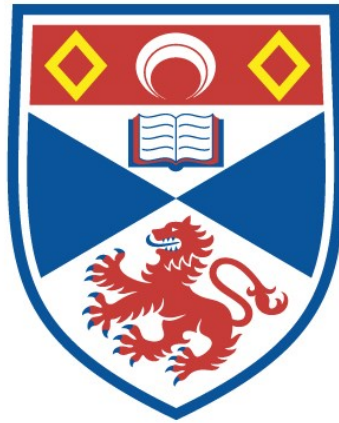


U.S. STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENT AND THE  
SECOND 'LOSS OF CHINA':  
CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE CHINA  
STRATEGIES OF THE OBAMA, TRUMP, AND  
BIDEN ADMINISTRATIONS

Rupert Schulenburg

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil  
at the  
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**U.S. strategic adjustment and the  
second ‘loss of China’:  
Change and continuity in the China  
strategies of the Obama, Trump, and  
Biden administrations**



University of  
St Andrews

**Rupert Schulenburg**

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy (MPhil) at the University of St Andrews

Dr Chris Ogden (Principal supervisor)  
Professor Anthony Lang (Secondary supervisor)

**17th April 2023**

## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I explain why and how U.S. strategy towards China changed between the Obama and Trump administrations, and between the Trump and Biden administrations (2009 – February 2022). I use a neoclassical realist model as a theoretical framework to analyse why changes in U.S. strategy occurred at different levels of causality (the system, state, and individual). I use an ‘ends and means’ framework to analyse how strategy changed in terms of key ‘ends and means’, which also includes applying a schema to my analysis to consistently assess the significance of strategic adjustment; a change in ends is coded as a major change while a change in means is coded as a minor change. I use these frameworks to analyse two case studies: Taiwan and U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific, and sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Based on my analysis, I find that there were no major changes in U.S. strategy between the three administrations, only minor changes. I also show that while changes and continuities in U.S. strategy can largely be explained at the systemic level, layering in domestic and individual-level variables is required to provide a more complete explanation.

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I, Rupert Schulenburg, do hereby certify that this thesis, submitted for the degree of MPhil, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree. I confirm that any appendices included in my thesis contain only material permitted by the 'Assessment of Postgraduate Research Students' policy.

I was admitted as a research student at the University of St Andrews in September 2019.

I confirm that no funding was received for this work.

Date 17th April 2023

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## **List of abbreviations**

A2/AD	Anti-access/area-denial
ADIZ	Air defence identification zone
ASB	AirSea Battle
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, and United States Trilateral Security Partnership
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FONOP	Freedom of navigation operation
FPE	Foreign policy executive
GLBM	Ground-launched ballistic missile
GLCM	Ground-launched cruise missile
ICBM	Intercontinental ballistic missile
INDOPACOM	Indo-Pacific Command
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
INSSG	Interim National Security Strategic Guidance
IRBM	Intermediate-range ballistic missile
JAM-GC	Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons
LRPF	Long-range precision fires
NDS	National Defense Strategy

New START	New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
NSS	National Security Strategy
PAFMM	People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PLARF	People's Liberation Army Rocket Force
PRC	People's Republic of China
QDR	Quadrennial Defence Review
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
SCS	South China Sea
SLBM	Submarine-launched ballistic missile
SLCM	Submarine-launched cruise missile
SLOC	Sea lines of communication
SRBM	Short-range ballistic missile
SSK	Diesel-electric submarine
SSN	Nuclear powered submarine
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
TRA	Taiwan Relations Act
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
USDOD	United States Department of Defence
USDOS	United States Department of State

## **Introduction.**

On 1 October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) after defeating the Nationalist forces, the Guomindang, in the Chinese Civil War. Following Japan's surrender to the United States in 1945, the Truman administration began sending aid to support the Guomindang to avert China falling to Communism. As Secretary of State Dean Acheson put it, the objective of "assisting the Nationalist government" was "pursued vigorously from 1945 to 1949" (1949: xi). In the aftermath of the establishment of the PRC, critics of the Truman administration blamed it for having 'lost China'. They charged that members of the administration were Communists, homosexuals, and spies who had undermined support of the Guomindang (Oshinsky 2005; Wood 2012). This failure became known as the 'loss of China' (Newman 1992).

### ***The second 'loss of China'***

For much of the post-Cold War era, the U.S. followed a China strategy known as 'conengagement' (Friedberg 2012a: 88–119). 'Conengagement', as defined by Zalmay Khalilzad, who coined the term, is a strategy in which the U.S. works at engaging China to bring it "into the current international system" to uphold its rules. Simultaneously, the U.S. also gives equal attention to containing China by "preparing for a possible Chinese challenge to this system" (1999: 1). For instance, the G. H. W. Bush administration sold 150 F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan to bolster its defensive capability (Lee 1993) and banned arms sales to China following the Tiananmen Square massacre (Sullivan 1992). Despite that crackdown, the administration continued China's most favoured nation tariff status (Sutter 2017: 102). The Clinton administration inherited this strategy, overseeing much of China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (Gao 2011) whilst also maintaining a sizable forward-deployed U.S. military presence in East Asia (Nye 2001). Even with the G. W. Bush administration's focus on the War on Terror, it bolstered the U.S. military presence on Guam and built stronger interoperability with Asian allies (Green 2017; Silove 2016). Simultaneously, it coordinated with China through the multilateral Six-Party Talks to limit North Korea's nuclear capabilities (Glaser and Wang 2008).

China received greater focus in U.S. foreign policy under the Obama administration through its 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to Asia (Clinton 2011). The administration's strategy, however, remained in line with 'conengagement' (Friedberg 2022; Mastanduno 2020; Parmar 2020). It reconfigured the U.S.'s global maritime presence to prioritise the Pacific and increased the presence of U.S. forces in the territories of its allies and partners through additional basing access (Stuart 2012). It also pursued a free trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), to foster greater regional economic integration and communicate U.S. commitment to the region (Jackson 2016). Simultaneously, the Obama

administration instituted more frequent high-level dialogues with China (Lampton 2013) and produced a series of joint agreements to curb greenhouse gas emissions (Christensen 2015).

With the advent of the Trump administration in 2017, scholars have argued that a major upheaval in U.S. strategy towards China has occurred, a process known as strategic adjustment. Early into the administration's tenure, it indicated that it would abandon the 'engagement' pillar of 'conengagement' by rejecting the assumption that China could become a "responsible stakeholder" (Zoellick 2005). The Trump administration's 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) declared that the U.S. must "rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners [...]. This premise turned out to be false" (White House 2017c: 3). Consequently, "great power competition returned" (ibid. 27). Contrary to becoming a 'responsible stakeholder', China, as the 2018 *National Defence Strategy* (NDS) put it, had become a "revisionist power" working to "shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model" (USDOD 2018b: 2). To counter this, the U.S. would promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (Trump 2017a).

With this assessment, the administration claimed that it would focus on *competing* with China, as opposed to engaging it. Matt Pottinger, who led the creation of the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* as the Senior Director for Asia on the National Security Council (NSC), stated in September 2018: "we in the Trump administration have updated our China policy, to bring the concept of competition to the forefront" (Landler 2018). Scholars have largely agreed, arguing that it pursued a "competitive strategy" (Ford 2020; Zhao 2019) or "strategy of competition" (Chang-Liao 2019; Mastanduno 2019). Moreover, scholars largely agreed that it abandoned 'engagement' (Economy 2021; Mearsheimer 2021). This was described by scholars as a major shift in strategy, being called a "definitive change in American policy" (Nathan 2021: 387) and a "profound departure" (Mastanduno 2020: 187).

I term this reassessment of U.S. strategy the *second* 'loss of China'. Of course, this does not perfectly mirror the so-called first 'loss of China' when it was lost as an ally of the U.S. when the CCP won the civil war; neither did the McCarthyism of that time recur. However, there was a significant transformation in the perception of the U.S.-China relationship. China was no longer perceived as a potential *partner* of the U.S., but now a *competitor*. Moreover, those who had pursued 'engagement' were castigated given that it had failed to make China sufficiently benign (Ashford 2021; Johnston 2019; Zakaria 2020).

This supposed new U.S. strategy did not end with the Trump administration. The Biden administration's strategy towards China has been widely noted by scholars for its continuity with its predecessor. Elizabeth Economy argued that the administration has "retained many of the competitive and confrontational policies" (2021: 214), and Wang Jisi argued that it has been without a "dramatic shift in substance" (2021: 48). Moreover, senior Trump administration official Matt Pottinger noted that the Biden administration "has largely maintained its predecessor's policy" (2021: 110). The Biden administration's 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* rejected the goal of engaging China to change its behaviour, stating that "our objective is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates" by pursuing a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (White House 2022: 5). Moreover, the Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific on the NSC, Kurt Campbell, declared the "dominant paradigm is going to be competition" (2021a). To the Biden administration, China remained 'lost'.

Regarding why this change in U.S. strategy occurred under the Trump administration, and why it was sustained by the Biden administration, scholars have generally agreed that this is due to China's rise. Over the last few decades, China has made exceptional growth in its military and economic power, and has become more assertive in its foreign policy (Friedberg 2014b; Goldstein 2020; Johnston 2013; Shambaugh 2020). This is encapsulated in the common observation that General Secretary of the CCP and Country Chairman, Xi Jinping, brought an end to China's former guiding principle of foreign policy, espoused by Deng Xiaoping, that China should "hide our capabilities and bide our time" (Doshi 2021; Friedberg 2014b; Goldstein 2020). The Trump administration consequently, in Aaron Friedberg's view, "accepted the reality of the challenge posed by China and began to implement some of the policies that will be needed in order to meet it" (2020). Similarly, John Mearsheimer noted that Trump "abandoned the engagement strategy" to "stop China from succeeding" in challenging U.S. power (2021: 55). The Biden administration has been assessed by scholars to have sustained the Trump administration's strategy given China's rise (Mastanduno 2021; Wei and Zhang 2021). For example, Richard Haass observed that "U.S. policy toward China has hardly changed" due to "heightened concern about how Beijing is using its growing strength" (2021: 85).

### ***Thesis structure***

Amidst the second 'loss of China', it has been widely argued that the Trump administration implemented a *major* change in strategy towards China from that of the Obama administration (Mastanduno 2020; Mearsheimer 2021; Nathan 2021). Moreover, it has been widely argued that the Biden administration largely sustained the Trump administration's strategy towards China (Economy 2021; Haass 2021; Wang 2021). I will answer the following question to assess this claim:

*Why and how* did U.S. strategy towards China change between the Obama and Trump administrations, and between the Trump and Biden administrations?

This thesis is structured as follows. In chapter one, I evaluate the literature concerning U.S. strategy towards China between the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. I find that there is a general absence of studies that explicitly use a theoretical framework to explain *why* U.S. strategy towards China changed between the three administrations, and a lack of studies that explicitly use an analytical framework to show *how* U.S. strategy changed.

In chapter two, I outline my research design. I use a neoclassical realist model as my theoretical framework to analyse *why* changes in U.S. strategy occurred at different levels of causality (the system, state, and individual). This model assumes that the international system (the *independent* variable) is the principal causal mechanism that affects U.S. strategy (the *dependent* variable), while the state and the individual also function as *intervening* variables. I focus on the behaviour of the executive branch of the U.S. government in my analysis, not Congress, given the dominant role the executive plays in formulating and executing U.S. foreign policy (Brattebo and Lansford 2018; Serafino and Ekmektsioglou 2018). This means that Congress' behaviour is discussed as an intervening variable rather than as the dependent variable. I use an 'ends and means' framework as my analytical framework to analyse *how* strategy changed in terms of 'ends and means'. This also includes applying a schema to my analysis to assess the significance of the adjustments, wherein a change in ends is coded as a *major* change while a change in means is coded as a *minor* change. Following this, I explain my methodology for applying these two frameworks to conduct my analysis which relies upon logical inference and process-tracing.

In chapters three and four I use these two frameworks to analyse changes in U.S. strategy using two case studies, Taiwan and U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific, and sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, respectively. I selected these as my case studies for three reasons. First, they are of intrinsic importance, as these two issues are widely regarded by scholars as the most likely flashpoints for a U.S.-China war (Feng and He 2018; Glaser 2015; Li et al. 2019; Talmadge 2017; O'Hanlon 2019). Given the potential costs that could arise from such a conflict (Gompert et al. 2016), gaining an understanding of changes in U.S. strategy regarding these issues is crucial. Second, given their importance, these two issues are data-rich, providing ample primary and secondary sources to draw upon for analysis (Kratiuk et al. 2023; Turner et al. 2022; Zou 2023). Third, these case studies can serve as an indicator of U.S. strategy towards China more broadly. Because of the war risks these issues entail, some U.S. scholars advocate that U.S. objectives should be more limited and accommodating of China's interests. As such, a decrease in U.S. interest and action towards these issues could suggest a more

accommodationist approach to China's rise, while an increase could indicate the opposite (Bandow 2013; Glaser 2021; Gomez 2016).

In chapter five, I conclude this thesis by arguing that through applying my schema to the analysis, I find that there were no *major* changes in U.S. strategy towards China between the Obama and Trump administrations, nor between the Trump and Biden administrations. This is because, regarding Taiwan and U.S. allies, all three administrations desired the same ends; namely, peace across the Taiwan Strait and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. Moreover, regarding sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, they also all desired the same ends; namely, freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners. Some evidence suggests that a *major* change in U.S. strategy towards Taiwan occurred under the Biden administration, as a statement from a senior administration official indicated that it desired that Taiwan remain out of China's control, which deviated from the desire for peace across the Taiwan Strait. The latter objective does not rule out U.S. acceptance of Taiwan's unification with China, only that it be done peacefully and as per the wishes of Taiwan's people. However, I do not code this as a clear case of *major* change for two reasons. First, after this single case of apparent divergence, the Biden administration soon returned to the traditional 'process of resolution' framing of the Taiwan issue. Second, this apparent divergence did not, in any case, necessarily constitute a clear departure from the Trump administration, or even other former U.S. administrations, as China has long assumed that the U.S. desires that Taiwan remain out of China's control. Yet, through applying my schema to the analysis, I find that some *minor* changes in U.S. strategy did occur between the Obama and Trump administrations, and between the Trump and Biden administrations. Between each administration, there were either increases in the level of effort in their use of means or the adoption of new means towards their desired objectives. For instance, this included increasing the value of arms sold to Taiwan, extending the scope of existing alliance commitments, increasing the number of freedom of navigation operations, and increasing military foreign assistance funding to allies and partners.

The desire for these ends can largely be explained at the systemic level. If China conducted aggression towards Taiwan and U.S. allies, or denied the U.S. freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, China could shift the balance of power in its favour. The changes in the use of means can similarly be explained largely at the systemic level. The three administrations generally increased the use of means, such as arms sales, U.S. presence, and capacity building so that the U.S. could balance China's rising power. Variables at the state level and individual level, however, are required to explain some changes. For example, both the Obama and Trump administrations paused freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea due to the worldviews of their Presidents that cooperation with China was essential for solving transnational threats.



## **Chapter 1. Literature review**

In this chapter, I evaluate the literature concerning U.S. strategy towards China between the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations to identify any gaps. This will show how this thesis can contribute to the existing literature. First, I discuss theoretical research concerning U.S. strategy towards China between the three administrations. Second, in section 1.2, I discuss empirical research on this topic. I conclude this chapter by identifying gaps in the literature this thesis will fill.

### **1.1. Theoretical research**

In this section, I briefly discuss the dominant International Relations theories, followed by a discussion of the theoretical research concerning U.S. strategy towards China between the three administrations based on the three levels of analysis at which scholars typically stress relative causal importance (Ripsman et al. 2016: 5). This includes literature that stresses systemic determinism, literature that stresses systemic determinism moderated by domestic variables, and literature that stresses individual determinism.

The study of international affairs, as Stephen Walt puts it, "is best understood as a protracted competition between the [neo]realist, liberal, and radical approaches" (1998: 30). Neorealism posits that the key variable affecting state behaviour is the structure of the international system. The absence of an ultimate arbiter above states constitutes an anarchical system of 'self-help' that incentivises states to pursue a favourable balance of military and economic power relative to other states to protect their sovereignty. The explanatory primacy neorealism places on the international systems means that the internal characteristics of states are not considered an important variable (Waltz 1979).

Liberalism posits that the relationship between states and both their domestic and transnational society critically affects state behaviour by influencing state preferences (Moravcsik 1997). The core liberal claim that flows from this assumption is the concept of 'democratic peace' (Russett 1994). This posits that when states have a combination of republican representation, an ideological commitment to fundamental human rights, and transnational interdependence, this results in more peace-prone relations between liberal states (Doyle 1983). While liberals acknowledge that states have not escaped anarchy, states can mitigate anarchy's war-incentivising structure (Doyle 1986). Contrary to neorealism, states' internal characteristics are considered an important variable (Bueno and Smith 2011).

Of the so-called "radical" approach, which includes English School, poststructuralism, and critical theory, constructivism is the most well-known (Smith 2011). Constructivism posits that the

"distribution of knowledge", as opposed to the distribution of power, is what primarily drives the behaviour of states (Wendt 1992: 397). In this view, international politics is a 'world of our making', constituted through the processes of interaction between states (Onuf 1989). This creates intersubjective understandings between states which brings distinct realities, such as the identities and interests of states, into being (Wendt 1992). Consequently, international politics are socially constructed (Searle 1995). This leads constructivists to place greater importance on identity (Sending 2002) and norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) in analysing drivers of state behaviour.

A recent survey of the field shows that of the three main camps of International Relations theory, neorealism is the most prominent in terms of authors and citations (Kristensen 2018: 252). Moreover, neorealist theories are mostly used to explain patterns of state behaviour in the long-term (Wohlforth 2021: 566). Unsurprisingly, when theoretical frameworks are used, neorealist theories dominate the literature concerning recent changes in U.S. strategy towards China.

### ***1.1.1. The international system***

The general logic behind the strategy towards China of each of the administrations is generally located at the level of the *international system*. This posits that the relative distribution of power functions as a causal variable by creating incentives for state behaviour. Scholars have argued that the strategy of all three administrations was based on *balancing* to attain a favourable balance of power with China. However, the scholars below have not stated clearly that they are using a neorealist 'balance of power' theoretical framework to explain the cause behind an administration's strategy; their analyses are only implicitly neorealist.

Randall Schweller argued that the Obama administration's strategy towards China aimed to "preserve American hegemony in the face of a rising China" (2018: 43), much like Nina Silove, who argued that the 'pivot' was implemented to "preserve the existing power balance in the region" (2016: 46). In similar terms, Evan Montgomery argued that the Obama administration focused on "rebalancing its attention and resources to the Asia-Pacific region in response to China's rise" (2014: 148). Regarding the Trump administration, Christopher Layne argued that its strategy demonstrated an "implicit recognition of China's rise and the shifting balance of power in East Asia" (2020: 13), as has Joshua Shiffrinson, who noted that it was engaged in an effort at "reclaiming much of the dominance" previously enjoyed by the U.S. in response to China's "emergence as a great power" (2021: 86). The Biden administration's strategy has likewise been cast in similar 'balance of power' terms. Mastanduno wrote that Biden seeks to ensure that the "material balance of relative capabilities does not shift quickly or decisively in China's

favor" (2021: 15), similar to Wei Zongyou and Zhang Yunhan, who argued that the Biden administration aims to "balance and offset" China (2021: 16).

A rare case of the explicit use of a theoretical framework that emphasises causality at the level of the international system is that of Ye Xiaodi, who stated that the "change in the relative power positions between the U.S. and China and America's unilateral perceptions of China [...] are the two main factors leading the U.S. to change its China strategy" (2021: 2). From this, Ye concludes that because the Obama administration perceived the power gap as narrowing but perceived China as a status quo power, it pursued a strategy of "accommodation" and later "competition". The Trump administration, however, shifted to a strategy of "containment" as it likewise perceived the power gap as narrowing, but also perceived China as a "revolutionary" state (ibid. 29).

### ***1.1.2. The state***

Some scholars have emphasised that the causes of change in U.S. strategy are located at the level of the *state*, that being how domestic variables, such as state-society relations, domestic institutions, and strategic culture, amongst many others, function as a causal variable that influences the strategies of the administrations. Similar to the lack of the use of explicit theoretical frameworks for analysing systemic pressures, however, most of these scholars do not clearly state their theoretical framework that incorporates domestic variables. Moreover, some scholars only implicitly acknowledged their use of a 'balance of power' neorealist framework as the foundation upon which they consider intervening domestic variables. Even when scholars did acknowledge the role of systemic pressures, most scholars did not make clear in their arguments whether domestic variables functioned as an essential condition for determining elements of the strategies of the administrations, or if systemic pressures would likely have produced the same outcomes in the long-term.

A rare case of explicit use of a theory that emphasises causality at the level of the state is by Peter Harris and Peter Trubowitz. They posit a theory of the "domestic erosion of usable power", whereby a combination of hyper-partisanship, the absence of a compelling strategic frame, and the lack of an inclusive economic agenda, can function as a causal change (2021: 199). They conclude that these "domestic stumbling blocks" affected the Obama administration's ability to mobilise "usable power" to project into the Asia-Pacific (ibid. 199). Consequently, change was largely preordained by the "fractured political landscape" rather than Trump's decision-making (ibid. 189). They explicitly declare the importance of domestic-level causality, arguing that the cause of this change "can only be found at the domestic level" (ibid. 199).

Scholars have pointed to the emergence of consensus amongst elites of opposition to 'engagement' as having worked to produce a shift in strategy. David McCourt argued that a weak consensus amongst elites on 'engagement' facilitated change between Obama and Trump, as the "weakening of countervailing (i.e., pro-engagement) constituencies" (2021: 17) provided the Trump administration with a foundation for shifting the "predominant framing of China from potential challenger to current threat" to pursue a tougher strategy (ibid. 3). While McCourt stressed domestic causes of change, he recognised that growing systemic pressures gave rise to this consensus more concerned about China's rise. He noted that policymakers "evinced obvious misgivings about [China's] multiplying military" (2015: 242). However, McCourt does not make clear if growing systematic pressures would have been sufficient to result in an administration adopting a harder line towards China, *even if* there was a strong pro-engagement domestic consensus.

The strategy of the Biden administration has also been identified as being influenced by the shifting in the domestic consensus on China. Mastanduno argued that the Biden administration's continuation of the Trump administration's strategy was sustained because the administration "recognizes that the elite, bipartisan consensus on a confrontational approach to China [...] makes going back impossible" (2021: 2). Scholars observed that a 'new consensus' emerged in Washington under the Trump administration that 'engagement' failed and that the U.S. now needs to get 'tough' on China (Ashford 2021; Johnston 2019; Zakaria 2020). In this domestic context, Biden was left with political incentives to "continue the new harder line consensus", as resisting would be "unpopular at home and within the foreign policy establishment" (Mastanduno 2020: 7). However, Mastanduno did acknowledge systemic causality, noting that the domestic consensus has been "reinforced" by China's "foreign policy behavior" (ibid. 2). He does not, however, make clear if he holds that the Biden administration would have pursued a harder line regardless of the domestic consensus.

Some scholars have emphasised how negative U.S. public opinion more broadly, as opposed to a focus on elites or key domestic constituencies, caused a shift in U.S. strategy. Wang Donghui et al. argued that an increasingly negative view of China enabled the Trump administration to adopt a more hardline strategy. They stated that "because of American discontent toward China that Trump's policies had such widespread appeal", meaning that the Trump administration's adoption of a "tough-to-China" strategy was the "result of the increasing deterioration of U.S.-China relations, rather than just a cause" (2022: 232). Wang et al. did not, however, make clear *why* the U.S. public came to hold a more negative view of China. Scholars have pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a major cause of the Trump administration's adoption of a more hardline approach. Thomas Wright argued that "once [Trump] saw the virus as a threat to his reelection chances" he came to "endorse [...] policies to [...] intensify the contest with China" (2021: 197).

Another key focus by scholars at the level of the state is on the influence of public opinion, as a causal change in the strategies of the administrations. Regarding the economic component of U.S. strategy towards China, anti-trade liberalisation amongst the public has been commonly identified by scholars as a causal change. While Trump was the candidate most vocal during the 2016 Presidential campaign in criticising the TPP, opposition was extensive across the Democratic and Republican fields (Bisley 2020: 166). The political "tide had turned", meaning that regardless of the winning candidate, the core economic element of U.S. strategy would have changed (Ljunggren 2020: 199). Scholars note that Hillary Clinton was forced to distance herself from the TPP to "accord with the changed politics" (Sutter 2020: 146).

### ***1.1.3. The individual***

Regarding analysis at the level of the *individual* (where the worldviews, perceptions, and personalities of leaders function as a causal variable) in determining the strategy towards China by each of the administrations, scholars have identified certain worldviews held by each President which they argue have driven particular aspects of their China strategy. Obama's worldview that the U.S. needed to disengage from some areas, while still maintaining primacy, has been seen as a driver of his administration's strategy towards China through the 'pivot'. Drezner observed that one of Obama's "convictions" was that the U.S. was "overextended in all the wrong places" (2011: 64), as did Hal Brands, who argued that Obama worked at "preserving U.S. leadership", but through ways "that better reflected the shifting landscape of global power" (2016: 102). Scholars have also identified Trump's worldview of U.S. allies as a causal variable. As Ashley Tellis put it, the administration was often "handicapped by the president himself" (2020: 124) as Trump frequently "characterised allies as free riders, while other administration officials sought cooperation" (Economy 2021: 214).

In regards to Trump's worldview on trade, scholars have widely argued that Trump's "fixation" (Foot and King 2019: 47) on the U.S.-China trade deficit has functioned as a causal variable in the economic element of his administration's strategy. Mastanduno argued that the Trump administration's trade war with China "reflects Trump's mercantilist understanding" of trade, regarding bilateral deficit reduction opposed, as to market access, as the metric to determine the success of trade relationships (2020: 186). Trump "interpreted trade deficits as a sign of economic weakness" to such an extent that he insisted that renegotiation was "vital" (Drezner 2019: 9). Using "agential constructivism", which emphasises individual actors' opportunities for agency, J. Grant stressed Trump's use of social media. He observes that Trump worked to "elude the constraints of structure in world politics" by using Twitter to make statements castigating China. This enhanced individual agency as he "upended the norms" of the "conduct of foreign policy" (2018: 257).

Scholars have observed that Biden holds a worldview that the current defining feature of world politics is a struggle between democracy and autocracy, and that this is functioning as a driver of his strategy. Biden believes that "what is at stake is whether democracy works or authoritarianism works" (Nathan 2021: 392). China is the focus of this "battle" (Zhao 2021: 3) given Biden's view that the U.S. is the "exemplar of the democratic alternative and China the most formidable representative of the autocratic one" (Mastanduno 2021: 7). Biden's objective to show "that democracy works at solving problems" (Deudney and Ikenberry 2021: 27) has translated into domestic initiatives in the form of significant spending bills as part of the 'Build Back Better' agenda and foreign initiatives such as the Build Back Better World Partnership (Cooley and Nexon 2021).

## **1.2. Empirical research**

In this section, I discuss empirical research concerning U.S. strategy towards China across the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. In the first section, I discuss the general absence of the use of analytical frameworks regarding this topic. In the second to fourth sections, I discuss literature concerning security, economic, and diplomatic policy, respectively.

### ***1.2.1. Analytical frameworks***

While claims of change and continuity in strategy towards China between the three administrations are commonplace in the literature, such claims are not based upon the explicit use of analytical frameworks. Concerning the change in U.S. strategy towards China from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, this is generally assessed to have constituted a *departure*. As Börje Ljunggren put it, U.S. strategy towards China under Trump entailed a "sea change" (2020: 195). The core difference identified is that the Trump administration "abandoned the strategy of liberal engagement [...] to integrate China into a U.S.-led international order" (Mastanduno 2021: 1) and decided to "pursue containment instead" (Mearsheimer 2021: 55). Claims of continuity from the Biden administration are far from rare. Bonnie Glaser observed that it "revealed substantial continuity" with the Trump administration (2021: 29) and Yan Xuetong noted the "continuation of his predecessor's confrontational approach" (2021a: 44).

The lack of the explicit use of analytical frameworks for claims such as these is surprising for three reasons. First, there is a wide range of models proposed for studying foreign policy change (Carlsnaes 1993; Goldmann 1988; Gustavsson 1999; Hermann 1990; Holsti 1982; Rosati 1994; Skidmore 1994). One rare case is by Edward Ashbee and Steven Hurst, who apply a framework based upon "historical

institutionalism" to the Trump administration (2021: 721). This framework includes defining three stages: paradigmatic change at the ideational level; the development of new or reconfigured interest coalitions; and, shifts in the character of associated institutions. Using this framework, they conclude that while there is evidence of a "paradigmatic shift", there has been a limited change at the "level of interests and institutions" (ibid.).

Second, although typologies are frequently used in the study of international politics (Elman 2005), these have surprisingly not been widely used to analyse adjustments in strategy between the three administrations. Scholars have used certain terms to describe the strategies of the different administrations, such as declaring that the Obama administration had a strategy of "engagement", while the Trump administration had a strategy of "competition" (Hu 2020; Li 2020). However, these declarations have fallen short of the explicit use of a typological approach to demonstrate a change from one to another. The use of a typological framework has appeared in some recent scholarship, although this has been used to chart options for *future* U.S. strategy (Chang-Liao 2019; Cooper and Brands 2019). The only explicit case of using typologies to analyse at least two of the administrations I have located is by Ye Xiaodi (2021: 13). Using his six typologies of strategies, Ye concludes that the Obama administration shifted from "accommodation" to "competition", before the Trump administration shifted to "containment" (ibid. 29). Third, given the widely used 'ends and means' conceptualisation of strategy amongst scholars (Freedman 2018), the absence of studies that simply organise their analysis around changes in the administrations' strategies around 'ends and means' is another curious literature gap.

### ***1.2.2. Security***

In response to China's development of anti-access area-denial capabilities (A2/AD), the Obama administration began to develop the doctrine of AirSea Battle (ASB) to preserve U.S. operational access to the Western Pacific and its ability to defend regional allies and Taiwan (Friedberg 2014a). This aims to take offensive action using "cross-domain synergy" to blind China's sensor systems and physically destroy its A2/AD capabilities (Biddle and Oelrich 2016: 8). Using a "historical socio-cultural lens", Brice Harris argued that the doctrine of 'AirSea Battle' was driven by U.S. "strategic culture", given that U.S. strategic culture is heavily based upon seeking to hold technological primacy in a conflict (2014: 290). The Obama administration also reconfigured the U.S.'s global maritime presence to prioritise the Pacific and increased U.S. troop presence in the territories of U.S. allies and partners (Stuart 2012: 211). Despite Trump's declared disinterest in U.S. leadership (Haass 2020), the Trump administration's security approach to the Indo-Pacific has been assessed to "retains most of the key

features of Obama's approach" (Bisley 2020: 167), namely to "reinforce the American military presence" through bolstering capabilities and readiness (Sutter 2020: 148).

The strategy of the three administrations towards the U.S. 'hub-and-spokes system' of allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific has been identified by scholars as involving some variation. The Obama administration engaged in alliance empowerment through initiatives to enhance the capabilities of U.S. allies and partners (Saunders 2014: 35). While the Trump *administration* supported strengthening its allies and partners in the region, Trump *himself* did not. Trump castigated U.S. allies, demanded massive increases in defence spending, and suggested that supposedly underpaying allies should be left to defend themselves (Rapp-Hooper 2020). That said, senior officials went on "reassurance tours" to stress that the "underlying purpose, structure and funding of U.S. regional strategy were going to remain" (Bisley 2020: 168). The Biden administration has been observed to have delivered "effective relationship repair" (Townshend et al. 2021: 10) and articulated that "the U.S. alliance network is a crucial advantage" (Nathan 2021: 391). Beyond working at undoing the damage Trump did, the administration has used its allies to signal joint interest in Taiwan's security (Mazza 2021b:).

Concerning maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea, scholars noted the three administration's efforts at pushing back against China's claims. The Obama administration publicly called upon China to cease its militarization of the SCS, conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) around disputed features, and bolstered the U.S.'s military posture in the Indo-Pacific (Fravel 2017: 257). Moreover, it made a private warning to CCP officials that the U.S. would impose costs if China were to reclaim land at Scarborough Shoal, which it seized from the Philippines (Cooper and Douglas 2016). However, its pause in FONOPs in the SCS from 2012–2015 and its muted response to the *Philippines v. China* ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, led some to regard the administration as being "to slow" to respond (Brands and Cooper 2018: 5). The Trump administration is generally assessed to have taken a firmer line on disputes. It increased military foreign assistance for the Indo-Pacific (Denmark 2020: 128), increased the number of FONOPs in the SCS, gave vague warning of consequences for further militarization (Brands and Cooper 2018: 17), and endorsed the Arbitration ruling (Pedrozo 2022). The Biden administration has largely sustained the Trump administration's approach, having conducted FONOPs at a similar frequency and having endorsed the Trump administration's position on the Arbitration ruling (Glaser and Poling 2021).

### ***1.2.3. Economic***

The Obama and Trump administrations have been widely noted for their difference in the economic element of their respective strategies. Regarding trade in the Indo-Pacific region, scholars regarded the



change in strategy as a shift away from support for free trade and rule-setting to an "embrace of protectionism" (Gries 2020: 39). The Obama administration promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a "strategy of hegemonic ordering" in the Indo-Pacific (Parmar 2020: 2). The TPP exhibited an "institutionalist" logic through the TPP's aim to foster greater economic integration (Jackson 2016: 372). Its "primary selling point" was that "if the United States does not set the rules, China will" (Wright 2018: 89). The administration aimed to bind partners to the U.S. in a regime of market-promoting trade rules and show that the U.S. would keep the U.S. engaged in the region (Gries 2020: 40).

The Trump administration made a major departure in its policy towards trade in the Indo-Pacific region through its "rejection of America's geopolitical and economic strategy of hegemony" by withdrawing from the TPP (Mastanduno 2020: 186). As such, by not "presenting an alternative economic roadmap capable of competing for influence with new Chinese-led regional multilateral frameworks" (i.e., the Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), Trump was assessed to have surrendered the opportunity to set new rules (Bhardwaj 2020: 230). The Biden administration has shown continuity with Trump, having been assessed that it is "continuing to retreat from regional economic integration" by not pursuing membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which replaced the TPP (Goodman and Reinsch 2022). However, the Biden administration has not exhibited a complete disinterest in economic engagement, as it aims to fill the infrastructure investment gap in the region. With the G7, it proposed the B3W to fund infrastructure in the region (Crabtree 2021) and launched the Quad's Infrastructure Coordination Group (Townshend et al. 2021).

Regarding the U.S.-China trade relationship, the Obama and Trump administrations showed continuity in working to compel China towards greater economic openness. The Obama administration did this largely by using the WTO's dispute mechanism (Malawer 2016: 361). The Trump administration diverged in pursuing "more aggressive means" (Friedberg and Boustany 2017: 25). This involved launching a trade war through the imposition of tariffs on over \$250 billion of Chinese goods to gain leverage to encourage a "more market-friendly model" (Drezner 2021: 147). This also served the Trump administration's populist and protectionist "America First" agenda, which sought to pursue deficit reduction and counter the decline of U.S. manufacturing (Patel and Hansmeyer 2020: 214).

The Biden administration demonstrated continuity with the Trump administration regarding the U.S.-China trade relationship with "greater emphasis placed on building back manufacturing capacity at home", rather than being focused on "opening Chinese markets" (Mastanduno 2021: 6). Moreover, the Biden administration left in place almost all of the Trump administration's tariffs and export controls on China, and expects China to adhere to its purchase commitments under the Phase One Trade

Agreement (Friedberg 2021: 112). Its mantra of a 'foreign policy for the middle class "reflects some similar inclinations" by the Trump administration (Haass 2021: 90).

#### ***1.2.4. Diplomatic***

U.S. engagement with China has been noted as a significant area of change between the administrations. While the Obama administration sought to balance China, it simultaneously sought and succeeded in going "beyond the level of engagement" pursued by the G. W. Bush administration through securing agreements on issues relating to climate change and cybersecurity, and holding regular leadership-level meetings and more regular and upgraded high-level dialogues (Green 2019: 525). As Aaron Friedberg put it, the Obama administration pursued "enhanced engagement" (2012b: 255). The Trump administration, on the other hand, "disengaged" by ending cooperation on climate change and frequent leadership-level meetings (Economy 2021: 213). Scholars observed that the Biden administration has resurrected some level of 'engagement'. As Jue Zhang and Jin Xu noted, it "recognised the necessity" of cooperation with China (2021: 22). Similarly, Ye Xiaodi argued that Biden restored a "co-existence of competition and cooperation" (2021: 31). Regarding U.S. diplomatic engagement with Taiwan in particular, a steady upgrade in relations occurred over the course of the administrations. U.S.-Taiwan relations had been "an era of relative calm" under Obama (Ljunggren 2020: 202) by way of "avoiding actions that might rock-the-boat" (Sutter 2017: 158). The Trump administration engaged in an "upgrade of relations" by removing self-imposed restrictions on official U.S. interactions with Taiwanese officials (Mazza 2021a: 10). The Biden administration has even been observed to be "far from rescinding" this policy (Haass 2021: 90).

Human rights issues have largely been found to have entailed a shift under Trump followed by continuity. While Obama stressed the importance of advancing human rights in the region as part of the 'pivot' (Green and Cooper 2014), this did not translate into similar stress on or effort towards better protecting human rights in China (Gries 2020). Obama often stressed that the U.S. "did not seek to force China to conform to its view of human rights" (Sutter 2017: 243) and "lowered the critical tone toward China's human rights record" to try and ensure China's help in combating climate change and nuclear proliferation (Kim 2018: 92). Trump has been noted for his disinterest in human rights in China (Gallagher 2021; Gurtov 2021) and around the world (Shattuck and Sikkink 2021). However, the administration imposed costs for China's crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang and eroding Hong Kong's autonomy. It sanctioned CCP officials, added Chinese companies to the Commerce Department's Entity List, and declared that China had "committed genocide" in Xinjiang. The Biden administration has extended and applied new sanctions on CCP officials, banned imports from Xinjiang, and declared that China's actions in Xinjiang constituted genocide (Glaser 2021).

### 1.3. Conclusion

This chapter shows that there are two notable gaps in the literature on this topic. First, there is a general absence of studies that explicitly use a theoretical framework to explain *why* U.S. strategy towards China changed between the three administrations. This means that scholars have not tried to clearly show what variables drove the strategies of the administrations, and which causal forces were the most important in doing so. Second, there is a lack of studies that explicitly use an analytical framework to show *how* U.S. strategy changed. In the next chapter, I outline my research design which I will use to provide a more comprehensive contribution to the existing body of knowledge by addressing these two gaps.

## Chapter 2. Research design

In this chapter, I explain how I will answer the question: *Why* and *how* did U.S. strategy towards China change between the Obama and Trump administrations, and between the Trump and Biden administrations? To answer the *why* part of my question, I require a theoretical framework to identify the *causal mechanisms* that drove each administration to adopt the strategy that it did. In section 2.1, I outline the theoretical contours in the evolution of realism and explain why I will use neoclassical realism for this study. I also outline the neoclassical realist model I will use. To answer the *how* part of my question, I require an analytical framework to identify the *adjustments* in strategy between the administrations and *determine the significance* of those adjustments. In section 2.2, I outline the concept of strategy and strategic adjustment, discuss different analytical frameworks for analysing and assessing strategic adjustment, and outline my 'ends and means' analytical framework. In section 2.3, I outline my methodology for using these two frameworks to answer my research question. In section 2.4, I conclude by discussing the research limitations of this thesis.

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

In this section, I explain neoclassical realism's greater explanatory power and appropriateness for this thesis by outlining the main contours in the evolution of classical realism to neoclassical realism. The different branches of realism differ within the agent-structure debate on the location of the *principal cause* of state behaviour, that is, whether it is found at the level of the individual, the state, or the international system.

#### 2.1.1. Classical realism

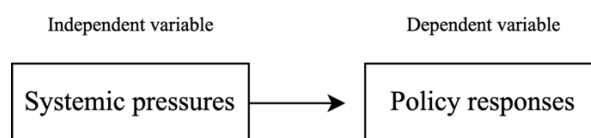
The writings considered part of the first realist research programme, *classical realism*, are diverse, going back to the works of Thucydides ([c.400 BCE] 2000) and Niccolò Machiavelli ([1532] 2003). It is more commonly associated, however, with the writings of E. H. Carr (1939) and Hans Morgenthau (1946; 1948). Classical realism posits that the principal cause of state behaviour is rooted in human nature. As Morgenthau put it, states are led by human beings who have a hardwired "limitedless lust for power" (1948: 194) and seek to dominate others by taking the offensive. This means that phenomena, such as great power wars, occur due to aggressive leaders or political systems that pursue a self-serving expansionist foreign policy (Spirtas 1996: 387). To classical realists, the absence of an ultimate arbiter above states creates an anarchical international system which presents a "permissive condition that gives human appetites free reign" (Elman 2008: 17); this serves as an incentive to bolster a state's military

and economic power. However, this systemic incentive is given second-order importance to essentialist human characteristics (Mearsheimer 2003: 19).

### 2.1.2. Neorealism

Classical realism's successor, *neorealism*, as proposed by Kenneth Waltz, reverses classical realism's prioritisation of causality. Instead, it posits that the anarchical structure of the international system is the principal causal variable of state behaviour. In other words, neorealism assumes that foreign policy is *externally* driven, as depicted in figure 2.1. The international system is an anarchical system of self-help as there is no ultimate arbiter above states. To protect their sovereignty, states are incentivised to *balance* against the military and economic power of other states which constitute systemic pressures (Waltz 1959; 1979). Balancing refers to a state's effort to increase its military and economic strength (internal balancing) and a state's effort to create and/or strengthen an alliance with another or several states (external balancing) (Schweller 2004: 166). Some scholars have expanded balancing to also include non-military tools (such as economic statecraft and diplomatic arrangements) *when used* to offset military power, known as *soft* balancing (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005; Pape 2005). The opposite of balancing could be defined as *retrenching*, which refers to when a state works to "economize expenditures by cutting, inter alia, military spending and personnel [...] and renounce existing commitments" (MacDonald and Parent 2011: 11).

**Figure 2.1 Model of neorealism**



Source: Ripsman et al. 2016: 19.

The anarchical system means that military and economic power are the main currency of international politics. States are incentivised to "pay careful attention to how much economic and military power they have relative to each other" and to ensure that no state "sharply shifts the balance of power in its favour" (Mearsheimer 2011: 72). If a state's power relative to another state is unfavourable, it will be more vulnerable to coercion and/or attack, placing its sovereignty at greater risk (ibid.). The structural imperative to balance against power to protect one's sovereignty is not a law, but rather, an ordering principle. As David Dessler put it, using the analogy of an office, "rationality dictates the use of

hallways", as employees would be fired for traversing air-conditioning ducts (1989: 466). Briefly, anarchy *incentivizes certain behaviour* but does not determine it. This is why neorealism, as Waltz acknowledged, is not deterministic, quipping that "we cannot know what state X will do on Tuesday" (1979: 121).

Given the explanatory primacy neorealism gives to the international system as the causal variable of state behaviour, it holds a "black box" conceptualization of the state, rejecting classical realism's claim that variation in leaders and political systems can function as a meaningful causal variable (Singer 1961: 81). This means that states, regardless of their regime type, can be expected to behave similarly when facing similar external threats (Ripsman et al. 2016: 19). Therefore, when it comes to explaining state behaviour, neorealists claim that one needs to only identify the "features of the international environment that threaten a state's security" (Trubowitz and Rhodes 1999: 4). That said, Waltz admits that a purely structural theory is insufficient to fully explain why a state behave the way they do (1996: 54), stating that "without the first and second images", that being the individual and the state, "there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy" (1959: 238). Neorealism, therefore, intentionally leaves "much of foreign policy aside" (Waltz 1996: 54). While neorealism "can explain a reasonable amount of state behaviour" even neorealists concede that it "needs to be supplemented by a separate theory of foreign policy" (Mearsheimer 2011: 75).

As Waltz famously stressed, neorealism is a theory of *international politics*, not *foreign policy*. The former shows how the international system explains state behaviour, while the latter solely takes the "performance of governments as its object of explanation" (1996: 54). A theory of international politics takes patterns of *international outcomes* from interactions between states as the dependent variable, while a theory of foreign policy takes the *behaviour* of an individual state as the dependent variable. Theories of foreign policy are the research program of the International Relations sub-field known as Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), which takes "decision-making as a central focus" (Snyder et al. 1954: 53) and the "horizon of interest" is delimited to human decision makers (Hudson 2005: 2).

### ***2.1.3. Neoclassical realism***

The most recent branch of realism, known as *neoclassical realism*, can function as a replacement of neorealism to offer a more complete explanation of state behaviour. The term neoclassical realism was coined by Gideon Rose (1998) in a review of literature that posited that state behaviour is principally the product of systemic pressures, albeit filtered through intervening domestic variables (Christensen 1996; Wohlforth 1993; Zakaria 1998). Neoclassical realism's distinguishing feature is that it "incorporates both external and internal variables", as it posits that a state's behaviour is "driven first

and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities", while stressing simultaneously that "systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level" (Rose 1998: 146). Neoclassical realism assumes that systemic pressures are filtered through intervening domestic variables which influence states' behaviour. When states interact, they produce international outcomes which affect the distribution of power. Therefore, depending on the choice of the dependent variable, neoclassical realism can function as a theory of international politics in its own right, not just a theory of foreign policy.

Given the inclusion of domestic variables, neoclassical realism falls between domestic and systemic determinism. However, to classify neoclassical realism neatly as a "middle ground" between neorealism and classical realism (Götz 2021: 8) is misleading, as this understates the fact that neoclassical realism understands the structure of the international system as playing a dominant role in determining state behaviour. Neoclassical realists "share neorealism's core assumption about [...] the primacy of the anarchical material structure" (Foulon 2015: 367), meaning that systemic variables are "privileged" as they set the "broad parameters within which states conduct their foreign policies" (Yuen 2014: 84), though they then go on to "factor in specific features of a given situation to generate more complete explanations" (Wohlforth 2008: 140). Briefly, neoclassical realism shares neorealism's claim that the anarchical structure of the international system is the *principal determinant* of state behaviour, but also shares classical realism's claim that the individual and the state function as *intervening variables*.

By incorporating domestic variables that "concerned classical realists" (Ripsman 2017: 7), neoclassical realism rejects neorealism's 'black box' conceptualization of the state (Foulon 2015: 367). Neoclassical realist critiques of the neorealist model can be encapsulated into four observations: states may not perceive systemic pressures correctly; leaders may not respond rationally to systemic pressures; the international system may not send clear signals about threats; and, domestic politics may not allow states to mobilise the domestic resources required to respond to systemic pressures (Ripsman 2017: 3–5). Briefly, they reject the neorealist assumption that states "perceive objectively and rationally and act in a unitary fashion" (Rathbun 2008: 305). This means that "there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behavior" (Rose 2017: 146). This is shown in Randall Schweller's neoclassical realist theory of 'underbalancing' and 'overbalancing', which posits that domestic politics can cause a state to deviate from neorealist expectations by underreacting or overreacting to systemic pressures (2014). Rose proposed just two intervening domestic variables: leaders' perceptions and a state's ability to utilise resources (1998), but the intervening variables proposed and stressed by neoclassical realist scholars have been expanded (Brawley 2009; Lobell 2009; Sterling-Folker 2009; Taliaferro 2009). More recent literature has established a neoclassical realist model with a set of intervening variables in four distinct categories

(leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions) (Ripsman et al. 2016).

The long-term significance that neoclassical realists ascribe to these intervening variables should not, however, be overstated. Neoclassical realism does not necessarily challenge the "predictions of long-term aggregate state behavior" as advocated by neorealism (Quinn 2018: 75). As neoclassical realists Jeffrey Taliaferro et al. admit, "over the longer term, international political outcomes", meaning observable political phenomena like great power war "generally mirror the actual distribution of power among states" (2009: 4). That said, this does not mean that neoclassical realism does not possess greater explanatory power than neorealism. As Taliaferro et al. further explain, "in the shorter term, however, the policies which states pursue are rarely objectively efficient or predictable based upon a purely systematic analysis" (2009: 4, 7). Neoclassical realism's assertion of greater explanatory power over that of neorealism is based upon its claim that "foreign policy is simply too micro-level for a structural theory" (Rathbun 2008: 307). As William Wohlforth put it, neoclassical realism is "realist theory for the foreign policy analyst" (2016: 52). Given the scope of my analysis and my aim to provide a more granular analysis of why and how U.S. strategy towards China changed, I will use neoclassical realism.

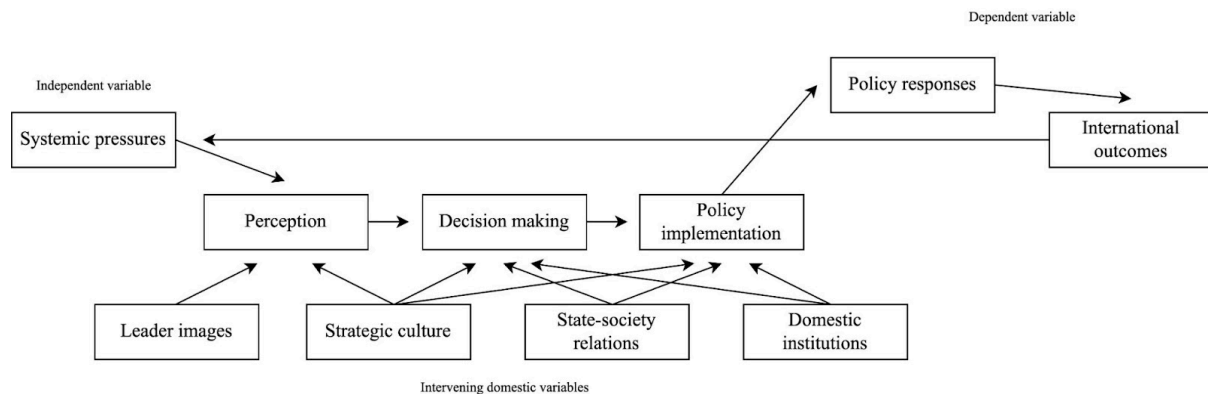
Neoclassical realism is not, however, without critics. By incorporating domestic intervening variables, neoclassical realism has been said to have "given up generality [...] in an attempt to gain descriptive accuracy" (Kitchen 2010: 118). Neoclassical realists' decision to sacrifice a degree of parsimony is the basis of the main critique of neorealists that adding additional domestic-level variables are "degenerating adjustments" to neorealism (Elman 1996: 39). As Adam Quinn observes, to neorealists, "reaching down to the level of state behavior" risks an uncontrollable proliferation of variables that belittle neorealism's parsimony (2018: 75). For neoclassical realists, however, parsimony is "not a proper measure of value" (Foulon 2015: 368). While Waltz argued that theories should be "beautifully simple", he conceded that the "explanatory power of a theory, not its parsimony, is the criteria of a theory's success" (1996: 57). To neoclassical realists, "parsimony must be balanced against explanatory power" (Taliaferro et al. 2009: 23). Striking an appropriate balance can be achieved by rejecting viewing theory as either being parsimonious *or* having contextual subtlety, and instead be thought of, as Robert Keohane put it, as a "*question of stages*" (1989: 187; original emphasis). This means that a theory can *first* seek parsimony, and *then* add complexity while monitoring the effects this has on its "ability to make significant inferences on the basis of limited information" (ibid. 188). This is what neoclassical realism claims to achieve.



## 2.2. Model of neoclassical realism

In this section, I outline the neoclassical realist model I will use for my analysis. As figure 2.2 shows, this model by Norrin Ripsman et al. assumes that systemic pressures (the *independent variable*), along with leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions (*intervening domestic variables*), influence policy responses (the *dependent variable*). They can do this by affecting *perception* (how the state's foreign policy executive [FPE] views systemic pressures), *decision-making* (what policy responses are chosen) and *policy implementation* (how the policy responses are enacted) (2016: 34). As such, this model assumes that, on account of these intervening domestic variables, a state may deviate from neorealist expectations and conduct (soft) underbalancing or overbalancing (Schweller 2014).

**Figure 2.2. Model of neoclassical realism**



Source: Ripsman et al. 2016: 34.

### 2.2.1. Independent variable

The independent variable is systemic pressures, constituted by the relative distribution of material power in the international system. The international system, as Waltz defined it, constitutes a structure formed by way of the interaction between units, meaning that the structure "emerges from the coexistence of states" (1979: 71). It assumes that this structure is anarchic; all states possess some offensive military capabilities; states can never be certain about another state's intentions; states' main goal is to survive; and, states are rational (Mearsheimer 2011: 73). Together, this creates an imperative for states to balance against power to prevent being "selected out of the system" (Dessler 1989: 466).

### **2.2.2. Intervening domestic variables**

The intervening domestic variables which it assumes can affect a state's response to international systemic pressures by way of affecting the policy processes, namely its perception, decision-making, and policy implementation, comprise four categories. The first is *leader images*, which are the worldviews/beliefs held by the foreign policy executive (FPE). The FPE are the policymakers who "sit at the helm of the state" (Ripsman et al. 2016: 61), receive privileged information (Taliaferro et al. 2009: 27), and are responsible for planning based on what they identify as changes in the distribution of power (Lobell 2009: 73). The worldviews of the FPE function as cognitive filters that affect how they process information and guide decision-making (Jervis 1976). The second is *strategic culture*, which are "semi-permanent elite beliefs, attitudes, and behavior patterns socialized into a distinctive mode of thought" (Snyder 1977: 8). I understand strategic culture as ideational content only (Lock 2010), meaning beliefs that are deeply entrenched to the extent that they can constrain or encourage certain behaviour (Ripsman et al. 2016: 67).

The third is *state-society relations*, which are the interactions between the state's central institutions in addition to assorted economic and societal groups (Ripsman et al. 2016: 71). The degree of harmony between the state and society is based on issues such as public opinion concerning foreign policy, competition among key societal coalitions, and political and social cohesion within the state, can affect a state's ability to mobilise national human and material resources for conducting foreign policy (Zakaria 1998: 13). The fourth is *domestic institutions*, which are the formal institutions, organisational processes, and bureaucratic oversight which set the parameters within which domestic competition over policy occurs (Tsebelis 2002). This can include factors such as the division of power across different branches of government (Doyle 1983, 1986), the degree of legislative oversight, the party system, and executive-legislative relations (Putnam 1988; Stepan and Linz 2011). Additionally, informal institutions (i.e., unwritten rules and routinized patterns of interaction) set parameters. Together, these can exert pressure to animate or hinder a state's mobilisation of power (Ripsman et al. 2016: 75).

### **2.2.3. Dependent variable**

Depending on the scope of one's study, the dependent variable can be either of the following. First, it can be the policy responses of a state. The scale of a state's policy responses can range from short-term *crisis decision-making* (i.e., days to months), to mid-term *strategic adjustment* (several years to over a decade), and to long-term *grand strategic adjustment* (several decades) (Ripsman et al. 2016: 110–113). Second, the dependent variable can be international outcomes, meaning phenomena that result from the interaction of states' policy responses, such as great power wars. International outcomes can reshape

the structure of the international system by way of changing the relative distribution of material power (ibid. 85).

## **2.3. Analytical framework**

In this section, I outline the analytical framework I will use to identify changes in strategy. First, I outline the concept of strategy and strategic adjustment. Second, I discuss different analytical frameworks for analysing strategic adjustment. Third, I outline my *'ends and means' analytical framework* for analysing strategic adjustment.

### ***2.3.1. Strategy and strategic adjustment***

*Strategy* is commonly defined by scholars as a relationship between "ends, ways, and means" (Freedman 2015: 6). This short-hand conceptualisation stems from Arthur Lykke's more extensive definition, which asserts that strategy "equals ends (objectives toward which one strives) plus ways (courses of action) plus means (instruments by which some end can be achieved)" (1989: 3). That said, as Nina Silove observes, scholars often simplify this definition, using means to "refer to both the resources mobilized as well as the ways in which they are mobilized" (2018: 45). The term policy is often used synonymously with strategy. However, strategy tends to be reserved for more high-level and longer-term goals and actions (Silove 2018: 31; 35). For instance, Ripsman et al. refer to "policy making" in the context of "crisis decision-making" between days and months (2016: 83). However, they refer to "strategic planning" and "grand strategy" in the context of "expected and unanticipated future crisis, challenges, and opportunities" over several years to a decade (ibid. 83–84). Hence, scholars talk about grand *strategy*, not grand *policy* (Brands 2014).

That said, the 'ends and means' type definition is not uncontentious. Debates over definitions of strategy and associated variants, like policy, military strategy, and grand strategy, are a mainstay (Balzacq et al. 2019; Betts 2000; Freedman 2015; Gray 1999; Silove 2018). But as Colin Gray concedes, "it is all too easy to lose the plot as a result of a praiseworthy effort to draft the perfect definition. People, even scholars, are apt to forget that definitions are intellectual inventions; they cannot be true or false" (2010: 18). Nonetheless, the wide usage of this 'ends and means' definition of strategy amongst scholars stems from its ability to succinctly capture the core of decision-making (Freedman 2018: 34; Meiser 2017: 82), namely, what an actor wants to achieve (desired ends) and how they go about trying to do so (use of means) (Hermann 1990: 5). As such, scholars commonly define strategy around this 'ends and means' formulation (sometimes using synonymous terms) (Meiser 2017: 82). For instance, Rebecca Lissner

defines strategy as the “process of careful marshalling of means to achieve desired ends” (2018: 57), similar to Hal Brands, who defines it as the “setting of goals and priorities, and the outlining of a realistic course of action for realizing these objectives” (2014: 199). Based upon this scholarship, I understand strategy as *desiring ends and using means to try and achieve those ends*.

*Strategic adjustment* is an adjustment in a strategy (Trubowitz and Rhodes 1999). Hence, scholars typically define strategic adjustment in relation to ‘ends and means’, sometimes using synonymous terms. For instance, Miroslav Nincic et al. define strategic adjustment as “altering the relations between ends and means” (1999: 176), Nicholas Kitchen defines it as a “shift in the goals and/or the methods of the state” (2010: 137), and Dueck defines it as when a state has “expanded, contracted, or [...] changed its overall strategic capabilities and commitments” (2008: 12). Based upon this scholarship, I understand strategic adjustment as *when a state adjusts its desired ends and the use of means to try and achieve those ends*.

### **2.3.2. Analytical frameworks for analysing strategic adjustment**

To analyse strategic adjustment, scholars typically use either of the following analytical frameworks. Some scholars create *typologies* (Elman 2005) of different strategies to demonstrate a shift from one strategy to another (Lissner 2021: 544). For instance, Alastair Johnston defines accommodationist, defensive, and expansionist strategies (1995a: 115), Charles Kupchan distinguishes between accommodationist, compellent, and deterrent strategies (1994: 3), while Edward Luttwak outlines expansionist and status quo strategies (1987: 180). Typologies, however, embrace parsimony at the expense of precision. As Kitchen observes, it is unlikely that a state’s entire strategy can “fit neatly” into typologies (2010: 137). Each typology is an “ideal type”, meaning that it “cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality” (Weber 1949: 90). Rigid coding inhibits the ability to “capture the subtle changes” making strategic adjustment less clearly identifiable (Dueck 2008: 12).

Alternatively, other scholars measure *adjustments in a state’s key policy instruments* that are commonly associated with statecraft (Kitchen 2010: 137). For instance, Dueck’s analytical framework for assessing grand strategic adjustment questions if a state has adjusted instruments such as military spending and military deployments overseas (2008: 12). Proponents of this framework argue that it can more clearly capture adjustments in a strategy by focusing on analysing specific observable decisions (Kitchen 2010: 137). While more precise than typologies, it is undermined by its limited focus on means without also considering ends.

Scholars also use schemas to broadly code the significance of strategic adjustment. In line with the common scholarly definitions of strategy and strategic adjustment, ‘ends and means’ are a focal point in such schemas. In these, adjustments in means are typically regarded as being less important than adjustments in ends (Dueck 2006: 12; Sparrow 1999: 141). For instance, to identify “minor alterations” in a state’s strategy, Nicholas Kitchen proposes a more important “first-order” adjustment that entails a “shift in the goals of the state” and a less important “second-order” adjustment of a “shift in the primary means by which to pursue existing goals” (2010: 137). With greater depth, Charles Hermann proposes a four-level “graduated” scale wherein a change in means occupies the lowest level. His scale begins with an adjustment in the “level of effort” in the pursuit of an existing goal. This is followed by changes in the “methods or means by which the goal or problem is addressed”, the “goal”, and lastly, the “redirection of the state’s entire orientation toward world affairs” (1990: 5–6).

This is not to say that a change in means can never be regarded as significant. As Hermann admits, the U.S. shift from sending aid to South Vietnam to later sending ground forces, all towards the same objective of preventing it from becoming Communist, for instance, was indeed a significant change (1990: 6). However, these scholars regard changes in ends as more significant in their schemas for two key reasons. First, as noted earlier, strategy is typically concerned with long-term decision-making (Ripsman et al. 2016: 83; Silove 2018: 31; 35). Over a longer timeframe, therefore, a “great deal of minor tinkering goes on within the framework of any given strategic approach” (Dueck 2006: 9). For instance, the U.S.’s goal to prevent the spread of communism was consistent throughout the Cold War, although *how* this was pursued underwent adjustments (Gaddis 2005). As such, adjustments in ends tend to be a rarer occurrence than changes in means (Dueck 2006: 12; Kitchen 2010: 137).

Second, they observe that changes in ends generally hold premium importance over means given the place they hold in decision-making. When it comes to conducting foreign policy, as Hermann observes, we assume that policymakers are “goal-oriented”. They *first* identify some ends they wish to realise and secondly use means accordingly to achieve them (1990: 5). Accordingly, a change in an end could bring about sizeable changes in means too (Dueck 2006: 12; Kitchen 2010: 137). For instance, if the U.S. had ended its objective to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War to return to isolationism, it is reasonable to assume that the U.S.’s use of means, such as overseas military deployments, alliance commitments, and military spending, would have undergone drastic changes (Kupchan 2020: 303–321). In other words, goals have a large influence over what actions are taken.

The combination of the typically lower frequency of changes in ends, coupled with the importance ends have in the strategy-formation process, gives credence to a schema that regards changes in ends as more significant than changes in means. While this binary way of coding changes sacrifices some nuance, the parsimony of this schema allows for a more consistent way to evaluate the significance of changes

over time. Consequently, I understand a change in ends as *major* and a change in means as *minor* to consistently code the significance of strategic adjustment in broad terms.

### **2.3.3. 'Ends and means' analytical framework**

I propose an 'ends and means' analytical framework for analysing strategic adjustment that involves two stages.

1. Analyse adjustments in a state's strategy towards another state in terms of its 'ends and means'. A change in ends can be identified by: desiring a new end; and/or no longer desiring a previously desired end. A change in means can be identified by: adopting new means; no longer employing previously used means; and/or making a significant increase or decrease in the level of effort a certain means is used.
2. Apply a schema to the analysis of any changes in a state's 'ends and means' to assess the scale of adjustment. Under this schema, a change in a state's ends is coded as a *major* adjustment, while a change in a state's means is coded as a *minor* adjustment.

Compared to the methods discussed above, this framework can produce more precise and detailed findings. First, unlike typologies, it allows for a more comprehensive and more granular analysis of a state's strategy by organising analysis around changes in 'ends and means', as opposed to encapsulating a state's entire strategy within a single typology. Second, unlike focusing solely on adjustments in means, this method also aims to identify the specific desired ends that the policy instruments are employed to realise. Third, it allows me to consistently code the significance of adjustments by distinguishing between *major* and *minor* changes.

## **2.4. Methodology**

In this section, I outline the methodology I will use to apply my theoretical and analytical frameworks in order to answer the question: *why* and *how* did U.S. strategy towards China change between the Obama and Trump administrations, and between the Trump and Biden administrations? My neoclassical realist model forms the theoretical framework for my analysis. Using this model, I assume that the international system (the independent variable) is the principal causal mechanism that affects U.S. strategy (the dependent variable), while the state and the individual also function as intervening variables (Ripsman et al. 2016: 34). As I am attempting to derive a logical conclusion from the assumed premises of my theoretical model, the conclusions reached in this thesis rest upon logical inference

(Levy 2008). The “inability to experience causation directly” (Wendt 1998: 105) results in what Gary King et al. call the “fundamental problem” of causal inference; the fact that “our uncertainty about causal inference will never be eliminated” (King et al. 1994: 76). This uncertainty means that any conclusion reached using logical inference is inherently “probabilistic”, as the conclusion is not based upon a universal law but rather a probabilistic hypothesis (Kurki 2008: 51). Consequently, my conclusions will not claim direct causation or a “smoking gun” (Seawright and Collier 2004: 283).

This study is observational in nature, as I am investigating whether my empirical observations correspond with my neoclassical realist theory’s assumptions (Van Evera 1997: 28–29). This leaves me with a choice between a small-*n* or large-*n* approach (Krasner 1985: 141). A large-*n* dataset of clearly defined variables that could affect U.S. strategy could allow me to confirm or deny correlations between various variables (Van Evera 1997: 27). However, within the scope of this thesis, I would be unable to scrutinise patterns and trends in detail, hindering my ability to provide a detailed theory as to *why* any correlations hold (Dueck 2011: 205–206). Considering this limitation, I follow a small-*n* case study approach. This involves an intensive reflection on a small number of cases regarding the relationship between empirical observations and theory (Blatter and Haverland 2012: 19) that should ideally be able to say something about a larger population of cases (Gerring 2007: 20). A smaller number of case studies will allow me to conduct a detailed scrutiny of the hypothesized causal relationship, adding more robustness to a theory of causality (King et al. 1994: 227).

For this thesis, I chose two case studies: Taiwan and U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific, and sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Using Stephen Van Evera’s case selection criteria (1997: 79–88), I chose them for three reasons. First, they are issues of intrinsic importance, as they are widely regarded by scholars as the most likely flashpoints for a U.S.-China war that could go nuclear (Feng and He 2018; Glaser 2015; Li et al. 2019; Talmadge 2017; O’Hanlon 2019). Unifying Taiwan with the mainland is a “core interest” of the CCP and its leaders have not ruled out the use of force to do so (Rubin 2022). As Xi declared in 2019, “we make no promise to renounce the use of force” (2019). The U.S. has played a spoiler role in China’s desire to occupy Taiwan, most significantly through its initial formal and later informal alliance (Nathan and Scobell 2014: 100). Regarding U.S. alliances, CCP officials view them as “encircling” and “containing” China (Liff 2018). The U.S. continues to reaffirm its defence commitment to its allies, engage in capacity-building, and forward-deploy its forces in its allies’ territory (Denmark 2020). Controlling the SCS has not been declared to be a “core interest” by CCP leaders (Swaine 2010). However, CCP leaders and officials often state that the SCS is China’s “inherent territory”, which is used to describe Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Mastro 2021a). China has also devoted substantial resources towards controlling the SCS (Zhang 2019). The U.S. rejects China’s maritime claims in the SCS and frequently deploys military capabilities to the region (Fravel and Glaser 2022). Given this U.S.-China contest over these issues, understanding changes in

U.S. strategy over both issues is important, as a U.S.-China war that could be sparked over these issues would be extremely consequential for the world given the potential costs (Gompert et al. 2016).

Second, largely due to the importance of these two issues, they have received significant attention from the U.S. and Chinese government and their scholarly communities. As such, they are data-rich in varied types of primary and secondary sources, providing ample data to analyse (Kratiuk et al. 2023; Turner et al. 2022; Zou 2023). Third, these case studies can say something larger about U.S. strategy more broadly. Some U.S. scholars advocate that the U.S. should be more accommodating of China's interests concerning Taiwan, U.S. alliances, and the SCS precisely because of the war risks they entail (Bandow 2013; Glaser 2015; Gomez 2016). Therefore, if the level of interest and effort a U.S. administration devoted towards these issues declined, this could signal a more accommodationist approach to China's rise. Conversely, an increase in U.S. interest and effort could signal an unwillingness to take an accommodationist approach to China's rise.

To identify if there is evidence that the hypothesised causal mechanisms in my neoclassical realist model drove changes in U.S. strategy, which I conceptualize in terms of 'ends and means' as per my analytical framework, I use the method known as process-tracing. This involves collecting empirical information to determine the temporal order in which hypothesized causal variables interact to produce an outcome of interest. In other words, the process entails identifying the stages within the cause-and-effect connection (Blatter and Haverland 2012: 23; Van Evera 1997: 64). To begin process-tracing, I analyse primary sources from the executive branch of the U.S. government by the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations pertaining to U.S. national security, China, and the Indo-Pacific. This includes statements and writings (e.g., biographies, briefings, interviews, speeches, and testimonies) by Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden and their senior officials in the White House and foreign policy-focused executive agencies (i.e., the USDOS and USDOD), and publications (e.g., documents, readouts, and press releases) from those same institutions. Adapting the method of Nina Tannenwald (1999: 440) and Matthew Kroenig (2018: 83), I analyse these sources by conducting discourse analysis, whereby I look to identify "ends talk" and "means talk". The former refers to explicit statements of desired ends along with incentives for doing so, and the latter refers to statements concerning the use of means in pursuit of those ends in conjunction with incentives for doing so. This means that I am analysing these sources to see if they contain references to their desired ends and use of means to understand *what* their strategies were; and to see if they contain references to the incentives (i.e., my hypothesised causal mechanisms) for pursuing their strategies to understand *why* these strategies were pursued. For instance, evidence in a source could have a reference to using forward-deployed forces in allied territory (i.e., use of means) to protect allies (desired end) due to the threat posed by an adversary's military power (systemic pressure).



However, information obtained from these sources alone is not sufficient to construct an evidentiary record of the administrations' strategies and the causal processes that drove them. First, owing to the contemporary nature of this study, these government sources are public, meaning that they contain far less detail compared to private sources that will remain classified for some time. Second, these public sources may suffer from dishonesty and bias in what they report (Bennett and Checkel 2012: 29; Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte 2021: 1419). As Andrew Scobell notes, even though governments "spew forth vast amounts of documents and leaders give numerous speeches" on strategy, "a researcher must interpret or tease out" strategy using other information (2022: 159).

As James Mahoney observes, logical inference plays a key role in process-tracing, as a researcher needs to "carry out sound logical reasoning by combining facts about the case with more general knowledge" and use "relevant pre-existing theories and generalizations" (2015: 202). Consequently, I triangulate observations from other sources to complete three tasks: to provide greater context and further details of steps I initially identified in the causal process, fill in gaps in the process, and make links between steps in the process (Beach and Pedersen 2019: 1441–1442). Sources I use for this purpose include non-government primary sources (e.g., datasets and polls) and secondary sources (e.g., academic literature and media reporting) relating to U.S.-China relations, U.S. strategy towards China, China's foreign policy, and international security. I also use authoritative Chinese government sources (e.g., speeches, documents, and readouts). To return to my earlier example, if a primary source referred to using forward-deployed forces in allied territory to help pursue that objective to protect an ally from a shared adversary, I could use scholarship on concepts such as deterrence, credibility, and tripwires, to try to infer their logic for using those means towards that end. Following my analysis of each case study, as per my analytical framework, I apply my schema to consistently determine the significance of any adjustments. I code change in a state's desired ends as a *major* adjustment and a change in the use of means as a *minor* adjustment.

## **2.5. Research limitations**

I conclude this chapter by discussing the three research limitations this thesis faced. First, I did not consider the Biden administration beyond February 2022. This decision was made so that I would not be analysing the Biden administration up until my submission date. Analysing the adjustments in U.S. strategy between Trump and Biden is limited by the fact that there are comparatively fewer primary sources, policies, and events to analyse, and less literature to draw upon. However, within 13 months of the Biden administration, there has still been a lot of material produced to make incorporating the Biden administration worthwhile. Second, while still data-rich for process-tracing, the contemporary nature of this study means that I am unable to use many formerly confidential sources. Third, I did not

conduct interviews with past and current senior administration officials, as it would have been impossible to get similar access across all three administrations, which would have led to an imbalance in the use of such sources. Consequently, my data lacks previously unrecorded insights from officials.

### Chapter 3. Taiwan and U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific

The U.S. has five formal allies and one informal ally in the Indo-Pacific, as shown in figure 3.1. The formal allies include Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, which constitute the ‘hub-and-spokes’ system of U.S. alliances in the region formed in the early stages of the Cold War (Cha 2010). The U.S. also has an ambiguous and informal alliance with Taiwan. After the U.S. established formal diplomatic relations with China in January 1979, it simultaneously terminated its formal alliance with Taiwan. That same month, however, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which established an ambiguous defence commitment (Bush 2005).

*Figure 3.1. U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific*



Source: CFR 2022.

Alliances pose an obstacle to states seeking to change the status quo, as they aim to deter aggression. They are generally successful in this endeavour, with defence commitments having a long track record of deterring would-be aggressors (Leeds 2003). China presents a unique challenge to U.S. alliances as "history has never seen one superpower rise in a region in which another had a dense system of long-standing alliances" (Rapp-Hooper 2015: 143b). The CCP has pledged to 'reunify' Taiwan, one of its 'core interests', and has not renounced the use of force to do so (Bush 2005). Moreover, CCP officials castigate U.S. allies in the region as "Cold War relics" that aim to "encircle" and "contain" China (Liff 2018). Given the U.S.'s ambiguous alliance, Taiwan is widely seen by scholars as a dangerous flashpoint for a U.S.-Chinese war. Moreover, U.S. alliances are assessed to risk bringing the U.S. into war with states such as China (Glaser 2015; Feng and He 2018; Li et al. 2019; Lind 2016; Lee and Schreer 2013; Talmadge 2017; White 2013).

In this chapter, I analyse *why* and *how* U.S. strategy regarding Taiwan and U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific changed between the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. I use the model of neoclassical realism and my 'ends and means' analytical framework to analyse the drivers of the administration's behaviour, in terms of its desired ends and use of means, at different levels (the system, state, and individual). I conclude this chapter by applying my analytical framework's schema to identify if any *major* and *minor* change in U.S. strategy occurred.

### **3.1. Ends**

In this section, I analyse any changes and continuities between the three administrations in their desired ends regarding Taiwan and U.S. alliances. This includes the desire for peace across the Taiwan Strait; that Taiwan remain out of China's control; and, to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies.

#### ***3.1.1. Peace across the Taiwan Strait***

Peace across the Taiwan Strait refers to the maintenance of the status quo, meaning that China does not annex Taiwan and that Taiwan does not declare formal independence (Bush 2001: 255). This does not rule out U.S. acceptance of unification with China, only that it would have to be done as per the wishes of Taiwan's people. As such, this desire concerns the *process of resolution* of the Taiwan question, not a *particular outcome*. In other words, Taiwan's status is undetermined (Kan 2014: i). Like its predecessors since 1971, the three administrations have all declared that the U.S. opposes unilateral changes to the status quo by either side (USDOS 2016; USDOS 2018; White House 2021). The three

administrations have also all declared that the U.S. "does not support Taiwan independence" (USDOS 2016; USDOS 2018; Campbell 2021a).

Why did and do the three administrations desire peace across the Taiwan Strait? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. First, it avoids the risk of war between the U.S. and China. Given the U.S.'s policy of 'strategic ambiguity' (this is discussed further in section 3.2.1), the U.S. has a tacit commitment to defend Taiwan if China attempts to invade (Bush 2005: 255). Each side could take a unilateral action that risks war *if* the U.S. were to honour its ambiguous defence commitment: China could decide to attempt to annex Taiwan; or Taiwan could declare *de jure* independence. CCP leaders have long suggested that a formal declaration of independence would trigger a military response (Kastner 2015: 60) which was even codified into Chinese law in 2005 (NPC 2005). While a U.S.-China war over Taiwan could escalate from a brief and mild conventional conflict (Gompert et al. 2016) to nuclear exchanges (Talmadge 2017). Either way, war could severely degrade the military and economic power of the U.S., undermining its ability to balance in the international system.

Second, if China invaded Taiwan, China could militarise the island and shift the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific in China's favour. Taiwan's ability to serve as a power projection platform has long been noted by scholars (Beckley 2017; Friedberg 2011; Mearsheimer 2014). As Brenden Rittenhouse and Caitlin Talmadge observe, China could base submarines, air defences, and surveillance assets on the island to allow it to impede U.S. naval and air operations in the first island chain; the line of archipelagic features extending from Japan, through Taiwan and the Philippines, and across the northern reaches of Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and the east coast of Vietnam. Hydrophone arrays deployed on Taiwan's east coast, along with basing a submarine fleet in Taiwan's eastern deep-water ports, could reduce the attrition rate of Chinese submarines in a war, and increase the number of attack opportunities against U.S. surface combatants. In the longer term, China could base a large fleet of quiet nuclear attack submarines (SSNs) and ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) on Taiwan to threaten sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) upon which South Korea and Japan depend (2022: 37–42). Taiwan's ability to be used to threaten the ability to operate in the first island chain was even noted by the Truman administration in November 1948 (Garver 1997: 15). More famously, in 1950, Douglas MacArthur warned that Taiwan in China's hands could become an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" which could "checkmate counter-offensive" in the first island chain (Tsang 2005: 16). Chinese military analysts have long noted Taiwan's strategically important location to break through the first and second island chains (Erickson and Wuthnow 2016; Toshi and Holmes 2018: 83).

**Figure 3.2. Choke points along the first island chain**



Source: Brands and Beckley 2022.

A militarised Taiwan that could better impede the U.S.'s ability to operate in the first island chain could encourage a wider regional shift in the balance of power in China's favour. To explain how this could occur, it is necessary to outline the concepts of deterrence and credibility. The main purpose of an alliance, to neorealists, is to *deter*. Briefly, deterrence refers to when an actor (i.e., the defender) threatens another actor (the potential aggressor) with the use of force in an attempt to prevent the potential aggressor from using force against it (Morgan 2003: 44). As such, an alliance is a form of *extended* deterrence, because a defender threatens the potential aggressor with the use of force to prevent the potential aggressor using force against the defender's *ally* (Huth 1988: 424). At its core, deterrence is about threat. As Thomas Schelling put it, deterrence is based upon the "threat of damage" to "make someone yield or comply" (2020: 3). Crucially, threats must be *credible* to deter. What makes a threat credible has gone through waves of scholarship (Jervis et al. 2021: 168). The most recent literature generally agrees that to deter, a state needs to convince its adversary that it possesses the *capability*, *interest*, and *resolve* to carry out its threat. This is why deterrence failures occur even when a defender has the military power to carry out what it threatens (Crescenzi 2018; Harvey and Mitton

2016; Jackson 2016; Kertzer 2016; Lupton 2020; McManus 2017; Renshon et al. 2018; Yarhi-Milo 2014, 2018).

U.S. credibility could be damaged by a militarised Taiwan as China would undermine the U.S.'s *capability* to defend its allies. Given that the U.S. could incur greater costs for defending its allies, U.S. allies may perceive that the U.S. lacks the *resolve* to honour its defence commitments (Rittenhouse and Talmadge 2022: 44; Friedberg 2018: 29). The loss of the U.S. as an ally would shift the military balance of U.S. allies firmly in China's favour, potentially incentivizing U.S. allies to bandwagon with China. Bandwagoning refers to aligning with the source of danger (Walt 1987: 17) on the assumption that "if a state is badly outgunned by a rival, it makes no sense to resist its demands" (Mearsheimer 2001: 162). In other words, they "hope to avoid war by appeasing adversaries" (Waltz 2000: 38).

Third, U.S. credibility could be damaged and lead to bandwagoning if the U.S. did not come to the defence of Taiwan. This is because it could make U.S. allies doubt the U.S.'s *resolve* to defend its allies. Although the U.S. does not have a formal commitment to defend Taiwan, its ambiguous commitment is still widely assessed by scholars in the U.S. and the Indo-Pacific that U.S. allies view Taiwan to be the 'canary in the coal mine' for U.S. alliance commitments (Brands 2022; Colby 2020). As Nancy Tucker and Bonnie Glaser put it, the U.S.'s "long-term support for Taiwan also has significance for U.S. allies. [...] Were [the U.S.] to conversely ignore Taiwan's security, they would see their own safety threatened. U.S. credibility, therefore, is at stake" (2011: 33).

Moreover, U.S. credibility could be damaged from China's perspective if the U.S. decided not to defend Taiwan. China may perceive that the U.S. lacks the *resolve* to honour its formal commitments to its allies in the region. Without U.S. defence commitments, the military balance would shift decisively in China's favour. As scholars have observed, this could embolden China to more aggressively pursue its interests in the region (Beckley 2017: 119; Colby 2020: 116). Consequently, the three administrations stressed that the U.S. needs to "ensure the credibility of security partnerships" (White House 2010: 18), "demonstrate our commitment to deterring aggression" (USDOD 2018b: 5), and "ensur[e] our [...] commitments to our allies remain strong and credible" (White House 2021c: 13).

If U.S. allies bandwagon with China, U.S. military power would be undermined without their security cooperation, shifting the balance of power in China's favour. After all, alliances enable a state to aggregate power (Liska 1962). Increased alignment with China could mean that U.S. allies, such as Japan and South Korea, could be unlikely to conduct joint-operations with the U.S. in a China contingency. Their loss of support could significantly undermine U.S. power, given that between 2009–2021, on average, Japan ranked as the 7th largest military spender and South Korea ranked 10th (SIPRI 2022). Moreover, U.S. allies could limit the U.S.'s ability to forward-deploy forces in their territory.

This would degrade U.S. power by forcing the U.S. to rely on Guam and Hawaii to forward-deploy U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific. This would increase the amount of time U.S. forces require to arrive on station, and reduce their survivability through a more concentrated force posture (Lind 2016: 313; Montgomery 2014: 134). Allies could also decide to deny the U.S. basing access during a China contingency, grounding U.S. air and naval power (Cooper and Greitens 2021: 27; Lin 2021: 5). The three administrations have made clear that they appreciate the security benefits provided by U.S. allies, declaring that alliances are the "bedrock of security" (White House 2010: 42), help maintain "favorable balances of power" (USDOD 2018b: 8), and "amplify our power" (White House 2021c: i).

A major shift in the balance of power in China's favour would further the prospect of China achieving hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. Hegemony refers to the domination of one state over others in a region or the entire international system (Gilpin 1981: 116). In neorealist terms, domination is enabled by having substantially more material power relative to the other states in the region or system. This allows the hegemon to demand other states' deference to its interests, as it has the power to coerce states to align and punish states for non-compliance (Mearsheimer 2001: 40). Preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon has been a cornerstone of U.S. grand strategy since the end of the Second World War (Ikenberry 2016; Miller and Rubinovitz 2020). The Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations are no exception. The Obama administration proclaimed that it would work at "detering aggression and coercive behavior in key regions" (USDOD 2014: 11), the Trump administration stated that it would "ensure that regions of the world are not dominated by one power" (White House 2017c: 4), and the Biden administration declared its aim to "prevent adversaries from [...] dominating key regions" (White House 2021c: 9). This is of particular importance in the Indo-Pacific, as the administrations perceived it as the region most important to U.S. interests. The Obama administration called the U.S.'s mission in the region a "top priority" (Obama 2011) and the "vital theater" (JCS 2015b: 9). The Trump administration called the Indo-Pacific the "most consequential part of the globe" (Tillerson 2017: 4) and "our priority theater" (Esper 2019; Shanahan 2019: 13). The Biden administration declared that the "future of each of our nations [...] depends on a free and open Indo-Pacific" (Biden 2021d).

### ***3.1.2. Taiwan remain out of China's control***

The desire that Taiwan remain out of China's control focuses on a particular *outcome* of the Taiwan question, not the *process* of its resolution. In a departure from the other two administrations, the Biden administration indicated that it desires the additional end that Taiwan remains out of China's control. This can be identified from the testimony of Ely Ratner, the Assistant Secretary of Defence for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) in December 2021. He explained that "Taiwan's security is so important to the United States" for three reasons: Taiwan is



"located at a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of U.S. allies and partners"; a "free-market economy" that is "valuable economic and trade partner for the United States"; and, a "beacon of democratic values and ideals" which is "in stark contrast to deepening authoritarianism and oppression in the PRC" (Ratner 2021: 1).

By outlining these traits as U.S. interests, Ratner indicated the administration's desire that Taiwan not come under China's control. As Wu Xinboi put it, Ratner's remarks reveal that "they indeed do not hope to see China unify" (Hille 2021). Ratner's statement was even interpreted by some scholars as a shift in the U.S.'s 'one China policy', under which the U.S. *recognizes* the PRC as the "sole legal Government of China", but only *acknowledges* China's position that it has sovereignty over Taiwan (Green and Glaser 2017). To Michael Swaine, Ratner's remarks amounted to "direct abandonment" of the policy given that it regarded Taiwan as a "strategic asset to be kept separate from Beijing" (2021b). Similarly, Paul Heer questioned, "how is that not a de facto 'one China, one Taiwan' policy?" given that Ratner talked about Taiwan as "distinct from China" (2021).

If Taiwan did come under China's control, it would likely *lose the three traits which made it a U.S. strategic asset*. China could militarise Taiwan to project power further into the first island chain; rid Taiwan of its free-market economy and restrict high-tech exports (i.e., semiconductors) to the U.S.; and, rid Taiwan of its liberal and democratic political system. In a white paper published in 2000, China stated it will "not send troops" and that Taiwan will "enjoy a high degree of autonomy" (Taiwan Affairs Office 2000). However, given China's recent behaviour, such an outcome is unlikely. First, China continues to expand its military presence in the Indo-Pacific (Shugart 2021) and Taiwan offers itself as a useful power projection platform—as Chinese military analysts have long noted (Erickson and Wuthnow 2016). Second, China is trying to lead on key emerging technologies, particularly semiconductors, which the world economy is reliant (Foot and King 2019). Controlling Taiwan's semiconductor industry, which provides around two-thirds of the world's supply, would enable China to dominate this supply chain (Arcuri 2022). Third, China continues to erode the democratic freedom of Hong Kong (Chan et al. 2020).

That said, I do not code this as a clear *major* change for two reasons. First, the Biden administration soon reverted to the traditional *process of resolution* framing of U.S. policy towards Taiwan. The White House's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, which was published on 11 February 2022 (two months after Ratner's testimony), stated that the administration will work to ensure that "Taiwan's future is determined peacefully as per the wishes and best interests of Taiwan's people" (White House 2022: 13). Second, it is not necessarily a clear departure from the Trump administration or even other past U.S. administrations, as it has been generally assumed that the U.S. desires that Taiwan remain out of China's control (Heer 2021). As Wu Xinboi put it, "when we ask the US if they do not hope to see the unification

of China, they deny that”, but from Ratner’s remarks, “it is clear that they indeed do not hope to see China unify. Ely Ratner has now said this out loud” (2021). Kathrin Hille even wrote that “this may well be remembered as the moment Washington came clean on its intentions regarding Taiwan” (2021). After all, U.S. efforts towards keeping Taiwan out of China’s control would largely be indistinguishable from efforts towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, as both would aim to raise the cost of a Chinese invasion to deter aggression. However, the U.S. has likely not publicly declared its desire that Taiwan never unifies with China as this would be highly incendiary. This is because the U.S. would essentially be abandoning its ‘one China policy’ by effectively supporting Taiwanese independence (Christensen et al. 2022). The U.S. also likely understands that the prospect of Taiwan willingly unifying with China is minimal. Over the last two decades, polls have shown that a minority of Taiwanese citizens support unification and by now a majority identify solely as Taiwanese (White 2018).

Why did the Biden administration voice this desire that Taiwan remain out of China’s control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. As discussed in section 3.1.1, Taiwan under China’s control could be militarised to better threaten the ability of the U.S. to operate in the first island chain. This could result in a wider regional shift in the balance of power, as the credibility of U.S. defence commitments would be eroded. The loss of the U.S. as an ally would shift the military balance for U.S. allies firmly in China’s favour, incentivizing U.S. allies to bandwagon with China. This could severely degrade U.S. military power, as increased alignment of U.S. allies with China could result in the U.S. facing a loss of security cooperation in peacetime or a China-related contingency. This would shift the balance of power in China’s favour, improving its ability to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

Systemic pressures provide a satisfactory explanation of the desire for this end, but layering in leader images provides a more complete explanation of why this desire was articulated by the Biden administration. Leader images influence a state’s responses to external stimuli. Biden possesses a worldview that the defining feature of world politics is a struggle between democracy and autocracy (Brands 2021; Deudney and Ikenberry 2021; Mastanduno 2021; Nathan 2021). He has stressed that “we’re at an inflection point between those who argue that [...] autocracy is the best way forward” (2021). The administration has often touted Taiwan’s democracy as a positive example, with senior officials stating that “we see Taiwan as a leading democracy [...]. It’s a powerful example” (White House 2021), a “democratic success story” (Blinken 2021f), and a “beacon of democratic values” (Ratner 2021: 1). Given the way the administration has held up Taiwan as a model example in the fight between democracies and autocracies, Taiwan coming under China’s authoritarian control, *even peacefully*, would undermine Biden’s objective to show that “democracy can still deliver” (White House 2021c: i). It would also give weight to Biden’s frequent assertion that China and Russia claim that “autocracy is the wave of the future” (2021). Biden often voices his concern that democratic states are

in decline. At the administration's Summit for Democracy in December 2021, Biden referred to several reports from non-government organisations which showed that "global freedom [is] in retreat" (2021). Consequently, given what Biden perceives Taiwan to *represent*, Taiwan succumbing to authoritarianism has even greater importance, as it would further add to Biden's fear of democratic decline.

### ***3.1.3. Prevent aggression towards U.S. allies***

The U.S. has five formal U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific: Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. The three administrations all declared their desire to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. The Obama administration stated its interest to address "threats or attacks against U.S. citizens abroad and our allies" (White House 2015b: 2), the Trump administration declared its objective of "defending allies from military aggression" (USDOD 2018b: 4), and the Biden administration declared its desire to "deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and our allies" (White House 2021c: 9).

Why did the three administrations desire to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures, following much of the same arguments in section 3.1.1. First, given formal U.S. alliance commitments, the absence of aggression avoids the risk of war between the U.S. and China. Given the risk of nuclear exchanges, a U.S.-China war could severely degrade the military and economic power of the U.S. (Talmadge 2017). Second, aggression towards U.S. allies could force them to defer to China's interests in fear of future and/or greater punishment. As U.S. allies defer to China's interests, the U.S. could face a lack of security cooperation by its allies that erodes U.S. military power. Therefore, in a U.S.-China contingency, U.S. allies may refuse to conduct joint-operations with the U.S., allow the U.S. to forward-deploy forces in other states' territories, and/or grant the U.S. basing access to a contingency with China (Cooper and Greitens 2021).

Third, U.S. credibility could be damaged and lead to bandwagoning if the U.S. did not defend its allies from Chinese aggression. This is because it could make U.S. allies doubt the U.S.'s resolve to defend them (Brands 2022; Friedberg 2012b; Tucker and Glaser 2011). Moreover, from China's perspective, U.S. credibility could also be damaged if the U.S. did not defend its allies, as China may perceive that the U.S. lacks the *resolve* to honour its formal commitments to its allies in the region. Without U.S. defence commitments, the military balance would shift decisively in China's favour. This could embolden China to more aggressively pursue its interests in the region (Beckley 2017; Colby 2020). As the regional balance of power shifts in China's favour, it would have a greater prospect of achieving Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

### 3.2. Means

In this section, I analyse any changes and continuities between the three administrations in their use of means in pursuit of their desired ends discussed above. These include: military strategy; ambiguous extended deterrence; collective ambiguous extended deterrence; extended deterrence; presence; capacity building; arms sales to Taiwan; transits through the Taiwan Strait; diplomatic engagement with Taiwan; and, arms control agreements.

#### *3.2.1. Military strategy*

Military strategy is how a state's armed forces will be employed to achieve military objectives (Fravel 2019: 10). The Obama and Trump administrations appear to have adopted the same military strategy towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. Regarding the Biden administration, there is little information to indicate that it has departed from the same strategy towards the same ends, with the potential additional end that Taiwan remains out of China's control. That said, it has indicated a particular emphasis on allied cooperation as part of this strategy, but this does not appear to constitute a major departure in military strategy.

In July 2009, the UDOD began the development of a new "operational concept" called AirSea Battle (ASB) (AirSea Battle Office 2013: 1), later renamed the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) in January 2015 (JCS 2015a: 1). ASB intends to overcome the threat posed by China's anti-access area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities which intend to challenge a state's 'operational access' or 'freedom of manoeuvre', that being the ability of a state to "get to the fight and to fight effectively once there" (AirSea Battle Office 2013: 2). ASB's "solution to the A2/AD challenge" is to "develop networked, integrated forces capable of attack-in-depth to disrupt, destroy and defeat adversary forces" across air, maritime, land, space, and cyberspace (AirSea Battle Office 2013: 4). In other words, the U.S. has contingency plans to conduct strikes across mainland China (some even 2,000km inland) to neutralise China's A2/AD forces (missile launchers, command posts, sensors, supply networks, and communication systems) (Biddle and Oelrich 2016: 8).

It has been generally assumed by scholars that the Trump administration continued to adhere to ASB (Gholz et al. 2019: 172; Hutchens et al. 2017: 134), but I have been unable to locate any administration documents or speech by a senior official which explicitly refer to adhering to ASB or JAM-GC. However, the administration has indicated that it is still following the basic principle of ASB, that is, to conduct attacks deep within enemy territory to neutralise A2/AD capabilities. The 2018 NDS states that the "Joint Force must be able to strike diverse targets inside adversary air and missile defense networks

to destroy mobile power-projection platforms" (USDOD 2018b: 6). Moreover, while it does not pertain to the Joint Force as a whole, it can be inferred from the U.S. Army's Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) operational concept that the Trump administration retained the principal objective of ASB.

Introduced in 2018, the MDO states that the "central idea" is to "penetrate and disintegrate enemy anti-access and area denial systems" (U.S. Army 2018: vi). To this end, the MDO states that "Army forces require the ability to provide" Long-Range Precision Fires (LRPFs) (ibid. 65). The Trump administration worked to facilitate the Army's objective. In August 2019, the administration withdrew the U.S. from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty (USDOS 2019). This was a U.S.-Soviet (later U.S.-Russian) arms control agreement signed in 1987 which foreswore the deployment of nuclear and conventional ground-launched missiles with 500–5,500km ranges (Woolf 2020). On 3 August 2019, a day after the U.S. formally withdrew from the INF Treaty, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper stated that "we would like to deploy a capability sooner rather than later" of conventional missiles within "INF range" in the Indo-Pacific (AP 2019). Later on 18 August, the USDOD successfully tested a ground-based variant of the Tomahawk missile which exceeded INF treaty limits (USDOD 2019a).

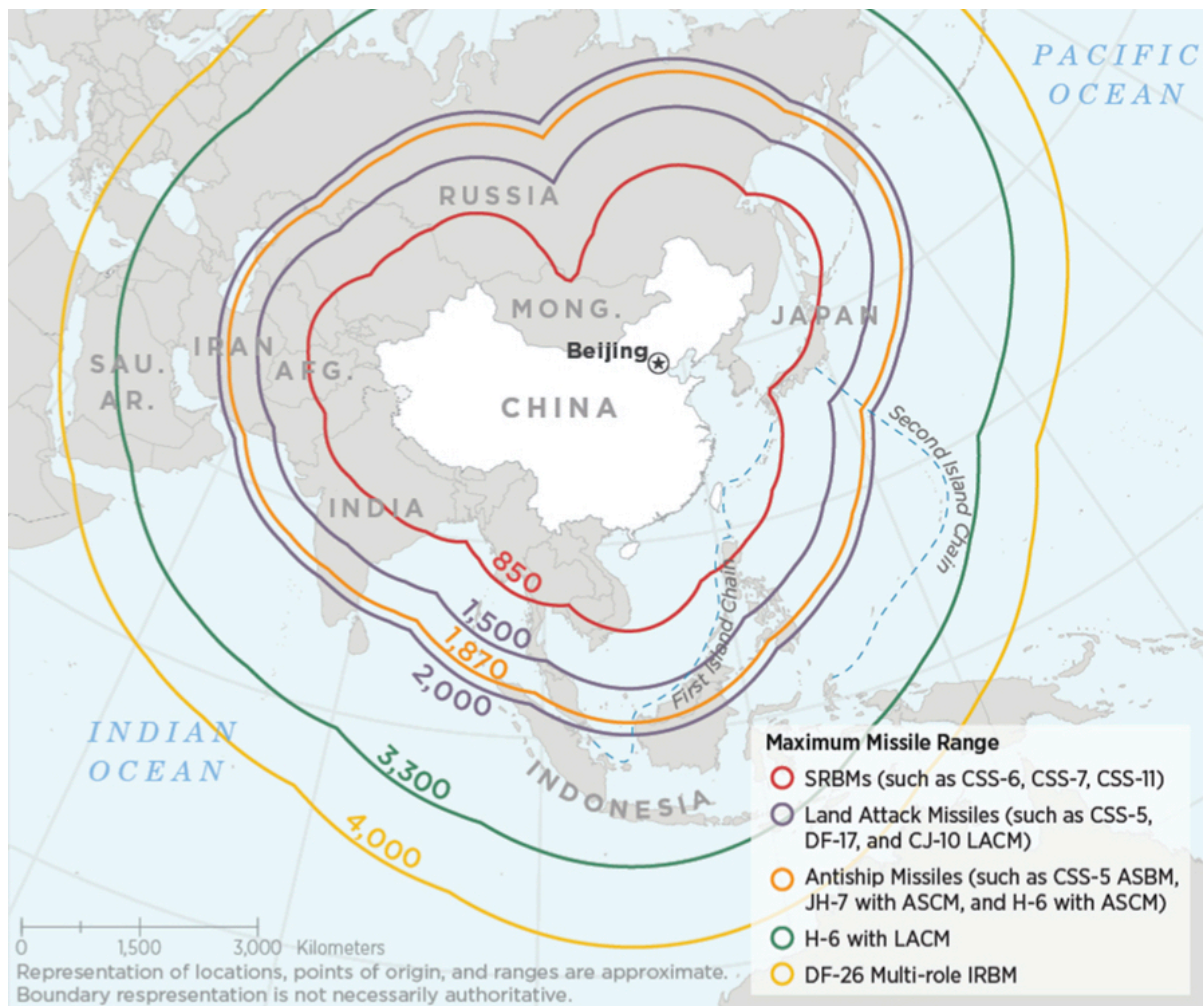
Regarding the Biden administration, I have been unable to locate any explicit information as to whether it has abandoned ASB or JAM-GC as of the end of February 2022. However, the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (INSSG) referred to the threat posed by China's A2/AD capabilities, which ASB is intended to neutralise. It stated that China has "invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and allies" (White House 2021c: 8). Moreover, like the Trump administration, it has indicated that it is seeking to acquire LRPFs that could be used to neutralise A2/AD capabilities. The FY2022 budget request by the USDOD calls for \$6.6 billion in funds to develop and field LRPFs (USDOD 2021b: 3).

Why did the Obama administration adopt, and the Trump and Biden administration also likely maintain, the military strategy of ASB towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies, and, uniquely for the Biden administration, the additional desire for Taiwan to remain out of China's control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China shifted the balance of power in China's favour through its development of A2/AD capabilities as part of its military modernisation. This allows China to pose more of a threat to U.S. forces defending Taiwan and U.S. allies. Consequently, ASB was adopted to internally balance China through bolstering U.S. military power via a strategy aimed at neutralising China's A2/AD forces in a contingency. This would improve its ability to deny China its objectives, and therefore better deter aggression towards Taiwan and U.S. allies.

As Scott Kastner observes, "preparation for a conflict in the Taiwan Strait—in particular, deterring Taiwan independence and possible U.S. intervention in a Taiwan Strait conflict—has been the primary driver of PRC military modernization efforts dating to the 1990s" (2016: 69). In 1993, China adopted the military strategy of 'local wars under high-technology conditions', which focused on being able to wage wars on China's periphery using technology-intensive weaponry (Fravel 2019). As Rush Doshi notes, "Chinese leaders admittedly focused on local wars, but the opponent was often described as a 'high-technology' opponent or a 'superior enemy' [...], criteria only the United States fulfilled" (2021: 81). This change in strategy was prompted by observing U.S. operations in the 1991 Gulf War, from which Chinese strategists assessed that China was "ill-prepared" to deal with a conflict with the U.S. over Taiwan which drove the research and development of "more-advanced weaponry to extend air and maritime defensive perimeters beyond China's coast" (Burke et al. 2020: 4).

The capabilities developed included diesel-electric submarines (SSKs) (Erickson and Goldstein 2007), sea mines (Erickson et al. 2009), and ballistic and cruise missiles (Erickson and Yang 2009). The latter, as part of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), formally the PLA Second Artillery Corps, is widely assessed by scholars to be the "centerpiece" of China's A2/AD strategy (Chase and Erickson 2012: 116). China developed a large arsenal of both *land*-attack and anti-*ship* short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), and GLCMs (Johnson 2017a). As figure 3.3 illustrates, these can conduct precision strikes on ships and bases into the second island chain (around 3,000km) (Mihal 2021).

**Figure 3.3. China's conventional missile strike capabilities**



Source: USDOD 2021a.

These asymmetric capabilities are known as anti-access area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities as they threaten the U.S.'s 'operational access' or 'freedom of maneuver'; that being, the ability of a state to "get to the fight and to fight effectively once there" (AirSea Battle Office 2013: 2). In more specific terms, A2/AD capabilities allow it to threaten U.S. bases, aircraft carrier strike groups, and its Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems. These are major sources of U.S. power projection essential to defend Taiwan and U.S. allies (Montgomery 2014: 117). By holding U.S. power projection platforms at risk, China can "deter them from intervening in areas of sensitivity to China in the first place" (Erickson 2013: 8).

The shift in the balance of power is succinctly captured by a report that assessed that from 2010 to 2017 China would make advances in four out of ten "operational areas" concerning a Taiwan scenario and maintain its position in the remaining six. Of note, there would be "Chinese advantage" concerning both

a Chinese *air base attack* and Chinese *anti-surface warfare* by 2017 (Heginbotham et al. 2015). The major and continuing shift in the balance of power via China's development of its A2/AD capabilities has been clearly acknowledged by the three administrations. The Obama administration's 2010 *Quadrennial Defence Review* (QDR) stressed that China's A2/AD capabilities could mean the "absence of dominant U.S. power projection capabilities" (USDOD 2010b: ix). The Trump administration's 2017 NSS observed that China is "fielding military capabilities designed to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest our ability to operate freely" (White House 2017c: 27). In August 2021, the Air Force Secretary, Frank Kendall, remarked that "we're the dominant military power until you get within about 1000 miles of China" (Cohen 2021). By 2017, a near-broad consensus had been reached by analysts that China could threaten U.S. bases and surface ships operating within, and even beyond, 2,000km (Beckley 2017: 100).

As the military balance has shifted, senior officials have become worried that China may soon attempt to invade Taiwan. In March 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), warned that "I think our concerns are manifest here during this decade" given the "development, the numbers of [...] ships, aircraft, rockets [...] they have put in the field" (2021: 47). In December 2021, Ratner called a Taiwan contingency a "pacing scenario" (2021: 9). Compounding this shift in the balance of power, Xi has signalled an unwillingness to wait indefinitely on resolving the Taiwan question. Xi has suggested on two occasions that he has a timeline for "reunification", in 2013 and 2019 (Reuters 2013; Xi 2019).

While the USDOD often did not link ASB to China specifically, scholars widely hold that ASB was adopted to offset the threat posed by China's development of A2/AD capabilities that can hold U.S. power projection platforms at risk. As the AirSea Battle Office of the U.S. Department of Defence (USDOD) put it, ASB is proposed as a "solution to the A2/AD challenge" (AirSea Battle Office 2013: 4). ASB aims to prevent Chinese aggression by denying China the ability to achieve its objectives by "conducting extensive conventional counterstrikes of its own" (Friedberg 2012b: 54) to disarm China's offensive capabilities and blind its surveillance capabilities across air, maritime, land, space, and cyberspace (Biddle and Oelrich: 2016; Dian 2015; Friedberg 2014a; Krepinevich 2010). This includes China's missile launchers, command posts, sensors, supply networks, and communication systems across mainland China, some even 2,000km inland (Biddle and Oelrich 2016: 8).

Aside from the Biden administration's likely continuation of ASB, the administration has outlined a new concept called "integrated deterrence". As Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin defined it, "integrated deterrence means using every military and non-military tool in our toolbox in lockstep with our allies and partners" (2021). Therefore, given Biden and senior officials' emphasis on the value of U.S. allies, "integrated deterrence" may simply result in attempting to foster greater coordination with



allies and partners being far more central to its military strategy. As the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl and the *Indo-Pacific Strategy* declared, integrated deterrence will be the “cornerstone” of U.S. defence strategy (Kahl 2021; White House 2022: 12).

Evidence of increasing coordination with allies can be found in comments from the U.S. Ambassador to Australia, Michael Goldman, who indicated in April 2021 that the U.S. and Australia were engaged in planning to jointly respond to a Taiwan contingency. He stated that "we're committed as allies [...] not only in making our militaries interoperable and functioning well together, but also in strategic planning [...]. It covers the range of contingencies [...] of which Taiwan is obviously an important component" (Scott 2021). However, as Jane Hardy notes, the "concept of integrated deterrence is not new" (2021: 4). The Trump administration also stressed alliance coordination; its NSS similarly declared the need to be "fully integrated with our allies" (White House 2017c: 26) and its NDS stressed taking "integrated actions with allies" (USDOD 2018b: 4).

Why did the Biden administration adopt "integrated deterrence" towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, that Taiwan remain out of China's control, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China continues to shift the balance of power in China's favour through its military modernisation, specifically its development of A2/AD capabilities. This allows China to pose more of a threat to U.S. forces defending Taiwan and U.S. allies. Consequently, 'integrated deterrence' was adopted to internally and externally balance China's military power by pursuing a strategy of closer allied coordination to more effectively employ the U.S.'s own military power, alongside allies, against China. This would improve its ability to deny China its objectives, and therefore better deter aggression. As the Biden administration observed, allies "enable us to present a common front" (White House 2021c: 10).

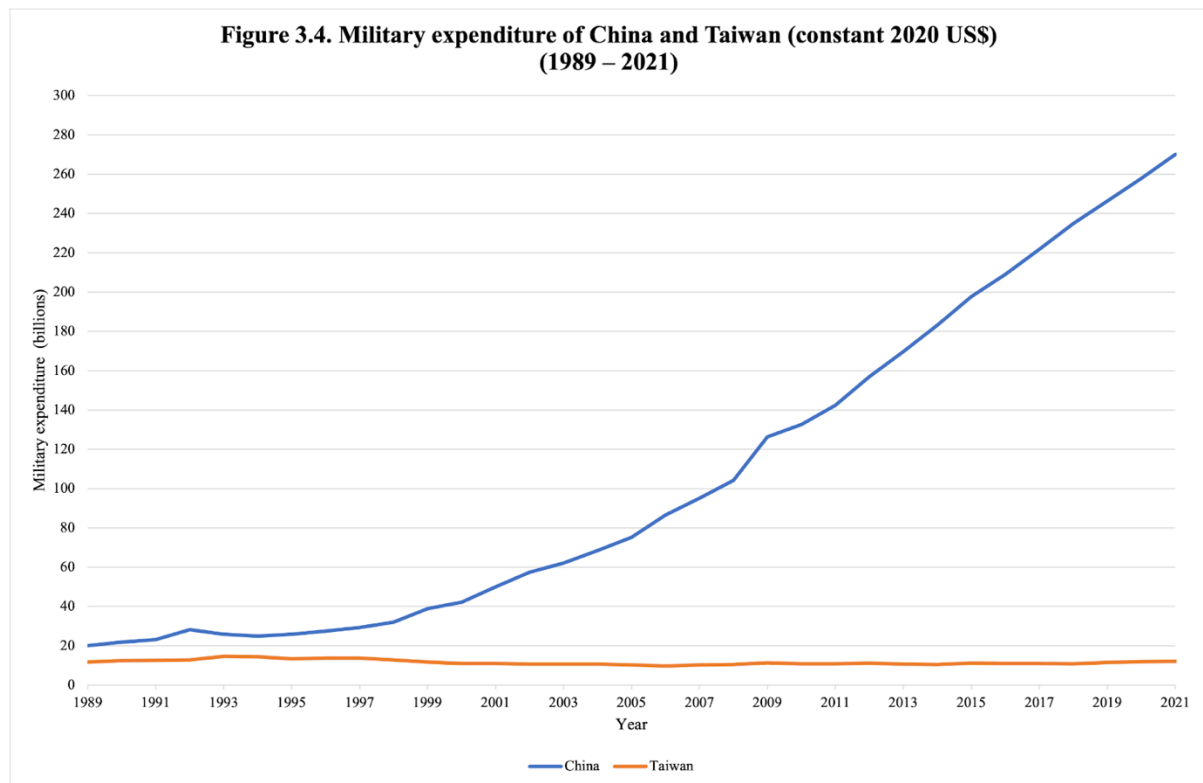
### ***3.2.2. Ambiguous extended deterrence***

In 1979, the U.S. terminated its alliance with Taiwan. Since then, the U.S. has not been clear as to whether it would use force to come to the aid of Taiwan, through a policy known as "strategic ambiguity" (Pan 2003: 387), but which can more accurately be termed *ambiguous extended deterrence*. Reaffirming ambitious extended deterrence is mainly based upon declaring the standard mantra that U.S. policy towards Taiwan is guided by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), the three Joint U.S.-China Communiques (1972, 1979, and 1982), and the 1982 Six Assurances (Bush 2016). This mantra has been routinely reaffirmed by the Obama administration (Swaine 2011: 88), the Trump administration (Boon and Sworn 2020: 1503), and the Biden administration (Glaser 2022: 33). Reaffirming commitment to the TRA is widely held to be the clearest element constituting ambiguous

extended deterrence (Tucker 2009: 43), as the law states that the U.S. will "consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means [...] of grave concern to the United States" (U.S. Congress 1979). This language largely mirrors that of the U.S.'s formal alliance treaties in the Indo-Pacific (Kuo 2022).

The Biden administration has made a notable shift from its predecessors in *how* it reaffirms ambiguous extended deterrence. The Biden administration made clear that, as discussed in greater depth in section 3.1.2, the U.S. has an interest in Taiwan *remaining out of China's control*. In December 2021, Ratner explained "why Taiwan's security is so important to the United States", which included Taiwan's location in the first island chain, its free-market economy, and its democratic system (2021: 1). Moreover, while it was not accompanied by an official change in policy, Biden has publicly declared twice *without ambiguity* (as of the end of February 2022), in August and October 2021, that the U.S. would come to the defence of Taiwan (Biden 2021a; Biden 2021e). In both instances, White House officials had to walk back these remarks by explaining that there had been *no official change* in U.S. policy (Reuters 2021a). However, Biden's remarks could be consequential given that deterrence depends upon how Biden's commitment to defend Taiwan is *perceived by China*. Regardless of an official change in U.S. policy, Biden's remarks may have led CCP leaders to regard this as a formal defence commitment.

Why did the three administrations reaffirm ambiguous extended deterrence towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, and, uniquely for the Biden administration, additionally towards that Taiwan remain out of China's control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. Reaffirming ambiguous extended deterrence is intended to externally balance China by threatening the use of U.S. military force to defend Taiwan. U.S. intervention in support of Taiwan would improve the prospect of Taiwan denying China its objectives, and therefore better deter aggression towards Taiwan. To attempt to deter a state from conducting aggression towards itself or a third-party, a state must reaffirm its defence commitment to ensure that the adversary knows what the red line is and what will happen if it is crossed (Morgan 2003: 17). As such, the three administrations continued to declare their commitment to the standard mantra of Taiwan-related documents, particularly the TRA. Moreover, given the ambiguity of the defence commitment, it deters Taiwan from formally declaring independence given the risk of U.S. abandonment, thereby avoiding triggering invasion (Bush 2001: 255). Reaffirming ambiguous extended deterrence has become even more important to deterring invasion. This is because China's military modernisation brought about a shift in the cross-Strait military balance in its favour. As figure 3.4 shows, China's military spending dwarfs that of Taiwan. As Sheryn Lee and Benjamin Schreer put it, the "days when ROC forces had a quantitative and qualitative advantage over the PLA are over" (2013: 56).



Source: Author (data from SIPRI 2022).

Along with the shift in the balance of power, China has taken coercive measures over the last decade "to keep Taiwan on the defensive and wear down its psychological confidence" that it can refuse unification (Bush 2021: 72). China has conducted a variety of 'grey-zone' actions—meaning actions that occur within the "operational space between peace and war" (Morris et al. 2019: 8)—towards pressuring Taiwan to 'reunify' by eroding Taiwan's will to resist. For instance, China conducted economic punishment in 2016 by suspending certain Taiwanese imports (Harrell et al. 2018); began conducting frequent intrusions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in 2020 (Brown 2022); and, crossed the median line in 2019 for the first time since 1999 (Trent 2020).

The continuing shift in the balance of power in China's favour, coupled with its aggressive actions towards Taiwan, also explains why the Biden administration differed in how it exercises ambiguous extended deterrence. First, the administration declared *its interest that Taiwan remains out of China's control* which could bolster deterrence. As previously discussed, a key element of convincing an adversary that it would follow through on its threat is communicating that it has an *interest* in following through on its threat. Consequently, by clearly communicating that it is in U.S. interests that Taiwan remains outside of China's control, this could help convince CCP leaders that the U.S. would indeed follow through on its threat to defend Taiwan, and thereby deter aggression. However, given that China regards unification as a core interest of the CCP, the balance of interests will remain firmly in China's favour (Bush 2005: 253). Second, Biden stated *without ambiguity* on two occasions that the U.S. would

defend Taiwan. This explicit commitment could have been made to try to enhance deterrence, as it lacks a loophole. States sometimes insert backdoors into alliance treaties to avoid entanglement (Cha 2010). By making an explicit defence commitment, the U.S., therefore, puts more of its credibility on the line (Fearon 1997). Therefore, China may perceive that the U.S. would be even more likely to use force to defend Taiwan, deterring invasion, given that the U.S. would now otherwise encounter even greater costs if it abandoned Taiwan.

### ***3.2.3. Collective ambiguous extended deterrence***

I define collective ambiguous extended deterrence as when a state, in concert with other states, publicly signals their declared interest in peace across the Taiwan Strait, or their interest in the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences. As shown in table 3.1, the Trump administration and the Biden administration used collective ambiguous extended deterrence towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, and, in the case of the Biden administration, potentially also so that Taiwan remain out of China's control. That said, under the Trump administration, its use was limited; only involving one instance. In July 2020, the U.S. and Australia released a joint-statement after the U.S.-Australia ministerial consultations which, for the *first time*, directly addressed Taiwan (Mazza 2021b: 13). It states that "they reiterated that any resolution of cross-Strait differences should be peaceful and according to the will of the people on both sides, without resorting to threats or coercion" (USDOD 2020b).

The Biden administration has also used collective ambiguous extended deterrence towards the desire for peace across the Taiwan Strait, and potentially also so that Taiwan remains out of China's control. This constituted a far more substantial effort. As table 3.1 shows, the Biden administration inserted language into *eight* joint-statements (as of the end of February 2022) with a total of eight formal U.S. allies (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom) and one 'major defense partner', as classified by the U.S. (India). Each joint-statement includes a phrase in the vein of: *we emphasise/underscore the importance of preserving peace and stability in/across the Taiwan Strait*.

Table 3.1. Joint-statements on Taiwan (2021 – February 2022)			
Year	Month	Meeting	Reference to Taiwan
2021	January	U.S.-Japan (virtual) leadership meeting	"Underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" (White House 2021d).
	March	U.S.-Japan 2+2 ministers meeting	"Ministers underscored the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" (USDOS 2021a).
	April	U.S.-Japan leadership summit	"We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" (White House 2021e).
	May	U.S.-South Korea leadership summit	"Emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" (White House 2021f).
	June	G7 summit	"We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" (White House 2021b).
	August	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue senior officials meeting	"Senior officials discussed the importance of peace and security in the Taiwan Strait" (USDOS 2021j).
2022	January	U.S.-Japan 2+2 ministers meeting	"Ministers underscored the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" (USDOS 2022b).
	February	U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral ministerial meeting	"They emphasized the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" (USDOS 2022a).

Table by author.

Why did the Biden administration use collective ambiguous extended deterrence towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, and potentially also so that Taiwan remains out of China's control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China continues to shift the balance of power in China's favour through its military modernisation, eroding deterrence. China's improved military power could embolden China to invade Taiwan. To offset this shift, the Biden administration began releasing joint-statements with its allies which declare an interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. These statements externally balance China, as they communicate to China that in a Taiwan contingency, U.S. allies might support the U.S.. This could offset China's power, and thereby deter aggression.

The type of allied support could vary. U.S. allies and partners around the world may simply support a U.S.-led economic, political, and cultural sanctions regime. But in East Asia, U.S. allies would be in a position to provide direct military support, ranging from intelligence sharing, granting U.S. requests to access its military bases in allied territory for combat operations, or even joint-operations. In this section, I focus on the basing access scenario. This is because given the potential for more severe Chinese retaliation for conducting joint-operations with the U.S., granting basing access is generally suggested to be the most likely form of allied military support (Lin 2021). It is important to stress that U.S. allies are ambiguous as to whether they would *help the U.S. defend Taiwan*. This is because basing access in a Taiwan contingency is not guaranteed, as the U.S. requires permission from its hosts to use its *own bases* in allied territory to conduct combat operations. Consequently, uncooperative allies "could impede rapid and coordinated responses to an invasion of Taiwan" (Cooper and Greitens 2021: 17). This is because the airbase closest to Taiwan which the U.S. has complete control over is Andersen airbase on the U.S. territory of Guam, which is 2,700km away from the Taiwan Strait. However, the U.S. has two airbases on the Japanese island of Okinawa (Kadena and Futenma) 770km away, and two in South Korea (Kunsan and Osan) less than 1,500km away (Heginbotham et al. 2015: 55). Therefore, only being able to use Guam to conduct air operations "would significantly reduce the amount of combat power that the U.S. Air Force could project into East Asia" (Montgomery 2014: 134).

U.S. allies and partners have historically been overwhelmingly willing to grant contingency access requests, having only denied 15% of requests between 1945–2016 (Pettyjohn and Kavanagh 2016: 73). Given China's military and economic power, however, it can punish regional U.S. allies in a way that could deter them from supporting the U.S. in a Taiwan contingency. South Korea serves as an example of how a U.S. ally may be deterred due to the risk of punishment. China, as Jung Pak notes, "perceives Seoul as the weakest link in the U.S. alliance network" (2021: 53). Between 2013–2019, across ten cases of binary choices, South Korea "delinked [with the U.S.] on the majority of them (70%) when pressured by both the United States and China" (Cha 2020: 529). Given South Korea's proximity and its deep economic relationship with China, it could punish South Korea by reducing trade or even

conducting military strikes (Lin 2021: 5). China recently punished South Korea for not accommodating its interests. In March 2017, the U.S. and South Korea began deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, which China claimed would weaken its nuclear deterrent. China responded with an economic boycott which cost the South Korean economy U.S.\$7.5 billion in 2017 (Jung 2020: 4).

In the face of South Korea's vulnerability to and accommodation of China, CPP leaders may currently be banking on South Korea being deterred from supporting the U.S. in a Taiwan contingency. Issuing joint-statements regarding the importance of Taiwan could change China's perception of South Korea's resolve, and, therefore, better deter China. As discussed in section 3.1.1, one of the required elements of deterrence is to convince an adversary that it has an *interest* in following through on its threat. Issuing joint-statements regarding the importance of Taiwan, South Korea, could convince CCP leaders that it *would* be willing to allow the U.S. to use its bases. If the U.S. could employ more military power to defend the island by using South Korean bases, this could change China's calculus and thereby better deter China from invading.

This thinking is clearly demonstrated in statements from senior officials in the Biden administration which claim that these joint-statements highlight how the U.S. *and* its allies and partners have an interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and may, therefore, take action. In June 2021, referring to the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea joint-statements, the Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific on the National Security Council (NSC), Kurt Campbell, stated that "other nations who have interests in the Indo-Pacific have an interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" (Campbell 2021b). He further added that "we are seeking to take these concerted actions to send a clear message of resolve that we are determined to maintain that peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" (ibid.). Similarly, in November, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that "there are many countries [...] that would see any unilateral action to use force to disrupt the status quo as a significant threat to peace and security, and they too would take action" (Blinken 2021e).

Collective ambiguous extended deterrence, of course, requires the cooperation of U.S. allies. The willingness of allies to cooperate with the Biden administration in this way can also be explained at the systemic level. By being party to collective ambiguous extended deterrence, Japan, for instance, can balance China by signalling that it may support Taiwan in the event of invasion. Japan's willingness to join this effort can also be explained by how China has shifted the balance of power in its favour, allowing it to pose more of a threat to Taiwan and a U.S. defence of the island. With Taiwan under China's control, China could better "threaten the security of Japan's maritime trade and energy routes" (Lin 2021: 4). As such, Japanese officials and the Ministry of Defence have recently described the

security of Taiwan as being “directly connected to Japan” (Reuters 2021c) and “important for Japan’s security” (MOD 2021).

While systemic pressures provide a satisfactory explanation of the Biden administration’s decision to implement collective ambiguous extended deterrence, layering in leader images provides a more complete explanation of why it was likely pursued with a greater effort by the Biden administration. Leader images influence a state’s responses to external stimuli. As scholars have widely noted, Biden has demonstrated a worldview in which he perceives immense value in and commitment to U.S. alliances (Mastanduno 2021; Nathan 2021). He has called them “our greatest asset” (Biden 2021g) and called the U.S. commitment to them an “unshakable vow” (Biden 2021c). Trump, on the other hand, demonstrated a worldview in which he perceived little value in and commitment to U.S. alliances. As Thomas Wright observed, Trump’s views towards U.S. alliances show a “remarkably coherent and consistent worldview” going back to the late 1980s (2016). Before and after becoming President, he bemoaned the defence commitments, challenged the benefit they provide to the U.S., and suggested that “underpaying” allies may have to defend themselves (Kelly and Poast 2022; Rapp-Hooper 2020).

For instance, in June 2019, Trump complained that U.S. allies “take tremendous advantage” of the U.S. and moaned that “if Japan is attacked, we will fight World War III [...] But if we are attacked, Japan doesn’t have to help us at all” (CNBC 2019). Some reporting revealed that Trump even mused about terminating the U.S.-Japan alliance (Jacobs 2019) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Barnes and Cooper 2019). Regarding defending Taiwan, Trump privately indicated a lack of resolve. Journalistic accounts noted that he questioned the value of defending Taiwan, remarking “what do we get from protecting Taiwan, say?” (Woodward 2018: 305). Trump also expressed pessimism about the U.S.’s ability to defend Taiwan, stating that “we are eight thousand miles away. If they invade, there isn’t a fucking thing we can do about it” (Rogin 2021: 44).

As such, Trump’s worldview may have translated into little and/or failed efforts by the administration to bring allies on board to make joint-statements referencing Taiwan. The administration only made one joint-statement on Taiwan. Moreover, this was only at a ministerial level, and with Australia, which, given its location, is far less crucial to a U.S. defence of Taiwan compared to East Asian allies. Given Trump’s seeming unwillingness to defend U.S. allies, this attitude may have inhibited allies from cooperating with the Trump administration to include Taiwan in a joint-statement, given the risk of incurring costs from China. Even *despite* the Biden administration’s wholesale embrace of its commitment to defend its allies, reporting on the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea summits revealed that the administration still had to exert pressure to convince them to include Taiwan. Senior Japan and South Korean officials were reluctant, given fears of overly antagonising China (Sevastopulo 2021b; Sevastopulo 2021a). Japanese PM Suga Yoshihide and South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s



statements following the summits *toned down* the significance of Taiwan's inclusion, further indicating their hesitations (Hornung 2021; Cho 2021).

#### ***3.2.4. Extended deterrence***

The three administrations all reaffirmed the U.S.'s commitment to the defence of U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. The Obama administration often reaffirmed and declared its perceived value in U.S. alliances, declaring that "our commitment to their security is unshakable" (White House 2010: 41) and that the U.S. "will always defend our interests and uphold our commitments to allies and partners" (White House 2015b: ii). Likewise, the Biden administration conducted a wholesale embrace of U.S. defence commitments, declaring that the administration is "recommitting to our alliances and partnerships" (White House 2021c: 11) and that the U.S. "has been a steadfast regional ally and will remain so in the 21st century" (White House 2022: 12). The Trump administration also reaffirmed commitment to U.S. alliances. However, Trump engaged in rhetoric which indicated a lack of interest in upholding the U.S.'s commitments. Trump frequently demanded increases in their defence spending, questioned the value of U.S. defence commitments, and suggested that 'underpaying' allies could be left to defend themselves (Kelly and Poast 2022; Rapp-Hooper 2020). However, Trump, not just senior officials, still reaffirmed key U.S. alliances. In 2017, Trump reaffirmed the U.S.'s commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance, the U.S.-South Korea alliance, and the U.S.-Philippines alliance. Moreover, senior officials went on "reassurance tours" in the Indo-Pacific to reaffirm U.S. commitments (Bisley 2020: 168).

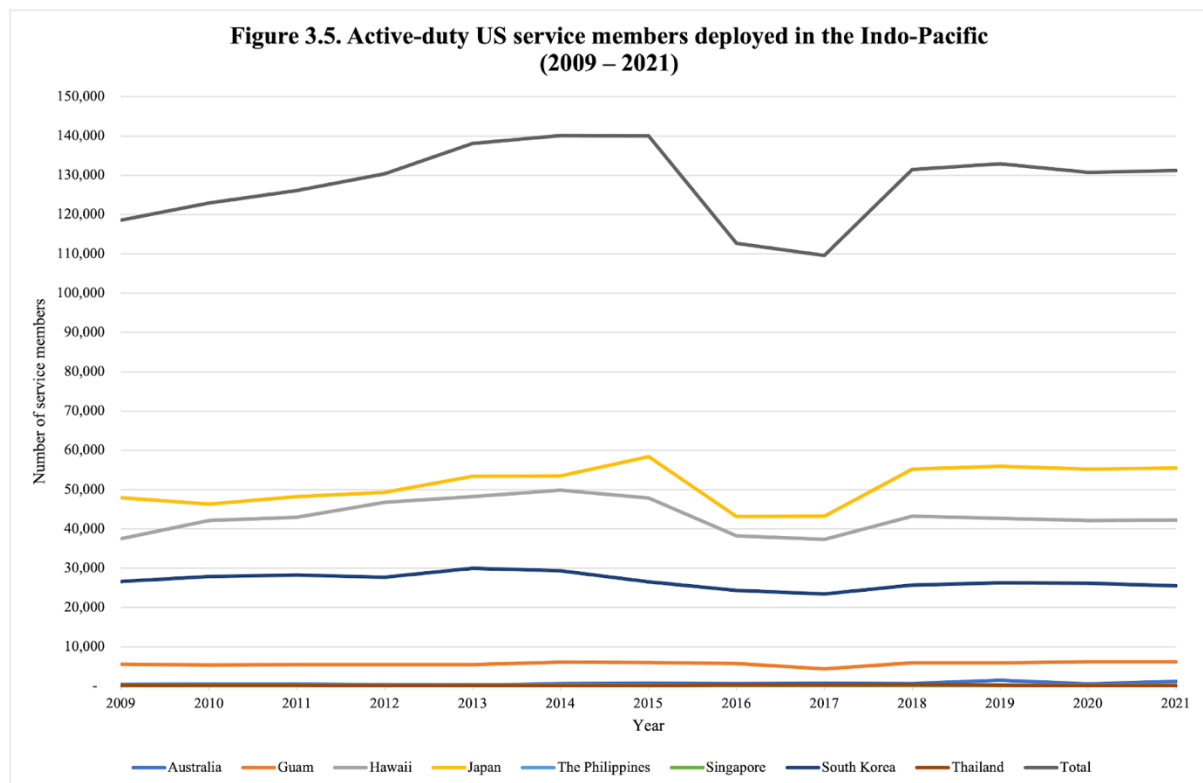
Why did the three administrations reaffirm alliance commitments in the region to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. Reaffirming U.S. alliance commitments is intended to externally balance China by threatening the use of U.S. military force to defend these states. A U.S. defence of its allies would improve the prospect of denying China its objectives, and therefore better deter aggression towards these states. To attempt to deter a state from conducting aggression towards itself or a third-party, a state must clearly reaffirm its defence commitment to convey to an adversary what the red line is and what will happen if it is crossed (Morgan 2003: 17). Layering in leader images provides a more complete explanation of why the Trump administration was inconsistent in its reaffirmations of U.S. alliance commitments in the region.

Leader images influence a state's responses to external stimuli. Trump has shown a worldview in which he holds a clear disdain for U.S. allies and partners, which he sees as 'ripping off' the U.S.. As discussed in the previous section, Trump has bemoaned the U.S.'s commitment to the defence of its allies, challenging the benefit they provide to the U.S., demanding massive increases in their defence spending,

and even suggesting that what he perceived as underpaying allies should potentially be left to defend themselves. This clashed with his senior officials' efforts to reaffirm the U.S. defence commitments, making him "his administration's worst enemy" (Tellis 2020: 130). As such, Trump's worldview overrode the incentive to respond to system pressures, causing external underbalancing.

### 3.2.5. Presence

Presence has two components: *force deployment* (deploying forces in allied territory), and *access* (the ability to use another state's territory and/or airspace for military purposes) (Joyce and Wasser 2021: 47). The three administrations largely maintained and/or expanded U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, for Taiwan to remain out of China's control, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. As figure 3.5 shows, the three administrations largely *sustained the same number of U.S. forces* in the Indo-Pacific region across the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. The Obama administration had an average of around 130,00 U.S. forces deployed in the Indo-Pacific annually, while the Trump administration averaged 126,000, and the Biden administration averaged 131,000.



Source: Defense Manpower Data Center 2022. Graph by author.

A complete overview of changes in U.S. force posture, analysing changes in the number of specific types of U.S. forces in terms of class and generation, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Given the maritime nature of the Indo-Pacific theatre, and the importance of nuclear weapons, I limit this analysis to changes in the general posture of the U.S. Navy and the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The three administrations sustained the same posture of the navy in the region. In June 2012, U.S. Secretary of Defence, Leon Panetta, announced that 60% of the U.S. Navy would be deployed to the Asia-Pacific by 2020, reversing the 50:50 posture between the Asia-Pacific and the Atlantic (Panetta 2012a). The Trump administration completed this reposture three years early in June 2017 (Mattis 2017), and the Biden administration has sustained this posture (UNSI 2022).

Regarding nuclear weapons, the three administrations have largely sustained an arsenal of around 1,700 *deployed* nuclear warheads (Kristensen et al. 2022). Moreover, they have also supported the modernisation of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The Obama administration implemented plans to modernise delivery systems, nuclear warheads, the production complex, and command control systems. The Trump administration continued this effort, but also developed several new nuclear weapons capabilities. This included new low-yield nuclear warheads for submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and new nuclear submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs). The Biden administration's first budget request proposed to continue the Trump administration's nuclear modernisation plans (ACA 2022).

The Obama administration sustained and increased access in the Indo-Pacific. In 2011, the U.S. and Australia concluded a force rotation agreement of 250 U.S. Marines to rotate through the Australian base in Darwin every six months with plans to grow to 2,500 Marines by 2020 (U.S.CC 2016: 479). In 2014, the U.S. and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which gave U.S. forces access to Filipino bases (Brands 2016: 116). In 2012, the U.S. lifted its ban on New Zealand naval ships from docking at its ports in return for access to New Zealand's ports (Beckley 2020: 242). In 2011, the U.S. reached an agreement with Singapore to deploy four LCS to Singapore on a rotational basis, with the first arriving in 2013 (Gady 2019). In 2015, the U.S. and Singapore agreed to allow U.S. P8-A maritime-patrol aircraft to operate out of Singapore (Townshend and Crabtree 2022: 21).

While the Trump administration attempted to increase access in the Indo-Pacific, it largely only sustained it. In 2018, the U.S. and Australia announced that they would partner to upgrade facilities at the Lombrum base in Papua New Guinea (Pence 2018). However, whether U.S. forces would be rotationally or permanently stationed there is unclear (Shugart 2020). In 2019, Esper announced that the administration was seeking to deploy IRBMs in the Asia-Pacific, but no allies expressed interest in hosting them (Schulenburg 2021). In 2019, the Trump administration renewed the U.S.-Singapore 1990

Memorandum of Understanding, which grants U.S. forces access to Singaporean air and naval bases (MINDEF 2019). In 2018, the U.S. made its first aircraft carrier visit to Vietnam since 1975 (USDOD 2018). The Biden administration has sustained and increased access in the Indo-Pacific. In 2021, the U.S. and Australia announced the rotational deployment of U.S. aircraft in Australia, in addition to increased logistics and sustainment capabilities of U.S. naval vessels in Australia (USDOS 2021b).

Why did the three administrations maintain and increase U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies, and, uniquely for the Biden administration, the additional desire for Taiwan to remain out of China's control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. Sustaining and/or expanding U.S. presence in the region is intended to internally and externally balance China's military power. U.S. presence across allied states in the Indo-Pacific enhances the U.S.'s ability to respond to an attack on Taiwan and/or U.S. allies. This could, therefore, improve the U.S.'s ability to deny China its objectives, deterring aggression for three reasons.

First, the U.S.'s presence internally balances China by reducing the amount of time required to arrive on station. This greater proximity to the anticipated operating area of conflict increases the U.S.'s ability to provide an initial response necessary to prevent quick defeat, launch attacks and gather intelligence on its targets, and provide logistical support during operations for its forces (Yeo and Pettyjohn 2021; Lostumbo et al. 2013). This is why they have been called "important stepping-stones around the world" (Posen 2003: 17). As Jennifer Lind observes, a U.S. presence in East Asia reduces the amount of time required to arrive on station which enable higher sortie-rates that "enhances the U.S. ability to destroy the naval forces of rivals" (Lind 2016: 313). For instance, U.S. basing access in Japan means that the U.S. has two airbases that are within unrefuelled combat radius of most U.S. aircraft of the Taiwan Strait (Heginbotham et al. 2015: 55).

Second, U.S. presence across allied states in the Indo-Pacific internally balances China through a more geographically dispersed force posture, making U.S. forces more vulnerable. Crowding U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific on Guam would only enhance the lethality of large salvos of Chinese missiles aimed at infrastructure (i.e., runways and ports). A study found that a Chinese first-strike on Japan using *less than half* its arsenal of SRBMs, MRBMs, and GLCMs, could neutralise almost every major fixed U.S. headquarters, logistical facility, ship in port, and major U.S. air bases in Japan (Shugart and Gonzalez 2017: 12). As such, analysts often note the need for more geographically dispersed bases and forces in the region to make them more survivable (Pettyjohn 2022; Wasser 2021).

Third, regarding the end to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies where U.S. forces are forward-deployed specifically, U.S. forces externally balance China's military power by communicating the

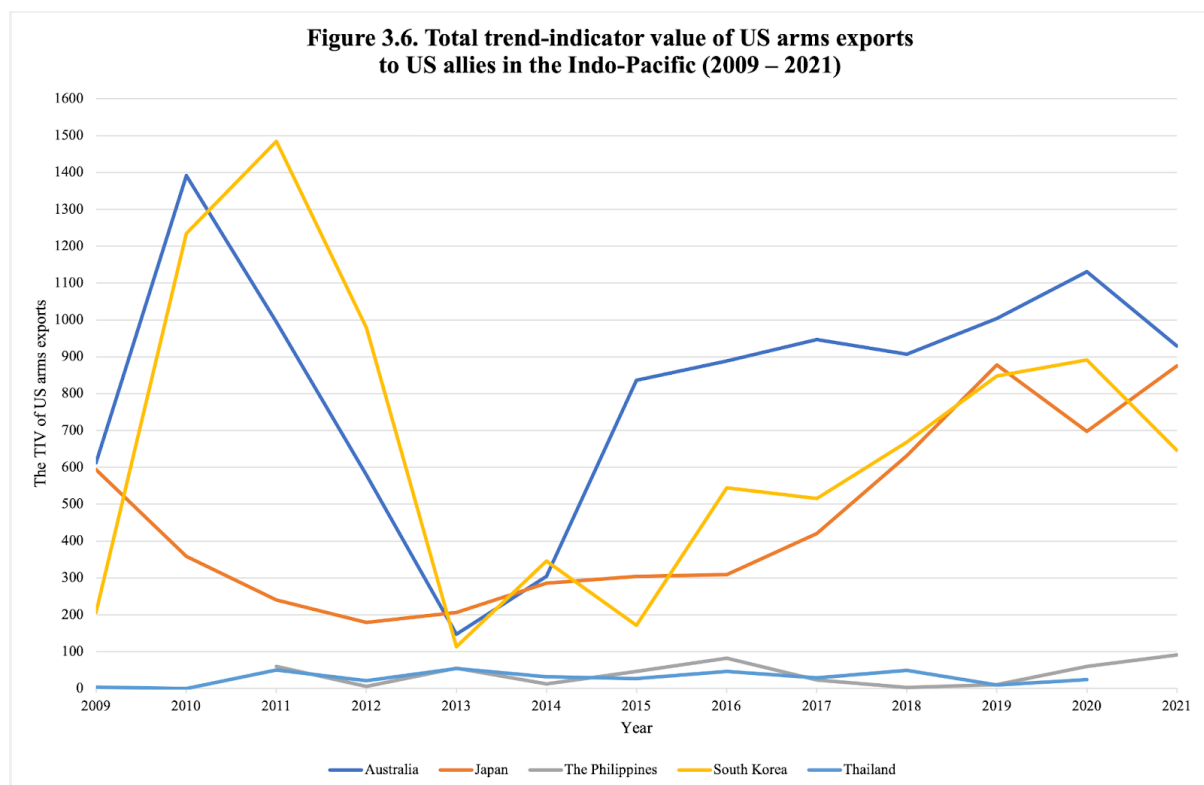
U.S.'s commitment to defend allies. The deterrent value of forward-deployed forces, as Thomas Schelling put it, is constituted by the fact that "bluntly, they can die", as they represent the reputation of a state (2020: 47). If the state failed to respond to an attack on its own forces, its perceived willingness to respond to attacks elsewhere would be damaged (Fearon 1997). As such, forward-deploying forces create a powerful deterrent to aggression, given the adversary's knowledge that the defender has a major interest in responding to an attack to preserve its credibility. As such, the presence of thousands of U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea is considered to deter Chinese aggression towards them, as this allows the U.S. to communicate its willingness to defend them (Lind 2018). A U.S. defence of its allies would improve the prospect of denying China its objectives, deterring aggression.

### ***3.2.6. Capacity building***

Capacity building refers to efforts to support an ally or partner to bolster its military power by supplying military capabilities, supplying resources to help them develop additional military capabilities themselves, and/or facilitating training to improve their combat performance (Lanoszka 2022: 109–118). The three administrations all engaged in capacity building to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. They did not show any clear signs of seeking to make major reductions in supporting their military capabilities.

A complete account of all the capacity building initiatives is beyond the scope of this thesis. As such, I provide an overview of some of the initiatives pursued by the administration, such as military exercises, arms and technology transfers, and arms sales. For instance, in April 2015, the Obama administration and Japan revised U.S.-Japan defence guidelines. This included the creation of an alliance coordination mechanism that would enable more seamless cooperation in assessing threats and sharing information to develop a joint response (Miller 2015). The Trump administration also empowered U.S. allies and partners. For example, in November 2017, it agreed to remove warhead weight limits for South Korean ballistic missiles (Gady 2017). In November 2017, it supported the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a forum composed of the U.S., Australia, Japan, and India (Madan 2017). Security measures have included increasing the tempo and scope of joint military exercises, such as the U.S.-led 'Sea Dragon' exercises (Feigenbaum and Schwemlein 2021). In December 2017, the U.S. conducted trilateral ballistic missile defence exercises with South Korea and Japan (Panda 2017b). The Biden administration also pursued capacity building. For instance, in May 2021, the U.S. and South Korea agreed to end restrictions governing the maximum range of South Korea's ballistic missiles (Wright 2021). The administration formed a trilateral security pact with Australia and the U.K. (AUKUS) in September 2021, under which the U.S. and the U.K. would share nuclear propulsion technology to support Australia in acquiring at least eight nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) (White House 2021).

In the four years following the 2008 financial crisis, global military expenditure underwent a year-on-year decline (SIPRI 2014: 7). Amidst this decrease in demand, as figure 3.6 shows, U.S. arms exports declined. Since 2013, however, the U.S. has steadily increased the value of arms exports to Australia, Japan, and South Korea, while sales to Thailand and the Philippines remained largely consistent. The trend-indicator value represents the "transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer" (SIPRI 2022).



Source: SIPRI 2022. Graph by author.

Why did the administration conduct capacity building to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China continues to shift the balance of power in China's favour through its military modernisation, allowing China to pose more of a threat to U.S. allies. As such, the three administrations engaged in external balancing by bolstering the military power of U.S. allies through initiatives such as arms sales, military exercises, and arms and technology transfers. This should enable them to better offset China's military power, and thereby weaken China's ability to conduct aggression towards U.S. allies, deterring aggression. For example, the Biden administration's trilateral security pact, AUKUS, is intended to better deter Chinese aggression in the region by bolstering Australia's defence capability. The joint-statement declared that it would "help sustain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region" (White House 2021). SSNs offer an important advantage compared to SSKs, which Australia was going to acquire from France. SSNs require considerably less time to arrive on station and can remain deployed for longer periods (Talmadge 2021).

If an SSN were to operate from Australia, the estimated peak time on station in the Spratly Islands would be 77 days compared to just 11 days for an SSK (Thomas et al. 2013: 31).

### ***3.2.7. Arms sales to Taiwan***

The three administrations all made arms sales towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, and, in the case of the Biden administration, potentially also so that Taiwan remains out of China's control. Under the 1979 TRA, the U.S. is to "provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character" (U.S. Congress 1979), and, as per the 1982 'Six Assurances', the U.S. does not have a "set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan" (White House 1982). The Obama administration (Swaine 2011: 88), the Trump administration (Boon and Sworn 2020: 1503), and the Biden administration (Glaser 2022: 33) all routinely reaffirmed their commitment to the TRA and the 'Six Assurances', and made arms sales to Taiwan. That said, there has been variation in the *value of arms* sold to Taiwan by the administrations.

The Obama administration approved U.S.\$14 billion in military sales to Taiwan over eight years, the Trump administration notified U.S.\$18 billion in sales over four years, and the Biden administration notified U.S.\$850 million in sales as of the end of February 2022 (13 months) (in constant 2021 U.S.\$) (Maizland 2022). Proportionally to the duration of the two administrations, the Trump administration sold around 2.6 times the value of arms to Taiwan as the Obama administration. Given the short duration of the Biden administration, a similar comparison is not yet very informative. As part of the Trump administration's approval of a greater value of arms sales to Taiwan, it was willing to sell high-value capabilities which had been previously *denied* by the Obama administration. In 2011, the Obama administration refused Taiwan's request to buy 66 of the new F-16 variant (the C/D) to replace its current F-16s (A/B) which were purchased in 1992. Instead, the administration agreed to only upgrade Taiwan's existing fleet of F-16s (Deng 2014: 90). In 2018, the Trump administration agreed to sell Taiwan F-16s (V), which was the first F-16 arms sales to Taiwan since 1992 (Boon and Sworn 2020: 1500).

There was also variation in the *type of arms* sold to Taiwan. As the U.S. can rebuff Taiwan's requests, Taiwan's purchases also reflect what the U.S. wants Taiwan to have, not purely what Taiwan wants (Seligman 2022). Scholars have noted that the arms sales by the Trump and Biden administrations show support for a 'porcupine strategy'. This intends to enable Taiwan to resist China's military without immediate U.S. intervention (Murray 2008: 4) by relying upon "distributed, affordable defenses with sufficient numbers to survive initial strikes" (Timbie and Ellis Jr. 2021: 91). Taiwan began shifting towards this approach in 2017, as reflected in Taiwan's 2017 Overall Defence Concept, which "redefines winning the war as foiling the PLA's mission of successfully invading" (Lee 2020).

The Trump administration's arms sales in 2020 were, as David Keegan and Kyle Churchman put it, "more closely aligned with Taipei's porcupine strategy than some earlier high-profile sales" (2021: 71). Likewise, Sidharth Kaushal noted that the 2020 arms sales "reflects a shift to [...] a porcupine strategy" which "differs from previous arms transactions" (2020). The sales included Harpoon coastal missile defence systems, UAVs, and HIMARS (Keegan and Churchman 2021: 82). Together these "could significantly attrit China's still limited fleet of amphibious vessels" and work at "disrupting PLA forces that land on Taiwan's beaches" (Kaushal 2020). The Biden administration appears intent on sustaining this approach. In December 2021, Ratner stated that "we appreciate that President Tsai has prioritized the development of asymmetric capabilities" and that the USDOD "is taking an increasingly proactive approach to supporting these efforts" (2021: 2).

Why did the three administrations make arms sales towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, and, in the case of the Biden administration, potentially also so that Taiwan remains out of China's control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. U.S. arms sales are a way of external balancing, as they work to "counter-balance China's on-going military build-up" to deter invasion (Scobell 2014: 466). That said, the military objectives of arms sales are limited. Given the ever-increasing disparity in military power across the Taiwan Strait, U.S. arms sales are largely understood to be intended to provide Taiwan "with the wherewithal to withstand a Chinese attack long enough for U.S. assistance to turn the tide", rather than for Taiwan to hold (Bader 2012: 34). Secondly, U.S. arms sales also externally balance China, as they show the U.S.'s interest in Taiwan's security and thereby also help communicate its ambiguous defence commitment to Taiwan (Bush 2016: 3). This signal of U.S. commitment is enhanced by the fact China protests the sales as interference in its 'core interests' by sending supportive signals to "separatist forces" within Taiwan. In protest of arms sales, China has suspended bilateral talks with the U.S. to cooperate on weapons non-proliferation (Kan 2014: 44). As such, continuing to sell arms despite China's protests further illustrates the U.S.'s commitment to Taiwan.

Why did the Trump administration approve to sell a greater value of arms and differ in the type of arms sold to Taiwan? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China's military modernisation has shifted the balance of power in its favour which could embolden China to invade Taiwan. To try to improve Taiwan military power to deter invasion, the Trump administration approved a greater value of arms sales to Taiwan than its predecessor. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo bragged about the increase by comparing the difference in value sold by the Obama administration to the Trump administration, stating "do the math" (Pompeo 2021). Moreover, the Trump administration began to place a greater focus on selling arms that would support a "porcupine strategy" (Keegan and Churchman 2021: 82; Kaushal 2020). This strategy is widely assessed by scholars to give Taiwan a better chance of deterring China, by improving its ability to deny China from achieving a *fait accompli*, giving U.S.



forces time to arrive, or even outright prevent invasion (Erickson and Collins 2022; Hunzeker 2021; Timbie and Ellis Jr. 2021). The Trump administration concurred, declaring it an objective to "enable Taiwan to develop an effective asymmetric defense strategy" (White House 2018: 5). Moreover, in 2020, Trump's NSA, Robert O'Brien bluntly stated that Taiwan needs to "turn themselves into a porcupine" (Reuters 2020).

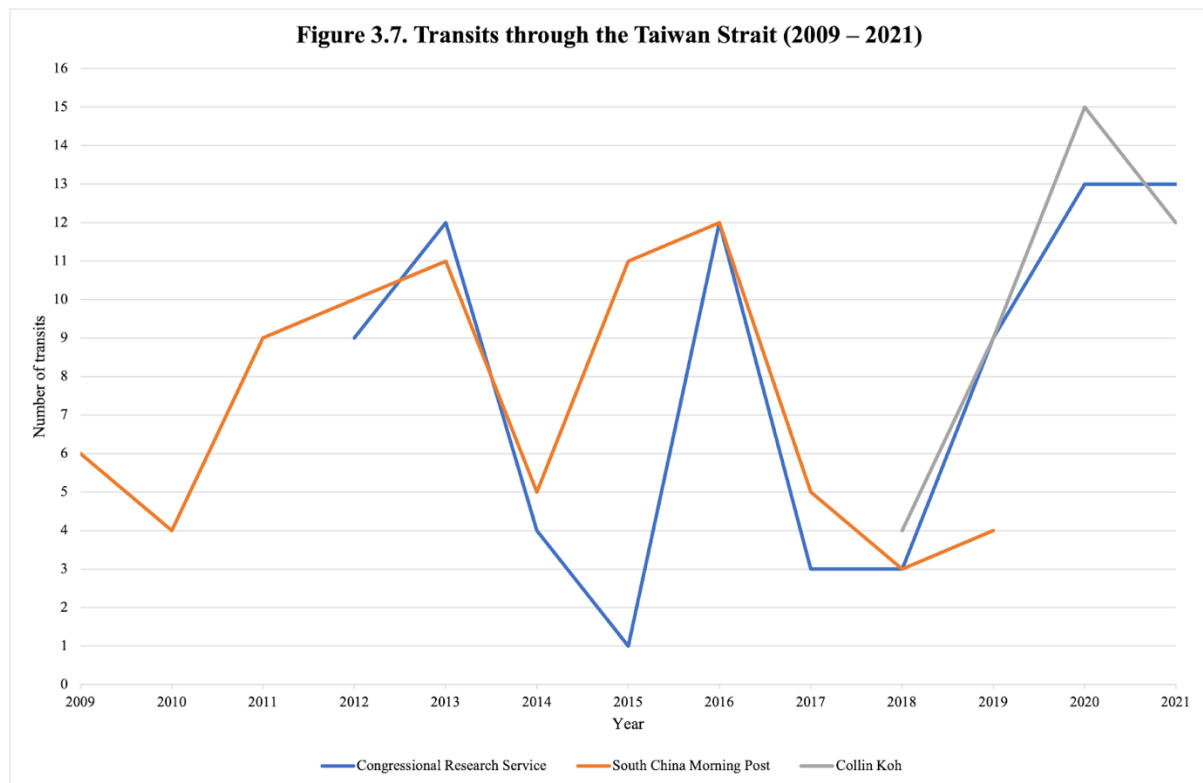
Layering in leader images provides a more complete explanation of why the Trump administration decided to approve a greater value of arms sales than the Obama administration. Leader images influence a state's responses to external stimuli. Obama and senior officials, especially in the first few years of the administration, held a worldview that the U.S. needed to maintain a positive relationship with China to elicit its cooperation on transnational threats, such as climate change and nuclear proliferation. Obama and senior officials stressed their desire to build a "positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship" with China (Obama 2009a; Clinton 2009). This three-word description was a repeat of the G. W. Bush administration's formulation, but dropped the word candid for *positive*, demonstrating the premium it placed on maintain good relations (Green 2019: 525). This was pursued because Obama and senior officials perceived China's cooperation on transnational threats to be essential, given that the U.S. could not solve them alone. Obama remarked that the "major challenges of the 21st century" are "challenges that neither of our nations can solve by acting alone" (Obama 2009b) and "it is important to pursue pragmatic cooperation with China on issues of mutual concern, because no one nation can meet the challenges of the 21st century alone" (Obama 2009b). Of these challenges, Obama perceived climate change as having significant importance (Jones and Fowler 2021), going as far as to call it a "potential existential threat to the entire world if we don't do something" (Goldberg 2016).

China opposes U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, viewing them as interference in its 'internal affairs'. As such, they often lead to warnings from CCP officials that such frictions could affect China's willingness to cooperate (Tucker 2009: 43). As such, when it came to the sale of F-16s (C/D variant), the Obama administration refused the sale to avoid upsetting relations with China. As the Senior Director for Asia on the NSC Jeff Bader later admitted, the administration worried that *even without* including the F-16s, the "arms sale plus the meeting with the Dalai Lama would at a minimum persuade Hu not to come to Washington for the Nuclear Security Summit and perhaps cast a long-term chill over the relationship" (2012: 72). As such, Obama's worldview caused the administration to deny some of Taiwan's purchase requests (intended to balance China's military build-up) to avoid thwarting cooperation with China. This resulted in underbalancing, as the systemic incentive to help Taiwan respond to system pressures was overridden.

In contrast, Trump and senior officials did not hold the worldview in which they perceived it necessary to have positive relations with China so that it could garner China's cooperation in combating transnational threats. While the administration initially perceived Chinese cooperation as essential for helping mitigate the North Korean threat, as previously discussed, this view soon dissipated (Jackson 2019: 105). Moreover, unlike the Obama administration, Trump has demonstrated a worldview of ignoring climate change as a threat (Matthews 2017). Trump called climate change "mythical" and an "expensive hoax" (Meyer 2018). As such, the Trump administration did not perceive it as necessary to limit its undermining of China's 'core interests' (such as selling arms to Taiwan) given that it did not seek China's cooperation in combating transnational threats. Selling the F-16s was, therefore, not perceived as such a major issue. NSA John Bolton revealed that Trump only asked that he "do it quietly" without making a speech (2020: 314).

### ***3.2.8. Transits through the Taiwan Strait***

Transits are the passage of U.S. naval assets through the Taiwan Strait. While the U.S. has sometimes sent U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups through the Strait since 1950, more frequent transits with smaller vessels only began under the G. W. Bush administration in 2005 (Bosco 2017). The three administrations all conducted transits through the Taiwan Strait towards no unilateral changes in the status quo, and, in the case of the Biden administration, potentially also so that Taiwan remains out of China's control. I have compiled three datasets which reveal that the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations consistently conducted transits in the Taiwan Strait. Based on the data available, as figure 3.7 shows, the Obama administration conducted transits at a rate of approximately 8.5 per year, while the Trump administration did so at 10 per year, and the Biden administration at 13 per year. Moreover, the willingness to *publicise* transits of the Taiwan Strait has varied between administrations. Analysing press releases from the U.S. Navy and the U.S. 7th Fleet, I found that the Obama administration did not publicise any transits, the Trump administration publicised *four*, and the Biden administration publicised *eleven* (Commander 7th Fleet 2020, 2021, 2022; U.S. Navy 2020).



Sources: 2007 to April 2019 (SCMP 2019); 2012 to 2020 (CRS 2022: 41); July 2018 to February 2022 (Koh 2022). Graph by author.

Why did the three administrations conduct transits in the Taiwan Strait towards peace across the Taiwan Strait Taiwan, and, in the case of the Biden administration, potentially also so that Taiwan remains out of China's control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. Transits are intended to externally balance China's military power, as they are meant to communicate the U.S.'s commitment to Taiwan to deter invasion. As press releases from the U.S. 7th Fleet have put it since 2020, a U.S. transit "demonstrates the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific" (Commander 7th Fleet 2020; 2021). According to the Trump and Biden administrations, a free and open Indo-Pacific is one in which "people take ownership of their future" (Trump 2017a) and where "governments can make their own sovereign choices" (White House 2022: 8). Transits aim to signal that the U.S. may defend Taiwan by showing that the U.S. has not been deterred from traversing the region. Were the U.S. to scale back or halt transits, this could signal a lack of resolve to defend Taiwan from China. China condemns transits through the Taiwan Strait as interference in China's 'internal affairs', calling them "provocative actions" which send "erroneous signals to the 'Taiwan independence' forces" (Chen 2020). China often threatens that interference in its 'core interests' could result in souring U.S.-China relations, and China refusing to cooperate on issues the U.S. cares about (Collins and Erickson 2021). As such, conducting transits despite China's protests and threats further illustrates the U.S.'s commitment to Taiwan.

Why did the Trump administration and the Biden administration publicise transits? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China's military modernisation has shifted the balance of power in its favour. This could embolden China to invade Taiwan given its improved ability to not only invade Taiwan but also to defeat a U.S. defence of the island. To help offset this shift, the Trump and Biden administrations began publicising transits to better signal their support of Taiwan to bolster deterrence. Publicising transits prompts all the more strenuous public complaints from CCP officials, because if Chinese citizens perceive that the CCP is responding too weakly to foreign provocations, nationalist ire could turn against the CCP (Weiss 2020). Notably, CCP officials did not comment publicly on any of the Obama administration's transits, as they were *never* publicised (Power 2019). China has even specifically objected to the U.S.'s "public hyping" of transits (Feng 2021). As such, publicising transits despite China's protests further illustrates the U.S.'s commitment to Taiwan.

### ***3.2.9. Diplomatic engagement with Taiwan***

Broadly, diplomatic engagement refers to how the U.S. engages with Taiwan (relating to matters such as foreign representation, economic relations, cooperation, people-to-people ties, and supporting Taiwan's participation in international organisations where statehood is not required). Given that the U.S. does not have formal relations with Taiwan under its 'one China policy', its diplomatic relations are unofficial (Green and Glaser 2017). The three administrations all sustained these general diplomatic ways of engagement with Taiwan (Chen 2014; Boon and Sworn 2020; Chen 2022). An outline of the general year-on-year engagement is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I focus on upgrades in engagement.

The Obama administration's engagement with Taiwan did not entail any major upgrades in relations. The only real upgrade was a visit by Gina McCarthy, the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency to Taiwan in April 2014. There she met with Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou and senior officials. This was the first Cabinet-level visit to Taiwan since Rodney Slater, the Secretary of Transportation, visited in June 2000 (Kan 2014: 5). The Trump administration, however, instigated a broader enhancement of U.S. engagement. In August 2020, Alex Azar, Secretary of Health and Human Services visited Taiwan, the highest-level U.S. official to visit in four decades. In January 2021, the Trump administration lifted restrictions on interactions with Taiwanese counterparts by U.S. diplomats, service members, and other officials (USDOS 2021c).

The Biden administration continued expanding engagement. In April 2021 and February 2022, the administration sent an unofficial U.S. delegation for talks with senior Taiwanese officials, made up of senior USDOD and NSC officials and U.S. senators (Sevastopulo 2022). In April 2021, the USDOS

announced that it had "issued new guidelines for U.S. government interaction with Taiwan counterparts to encourage U.S. government engagement with Taiwan" (USDOS 2021d). In June 2021, the administration resumed Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Council meetings with Taiwan (U.S.TR 2021), after being suspended during the Trump administration (Palmer 2016). The Biden administration also supported Taiwan's "bid to play a more meaningful role in the international community" (Tsai 2021: 80). It supported that Taiwan should join the World Health Assembly as a full member (not just an observer) (USDOS 2021h), gave a tacit endorsement of Taiwan becoming a member of the CPTPP (Price 2021a), and invited Taiwan to the Biden administration's Summit for Democracy (USDOS 2021f).

Why did the Trump and Biden administrations upgrade U.S. diplomatic engagement with Taiwan towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, and, uniquely in the case of the Biden administration, also towards that Taiwan remain out of China's control? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China shifted the balance of power in its favour through its military modernisation. This could embolden China to invade Taiwan, given its improved ability to invade Taiwan and defeat a U.S. defence of the island. To help offset this shift, the Trump and Biden administrations upgraded U.S. diplomatic relations with Taiwan to externally balance China by signalling its commitment to Taiwan to deter invasion. Upgrades in diplomatic engagement communicate the U.S.'s commitment precisely because China opposes it. China claims that the U.S.'s diplomatic engagement interferes in its 'core interests' by supporting Taiwanese "separatist forces" (Kan and Morrison 2013). CCP officials often threaten and act on its threats that interference in its 'core interests' will result in costs, such as China refusing to cooperate on issues the U.S. cares about (Collins and Erickson 2021), or sending combat aircraft across the centerline of the Taiwan Strait and into Taiwan's ADIZ (Trent 2020). As such, continuing to engage and upgrade U.S. engagement despite China's protests and threats further illustrates the U.S.'s commitment to Taiwan.

### ***3.2.10. Arms control agreements***

Arms control agreements are formal agreements between states that place restrictions on developing, producing, stockpiling, and using conventional and/or nuclear weapons (Blacker and Duffy 1984). While the Obama administration did not use this means, both the Trump and the Biden administrations did towards peace across the Taiwan Strait, to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies, and, uniquely for the Biden administration, the additional desire for Taiwan to remain out of China's control. However, neither achieved the formation of a formal arms control agreement with China that placed restrictions on its nuclear weapons.

The Obama administration did not pursue a formal arms control agreement with China. More modestly, as outlined in its 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review*, it pursued "strategic stability dialogues" with China to "communicate its views about the other's strategies, policies, and programs on nuclear weapons and other strategic capabilities" (USDOD 2010a: 20). Calls for such dialogues continued throughout the administration, but never materialised (Kan 2015: 44). The Trump administration, in contrast, pursued a formal arms control agreement with China. In 2018, Trump first announced his interest in bringing China into an arms control agreement (Reuters 2018), and later in 2019, the USDOS announced that it had formally invited China to participate in arms control talks (ISN 2019). To try and bring about an arms control agreement, it pursued a 'linkage' policy. This involved declaring that it would renew the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) *only if* China also joined. In June 2020, the Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control, announced that "we are willing to contemplate an extension of [New START] but only under select circumstances [...]. The next agreement has got to address [China's] incredibly worrisome crash nuclear program" (Billingslea 2020).

New START, which was signed by the U.S. and Russia and entered into force in 2011, places verifiable limits on all U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads (Woolf 2021). This 'linkage' aimed to incentivise China to enter an arms control agreement, which it has long opposed (Garrett and Glaser 1995: 48), as not also becoming a party to a treaty could result in U.S. nuclear proliferation. As noted by the undersecretary of Defense for Policy at the USDOD, in December 2019, "if the [U.S.] were to agree to extend the treaty now, I think it would make it less likely that we would have the ability to persuade Russia and China to enter negotiations on a broader agreement" (Rood 2019: 33). China did not enter arms control talks with the U.S., nor did the Trump administration did not renege on its 'linkage' policy. Trump left office without renewing New START.

The Biden administration is pursuing a formal arms control agreement with China, however, it has not taken any public measures, like the Trump administration did, towards trying to convince China to do so. In February 2021, Blinken stated that "we will also pursue arms control to reduce the dangers from China's modern and growing nuclear arsenal" (2021c). It also pursued a "strategic stability dialogue" with China, which falls short of an arms control agreement. Following Biden's virtual meeting with Xi in November 2021, NSA Jake Sullivan stated that Biden and Xi "agreed that we would look to begin to carry forward discussions on strategic stability" (2021: 11). Senior officials admitted the limited scope of the talks, stating that "these are not arms control talks" (Reuters 2021b).

Why did the Trump administration pursue an arms control agreement with China towards the desired ends of peace across the Taiwan Strait and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China shifted the balance of power in China's favour by expanding the size of its nuclear arsenal throughout the Trump administration's tenure. Moreover,

the administration projected that it would continue to grow over the next decade. In 2018, China was estimated to have approximately 280 nuclear warheads, this increased to approximately 290 in 2019, and in a greater expansion, increased to approximately 350 in 2020 (Kristensen and Korda 2020: 443). Moreover, the administration declared that China's nuclear arsenal would continue to grow. Ashley declared, "over the next decade, China will likely at least double the size of its nuclear stockpile" (2019: 5). Given this expansion, the administration expressed concern that China "could shift away from its longstanding minimalist force posture" (USDOD 2020a: 86).

China has long pursued a strategy of "assured retaliation", which relied upon only a small number of nuclear weapons to deter an adversary through the threat of unacceptable damage through a retaliatory nuclear strike (Cunningham and Fravel 2015). A larger nuclear arsenal would enable China to pose a greater threat to Taiwan and U.S. allies as it would further increase China's ability to survive a U.S. first-strike and execute a second-strike in retaliation against the U.S. (Gottemoeller 2021: 117). China could thereby become "more bold in conventional crises [...] knowing that China is at least capable of countering any American threat of nuclear escalation" (Christensen 2012: 452). As such, this incentivized the Trump administration to engage in soft balancing by trying to place restraints on the size of China's nuclear arsenal through a diplomatic arms control agreement.

Layering in domestic variables provides a more complete explanation of why the Trump administration was especially sensitive to China's relatively minor shift in the balance of power. Strategic culture influences how leaders perceive system pressures. To outline U.S. strategic culture, it is important to define military primacy. This refers to a "distribution of military capabilities in which one country faces no current or emergent peers" (Drezner 2013: 54). In other words, it is when a state has *vastly more* military power than its closest competitor, not just a favourable advantage. Relatedly, nuclear primacy refers to when a state has vastly more nuclear weapons relative to an adversary, allowing it to "destroy its adversary's nuclear retaliatory capabilities in a disarming strike" (Lieber and Press 2006: 9). In this context, the two states are *not* in a state of 'mutual vulnerability', as the adversary does not have a secure second-strike capability (Green and Long 2022). This advantage is assumed to reduce a state's "expected cost of nuclear war, increasing its resolve in high-stakes crises, providing it with coercive bargaining leverage, and enhancing nuclear deterrence" (Kroenig 2018: 3).

Scholars have widely noted that since the U.S. achieved primacy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. administrations have had an ideological fixation on sustaining primacy (Brands 2016; Fettweis 2018; Layne 2017; Mearsheimer 2018; Walt 2018; Wertheim 2020). It has been called a "long-standing ambition" (Walt 2002: 2) and "habit" (Porter 2018: 11) of administrations, with them being "fixed on the idea" (Shiffrinson 2021: 82) following it like an "article of faith" (Friedman and Logan 2016: 15). This is indicative of strategic culture, that being "semi-permanent elite beliefs, attitudes, and

behavior patterns" (Snyder 1977: 8). The Trump administration also clung to the pursuit of primacy. Its 2018 *Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* refers to the need to "maintain U.S. primacy in the region" (White House 2018: 1).

As such, this U.S. strategic culture meant that even China's relatively small increase to a relatively small arsenal was still perceived as a particularly worrying trend. As Ashley admitted, "while China's overall arsenal is assessed to be much smaller than Russia's [4,300 warheads], this does not make this trend any less concerning" (2019: 6). In 2018, the U.S. had a stockpile of 4,000 warheads, vastly more than China's stockpile of 280 warheads (Kristensen and Norris 2018b: 2; Kristensen and Norris 2018a: 289). As Gerland Brown observed, even if China doubled its nuclear arsenal by 2030, China is "unlikely to quantitatively outpace U.S. nuclear forces in the foreseeable future" (2021: 6). However, China's expansion could nonetheless undermine U.S. *nuclear primacy*. As such, despite the relatively minor shift in the balance of nuclear forces, the Trump administration still perceived it necessary to try and limit China's ability to challenge U.S. nuclear primacy through arms control.

Layering in leader images provides a more complete explanation of why the Trump administration decided to adopt the 'linkage' policy specifically. Leader images influence a state's responses to external stimuli. As scholars have widely noted, Trump has demonstrated to hold a worldview of contempt for international agreements as he perceives that they constrain U.S. freedom of action (Amirfar and Singh 2018; Lissner and Rapp-Hooper 2018). As Doug Stokes put it, Trump is "deeply sceptical about regimes perceived as encumbering or restricting American freedom of action" (2018: 137). This manifested as a "habit of withdrawing or threatening to withdraw from multilateral commitments" (Haass 2020: 28). Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Iran Deal, the INF treaty, the Paris Climate Accord, the TPP, UNESCO, the UN Human Rights Council, and the WHO (Maizland 2021). Regarding the Paris Climate Accord, for instance, he stated that it would "weaken our sovereignty" (Trump 2017b). Given New START's limits on the U.S., the treaty clashed with Trump's worldview that the U.S. should not have constraints on its decision-making, opening withdrawal from the treaty as a policy option to attempt to balance China's power. Consequently, U.S. strategic culture and Trump's worldview resulted in soft overbalancing system pressures.

Why has the Biden administration pursued the use of arms control agreements towards the desired ends of peace across the Taiwan Strait, for Taiwan to remain out of China's control, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China's nuclear expansion will continue to shift the balance of power in its favour. The 2021 USDOD *China Military Power Report* states that the "accelerating pace of the PRC's nuclear expansion may enable the PRC to have up to 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027. The PRC likely intends to have at least 1,000 warheads by 2030" (USDOD 2021a: 90). In 2021, it was publicly revealed that China is constructing



approximately 300 new missile silos (Kristensen and Korda 2021: 326). Even if not all silos are loaded as part of a "shell game" (Meyer 1979), this still shifts the U.S.-China nuclear balance in its favour, as it makes it harder for the U.S. to execute a counterforce strike (Wagner 1991). China is also developing more sophisticated delivery systems for these warheads. This includes a nuclear-capable hypersonic glide vehicle atop a fractional orbital bombardment system (Denmark and Talmadge 2021). Referring to China's growing nuclear arsenal, Sullivan stated that it "matter[s] profoundly for America's national security" (2021: 11).

Layering in leader images at the individual level explains why, despite this trend in the shifting military balance, the Biden administration abandoned the Trump administration's 'linkage' policy. Biden holds a worldview that the U.S. needed to reclaim U.S. leadership post-Trump. As scholars have widely observed, Biden has often stressed that the U.S. needs to recover its previous role as a responsible leader that works to manage global threats (Mathews 2021; Shapiro 2021; Wertheim 2021). As Michael Boyle put it, Biden intends to "reclaim the mantle of world leadership" Trump abandoned (2020: 65). Biden castigated Trump's "abdication of that responsibility" to have the U.S. "at the head of the table" where it plays a "leading role in writing the rules" (Biden 2020: 71). Upon entering office, Biden claimed that "America is back" (Biden 2021c) and "cannot afford to be absent any longer on the world stage" (Biden 2021g). This worldview is shown in statements which declare the need for the U.S. to reclaim its role as a responsible leader that limits nuclear proliferation. Blinken stated that "Biden pledged to keep the American people safe from nuclear threats by restoring U.S. leadership on arms control and nonproliferation. Today, the United States took the first step toward making good on that pledge when it extended the New START Treaty" (Blinken 2021c). Likewise, the INSSG stated that it would "re-establish our credibility as a leader in arms control. That is why we moved quickly to extend the New START Treaty" (White House 2021c: 13). As such, not renewing New START was incompatible with Biden's worldview on U.S. leadership. This incentivised renewal of the treaty even though the 'linkage' policy may have enabled the U.S. to balance China's power. Consequently, Biden's worldview overrode the incentive to respond to system pressures, causing soft underbalancing.

### **3.3. Conclusion**

From applying my schema to this analysis to assess the scale of adjustment, I found that there were no *major* changes in U.S. strategy towards China over Taiwan and U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific. This is because the three administrations were united in desiring the same ends; no unilateral changes to the status-quo, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. They did not abandon these objectives for a more accommodationist position, whereby the U.S. would no longer seek to defend Taiwan or end (or severely downgrade) its role as a security provider for present U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific (Bandow

2013; Glaser 2021; Gomez 2016). As noted in the chapter, there was a seeming *major* change in U.S. strategy by the Biden administration through its declared desire that Taiwan remain out of Taiwan's control, as opposed to being open to unification through "peaceful resolution" like the Trump administration. However, I do not code this as a clear case of *major* change for two reasons. First, the Biden administration soon returned to the traditional 'process of resolution' framing of the Taiwan issue after this single case of seeming divergence. Second, as China has long assumed that the U.S. desires that Taiwan remain out of China's control, this apparent divergence did not, in any case, necessarily constitute a clear departure from the Trump administration, or even other former U.S. administrations.

The principal incentive to desire these ends can be explained by systemic pressures. If China brought Taiwan under its control, it could militarise the island, threatening the U.S.'s ability to operate in the first island chain. This could bring about a wider shift in the balance of power in China's favour, as it would undermine the credibility of U.S. alliance commitments and thereby potentially incentivise U.S. allies to bandwagon with China. Bandwagoning would likely result in the U.S. losing security cooperation with allies in the region, undermining U.S. military power. Credibility could also be damaged if the U.S. refused to defend Taiwan or its allies, similarly incentivising bandwagoning with China. As the regional balance of power shifts in China's favour, it will come closer to being able to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

However, as per my schema, I found that there were some *minor* changes in U.S. strategy, given that there were changes in the use of means. For instance, in a departure from the Obama administration, the Trump administration worked towards trying to bring China into an arms control agreement. In another instance, the Biden administration made a greater effort than the Trump administration to exercise collective ambiguous extended deterrence. These changes in the use of means can largely be explained at the systemic level, whereby China's shift in the balance of power prompted the administrations to intensify internal, external, and soft balancing. For instance, in response to China's military modernisation, shifting the cross-Strait military balance, the Trump administration sold a greater value of arms to Taiwan. That said, variables at the state level and individual level are required to explain some deviations from neorealist explanations. For example, U.S. strategic culture and Trump's worldview of contempt for international agreements that constrain U.S. freedom of action lead the Trump administration to threaten to withdraw from New START to incentivise China to enter an arms control agreement after its relatively minor shift in the military balance. As such, this was a case of soft overbalancing as the administration attempted to limit China's ability to challenge U.S. primacy.

## Chapter 4. Sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea

Disputes regarding sovereignty over land features and their maritime entitlements in the South China Sea (SCS) concern two archipelagos and a Shoal. This includes the Paracel Islands (between China, Taiwan, and Vietnam), the Spratly Islands (between Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam), and the Scarborough Shoal (between China, the Philippines, and Taiwan) (O'Rourke 2022b: 7). These disputes are illustrated in figure 4.1 below. China claims sovereignty over virtually all of the islands and their adjacent waters in the SCS as its "inherent territory" (Mastro 2021a). The U.S. is not a party to any of these disputes, nor does it take a position on the question of territorial sovereignty, only maritime claims. That said, the U.S. has not only interests and a military presence in Southeast Asia, but a formal ally, the Philippines, which has sovereignty and maritime disputes with China in the SCS. These disputes are nonetheless perceived by scholars as a potential flashpoint for a U.S.-China war (Cronin 2019; Feng and He 2018; Hayton 2014; Li et al. 2019; Kaplan 2014; Klare 2001; O'Hanlon 2019).

*Figure 4.1. Sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea involving China*



Source: CRS 2022: 51.

In this chapter, I analyse *why* and *how* U.S. strategy regarding sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea changed between the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. I use the model of neoclassical realism and my 'ends and means' analytical framework to analyse the drivers of the

administration's behaviour, in terms of its desired ends and use of means, at different levels of causality. I conclude this chapter by applying my analytical framework's schema to identify if any *major* and *minor* change in U.S. strategy occurred.

#### **4.1. Ends**

In this section, I analyse any changes and continuities between the three administrations in their desired ends regarding sovereignty and maritime disputes. This includes the desire for freedom of navigation and access to the global commons; and, to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners.

##### ***4.1.1. Freedom of navigation and access to the global commons***

Freedom of navigation is the ability of both commercial and military vessels to navigate Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) as per their rights under international law without interference from states (Jones et al. 2017: 19). Access to the global commons refers to the ability to access international waters, outer space, and airspace (above 15,000 feet) (Posen 2003: 8). The three administrations all desired freedom of navigation and access to the global commons. The Obama administration's 2010 NSS refers to the need to "preserve access to the global commons" (White House 2010: 14), and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the U.S. "has a national interest in freedom of navigation" (2010). The Trump administration made similar claims. In November 2017, Trump stated that "we must uphold [...] freedom of navigation" (Trump 2017a), much like the USDOD's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, which states that "we have a shared responsibility to uphold [...] freedom of navigation" (USDOD 2019b: 3). The Biden administration has said similar. Blinken stated that "we are determined to ensure freedom of the seas" (2021a) and the INSSG states that "we will continue to defend access to the global commons, including freedom of navigation and overflight" (White House 2021c: 20).

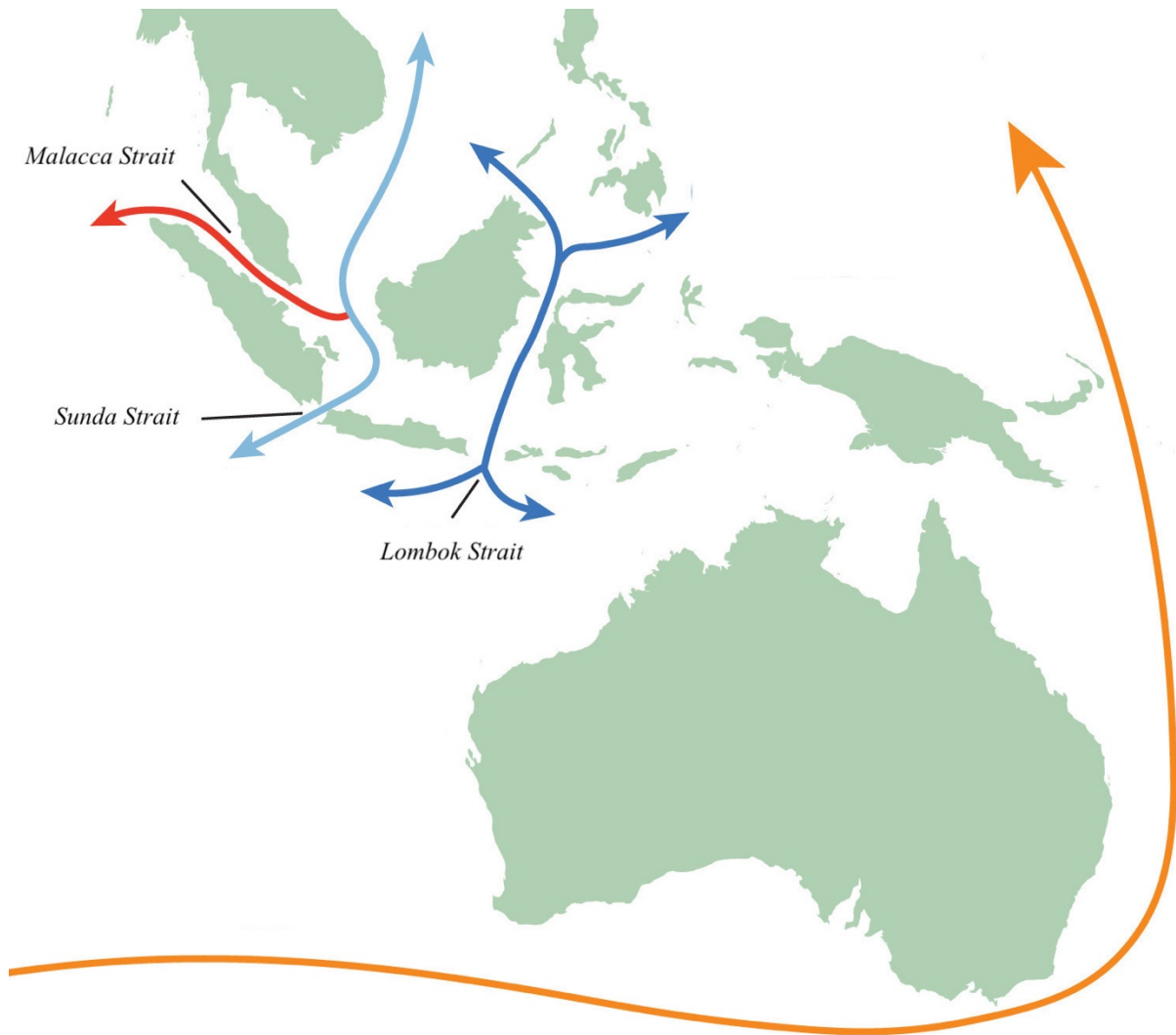
Why did they all desire freedom of navigation and access to the global commons? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. Freedom of navigation and access to the global commons allows the U.S. to project and sustain large-scale military operations. Going beyond just *access*, the U.S. has largely had "command of the commons" since the early 1990s (Hart and Jones 2010). Briefly, "command of the commons" empowers the U.S. to: get vastly more military use out of the sea, space, and air than other states; be able to credibly threaten to deny its use to other states; and, ensure that other states would lose a military contest for the commons if they attempted to deny command to the U.S. (Posen 2003: 8). This enables the U.S. to move large and heavy forces around the world; gather vast amounts of intelligence to locate and identify military targets for offensive forces to

target; and, allows U.S. airpower to reach targets deep inland and support ground forces (ibid. 9). Together, this "provides an unparalleled ability to deploy, operate, and sustain military units" (Montgomery 2014: 123).

As such, if the U.S.'s ability to have freedom of navigation and access to the global commons is hindered by China in the SCS, the U.S. will be less able to conduct military operations in the Indo-Pacific. This could result in a broader shift in the balance of power, as it could make U.S. allies doubt the credibility of U.S. defence commitments. For U.S. allies, the loss of U.S. support would shift the military balance firmly in China's favour, potentially incentivizing allies to bandwagon with China. Bandwagoning (as discussed in section 3.1.1) could severely degrade U.S. military power, as increased alignment of U.S. allies with China could result in the U.S. facing a lack of support by U.S. allies to: conduct joint-operations, allow the U.S. to forward-deploy forces in other states' territories, and/or grant the U.S. basing access a contingency with China. This power shift in the Indo-Pacific would be a step towards China achieving regional hegemony.

Beyond military power, freedom of navigation is also key for U.S. economic power. In 2016, 14% (U.S.\$208 billion) of the U.S.'s maritime trade passed through the SCS. As figure 4.2 shows, if China were to close the three SLOCs through the SCS (i.e., the Malacca, Sunda, and the Lombok Straits), this would force all shipping that would normally go through the SCS to go around Australia. This could initially result in a 0.8–1% reduction in trade. Over time, the cost of shipping could rise further as the price of war risk premiums could increase (CSIS 2017). As such, having to circumnavigate the SCS could harm the U.S. economy. Given China benefits vastly more than any other state from commercial traffic through the SCS, with U.S.\$1.47 trillion of China's maritime trade transiting the SCS in 2016 (CSIS 2017), scholars have suggested that China would be unlikely to deny commercial traffic access (Swaine et al. 2021). However, in a situation where China perceived its 'core interests' at stake, "it is possible that China may feel it has no other option but to blockade commercial shipping to U.S. allies and the United States" (Herscovitch 2017: 8).

**Figure 4.2** *Sea lines of communication with entry into the South China Sea*



Source: Adapted from CSIS 2017.

Given how freedom of navigation and access to the global commons is key for U.S. military and economic power, the three administration's all declared it to be vital to U.S. interests. The Obama administration noted that access to the global commons is the "connective tissue around our globe upon which all nations' security and prosperity depend" (White House 2010: 49), the Trump administration called it "a central principle of national security and economic prosperity" (White House 2017c: 40), and the Biden administration stated that "national security requires [...] access to the global commons" (White House 2021c: 9). As such, were China to hinder U.S. freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, it could deny the U.S. considerable security and economic benefits. This could result in a considerable shift in the balance of power in China's favour, furthering its ability to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

#### ***4.1.2. Prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners***

The U.S. has one ally, the Philippines, which has sovereignty and maritime disputes with China in the SCS over some of the Scarborough Shoal and some of the Spratly Islands. The three administration's also made statements indicating their desire that the Philippines be free from Chinese aggression in the SCS, condemning instances of aggression by China towards Filipino forces in the SCS (Clinton 2012a; Pompeo 2019; USDOS 2021e). Regarding U.S. partners around the SCS (i.e., Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam), the three administrations declared their interest in supporting the rights of states to sail wherever international law allows (White House 2015a; White House 2017c: 47; White House 2016; 10).

Why did the three administrations desire to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. Briefly, if China conducted aggression towards U.S. allies and partners in the SCS, this could shift the balance of power in China's favour in three ways. First, given the U.S.'s alliance commitments to the Philippines, the U.S. risks entering a war with China in the event China conducts aggression against either ally. War could range from brief and mild hostilities with conventional weapons (Gompert et al. 2016) to nuclear exchanges (Talmadge 2017). As such, war could severely degrade the military and economic power of the U.S., undermining its ability to balance other states. Second, if China occupied islands in the SCS, it could militarise them and shift the balance of power in China's favour. For instance, the Scarborough Shoal could be militarised like Woody Island. This would be a "game changer", as it would enable China to hold Philippine bases, which station U.S. forces, at greater risk (Morris 2019: 2). Moreover, in the SCS, Thitu Island (controlled by the Philippines), Swallow Reef (Malaysian), Taiping Island (Taiwanese), and Spratly Island (Vietnamese) all have airfields (CSIS 2015). Under China's control, runways could be used (and extended) to base combat and reconnaissance aircraft in the SCS.

Third, if the U.S. decided not to defend the Philippines in the SCS, this could damage U.S. credibility and encourage a wider regional shift in the balance of power in China's favour by incentivising bandwagoning. This could occur in two ways. First, if the U.S. decided not to defend the Philippines in the SCS, its allies may still perceive that the U.S. lacks the *resolve* to defend its allies more broadly, damaging the credibility of its alliance commitments. In the absence of U.S. defence commitments, the military balance for U.S. allies would shift decisively in China's favour, which could incentivise bandwagoning. As Gregory Poling put it, the Philippines "would find it all but impossible to defend its maritime rights from growing Chinese encroachment without U.S. military support" (2022). As such, if the U.S. clarified that its commitment to the Philippines excludes the SCS, as Hal Brands and Zack Cooper observe, this could "undercut U.S. alliances and partnerships in Southeast Asia and beyond, by

demonstrating that the United States is no longer willing to contest Chinese power in this area [...] perhaps encouraging countries [...] to align with a rising Beijing" (2018: 14).

Second, U.S. credibility could also be damaged from China's perspective if the U.S. abandoned the defence of the Philippines, as China may perceive that the U.S. lacks the *resolve* to defend its allies. The military balance for U.S. allies would shift decisively in China's favour in the absence of U.S. defence commitments. This could encourage China to more aggressively pursue its interests in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific more broadly. If China is successful in its pursuits, such as occupying other states' islands in the SCS and shifts the balance of power in its favour, this could encourage U.S. allies to bandwagon with China given the greater threat to their sovereignty (Beckley 2017). In short, if China conducted aggression towards U.S. allies and partners, it could shift the balance of power in China's favour, improving its ability to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

## **4.2. Means**

In this section, I analyse any changes and continuities between the three administrations in their use of means in pursuit of their desired ends discussed above. These include: naming and shaming; freedom of navigation operations; extended deterrence; presence; capacity building; the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); and, sanctions.

### ***4.2.1. Naming and shaming***

Naming and shaming is when an actor publicly exposes another actor deemed to have "behaved in an objectionable manner by not abiding by customary norms and dominant narratives". As such, it relies upon publicly broadcasting accusations of illegitimate conduct to get a target "concerned about the erosion of their community or international standing as a result of their non-compliance with declared normative standards" (He and Ramasamy 2020: 320). Here, speech is a form of power used towards trying to *coerce* another actor (Beer and Hariman 1996). This is because 'naming and shaming' functions as a punishment which could be withdrawn if the target begins acting accordingly. As Matthew Krain explains, the aim is that targets "will change their behaviour if they cannot risk the loss of power, resources, allies, or legitimacy that inaction in the face of such condemnation would bring" (2012: 576).

The three administrations have largely not differed in naming and shaming towards freedom of navigation. First, they have called upon China to cease its militarization of the SCS. Obama and senior



officials publicly called upon China to cease land reclamation and militarization of the islands. In May 2015, Carter stated that "our position [...] is that all of the claimants to the [SCS] disputes should halt reclamation, not further militarise those features" (2015a: 5). In August 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry called for a halt in reclamation, construction, and actions that could heighten tensions (AP 2015). In November, Obama called on China to "halt further reclamation, new construction and militarization" of the SCS (Shear 2015). Likewise, the Trump administration issued similar calls. In 2018, Pompeo stated that "we have continued concerns about China's activities and militarization in the [SCS]" (AP 2018). The Biden administration, likewise, made similar remarks. In 2021, Blinken released a statement which called on China to "cease its provocative behavior" in the SCS (2021b) and in January 2022 the USDOS released a statement which called on China to "cease its unlawful and coercive activities in the [SCS]" (USDOS 2022c).

Second, the three administrations declared China's maritime claims in the SCS under its nine-dash-line illegal. This line forms part of China's claim to approximately 90% of the SCS (Mastro 2020). In February 2014, in testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Russel, stated that "any use of the 'nine-dash-line' by China to claim maritime rights not based on claimed land features would be inconsistent with international law" (2014). On 13 July 2020, the fourth anniversary of the *Philippines v. China* ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, the USDOS published a statement which stated that China "has no legal grounds to unilaterally impose its will on the region" and declared that it was "aligning the U.S. position" with the Tribunal ruling (USDOS 2020). Some regarded the Trump administration's declaration as a change, calling it "new" and "revised" (Quinn 2020; Pedrozo 2022: 73). However, its novelty should not be overstated. While specifically aligning with the Tribunal ruling to call China's maritime claims under the nine-dash-line illegal was new, Russel's statement in 2014 makes clear that the Obama administration regarded China's maritime claims under the nine-dash-line as illegal. In continuity, the Biden administration reiterated that China's maritime claims under the nine-dash-line are illegal, even doing so by specifically reaffirming the Trump administration's statement mentioned above. In July 2021, a day before the fifth anniversary of the ruling by the Arbitration Tribunal, Blinken declared that the U.S. "reaffirms its July 13, 2020 policy regarding maritime claims in the [SCS]" (Blinken 2021b).

Why did the three administrations name and shame China towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. The three administrations engaged in soft balancing by declaring China's activities to be illegitimate to try and instil concern amongst CCP that its international standing may be damaged if they continue their non-compliance to dissuade China from further reclamation, construction, and/or militarization in the SCS. This could limit China's militarization of

the SCS to halt China's efforts towards shifting the balance of power in its favour. This would enable China to better threaten freedom of navigation and conduct aggression towards U.S. allies and partners.

China claims approximately 90% of the SCS as "inalienable parts of the Chinese territory" (Strating 2022). China has slowly seized control of features in the SCS. In 1956, China seized control of Woody Island in the Paracel Islands. In 1974, China occupied the remaining the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam. In 1988, China took control of six reefs in the Spratly Islands and another reef in 1994. In 2012, China seized the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines (Hayton 2020: 239). In September 2013, China began to undertake extensive land reclamation in the Spratly Islands. By the end of May 2015, China had created around 13km<sup>2</sup> of land (Zhao 2022). Throughout the 2010s, as table 4.1 shows, China created platforms, deployed weapons systems and deployed surveillance and tracking systems to its features. Together, these provide China with a comprehensive awareness of the environment and the capabilities to compel and coerce targets in the region (Mastro 2020). As China's Foreign Ministry put it in March 2015, this work aims to "satisfy the necessary military defense needs" (MOFA 2015).

<b>Table 4.1. China's militarization of the South China Sea (2014 – 2018)</b>			
Year	Archipelago	Feature	Activity
2014	Paracel Islands	Woody Island	Completed runway extension
2015	Spratly Islands	Fiery Cross Reef	Completed runway construction
2016	Paracel Islands	Woody Island	Deployed HQ-9B SAMs and radar
			Deployed YJ-62 ASCMs
		Bombay Reef	Deployed Type 305A radar
	Spratly Islands	Mischief and Subi Reef	Completed runway construction
2018		Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi Reef	Deployed jamming equipment, YJ-12B ASCMs, and HQ-9B SAMs

Source: Lowy Institute 2021. Table by author.

Neutralising China's bases would be difficult for U.S. forces, as strikes on China's features would be limited, ineffective, and vulnerable. Given the size of some of China's features in the SCS, the U.S. would have to conduct blanket strikes across thousands of acres of land to try to neutralise key infrastructure, such as runways and hangers (Shugart 2016). The U.S. could use long-range strategic bombers from Guam to conduct strikes (Suosa 2020). However, as Poling notes, "it is hard to imagine a scenario in which the [U.S.] would be seriously considering kinetic strikes on Chinese bases in the [SCS] that would not also involve fighting in Northeast Asia" (2020). As such, these high-value assets would likely be prioritised for East Asia. The U.S. would, therefore, have to rely upon its SSN force. But with each launch, they will become far easier to detect, eroding their survivability during a conflict. Additionally, they would have to combine conducting strikes on China's SCS features with attacking China's surface ships (Poling 2020).

In addition to its militarization of features in the SCS, China has also engaged in more assertive behaviour through intimidation of its neighbours. These have largely occurred in the 'grey-zone', with China using the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) as opposed to the PLA Navy (PLAN). This has involved firing water cannons, ramming, and sinking vessels, and cutting the cables of oil and gas survey vessels of rival claimants. Moreover, it has used 'cabbage' tactics (i.e., wrapping

features in layers of naval ships) to cut features from outside support to coerce those stationed on the island to leave (Erickson 2016). Further supplementing China's militarization of the SCS is the "largest and most rapid expansion of maritime and aerospace power in generations" (Shugart 2021: 2) that has furthered its ability to attain command of the near seas (Rice and Robb 2021). The number of ships in the PLAN increased from 262 in 2009 to 348 by 2021 (O'Rourke 2022a: 7).

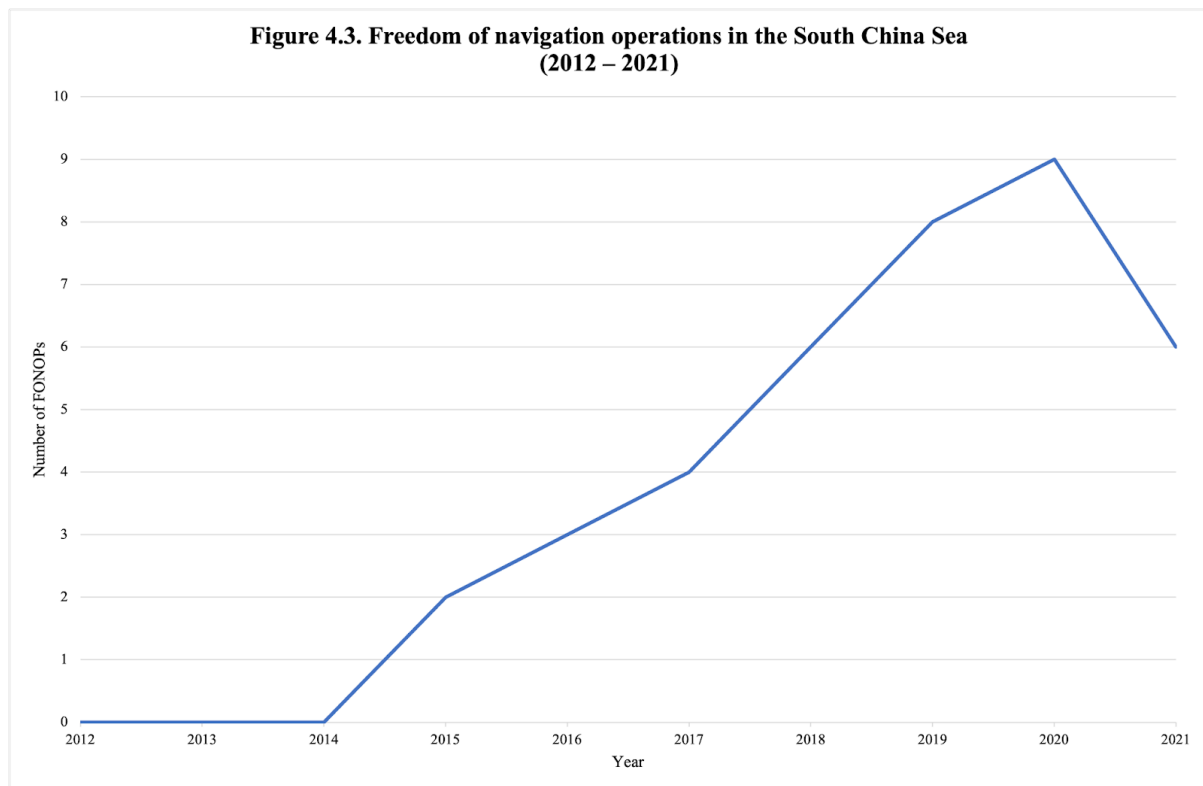
The three administrations noted how China's militarization of the SCS has bolstered its ability to control the SCS. For instance, the 2016 USDOD *China Military Power Report* stated that China's features in the SCS allow it to "enhance its presence in the [SCS] significantly and enhance China's ability to control the features and nearby maritime space" (USDOD 2016: 7). In April 2018, Commander of INDOPACOM, Admiral Philip Davidson, stated that China was "capable of controlling the [SCS] in all scenarios short of war" with the U.S. (2018: 18). In 2020, the USDOD noted that China's military build-up in the SCS "improves China's ability to detect and challenge activities" by rivals (USDOD 2020a: 102). While some scholars have downplayed the degree to which this has affected the military balance, they concede that China's activities have *still* shifted the balance of power in its favour (Beckley 2017; Pasandideh 2020).

#### ***4.2.2. Freedom of navigation operations***

Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) involve sending naval and/or air forces into maritime areas to challenge excessive maritime claims (Freund 2017: 19). The three administrations all used freedom of navigation operations FONOPs in the SCS towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons. However, there has been variation in their use. Using available data, the three administrations, as figure 4.3 shows, all conducted FONOPs challenging China's excessive maritime claims. More specifically, FONOPs during the three administrations have varied in frequency.

Out of the FONOPs in the public record, the Obama administration conducted five FONOPS in five years (2012–January 2017), the Trump administration conducted 27 in four years, and the Biden administration conducted seven in 13 months. As such, relative to their time in office, the Obama administration conducted FONOPs at a rate of 1 per year, while the Trump administration did so at seven per year, and the Biden administration at six per year. The Obama administration entailed a considerable pause in FONOPs, having not conducted any in the SCS from 2012 to October 2015 (Shear 2015: 22). Once FONOPs resumed, they were conducted approximately every *four* months. A pause was also held by the Trump administration; however, this was far shorter, having lasted till May 2017. Once they were resumed, they were conducted approximately every *two* months. The Biden administration barely hesitated, conducting its first FONOP on 5 February 2021, just 16 days after being

inaugurated (O'Rourke 2022b: 41). Once they began, they were conducted approximately every *three* months.



Sources: 2012 to December 2016 (Larter 2020); 2017 to February 2022 (O'Rourke 2022b: 41).

Graph by author.

These FONOPs in the SCS challenged two types of China's maritime claims. First, they challenged China's claim that its features in the SCS generate a 200-neutral mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), within which China claims the right to regulate military activity. The U.S. asserts that the freedom of navigation of military vessels is universally established under UNCLOS (not all states accept this interpretation). Although the U.S. is not a party to UNCLOS, it recognizes that it reflects customary international law. Second, FONOPs challenged China's claims that its features in the SCS generate a 12nm territorial sea, a space within which China claims the exclusive right to make, apply, and execute its laws without foreign interference. Under UNCLOS, all ships (even military) have the right of 'innocent passage' through state territorial seas (Mastro 2021b).

Why did the three administrations conduct FONOPs in the SCS towards freedom of navigation and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China shifted the balance of power in its favour through conducting land

reclamation, construction, and militarization of the SCS. This furthers China's ability to threaten the assets of states traversing the SCS, allowing it to threaten freedom of navigation and U.S. allies and partners in the region. In response to this shift in the balance of power, the three administrations conducted FONOPs to soft balance China. FONOPs are not a hard military power tool intended to "menace the offending state with gunboats" (Dutton and Kardon 2017). Rather, they are a diplomatic tool meant to articulate the U.S.'s interpretations of international maritime law, specifically, that the U.S. will sail and fly wherever international law allows (Green and Poling 2015).

That said, FONOPs intend to still communicate a more general message of resolve to defend freedom of navigation by communicating to China the U.S. has not been deterred from traversing the region (Mastro 2021a: 350). FONOPs put U.S. forces at some risk, as China harasses U.S. naval and air operations in the SCS which has forced U.S. vessels to take evasive action (Green et al. 2017: 52). As such, were the U.S. to scale back or halt FONOPs, this could signal a lack of resolve to contest China's claim of the SCS. In turn, this could encourage China to pursue its interests more aggressively in the SCS, such as occupying and militarising additional islands, which would shift the balance of power in its favour. As China continued to militarise the SCS, the Trump administration increased the frequency of FONOPs in the SCS. This frequency has largely been sustained by the Biden administration.

Layering in leader images is required to explain why the Obama administration paused FONOPs. Leader images influence a state's responses to external stimuli. Obama and senior officials, as previously discussed, held a worldview that the U.S. needed to maintain a positive relationship with China to elicit its cooperation on transnational threats, particularly climate change (Jones and Fowler 2021). They stressed the need to build a "positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship" with China (Clinton 2009; Obama 2009) and that "one of America's clearest and most compelling interests is to develop a positive and constructive U.S.-China relationship" (Kerry 2014). Climate change was particularly viewed as an urgent challenge that necessitated China's cooperation.

In 2012, this worldview resulted in a pause in FONOPs, which China protests as interference in its internal affairs, to avoid potentially upsetting U.S.-China relations in a way that thwarts cooperation. As Richard McGregor notes, diplomats of states in the Indo-Pacific often complained that "Obama and John Kerry were more focused on striking a deal on climate change with China than taking a stand in the [SCSJ]" (2018: 342). Kerry reportedly wanted to delay FONOPs until after December 2015, when the Paris Climate Accords would be finished negotiated (Sevastopulo 2015). Further revealing the administration's reluctance to upset relations with China is the fact that when the Obama administration did resume FONOPs in October 2015, it tried to downplay the operation to make it less provocative. The White House instructed USDOD officials "not to say anything publicly about the episode" and no formal announcements were made (Cooper and Perlez 2015). Moreover, the FONOP was an 'innocent

passage' operation, which "is the weakest type of FONOP the U.S. could have chosen" given it lacks military activity (Ku 2015). As such, Obama's worldview overrode the incentive to respond to system pressures, causing soft underbalancing.

Layering in domestic institutions is required to explain why the Obama administration ended the years-long pause in FONOPs in the SCS. Domestic institutions influence a state's decision-making as they can exert pressure to animate a state to act. As Phuong Nguyen notes, in 2015, "U.S. lawmakers and military leaders consistently pushed the Obama administration to act more forcefully to stop China's reclamation" (2016: 404). Most prominently, the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), Senator John McCain, frequently complained about the Obama administration's lack of action in the SCS (Wagner 2015: 147–153). In September 2015, McCain castigated the Obama administration for the fact that conducting FONOPs within 12nm of a Chinese "has not been exercised in 3 years" (2015: 24). That same month, INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Harry Harris expressed deep concern regarding China's activities at a SASC hearing, stating that it enables China to "have de facto control over the [SCS]" (2015: 50). Reporting revealed that the White House was "not happy with Harris's forcefulness, which officials viewed as an effort to manoeuvre the president into a tougher position" (McGregor 2019: 342). The Obama administration appeared to yield to this rising criticism from the Senate in October, conducting a FONOP within 12nm of a Chinese feature in the SCS—the first FONOP in the SCS since 2012 (Panda 2017a).

Layering in leader images at the individual level also explains why the Trump administration paused FONOPs. Like Obama, Trump held a worldview, at least initially, in which he perceived China as essential towards combating transnational threats. This is because he perceived that China possessed great leverage over North Korea, meaning that Chinese cooperation was essential towards helping eliminate the North Korean threat (Jackson 2019: 105). This resulted in the administration pausing FONOPs to avoid upsetting U.S.-China relations in a way that thwarts cooperation. In the lead-up to the Trump-Xi meeting in April 2017, Trump gave an interview in which he stated that "China has great influence over North Korea. And China will either decide to help us with North Korea, or they won't" (Barber 2017). As such, the administration did not conduct FONOPs to avoid souring U.S.-China relations. A request by INDOPACOM to conduct a FONOP in the SCS was rebuffed by the USDOD in February 2017 (Cooper 2017). Trump's worldview, therefore, could be said to have resulted in soft underbalancing as overriding the imperative to respond to system pressures. This worldview, however, as Van Jackson documents, soon dissipated after Xi appeared to convince Trump that China did not possess the leverage over North Korea that Trump thought it had (2019: 217–219). The following week, Trump remarked that "after listening [to Xi] for 10 minutes, I realized it's not so easy. I felt pretty strongly that [China] had a tremendous power [over] North Korea [...]. But it's not what you would

think" (Baker 2017). FONOPs resumed on 25 May 2017, and were held every two months for the remainder of the administration (O'Rourke 2022b: 40).

#### *4.2.3. Extended deterrence*

The three administrations differed in exercising extended deterrence based upon the U.S.-Philippines alliance to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners. The Obama administration intentionally did not declare that the treaty covered Philippine forces in the SCS. On 28 April 2014, during a visit to Manila, stated that the U.S. commitment to the U.S.-Philippine alliance was "ironclad", without going as far as to say that the treaty applied to the Philippines' forces in the SCS (Obama 2014b). The term "ironclad" continued to be repeated by Obama administration officials when discussing the application of the treaty without an explicit guarantee (Poling and Sayers 2019). As such, it gave itself a loophole to avoid entanglement (Cha 2010). It is important to note that the U.S.-Philippine alliance treaty obligates the defence of "metropolitan territory" or the "island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific or on its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific". It is not explicit if the islands and reefs the Philippines occupy come under the treaty's scope (Rapp-Hooper 2015b: 135).

The Trump administration, in a departure from the Obama administration, declared that the treaty applied to the Philippines' forces in the SCS. In February 2019, Pompeo stated that "as the [SCS] is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on any Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the [SCS] will trigger mutual defense obligations" (Pompeo 2019). The Biden administration also made an explicit declaration that the alliance applies to the Philippines' forces in the SCS. In January 2021 the USDOS released a statement which stated that Blinken stressed the "clear application" of the alliance to "armed attacks against the Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the Pacific, which includes the [SCS]" (USDOS 2021i).

Why did the Trump administration declare that the U.S.-Philippines alliance applies to the SCS? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China continues to shift the balance of power in China's favour through its military modernisation and militarization of the SCS, which allows China to pose more of a threat to the Philippines. Moreover, in June 2012 China took *de facto* control of the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, which is in the Philippines' EEZ, and then established a constant presence of the CCG which denies Philippine fisherman entry (Green et al. 2017: 95). As China was seemingly undeterred by the U.S.-Philippine alliance, President Rodrigo Duterte repeatedly threatened to scrap the EDCA and called for a strategic reorientation towards China (Murphy 2017). In December 2018, Secretary of Defence of the Philippines, Delfin Lorenzana, announced that government



lawyers had been tasked to study ways to "maintain it, strengthen it, or scrap" the alliance (Musico 2018). Quite simply, the "issue became more urgent" (Poling and Sayers 2019).

Terminating the alliance or the EDCA would end U.S. basing access in the Philippines, undermining the U.S.'s ability to project power in the SCS. As such, the Trump administration made this treaty clarification to more effectively externally balance China's power. By clearly threatening the use of military force to defend the Philippines in the SCS, this could better deter China from conducting aggression towards the Philippines given the increased risk of having to combat U.S. military power. Moreover, this clarification would better reassure the Philippines of the U.S.'s commitment, and thereby disincentivize the Philippines from alliance termination. In 2021, the Biden administration also clarified that the alliance covered the SCS (USDOS 2021i), likely for the same rationale.

#### **4.2.4. Presence**

Presence is constituted by both *force deployment* (forward-deploying and/or rotationally deploying forces) and *access* (the ability to use another state's territory and/or airspace for military purposes) (Joyce and Wasser 2021: 47). The three administrations all engaged in capacity building towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners. Regarding the deployment of the U.S. naval assets in the Indo-Pacific more broadly, the Obama administration instigated a reposture of the U.S. Navy. In June 2012, it was announced that 60% of the U.S. Navy would be deployed to the Asia-Pacific by 2020 (Panetta 2012a). The Trump administration sustained this posture (Mattis 2017) as has the Biden administration (UNSI 2022).

Regarding access around the SCS, the three administrations sustained and/or expanded access arrangements in Southeast Asia. In 2011, the U.S. Navy was permitted to call in at a Vietnamese naval base for the first time since 1981 (Mastanduno 2014: 35). In 2011, the U.S. reached an agreement with Singapore to deploy four of its new class of LCS to Singapore on a rotational basis (Gady 2019). In 2014, the U.S. and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which gave U.S. forces access to Clark Air Base and the Subic Naval Base (Brands 2016: 116). In 2015, Singapore agreed to allow a U.S. maritime-patrol aircraft to operate out of Singapore to patrol the SCS (Townshend and Crabtree 2022: 21). In 2016, the U.S. and the Philippines began joint naval and air patrols in the SCS (Whaley 2016) and the administration announced that it would deploy 200 pilots and crew members, and six aircraft in the Philippines (Carter 2016). The Trump administration made similar expansions. In 2018, the U.S. made its first aircraft carrier visit to Vietnam since 1975 (USDOD 2018a). It continued the LCS deployment to Singapore, with the last being forward deployed in 2019 (Gady 2019). In 2019, it also renewed the U.S.-Singapore 1990 Memorandum of Understanding, which allows

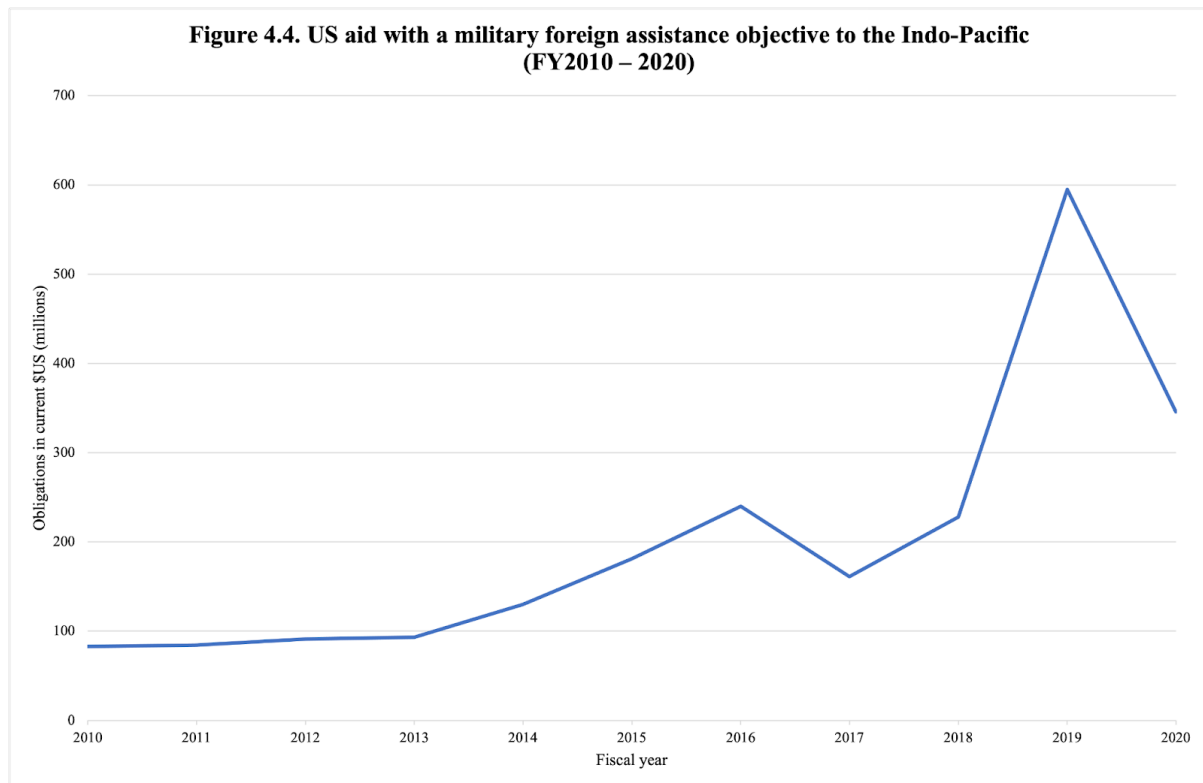
U.S. forces to access Singapore's air and naval bases (MINDEF 2019). The Biden administration appears to have just sustained regional access arrangements so far.

Why did the three administrations maintain and/or expand U.S. presence in Southeast Asia towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China continues to shift the balance of power in China's favour through its militarization of the SCS and military modernisation. This is perceived to allow China to threaten freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and better allow it to conduct aggression towards the U.S. along with its allies and partners. As such, sustaining and/or expanding U.S. presence in Southeast Asia can balance China in two key ways.

First, a forward-deployed presence around the SCS internally balances China by shortening the time for U.S. forces to arrive on station, enhancing the ability of U.S. forces to respond to Chinese aggression. Without U.S. access to Clark Airbase in the Philippines, the closest military facilities to the SCS would be on Okinawa, outside of the unrefueled combat radius of most U.S. aircraft (Baxter 2020). As such, access to Philippine bases can "strengthen deterrence by giving the United States some rapid-response capability" in the SCS (Poling 2017). Second, forward-deploying U.S. forces to allied bases around the SCS can externally balance China, as it communicates the U.S.'s resolve to defend its allies. For instance, given the U.S. presence in the Philippines, the U.S. has a greater incentive to respond to an attack on the Philippines if U.S. forces were to come to harm. Failing to do so would damage U.S. credibility. This risk could better deter China, as U.S. defence of the Philippines would limit China's ability to conduct aggression towards the Philippines.

#### ***4.2.5. Capacity building***

Capacity building refers to improving the military power of allies and partners through providing military capabilities, supplying resources to help them develop additional military capabilities themselves, and/or facilitating training to improve their combat performance (Lanoszka 2022: 109–118). The three administrations all engaged in capacity building towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners. The Obama and Trump administrations gradually increased foreign aid to allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to bolster their military capabilities. As figure 4.4 shows the Obama and Trump administrations gradually increased funding for programs with a "military foreign assistance objective", meaning that it "enhances military capability" (USAID 2022).



Source: USAID 2022. Graph by author.

The increase in military foreign assistance funding can be tied specifically to improving maritime security around the SCS. First, in May 2015, the Obama administration launched the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (Carter 2015b). This was a five-year program focused on strengthening the maritime capacity of U.S. allies and partners in Southeast Asia with the Philippines as the largest recipient of the aid (White House 2015a). Second, in August 2018, the Trump administration announced a special increase in funding "especially to strengthen maritime security" with the Philippines as a priority (Pompeo 2018). Although data concerning aid with military foreign assistance objective to the Indo-Pacific by the Biden administration is not yet available, the administration indicated that it will continue to support this effort, declaring that it will "build the defense capacity of partners in South and Southeast Asia" (White House 2022: 13).

The administrations also built the capacity of U.S. allies and partners through other initiatives. For instance, the Obama administration transferred maritime-related Excess Defence Articles, such as U.S. Coast Guard Cutters and research vessels to the Philippines. It also ended the arms sales ban on maritime-related lethal capabilities to Vietnam (White House 2015a). Between 2017–2019, the Trump administration provided Vietnam with 18 PB-X littoral patrol boats (Tran 2019: 5). The Biden administration announced that it would build maritime capacity and maritime-domain awareness in Southeast Asia, which materialised through the Quad's Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (White House 2022: 15).

Why did the three administrations engage in capacity building towards the desired freedom of navigation and access to the global commons and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China's military modernisation and militarization of the SCS shifted the balance of power in its favour. This allows it to pose more of a threat to U.S. allies, partners, and the U.S. in Southeast Asia. As such, the U.S. engaged in external balancing through capacity building to improve the military capabilities of U.S. allies and partners in the region to offset the shift in the balance of power, and thereby bolster deterrence against China. If U.S. allies and partners have better capability to defend themselves, they can impose higher costs on Chinese forces in the region, and thereby may alter its calculus concerning activities such as harassing forces. For example, regarding Vietnam, the Obama administration ended its arms sale ban to better deter Chinese aggression by bolstering its defence capability. As Obama put it, this will "ensure that Vietnam has access to the equipment it needs to defend itself" and to "fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows" (2016). Vietnam's purchase of arms can improve its defence capabilities to "stiffen its willingness and capacity to stand up for itself" (Harold 2016).

#### ***4.2.6. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea***

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is an international agreement that defines the rights and responsibilities of states regarding marine and maritime activities, territorial waters, and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) (UNGA 1982). The Obama administration is the only administration which pursued Senate ratification of UNCLOS towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons. The 2010 NSS stated that the administration will pursue ratification (White House 2010: 50), and Obama and senior officials made calls throughout the Obama administration for the Senate to ratify the treaty. Neither the Trump nor the Biden administration pursued ratification of UNCLOS. Why did the Obama administration pursue ratifying UNCLOS towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China shifted the balance of power in its favour through land reclamation, construction, and militarization of the SCS. This furthers China's ability to threaten the assets of states traversing the SCS, allowing it to threaten freedom of navigation and U.S. allies and partners in Southeast Asia. In response to this shift in the balance of power, the Obama administration pursued the ratification of UNCLOS to soft balance China. The administration perceived ratifying UNCLOS would give greater weight to the U.S.'s 'naming and shaming' of China's activities in the SCS, which could, in turn, incentivise China to halt its militarization of the SCS.

China often laments the U.S.'s double standard of not being party to UNCLOS (Herscovitch 2017: 17). As such, it was perceived by the Obama administration acceding to UNCLOS would "quell criticism

that it is guilty of double standards" and make U.S. 'naming and shaming' more effective (Kuok 2019: 4). As Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta put it, by not being a party to UNCLOS, "we undercut our credibility [...] How can we argue that other nations must abide by international rules when we haven't joined the treaty that codifies those rules?" (2012: 3). Clinton similarly argued that joining would put "our ability to challenge other countries' behavior on the firmest and most persuasive legal footing, including in critical areas such as the [SCS]" (2012b: 8). Moreover, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey stated that the administration wanted a "consistent and effective legal framework for opposing challenges" (2012: 4). Becoming a party to UNCLOS would support this aim by giving the U.S. a direct voice in the key UNCLOS body, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, which adjudicates maritime disputes (Almond 2017).

Leader images are required to explain why the Trump administration most likely did not pursue ratifying UNCLOS. Leader images influence a state's responses to external stimuli. As previously discussed, Trump has demonstrated that he holds a worldview of contempt for international agreements that constrain U.S. freedom of action. This affected his perception of the imperative of responding to systemic pressures, leading the administration to not pursue ratifying UNCLOS. While Trump has not made any comments on UNCLOS, given his opposition to treaties that place constraints on the U.S., it would likely be of little attraction to him. According to a policy brief by the Heritage Foundation, a Republican-affiliated think tank, if the U.S. were to accede to UNCLOS it could result in the U.S. transferring a large portion of royalties generated on the U.S. extended continental shelf to the International Seabed Authority (Heritage Foundation 2021). Given Trump's worldview that the U.S. should not have constraints on its decision-making, ratifying UNCLOS was likely not perceived with favour. As such, this worldview overrode the incentive to respond to system pressures, causing soft underbalancing.

Domestic institutions and state-society relations are required to explain why the Biden administration has not pursued ratifying UNCLOS. These variables can influence a state's decision-making and policy implementations, as they can set constraints on an administration's policy options. The Senate functions as a "veto player" for treaties negotiated by the executive branch. For the Biden administration to achieve ratification, this would require a favourable vote out of the SFRC and then 67 votes from the full Senate (Stepan and Linz 2011: 844). Given the 50:50 split in the Senate of the 117th Congress, this would prove challenging. Studies of "treaty gridlock" show that polarisation significantly increases ratification time (Krutz and Peake 2009). In 2020, a highly polarised U.S. public elected a reflectively polarised Congress (Pew 2020). A poll found that in the 117th Congress, Democrats and Republicans are farther apart ideologically since 1972 (Pew 2022). With a Republican party largely unwilling to do the Democrats any legislative favours, coupled with the administration's legislative priorities (i.e., the Build Back Better agenda) (Kamarck 2021), the Biden administration likely perceived that pushing the

Senate to ratify UNCLOS was not likely to be a successful endeavour. Further evidence that these domestic variables constrained the administration is that Biden recently did support ratifying UNCLOS; he led an unsuccessful attempt to move forward with ratification as chairman of the SFRC in 2007 (Biden 2007: 47). Consequently, these domestic variables could be said to have resulted in soft underbalancing by obstructing the administration's ability to respond to system pressures.

#### ***4.2.7. Sanctions***

Sanctions refer to the withdrawal of customary trade, financial, and sometimes diplomatic relations (Pape 1997: 93). The Trump administration first used sanctions towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons. The Trump administration imposed two rounds of sanctions on China for activities concerning the reclamation, construction, and militarization of the SCS. The first, made in August 2020, involved visa restrictions by the USDOS on Chinese individuals, while the Commerce Department added 24 Chinese state-owned enterprises to the Entity List. These were applied to individuals and companies that had been "complicit in, either the large-scale reclamation, construction, or militarization of disputed outposts in the [SCS]" or "coercion against Southeast Asian claimants" (USDOS 2020). In January 2021, additional visa restrictions were imposed and other state-owned enterprises were added to the Entity List for the same reasons (USDOS 2021g). I have not found any evidence that the Biden administration has removed these sanctions, nor applied additional sanctions.

Why did the Trump administration use sanctions towards freedom of navigation and access to the global commons? The principal incentive can be explained by systemic pressures. China shifted the balance of power in its favour through its land reclamation, construction, and militarization of the SCS. This is perceived to allow China to threaten freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and better allow it to conduct aggression towards U.S. allies and partners. As such, the administration engaged in soft balancing through sanctions to deter China from further reclamation and construction in the SCS. This would limit China's ability to further militarise the SCS, thereby diminishing China's efforts towards bringing about a shift in the balance of power. For instance, China has not yet conducted land reclamation on Scarborough Shoal, which it seized from the Philippines in 2012 and which could be used to base a wide array of military infrastructure (Morris 2019). As such, using sanctions demonstrates a potential willingness to use them in the future that may deter companies from future conduction and dredging (Green et al. 2017: 17). Likewise, Cooper and Eric Lorber note that if sanctioned companies that conducted dredging were added to the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control's Specially Designated Nationals List, they could "find their business partnerships damaged and their ability to deal in U.S. dollars curtailed" and thereby "disincentive destabilizing conduct" (2016).

### 4.3. Conclusion

From applying my schema to this analysis to assess the scale of adjustment, I found that there were no *major* changes in U.S. strategy because there were no changes in desired ends concerning sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. The three administrations were united in desiring the same ends; namely, freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners. They did not abandon these objectives for a more accommodationist position, whereby the U.S. “accepts Chinese dominance of the South China Sea” and “seeks to ensure a smooth transition to Chinese regional primacy (Brands and Cooper 2018: 2). The principal incentive to retain these same ends can be explained by systemic pressures. If China were to deny the U.S. freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and/or conducted aggression towards U.S. allies and partners in the SCS (such as occupying islands), the military balance would shift in China’s favour. As such, the U.S. would be less likely to prevail in a contingency with China. Moreover, this power shift could make U.S. defence commitments to its allies in those regions less credible, potentially incentivising allies to bandwagon with China. Such shifts in power would improve China’s ability to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

However, as per my schema, I found that there were some *minor* changes in U.S. strategy, because there were changes in the use of means. For instance, only the Obama administration pursued the ratification of UNCLOS and only the Trump administration imposed sanctions on China for its activities in the SCS. The changes in the use of means can largely be explained at the systemic level, whereby China’s shift in the balance of power incentivised the administrations to intensify internal, external, and soft balancing. For instance, in response to China’s militarization of the SCS, the Trump administration clarified defence commitments to bolster deterrence and increased the number of FONOPs. However, variables at the state level and individual level are required to explain some deviations from neorealist explanations. For example, Obama’s worldview that the U.S. needed to maintain a positive relationship with China to elicit its cooperation on transnational threats resulted in soft underbalancing through pausing FONOPs *just* as China began its land reclamation.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

This thesis explained *why* and *how* U.S. strategy towards China changed between the Obama and Trump administrations, and between the Trump and Biden administrations. In chapter one, I discussed literature on changes in U.S. strategy towards China between the three administrations and found that there was an absence of studies that explicitly used a theoretical and analytical framework to explain changes. In chapter two, I outlined my theoretical and analytical framework to study strategic adjustment. This included a model of neoclassical realism and my ‘ends and means’ analytical framework to analyse the drivers of the administrations’ behaviour in terms of its desired ends and use of means at different levels of causality (the system, state, and individual). In chapters three and four, I used those two frameworks to analyse why and how U.S. strategy changed using two case studies: Taiwan and U.S. alliances, and sovereignty and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the contributions of this thesis to the literature and summarise my findings.

### 5.1. Theoretical contribution

This thesis contributes to debates concerning competing research programs by showing the greater explanatory power of *neoclassical realism* over that of *neorealism*. While a neorealist model would have been sufficient to explain the general logic of state behaviour in the long-term, a neoclassical realist model that incorporates domestic and individual-level variables provided a fuller account of state behaviour in the shorter-term. My analysis showed that the three administration’s behaviour could principally be explained by systemic pressures. As China shifted the balance of power in its favour, the three administrations largely intensified internal, external, and soft balancing efforts to prevent China from achieving a favourable balance of power.

However, variables at the domestic and individual-level were sometimes necessary to explain deviations from neorealist explanations, that is, cases of (often soft) underbalancing and overbalancing. This showed that there is a perfect transmission belt that connects system pressures to foreign policy behaviour. For instance, even as China militarised the SCS, both the Obama and Trump administrations instigated pauses in conducting FONOPs in the SCS due to the worldviews of these Presidents that cooperation with China was essential for solving certain transnational threats. In another instance, U.S. strategic culture of a preference for military primacy intersected with Trump’s worldview of opposition to international agreements that constrain U.S. freedom of action. This resulted in the administration pursuing an arms control agreement with China even though China only brought about a relatively minor shift in the nuclear balance.



This thesis has also highlighted the importance of the level of the individual, as the worldview of a President could well play a major role in the future of U.S. strategy towards China. This is because the core decision-making power surrounding the use of military force to defend allies, or maintain U.S. defence commitments, lies with the President. While Congress may place outer limits on what the President may direct the U.S. military to do, it cannot *force* the President to take military action. Moreover, no Congressional checks exist for alliance termination (Rapp-Hooper and Waxman 2019: 75). This means that the President could play a key role in a deterrence failure. CCP leaders could infer from a President's anti-alliance rhetoric that they lack the interest and resolve to defend U.S. allies, which could encourage aggression if those leaders assume that China will not face military consequences. As discussed, Trump had little personal interest in defending Taiwan and U.S. allies. He bemoaned U.S. commitments, questioned their relevance to U.S. interests, castigated allies, and sometimes refused to reaffirm U.S. alliance commitments at important meetings and summits. He also mused about terminating some U.S. alliances (Barnes and Cooper 2019; Jacobs 2019; Rapp-Hooper 2020). If a Trump-like figure or Trump *himself* takes office in 2025 with an even more hostile view of U.S. defence commitments, the desired end of preventing aggression towards Taiwan and U.S. alliances could change. Such an event would constitute a *major* change in not just U.S. strategy towards China, but also U.S. grand strategy, as it could improve China's ability to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. While systemic pressures will incentivise future administrations to desire to prevent aggression towards Taiwan and U.S. allies, a President with a powerful enough worldview could override systemic incentives.

This thesis has also contributed to the study of strategic adjustment by introducing my 'ends and means' analytical framework. By identifying the specific desired ends and the means regarding a specific issue in a state's relations with another state, this method offers a more granular analysis of changes in a state's behaviour than others. Typologies lack accuracy, and measuring adjustments in a state's key policy instruments fails to consider the ends the policy instruments are intended to achieve.

## **5.2. Empirical contribution**

This thesis has shown that claims from some scholars regarding the significance of U.S. strategic adjustment towards China between the Obama and Trump administrations are somewhat overstated. I show this by applying my schema to my analysis, whereby I code a *major* change as a change in ends, while I code a change in means as *minor*. From applying my schema to this analysis of Taiwan and U.S. alliances, I found that there was no *major* change between the Obama and Trump administrations. This is because they both desired the same end; namely, peace across the Taiwan Strait and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. There were, however, as per my schema, some *minor* changes between

the Obama and Trump administrations regarding this issue due to changes in the use of means. For instance, the Trump administration sold a greater value of arms to Taiwan, gave mixed messages on reaffirming the U.S.'s commitment to the defence of its allies, and pursued an arms control agreement with China.

Between the Trump and Biden administrations, some evidence suggested that a *major* change concerning Taiwan and U.S. alliances did occur. Both desired the end of peace across the Taiwan Strait and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies. Simultaneously, however, the Biden administration also indicated that it also desired the end that Taiwan remain out of China's control. That said, I do not code this as a clear *major* change between the Trump and the Biden administrations concerning Taiwan and U.S. alliances for two reasons. First, after this sole case of seeming divergence, subsequent messages from the administration soon returned to the traditional process of resolution framing of U.S. policy towards Taiwan. Second, this apparent divergence did not, in any case, represent a clear departure from the Trump administration, or even other former U.S. administrations, as it has been generally assumed that the U.S. desires that Taiwan remain out of China's control. However, the U.S. likely not publicly declared so, as doing so would effectively support Taiwanese independence, which would be highly incendiary. Moreover, the U.S. likely understands that Taiwan's willingness to unify with China is minimal. As per my schema, there were, however, some *minor* changes regarding this issue due to changes in the use of means. For instance, the Biden administration significantly increased the use of ambiguous extended deterrence, making a considerable number of joint-statements with U.S. allies and partners referring to Taiwan. Moreover, while not an official change in policy, the Biden administration has appeared to move away from *ambiguous* extended deterrence.

From applying my schema to this analysis of maritime and territorial disputes, I found that there was no *major* change between the three administrations. This is because they all desired the ends of freedom of navigation and access to the global commons, and to prevent aggression towards U.S. allies and partners. There were, however, as per my schema, some *minor* changes in U.S. strategy between the administrations due to changes in use of means. The Trump administration abandoned the pursuit of ratifying UNCLOS, conducted a higher frequency of FONOPs in the SCS, provided more foreign aid with a military objective to allies and partners, bolstered extended deterrence by clarifying that the U.S.-Philippines alliance applied to the SCS, and sanctioned China for its actions in the SCS. The Biden administration has largely sustained the same use of means, without making any clear changes in the level of effort used to pursue this use of means. That said, while it had not removed the Trump administration's sanctions on China for its actions in the SCS, it has not applied any additional sanctions.

The consistent desire for these ends between the three administrations can largely be explained at the systemic level, as these desires are, fundamentally, a desire to balance China's power. If China brought Taiwan under its control, it could militarise the island and more easily threaten the U.S.'s ability to conduct military operations in the first island chain. Likewise, if China conducted aggression towards U.S. allies and partners in the SCS, such as by occupying islands, it would militarise them to improve its ability to threaten the U.S.'s ability to conduct military operations in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the inability to have freedom of navigation and access to the global commons in the region would undermine the U.S.'s ability to operate. As such, this would result in a shift in the balance of military power in China's favour, and this could prompt a wider shift, as U.S. allies could begin to doubt the credibility of U.S. defence commitments. The loss of the U.S. as an ally in the Indo-Pacific would shift the regional military balance firmly in China's favour, potentially incentivizing bandwagoning with China. Alignment with China would undermine U.S. military power in the aggregate, as the U.S. could encounter a lack of support from U.S. allies in a contingency with China. The use of means can likewise largely be explained at the systemic level, with the three administrations generally intensifying internal, external, and soft balancing towards China. This included efforts such as expanding U.S. basing access in the Indo-Pacific and increasing the value of arms sold to Taiwan and U.S. allies.

Great powers have sometimes accommodated the rise of another great power, allowing it to pursue hegemony in its neighbourhood (Paul 2016). Some scholars have advocated that the U.S. be more accommodating of China (Layne 2020; MacDonald and Parent 2011; White 2013), such as by leaving Taiwan to its own defences, significantly curtailing or outright ending U.S. defence commitments to its Indo-Pacific allies, and granting China greater leeway in the SCS (Bandow 2013; Glaser 2021; Gomez 2016). However, Trump followed Obama, and Biden followed Trump in the pursuit of objectives that oppose such accommodation of China's interests regarding those issues. In short, there was no *major* change in U.S. strategy between them. But what is past is *not* necessarily prologue. As has been addressed, Trump laments U.S. alliance commitments and even considered terminating some. If someone like Trump, or even Trump again assumes the presidency in 2025, and has an even more adversarial view of U.S. defence commitments, the desire to prevent aggression towards both formal and informal allies could well end. As such, key aspects of U.S. strategy towards China could well undergo a *major* change.

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