

Article

Not peer-reviewed version

---

# US Taiwan Policy After 2016 and Asian Security: A Strategic Cultural Analysis

---

[Yongcheng Li](#)\*

Posted Date: 16 June 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202606.1145.v1

Keywords: the Taiwan question; John Mearsheimer; American strategic culture; Asian security



Preprints.org is a free multidisciplinary platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC, OpenAlex.

Copyright: This open access article is published under a [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](#), which permit the free download, distribution, and reuse, provided that the author and preprint are cited in any reuse.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

Article

# US Taiwan Policy After 2016 and Asian Security: A Strategic Cultural Analysis

Yongcheng Li

School of International Relations and Diplomacy, Beijing Foreign Studies University; liyongcheng@bfsu.edu.cn

## Abstract

East Asia has been one of the most volatile parts of international politics for decades, with the Taiwan Question being at the center of the geopolitical interactions among great and middle powers within the region. 2016 witnessed a new transfer of power between the two major political parties on Taiwan, from Kuomintang, a pro-status quo party to Democratic Progress Party, a pro-independence party. This new partisan political situation on the island produces worries about the uncertainty of geopolitical development and security situation in East Asia. The fact that America plays an important role in the cross-Strait relations makes policymakers and scholars very much concerned with the development of Sino-US security relationship and the overall trend of East Asian geopolitical evolution. Structural analyses offered by scholars like John Mearsheimer maintain that Washington will eventually forsake Taiwan when the cost to protect the island is too high. However, after exploring how strategic culture shapes and influences American decisions of using military force to achieve its political objectives in important geopolitical issues like Taiwan, this essay argues that American strategic culture will not allow forsaking Taiwan to happen, because the Taiwan question can be a significant strategic card for Washington to serve both purposes of protecting democratic values and holding China at bay. In order to avoid a regional security nightmare in East Asia, maintaining the status quo still remains the most rational and optimal choice for Beijing, Taipei, and Washington, though Tsai and Trump tend to challenge the fact.

**Keywords:** the Taiwan question; John Mearsheimer; American strategic culture; Asian security

---

## 1. Introduction

On May 20th, 2016, Ms. Tsai Ing-wen made her inaugural address but did not openly and literally adopt in it the "One China" principle which has been known as "the 1992 Consensus" for more than two decades, whose "core connotation" is that both the Chinese mainland and Taiwan politically belong to that one China, or "one China, different interpretations". Instead, Tsai used a new term "the 1992 fact", referring to that the Straits Exchange Foundation(SEF) and the Association of Relations Across the Taiwan Strait "through communication and negotiations, arrived at various joint acknowledgements and understandings". Some observers thought the tone of Tsai's rhetoric was acceptable, because it "could have been worse", as Richard Bush put it, who is an American senior commentator at Brookings Institution and a former chairman and managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan. (Bush, 2016) However, the official response from the mainland government was not in agreement with those optimistic commentators out there in America. Beijing made it clear that the 1992 Consensus is the bottom line and red line of cross-Strait relations and hence was not pleased at all with Tsai's ambiguity, calling it "an incomplete exam paper". Anyway, the case is there has been no major crisis since the inauguration festivity, "a crisis was avoided", Richard Bush said. (Bush, 2016)

However, Dr. Chih-yu Shih(石之瑜), one of Taiwan's most renowned political science professors at National Taiwan University, was at odds with those optimistic comments and analyses. He argued that Tsai's essential concept of the Cross-Strait Relationship is a "phased two-China policy oriented to Taiwan independence"(台独为导向的阶段性的两个中国政策), namely, using Republic of

China Taiwan to replace Republic of China, so as to bypass all the constitutional, legal and policy restrictions which bind Taipei to one China. (Shih, 2016) As a result, the Tsai administration on Taiwan has the ideological potential for deteriorating the Cross-Strait relationship. The fact is that from May 2016 on, the political tumbling in the Cross-Strait relations has gone from bad to worse, culminating in diplomatic conflicts in global multilateral participation of Taipei, with ICAO assembly being a spotlight case, which in turn made Tsai use “China” instead of “mainland” in her open letter to DPP members, indicating her strong incentive to change the political status quo across the Strait. This ominous signaling makes it quite likely that Beijing, Taipei, and Washington will head for a more complicated and tangled triangle of security interactions, which is convincingly bad news for security environment in East Asia.

Therefore, how to stop the above nightmare from taking place has been an important question in a lot of extraordinary minds across the Pacific Ocean and the Strait. For example, in recent years, some influential former senior officials and leading International Relations scholars in the U.S. maintained that U.S. government should change the course of its Taiwan policy in order to avoid a direct and catastrophic U.S.-China conflict.

## 2. The Structural Conventional Wisdom of US Taiwan Policy After 2016

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former Presidential security adviser to Jimmy Carter(1977-1981) and a world-class master of geopolitics at Johns Hopkins University, was one of the most influential advocates who speak in favor of a milder policy course for Washington. In his keynote speech during the Seminar on U.S. Foreign Policy held by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, May 30th, 2012, he said that Taiwan and Mainland China are heading towards a peaceful and unified future, and that U.S. should not be in the way. (Yu, 2012)

In addition to Brzezinski’s geopolitical argument, two structural analyses over America’s abandonment of Taiwan were presented by two prominent International Relations theorists, Professors John Mearsheimer and Charles Glaser. In 2011, Charles Glaser, a well-known International Relations Professor at George Washington University, who published an article in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, suggested that the U.S. should “consider backing away from its commitment to Taiwan”. Because “This would remove the most obvious and contentious flash point between the United States and China and smooth the way for better relations between them in the decades to come.” (Glaser, 2011: 87) In fact, Glaser’s policy recommendation was based on his “rational theory of international politics”, whose core causal logic believes that “A state’s choice of strategy should depend on three types of variables: the state’s own motives; material factors that influence the state’s military potential—power and offense-defense variables; and information about motives—both the state’s beliefs about the opposing state’s motives and its beliefs about the adversary’s information about its motives.” According to Glaser, when these variables work together, “[I]nternational anarchy does not create a general tendency for security-seeking states to pursue competitive strategies. Rather, under a range of conditions cooperation will be a rational state’s best option.” (Glaser, 2010:268)

In Glaser’s understanding of strategic choice, states as rational security seekers during peace time “should” prefer cooperation to competition, with the former defined as “coordinated policies designed to avoid arms races and improve political relations”, while the latter as “unilateral military buildups, which can generate arms races, and the formation of alliances”.(Glaser, 2010:51). Specifically, when Taiwan is put in the context of US-China strategic relations, even though the island is “a clear expansionist objective” of China, Glaser argued that “If China’s aims are limited to Taiwan, the stakes for the United States are far too small to warrant efforts to slow China’s rise, whether through economic means or through the direct use of force”. (Ibid.: 273-274) Furthermore, Glaser reminded that “The U.S. ability to protect Taiwan will be further reduced by improvements in China’s conventional capabilities.” Therefore, taking into account both the necessity judged by intention and likelihood by capabilities, Glaser recommended that America’s optimal China policy concerning Taiwan should be letting it go in that “At some point, the risks of continuing to protect

Taiwan could become too large. This is especially likely if Taiwan presses the limits of the extent of independence that China is willing to accept.” (Ibid.: 280)

In 2014, John Mearsheimer, the father of Offensive Realism and the most famous living Realist in America and the world, whose theory descriptively and prescriptively maintains that great powers aim to maximize national security by seeking power maximization defined as regional hegemony, made a similar version of prediction in an article, saying “While the United States has good reasons to want Taiwan as part of the balancing coalition it will build against China, there are also reasons to think this relationship is not sustainable over the long term.” According to Mearsheimer, China’s national power and powerful nationalist sentiment, geographical advantage over US in terms of projecting power onto Taiwan, these factors will encourage US to make a hard and painful decision to “forsake Taiwan”. To quote Professor Mearsheimer’s reasoning, “Given how dangerous it is for precipitating a war and given the fact that the United States will eventually reach the point where it cannot defend Taiwan, there is a reasonable chance that American policy makers will eventually conclude that it makes good strategic sense to abandon Taiwan and allow China to coerce it into accepting unification.”(Mearsheimer, 2014:36, 37). Therefore, Mearsheimer’s prediction is the Strait will become “dire” for Taiwan because of “China’s continued rise” and America’s painful “abandonment” of the island when US is unable or reluctant to challenge China and fight for Taiwan.

These three opinions certainly represent the policy preference of or strategic analysis by some important members of the US elite group of foreign policy, and provoked wide discussions in both China and the USA. However, this article takes a strategic cultural perspective on analyzing Washington’s commitment to Taiwan and argues that such academic opinions offered by Brzezinski, Glaser, and Mearsheimer are surely welcomed ones, but people should also see it clear that voluntarily giving up Taiwan goes against the basic elements and characteristics of U.S. strategic culture, thus making it unlikely in the foreseeable future to be adopted by any in-power top policy makers in the White House, the Foggy Bottom, the Pentagon, or on the Capitol Hill. In brief, even when China accumulates much power to make it very physically costly for America to “protect” Taiwan, Washington will come to aid and not let go of Taiwan without meaningful military fight. This is decided by the essential elements of US strategic culture. The following parts will present a theory of American strategic culture and explain the reasons, hoping to serve as an alternative analysis to the power-based structural ones presented by Glaser and Mearsheimer.

### 3. When America Uses Force in Foreign Policy: A Strategic Cultural Perspective

A theory is essentially needed to make strategic analysis about how the future of a certain question, such as American security commitment to Taiwan and US-China security relationship, will look like. Unlike structural IR scholars like Professors John Mearsheimer and Charles Glaser, whose analyses respectively make great sense, this article goes down to a reductionist approach, exploring why strategic culture plays a very important role in American foreign policy making, and why strategic culture will not allow American defection on Taiwan to happen in the foreseeable years down the road. In brief, strategic culture will make “Say goodbye to Taiwan” unlikely to happen without meaningful military fight.

What is strategic culture? According to Harvard Professor Ian Johnston’s definition, strategic culture is “ranked grand strategic preferences derived from central paradigmatic assumptions about the nature of conflict and the enemy, and collectively shared by decision makers.”(Johnston,1995: ix) Johnston convincingly pointed out that “there are consistent and persistent historical patterns in the way particular states (or state elites) think about the use of force for political ends”(Johnston,1995:1).In this article, strategic culture is defined as the conceptual system long held by decision makers about the role, efficacy and effect of military power in international affairs, and especially about when to use the military force to fight for whatever national interests the leadership defines.

Strategic culture helps make different great powers unfold different national styles in foreign policy decision making, especially when foreign policies have a lot to do with the threat and/or use

of military force. What is the mechanism that strategic culture works on foreign policy making? The answer here is that strategic culture functions as a tool for socialization of political leaders and serves as a policy filter which shapes leaders' international strategic preferences, and represents the fundamental concepts that different leaders must abide by in the decision-making process.

In 1977, which was the starting year of the academic history of strategic culture approach in great power politics, American leading IR professor Jack Snyder, who was a very young scholar in his middle twenties at that time, found in the Soviet case that because of the socialization process, individuals are socialized into a distinctive strategic culture defined as "the body of attitudes and beliefs that guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions, influences the way strategic issues are formulated, and sets the vocabulary and the perceptual parameters of strategic debate(Snyder, 1977:9). Snyder further specified the "strategic" face of the term in the Soviet case, treating it as "a set of general beliefs, attitudes and behavioral patters with regard to nuclear strategy". Meanwhile, the "culture" side of the coin by definition indicates that strategic culture enjoys "a state of semipermanence" compared to "policies" which come and go more easily and frequently. Even when new problems prop up in international politics, "they are seen through the perceptual lens provided by the strategic culture".(Snyder, 1977:v)

What is the American strategic culture? How important is strategic culture in influencing foreign policy decisions within Washington's Belt Way? American strategic culture is derived from its general culture, and has an important filtering function to make some foreign policy choices acceptable, while rendering other ones stopped from coming into being. According to some Chinese scholars, American general culture has an inherent influence on U.S. strategic thinking and foreign policy. For example, a seminal book in Chinese, which explored the linkage between America's culture and its foreign policy, attached great importance to such American cultural concepts as exceptionalism, and exceptionalism is defined in terms of "chosen people", "city on the hill"; "isolationism" based on unique geographical advantage; and "expansionism" in the name of "white man's burden".(Wang, 2000)

Among the literature on US strategic culture, Colin S. Gray's work was especially worthy of mentioning. In 1981, Dr. Colin S. Gray employed strategic culture to American case and argued that strategic culture helps produce "national style in strategy", indicating that different countries pursue different nuclear strategies because of their difference in strategic culture. (Gray, 1981:22)Gray defined strategic culture as "modes of thought and action with respect to force"(Gray, 1981:22), and used US nuclear strategy to demonstrate how America's strategic culture was shaped by its historical experience and traditional general culture. Gray legitimately argued that American strategic culture is a true existence "which flows from geopolitical, historical, economic and other unique influence", and he believed it "provides the milieu within which strategic ideas and defense policy decisions are debated and decided", therefore it "can help explain why American policymakers have made the decisions they have" and "it may be possible to employ the concept of strategic culture" to predict decisions in the future. (Gray, 1981:22)

According to Gray's observation, Americans have developed some dominant national beliefs on the use of military force throughout its military history. Americans tend to: (1) believe "good" causes tend to triumph—and Americans only wage war in "good" causes; (2) believe Americans could achieve anything that they set their hands to in earnest; (3) have an "illusion of American omnipotence";(4) believe that they could—if so moved—mobilize sufficient military muscle as to overwhelm any enemy. (Gray, 1981:26-28)

Even though scholars of strategic culture have produced very thought-provoking theories, but the most parsimonious narrative of American strategic culture was made by American's first female African-American secretary of state Condoleezza Rice. In her 2008 article "Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World", then Secretary Rice explicitly described the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy decision-making as "American Realism", which was defined in terms of "Power" and "Principle". She wrote, "as in the past, our policy has been sustained not just by our strength but also by our values. The United States has long tried to marry power and principle—

realism and idealism. At times, there have been short-term tensions between them." Nonetheless, Rice thought "idealism" is always more important than "realism". She continued, "But we have always known where our long-term interests lie. Thus, the United States has not been neutral about the importance of human rights or the superiority of democracy as a form of government, both in principle and in practice." Rice invented a term to describe this policy guideline as "uniquely American realism", saying it "has guided us over the past eight years, and it must guide us over the years to come." (Rice, 2008)

Rice's insights into the essential guideline for US foreign policy-making help people better understand the way American presidents and other top decision-makers set foreign policy goals and employ their national capabilities to achieve them. However, Rice is wrong to label America's strategic culture as "American realism", but the best term to name it should be "American liberalism", because principle's role is more important than power in deciding Washington's use of force in its foreign policy.

This article further develops Rice's argument and takes *power* and *principle* as not only the signposts of U.S. foreign policy, but also the basic elements and characteristics of U.S. strategic culture. Because strategic culture means the formal set of ideas about when and how to use military tools for political ends, it guides U.S. to use military might for 1) the purposes of keeping, increasing or demonstrating power, to quote Hans Morgenthau's famous argument of classical realism; 2) promoting American-styled democracy and humanitarian interventionist missions. These two characteristics intertwine like warp and woof, working as the filter of national security strategies and policy choices for specific security issues, which means the filtering device allows some strategies and policy choices in while keeps others out. Therefore, the making and shaping of America's China policy and Taiwan policy in the security realm can be understood through the strategic cultural perspective, and this perspective also provides a theoretical framework for analyzing and predicting the future evolution and modification of U.S. Cross-Strait policy. Parts 3 and 4 address principle and power respectively.

### 3. How Liberalism Shapes American Use of Force in Foreign Policy Making

Liberal principle reflects the ideological factors in U.S. foreign policy and serves as the strategic cultural root of America's policy of promoting liberal democracy and human rights diplomacy, as well as conducting humanitarian intervention overseas. Under the influence and effects of liberalism, the U.S. is keen on promoting abroad liberal capitalist values and western democratic institutions, and is willing to shoulder security commitments overseas as well as to keep treaty promise to protect the security of allies. U.S. political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset once pointed out that "Americans are utopian moralists who press hard to institutionalize virtue, to destroy evil people, and eliminate wicked institutions and practice." (quoted from Mearsheimer, 2001:24) Mearsheimer similarly believed that most Americans "prefer to think of fights between their own state and rival states as clashes between good and evil, where they are on the side of the angels and their opponents are aligned with the devil". As a result, Americans "tend to portray war as a moral crusade or an ideological contest, rather than as a struggle for power." (Mearsheimer, 2001:23)

How liberalism serves the mindset of presidential decision makers? In brief, the essential mechanism that liberalism influences US foreign policy making is to shape political leaders their faith in the necessity and strategic rewards of expanding American liberalism and pursuing regime change in foreign countries. American leaders' belief in and commitment to promoting liberal principle abroad has a long history, making it "America's mission" to lead "the worldwide struggle for democracy in the twentieth century" and beyond. (Smith, 1994).

For top decision-makers in Washington, it is imperative to use military force to spread liberal democracy, for the sake of making the world safe for America as a democracy, to imitate Woodrow Wilson's famous slogan of leading US into WWI. As one of the most important American presidents in terms of foreign policy, Richard Nixon also made it clear that US should use its force to determinedly fight against the spread of communism, which was regarded as the existential rival of

capitalism. He wrote in *No More Vietnams* that “We must develop strategies to meet the Soviet offensive at three different levels: when a non-Communist nation is under attack by a Communist insurgency; when a Communist regime has already won power; and when a non-Communist nation is at peace before a revolution begins.” (Richard Nixon, 1985: 166)

In sum, the liberal tradition significantly influences the liberalization of U.S. diplomacy. It is the “filter” of setting goals and observing international environment for U.S. decision-makers during diplomatic decision-making. Although it is not an “independent variable” for policy-making, it can filter out policies inconsistent with liberal concepts and leave only those legitimate, so as to narrow down the range of options. That is why the U.S. leaders are always willing to take the risk to adopt policies consistent with the U.S. liberal tradition but against physical national interests, even when international pressures pile up and urge them to give up controversial liberalistic policy preferences and behaviors. As Nixon pointed out, throughout American history of foreign policy, those greatest Presidents “have called upon Americans to participate in great causes”, one of which was “to make the world safe not only for ourselves but for others”. He continued, “Even greater is the challenge to give millions of people in poor nations a chance to share the blessings of freedom and progress we enjoy.” Nixon quoted Thomas Jefferson, Abe Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson to support his argument. Jefferson said that Americans “act not for ourselves alone but for the whole human race”, and Lincoln’s claim was “We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of earth”. What Roosevelt moved Nixon was his declaration that “Our first duty as citizens of the nation is owed to the United States, but if we are true to our principles we must also think of serving the interests of mankind at large.” In Nixon’s eyes, Wilson’s “greatest contribution” to America’s victory in fighting World War I was that he presented American effort “in idealistic terms”, by claiming the war “a war to end wars”, and a war to “make the world safe for democracy”. Nixon himself continued to advocate, “To make the world safe not only for ourselves but for others is a great cause. Even greater is the challenge to give millions of people in poor nations a chance to share the blessings of freedom and progress we enjoy.” (Nixon, 1985: 182)

Ronald Reagan, the presidential icon of American conservative ideology and Republican leadership, attributed national security and world peace to freedom and liberty, claiming that “we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty – the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace.” (Reagan, 1987) When Reagan’s presidency approached the conclusion, to the military audience, he said, “Just as America stands as an example to the world of the inestimable benefits of freedom and democracy, so too an America with the capacity to project her power for the purpose of protecting and expanding freedom and democracy abroad benefits the suffering people of the world.” (Reagan, 1989)

Truly, in the policy realm, the Bush administration’s “Freedom Agenda” is a most typical advocacy of a liberal democratic “crusading” in the 21st century. President Bush wrote in his memoir *Decision Points*, quoting his second inaugural address, “[I]t is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” The foreign policy logic behind this assertion is that Americans firmly believe “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.” (Bush, 2010: 396). Therefore, the fourth prong of the Bush Doctrine is to “advance liberty and hope as an alternative to the enemy’s ideology of repression and fear.” (Ibid.: 397) President Bush saw freedom agenda as realistic because “freedom is the most practical way to protect our country in the long run”. This makes national security as “America’s vital interests” and its manifest destiny as “deepest beliefs” converge, “are now one”, in Bush’s words. (Ibid.: 397) Promoting liberal democracy and pursuing social engineering in Afghanistan and Iraq were only overt examples among Washington’s efforts to carry out freedom agenda by force since the beginning of this new century. Condi Rice’s “transformational diplomacy” was a tool to serve freedom agenda on the working level, because it focused on “the need to foster the growth of well-governed democratic states”. (Rice, 2011: 425)

Under the influence of the liberal principle, U.S. has invariably set one of its grand strategic goals as to promote a more liberal international order. To quote President Barack Obama's discourse, "free trade, open market, the unfettered flow of information, the rule of law, democratic elections, and the like" are "America's notion of what the international system should be". Obama ultimately believes that those critics of America-led international order "are wrong to think that the world's poor will benefit by rejecting the ideals of free markets and liberal democracy". (Obama, 2010:372, 373)

The most inconvenient example in the 21st century is certainly the Iraq War. Although it is under pressure from allies and the international community, the U.S. still launched the Iraq War in 2003 following Bush Administration's "Freedom Agenda". This demonstrates the tremendous influence that liberal principle has on the U.S. foreign policy. As Bush's Vice President Cheney said in his memoir *In My Time*,

"If the United States took military action and remove Saddam from power, we had an obligation to ensure that what followed reflected our values and belief in freedom and democracy. It may well have been easier simply to handpick another Iraqi strongman and install him in one of Saddam's palaces, but that would have been inconsistent with American values and, in my view, immoral."(Cheney, 2011: 387-88)

Cheney's comment profoundly explained how the Wilsonian notion "make the world safe for democracy" by promoting American values, by social engineering, and by necessary regime change, influenced the war decisions in the Bush Administration.

As for the Obama Administration, things are no real different. The only difference is Obama prefers using the terminology "hope", like in his famous book *The Audacity of Hope*(Obama, 2010). Hope, of course, is freedom and democracy in another name, therefore, Obama's Hope programs in such countries as Libya and Syria are without substantive difference from Bush's "freedom agenda". Likewise, Hillary Clinton, in her memoir of those "hard choices" during her tenure as Obama's first secretary of state, said that "I have always believed that, even more than our military and economic power, America's values are the greatest source of strength and security. This isn't just idealism; it's based on a clear-eyed evaluation of our strategic position."(Clinton, 2015: 77) Furthermore, she maintained that the sustainable stability of the Middle East must be eventually be built on "credible democratic institutions that uphold the rights of every citizens while providing security and stability in the face of old enmities across faith, ethnic, economic, and geographic divides." (Clinton, 2015: 294)

The Libya case presents the reason why liberal principle serves as No.1 determinant, with all other factors being secondary, in national security and foreign policy making, as Hillary Clinton wrote on Libya in her *Hard Choices*, which deserves full quotation,

"The National Security Council remained divided on the wisdom of intervening in Libya. Some, including UN Ambassador Susan Rice and National Security Council aide Samantha Power, argued that we had a responsibility to protect civilians and prevent a massacre if we could. Defense Secretary Gates was firmly opposed. A veteran of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and a realist about the limits of American power, he did not think our interests in Libya justified the sacrifice. We all knew the consequences of intervention were unpredictable. But Qaddafi's troops were now a hundred miles from Benghazi and closing fast. We were looking at humanitarian catastrophe, with untold thousands at risk of being killed. If we were going to stop it, we had to act now."(Clinton, 2015: 302)

According to Secretary Gates, President Obama repeated "condemning the use of violence, and announced that he had asked his national security team for a full range of options to respond."(Gates, 2014: 511), which implied the use of military force. Even though Gates "was adamantly opposed to intervening in Libya", he understood that "if the president so ordered", it was his responsibility to make sure the American military was ready.(Gates, 2014: 512). Gates's opposition resulted from his belief that "what was happening in Libya was not a vital national interest of the United States. I opposed the United States attacking a third Muslim country within a decade to bring about regime change, no matter how odious the regime." Therefore, Gates reminded his colleagues that "when you

start a war, you never know how it will go. The advocates of military action expected a short, easy fight. How many times in history had that naïve assumption proven wrong?" (Gates, 2014: 511-512)

However, as expected, Obama's final decision was to topple Qaddafi by military operations "in a limited way", (Ibid.: 304) and "liberate Libya from a decades-long dictatorship", to quote Obama's own words. (Obama, 2013) This vividly indicated that liberal commitment of principle constantly had an upper hand over realist rational calculation of power cost in overseas use of American military might. In other words, principle has more say than power in American strategic culture when it comes to the use of force abroad.

#### 4. How Power Rationality Prevents Overuse of Force

As Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton implied, US decision-makers regarded promoting democracy abroad as a strategy to earn long-term national security. At the same time, power tends to be thought of as a short-term interest of national security, as Robert Gates demonstrated. However, when the wars America waged or got involved in turned out to be prolonged wars of attrition, power will gradually prevail over the idealist ideological interest, with the Vietnam War and the Iraq War being miserable cases. The painful withdrawal from those prolonged wars was driven by rational calculation of power cost and burden, so as to prevent further bleeding and destructive overspending of American military power and economic might. In other words, power rationality serves as a braking device which aims to better keep, increase and/or demonstrate American power.

Power rationality has two policy implications rooted deep in Realism. First, U.S. must prevent the emergence of a peer competitor that is capable of dominating important geopolitical regions like Europe, East Asia and the Middle East, and challenging America's relative power status as the only regional hegemony in modern international history. Mearsheimer's offensive realism provides the best theory that explains why US went great length to defeat challengers like Germany in the two world wars, imperial Japan in World War II, and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. (Mearsheimer, 2001)

Second, the U.S. should understand the limit of military power and use it prudently to avoid unnecessary overseas military operations that don't really serve U.S. vital interests. Mearsheimer best explained this point when he criticized Bush's decision on the 2003 Iraq War and the social engineering fantasy that guided the decision. Mearsheimer wrote, "Given American military might and the belief that democracy was sweeping the globe, the Bush administration and its supporters reasoned that it would be relatively easy to remake the Arab and Muslim world in America's image." (Mearsheimer, 2011:26) But the truth turned out to be very painful, as Mearsheimer observed, "They were wrong, of course, for the Bush administration failed to understand the limits of what American military power could do to transform the Middle East." (Mearsheimer, 2011:26)

In brief, if liberal principle ignites America's internationalist ambition to vehemently sell and spread western political values, then power rationality creates nationalist calculation of promoting physical and substantive interests, which serves as the Realist braking mechanism for stopping U.S. from blind overseas commitments. Before 2016, the relatively isolationist attitude towards Somalia and Balkan issue as well as the reluctance of U.S. government and people to shoulder the commitment of nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq manifest the strong impact of power rationality. In the 2016 presidential election, Trump's quasi-isolationist foreign policy approach to making "America First", his anti-immigration rhetoric, and his advocacy for burden shifting to the shoulders of American allies, all mark an impressive return of power rationality after more than 15 years of liberal internationalist over-consumption of American power.

In addition to Trump the businessman-turned politician and other people in politics, scholars' advocacy for a less liberal and more realist foreign policy agenda serves as another constraining power of American use of military force for such objectives as democratizing lesser powers in important regions. Harvard's star Professor Stephen Walt warned that "the rest of the world fears, resents, and sometimes hates America's current global role" due to Washington's liberal approach to using power in foreign policy. (Walt, 2006:11) Walt and Mearsheimer recommended that America

drop its liberal global hegemony agenda, and “forgo ambitious efforts to remake other societies and concentrate on what really matters: preserving U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere and countering potential hegemony in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf.” All in all, America must go back onto its traditional and realist grand strategic track of “offshore balancing”. (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016:71)

## 5. The Taiwan Question After 2016: Maintaining Status Quo Remains the Most Rational Option for Asian Security

Donald Trump, an America-first nationalist, was surprisingly selected by American people and their electorate college, whose foreign policy thinking has shown signs of both positive modifications and negative uncertainties. The most consequential uncertainty concerning Taiwan must be the one that Mr. Trump answered a congratulation call from Ms. Tsai and tweeted in a way that he may challenge the “one China” principle, after many media and people on the island speculated the gloomy prospect of Taiwan to be sacrificed by Trump in that Tsai In-wen was believed to be more supportive of Hillary Clinton and mistakenly expected a Clinton’s victory rather than defeat.

For sure, the Taiwan question has been officially and widely recognized as at the core of China’s national interests. Chinese leaders understand that it is also “the main obstacle to Sino-U.S. relations, and could even deteriorate into an explosive problem”, to quote Mr. Deng Xiaoping’s comment. (Deng, 1993: 97) Americans are as well aware of the subtlety and significance of Taiwan in Sino-U.S. Bilateral relations. For example, in 2008, former U.S. Secretary of State Albright reminded then President-elect Obama that China’s leaders were “most insistent about hearing” US presidential “assurances on Taiwan”. Otherwise, if the US presidents “fail to oblige, all other business will become secondary.” (Albright, 2008: 194)

However, China does not naively believe that US will say goodbye to Taiwan simply because it goes strongly against the US strategic culture. According to the US strategic culture, keeping the Taiwan question a thorny one is a strategy of killing two birds with one stone. In other words, it is not only a moral mission defined by the liberal principle to make East Asia safe for “democracies” like Taiwan, but also a strategic goal rooted deep in the power rationality to prevent China from growing into a peer competitor, which may in turn make the suspicion come true that “China planned to seek the ultimate expulsion of the United States from the region”. (Bader, 2012: 55) Nevertheless, for both Beijing and Washington, the bottom line and worst case here is Taiwan foolishly pursues independence and purposefully drags America and China into “the Thucydides’s Trap”. Otherwise, any strategic proposal to give up Taiwan would be impossible to penetrate through the filter of strategic culture and become the actual policy of the U.S. government. Therefore, in *The National Military Strategy of The United States of America 2011: Redefining America’s Military Leadership*, the U.S. made it clear that it “will continue to monitor carefully China’s military developments and the implications those developments have on the military balance in the Taiwan Strait”. (Mullen, 2011:14) Likewise, Hillary Clinton reiterated that “to promote reform” is “a major goal” of US strategy in Asia, and Taiwan is one of the “democratic societies that had delivered tremendous economic benefits to their people”. (Clinton, 2015: 55)

The Taiwan Relations Act is the policy embodiment of US strategic culture concerning the three-way Cross-Strait relations. According to the Act, American Strait Policy contains such security elements as: (1) “to declare that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern”; (2) “to make clear that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means”; (3) “to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States”; and (4) “to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan”.

The Act obviously makes any policy recommendation about giving up Taiwan voluntarily a substantive challenge to American international security commitment and credibility, thus facing great difficulties to gain any meaningful political and social support in America. The case is Washington's Taiwan policy has remained unchanged despite the White House occupants come and go.

Arms sales to Taiwan remain as a strategic tool for America to keep its role and interest on Taiwan. Jeffrey Bader, former Asia Policy adviser to President Obama, described this point well when he listed as follows the three different purposes Arms sales to Taiwan served, "One was to provide Taiwan with the wherewithal to withstand a Chinese attack long enough for U.S. assistance to turn the tide. Second, such sales would signal that the United States remained committed to Taiwan's security. Third, they would demonstrate U.S. credibility to other friends and allies in the region who would be alarmed at the use of force in the Taiwan Strait." (Bader, 2012:71)

Besides security commitment to Taiwan, values are also claimed to play an important role in America's responsibility to be on Taiwan's side. For instance, in 2014, Kin Moy, then deputy assistant secretary of state in charge of East Asia and Pacific Affairs, and now Director of the American Institute in Taiwan, said that he firmly believes that "strengthening our long-standing friendship with the people on Taiwan remains a key element of the U.S. strategic rebalance to the Asia-Pacific." He continued, "Our enduring relationship under the Taiwan Relations Act represents a unique asset for the United States and is an important multiplier of our influence in the region. This friendship is grounded in history, shared values, and our common commitment to democracy, free markets, rule of law, and human rights." (Moy, 2014)

Even though America's strategic culture will never allow forsaking Taiwan to be a policy, but in the event of an anti-secession war between the Mainland and the island, Beijing will surely go all out to prevent a separatist success. In other words, Chinese patriotic nationalism will be the most serious stopping power against America's liberalism. On November 11, 2016, in his remarks at the commemoration on the 150th anniversary of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's birth, President Xi Jinping solemnly said, "We would never allow any people, any organization or any political party, in any time and any form, to separate any piece of Chinese territory from the nation." (Xi, 2016) This is a clear message of Beijing to warn against Ms. Tsai In-wen or anybody's attempt at Taiwan's independence in any form.

Rationality shows that peaceful settlement is still the Pareto optimal solution to the Taiwan question and it is urgent for Washington and Beijing to make better strategic communication and prepare for better crisis management and control. It is in the highest interest of both U.S. and China to avoid being dragged into military conflicts by pro-independence separatist politicians on Taiwan. However, since she took power on May 20th, 2016, Ms. Tsai In-wen has failed to make reassurance of "the 1992 Consensus". What makes things worse is she keeps making moves towards independence.

It is well-known that Beijing has a legal card to stop any coming attempt by Taipei at crossing the red line. "Anti-Secession Law" was an important measure taken by the Mainland China on the Taiwan question in the last ten years, manifesting the determination against Taiwan independence, and setting the priority of peaceful settlement in the form of legislation. It declares that in three cases "non-peaceful means and other necessary measures" can be employed to "protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity". They are: (1) the "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China; (2) major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur; or (3) possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted.

As a legislation against Taiwan independence, "Anti-Secession Law" is not a law "that authorizes military force" as certain western media interpreted, but a law that demonstrates the bottom-line on the cross-Strait peace and development. Its emphasis on peaceful settlement not only reflects the basic stance and fundamental interests of the Mainland and Taiwan, but also takes into account the national interests of the U.S.. As a result, the Bush Administration did not respond strongly to the making of the law, even being criticized by some neoconservatives as giving "weak

response" (Kagan, 2005). Various political opinions and behaviors of the Obama Administration also show that the U.S. does not want to be dragged into long-lasting and power-consuming conflicts by the separatist forces on Taiwan. The U.S. has been vigilant against the behaviors that stubborn Taiwan separatists take advantage of U.S. concern about Strait issue to play with dangerous politics of brinkmanship that provokes Beijing.

From Beijing's perspective, its foreign policy priority has been to ensure a peaceful international environment and favorable neighbouring context, maintaining stability of international and regional societies to keep sustainable economic growth, to promote domestic social stability, and to achieve the Chinese Dream defined as "to build a moderately prosperous society and realize national rejuvenation". Therefore, China is undoubtedly unwilling to see the Taiwan question going on the wrong track of pro-secession. Instead, Beijing has been going great lengths to keep a stable Sino-U.S. political relation and to prevent bilateral trade, global trade and security issues from jeopardizing the momentum of a sustainable and healthy economic growth.

Hence, ideologies, behaviors and policies that lead to various forms of Taiwan independence are the common threat to both Chinese and American national interests; thus fighting against them is the mutual requirement and the political foundation for a win-win situation between Beijing and Washington. In 2002, then Chinese President Jiang Zemin told U.S. President Bush frankly that "China and the U.S. have a common ground on the Taiwan question— both sides insist One-China policy and hope for the peaceful settlement." Mr. Jiang labeled the pro-independence separatists as "the biggest threat to Strait stability and Sino-U.S. Relations". He urged American government to "abide by One-China Policy and the Three Sino-U.S. Joint Communiqués" and to "play a constructive role in Chinese peaceful reunification." (Jiang, 2006: 525-526)

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Albright's point of view reflects American people's strategic rationality on the Taiwan question when she wrote, "The United States is not formally committed to rescuing Taiwan in the event of attack because we don't want the Taiwanese to be so sure of our protection that they provoke Beijing." (Albright, 2008:196) This is a serious strategic reminder to the leadership group in Taipei. On November 2, 2016, when President Xi met KMT president Ms. Hung Hsiu-chu in Beijing, he presented six points as his latest thinking on promoting peace and development on both sides of the Strait, among which the top two were "adhering to 'the 1992 consensus' that embodies the one-China principle" and "fighting determinedly against the pro-independence forces and their separatist activities". (Peng, 2016) Therefore, judging from the trend of Cross-Strait relations, as the comprehensive development of Mainland China and the continuous increase of Cross-Strait economic and cultural exchange, time is on the side of Beijing. As a result, radical measures must be prevented, even though the situation has worsened recently as Tsai In-wen did not recognize "1992 Consensus".

## 6. Conclusion

Strategic culture is a set of concepts that filter a nation's policy choices of and decisions on when military force should be used to achieve international-political ends. Liberal principle and power rationality are the two essential elements of the U.S. strategic culture, with the former always having an upper hand over the later. In the case of Taiwan, some American prominent IR scholars like John Mearsheimer believe that US may forsake Taiwan when China, as a rising great power, becomes powerful enough to make it too costly for Washington to come to Taiwan's rescue in the event of an anti-secession conflict between Beijing and Taipei. However, arguments like Mearsheimer's go against US strategic cultural beliefs, thus people can conclude that US will not let go of Taiwan and make it helpless in a possible war across the Strait, because protecting Taiwan is required by liberal principle, while stopping China from growing too powerful serves America's power calculation and hegemonic maintenance.

Chinese leaders understand that Taiwan has been regarded by Washington as "a never-sinking aircraft carrier", which demonstrates the strategic value of Taiwan to the White House and the Pentagon. For example, more than three decades ago, Mr. Deng Xiaoping once pointed out that

“When it comes to the Taiwan question, the U.S. will cling to it and will never give it up; we know this for sure.”(Deng, 1993: 86) He continued to ask his colleagues to “spend time” in persuading Taiwan and US to accept “one country, two systems” as the peaceful solution to the Taiwan question. This strategic judgment still stands today. Therefore, we should follow the profound judgment of Mr. Deng on the Taiwan question: be strategically patient and prepare for the worst case scenario. Let’s hope that leaders in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington demonstrate their strategic wisdom, and work hard together to effectively manage troubles or even crises to safeguard peace and development for all.

**Funding:** This paper is a partial academic product of the research project “US Taiwan Policy after 2016 and Asian Security”, which was generously funded by the Information Center for World Asian Research(ICWAR), Beijing Foreign Studies University.

## References

1. Albright, Madeleine, Woodward, Bill. Memo to the President Elect: How We Can Restore America’s Reputation and Leadership[M]. New York: Harper, 2008.
2. Bacevich, Andrew J. What isolationism?[N]. Los Angeles Times, February 02, 2006, B-11.
3. Clinton, Bill. A National Security Strategy for A New Century[R]. The White House, 1999.
4. Cohen, Warren I. The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations (Volume II) [M]. Wang Chen. Beijing: Xinhua Press, 2004.
5. Dueck, Colin. Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy[M]. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University, 2006.
6. Fukuyama, Francis. Re-Envisioning Asia[J]. Foreign Affairs, 2005(1).
7. Glaser, Charles. Will China’s Rise Lead to War?: Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism[J]. Foreign Affairs, March/April 2011.
8. Gray, Colin S. National Style in Strategy:An American Example[J]. International Security, Fall 1981(Vol. 6, No.2).
9. Gray, Colin S. Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back[J]. Review of International Studies, 1999(25): pp.49-69.
10. Hartz, Louis. The Liberal Tradition in American[M]. New York: Harcourt, 1955.
11. Huntington, Samuel. Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity[M]. Cheng Kexiong. Beijing: Xinhua Press, 2005.
12. Jiang Zemin. Selected Works of Jiang Zemin (Volume III)[M]. Beijing: People’s Press, 2006.
13. Johnston, Alastair Iain. Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History[M]. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
14. Kagan, Robert. Those Subtle Chinese[N]. The Washington Post, March 10, 2005.
15. Lee Kuan Yew. Lee kuan Yew’s Memoirs: 1965-2000[M]. Taipei: World Bookstore, 2000.
16. Li Yongcheng. Power and Rationality: Hans Morgenthau’s Diplomatic Philosophy[J]. Pacific Journal, 2003(4).
17. McDougall, Walter. Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776[M]. New York & Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
18. Mearsheimer, John. The Tragedy of Great Power Politics[M]. New York: W·W·Norton & Company, 2001.
19. Mearsheimer, John J. Imperial by Design[J]. The National Interest, Jan / Feb 2011.
20. Mearsheimer, John J. Taiwan’s Dire Straits[J]. The National Interest, No. 130 (March/April 2014), pp. 29-39.
21. Morgenthau, Hans. Politics Among Nations[M]. Xu Xin. Beijing: Chinese People’s Public Security University Press, 1990.
22. Mullen, M. G. The National Military Strategy of The United States of America 2011: Redefining America’s Military Leadership[R]. Washington: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
23. Obama, Barack. The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream[M]. New York: Vintage Books, 2008.

24. Office of the Secretary of Defense. Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2012[R]. Washington: Pentagon, 2012.
25. Paine, Thomas. Common Sense[M]. New York: Penguin Books,1986.
26. Qin Yaqing. U.S. National Strategy: Between Attack and Integration[J]. Modern International Relations, 2003(8).
27. Rice, Condoleezza. Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World[J]. Foreign Affairs,2008(3).
28. Su Ge. U.S. Policy to China and Taiwan Issue[M]. Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1998.
29. Sino-U.S. Joint Statement[N]. People's Daily, 2011-01-20.
30. Deng Xiaoping. Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (Volume III)[M]. Beijing: People's Press,1993.
31. Waltz, Kenneth. Theory of International Politics[M]. Long Grove, Ill. Waveland Press,2010.
32. Wang Jisi, Zhu Wenli. "Grand China" to Americans[J]. American Study, 1994(1).
33. Wang Wei, Dai Chaowu. American Diplomatic History of Thought: 1775-2005[M]. Beijing: People's Press, 2007.
34. Washington,George.Farewell Address[EB/OL].  
<http://www.ushistory.org/documents/farewelladdress.htm>
35. Yu Dong hui. Brzezinski: Cross-Strait Peaceful Unification, the U.S. Should Not Be in the Way[EB/OL]. (2012/6/12). <http://www.zhgpl.com/crn-webapp/doc/docDetailCNML.jsp?kindid=7950&docid=102127689>

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.