



South Korea's Multifaceted Response to China's Goal of Reunification With Taiwan

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JCSP 50

Exercise Solo Flight

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SOUTH KOREA'S MULTIFACETED RESPONSE TO CHINA'S GOAL OF REUNIFICATION WITH TAIWAN

With the victory of the Democratic Progressive Party candidate, Lai Ching-te, in Taiwan's presidential election of the year, there are expectations that Taiwan's pro-independence stance will strengthen, leading to a heightened determination to counter China. In Taiwan, since the introduction of the direct election system in 1996, the pro-American Democratic Progressive Party and the pro-China Nationalist Party have been in power for eight years since 2000. However, for the first time in history, a single party has successfully won three consecutive terms in office, indicating a shift in sentiment.¹ The BBC noted that Lai Ching-te's victory demonstrates that China's pressure tactics were ineffective, as most people remained steadfast in their support for the Democratic Progressive Party despite fears of war. Since Tsai Ing-wen, who leans towards independence, took office in May 2016, China has severed official ties with Taiwan and continued to exert strong military pressure.² Given that the recent presidential election was viewed as a proxy battle between the United States and China, the relationship between China and Taiwan, as well as the security landscape in the Indo-Pacific region and the future power competition between the United States and China, are expected to have significant implications. Analysts predict that this will also have a profound impact on South Korea's economy, security, and diplomacy, as it maintains alliance relations with the United States.³

Looking at recent relations between China and Taiwan, this paper examines how China's pursuit of its goal of reunification with Taiwan through its 'one country, two systems' policy and gray zone strategies is being implemented today, particularly focusing on their implications for the security of both Taiwan and South Korea, and how South Korea should prepare. Ultimately, China's goal of reunification with Taiwan could have significant implications for South Korea's security, and South Korea's optimal response is to enhance security cooperation by maintaining strong alliances with the United States and Japan, establishing a robust response system for gray zone strategies, and preparing for military responses such as NATO-style nuclear sharing in anticipation of a potential invasion of Taiwan. In this paper, we will analyze China's goal of reunification with Taiwan in detail using Lykke's theory and examine its implications for South Korea's security. We will also explore the optimal responses for South Korea considering its relationships with the United States, Japan, Taiwan, China, and North Korea.

¹ Brian Hart, Scott Kennedy, Jude Blanchette, and Bonny Lin. 2024. "Taiwan's 2024 Elections: Results and Implications." *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, JAN 19. [Taiwan's 2024 Elections: Results and Implications \(csis.org\)](https://www.csis.org/analysis/taiwan-2024-elections-results-and-implications)

² Wilson, Kimberly L. 2022. "Strategic Responses to Chinese Election Interference in Taiwan's Presidential Elections." *Asian Perspective* 46 (2). doi:10.1353/apr.2022.0011.

³ Son Ji-hyoung, Kim Arin. 2024. "Taiwan Election Result could Put S. Korea-China Relations to Test." *The Korea Herald*, JAN 14. [Taiwan election result could put S. Korea-China relations to test \(koreaherald.com\)](https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?rid=KOREA2024011400010)

Theory: Lykke's Military Strategy Theory

Arthur F. Lykke Jr. provides a practical definition of military strategy. He argues that the term "strategy" is used too loosely today, emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding of what constitutes military strategy and the need for a general agreement on the conceptual approach to military strategy. He breaks down the components of strategy into objectives, methods, and means, with the following general concepts for each component. "Objective" represents the goals we pursue, which may include the use of force to achieve a nation's policy objectives. "Method" refers to the ways in which goals are pursued. "Means" represent the tools used to achieve goals. These general concepts can serve as the basis for formulating any type of strategy, whether political, economic, or military, depending on the elements of national power. Lykke suggests that these three elements are closely interrelated, and the success of a strategy depends on their harmonious coordination.⁴ Additionally, Donald M. Snow and Dennis M. Drew, military strategists at the U.S. Air Force College, define strategy as "the complex decision-making that connects the pursued objectives with the means and methods to achieve them." in their book "Making Strategy."⁵ The "2022 Defense White Paper" also defines military strategy as "setting military strategy goals to implement national security strategies and defense policies at the military level and specifying concepts for employing military capabilities and directions for building military power to achieve them."⁶ Ultimately, through analysis of these three definitions, it is apparent that setting objectives and connecting them with the means and methods to achieve them are crucial in formulating military strategy.

In this paper, the three components of strategy formulation (objective, method, and means) have been utilized as a framework for analyzing the relationship between China and Taiwan. Specifically, "objective" is defined as China's reunification with Taiwan, "method" is the 'one country, two systems' policy pursued by China, and "means" as China's military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities, including gray zone strategies. Consequently, this paper will closely examine how China's actions in executing modern strategy under the method of 'one country, two systems' through the means of gray zone strategies, under the goal of reunification with Taiwan, may affect South Korea and will focus on formulating response strategies accordingly.

Back Issue: 'One Country, Two Systems' Policy (Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan)

The term 'One country' implies that there is only one China in the world, and Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan are considered integral parts of China, with a relationship of indivisibility. 'Two systems' refers to the socialist system on the Chinese mainland and the capitalist systems in

⁴ Lykke, Arthur F. 1997. "Defining Military Strategy." *Military Review* 77 (1). [Defining military strategy - ProQuest](#)

⁵ Drew, Dennis M. and Donald M. Snow. 1988. *Making Strategy: An Introduction to National Security Processes and Problems*. Washington, DC; Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala: Air University Press.

⁶ Ministry of National Defense Republic of Korea. 2023. "2022 Defense White Paper." [PBLICTNEBOOK_202307280154382000.pdf \(mnd.go.kr\)](#)

Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. This concept, proposed by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, advocated for maintaining the socialist system under China's sovereignty while allowing Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan to retain their capitalist systems. During Deng Xiaoping's era in the 1980s, most Chinese leaders thoroughly theorized about this concept, envisioning a separate system that maintained existing administrative structures, economic systems, and even military forces, excluding sovereignty.

The meaning of 'one country' implies that there is only one China in the world, and Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan are considered integral parts of China, with a relationship of indivisibility. "Two Systems" refers to the socialist system on the Chinese mainland and the capitalist systems in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. This is part of China's reunification policy, under which the mainland with its one billion population practices socialism, while Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan maintain their existing capitalist systems. This concept was formulated by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, and most officials of that time thoroughly theorized about it. Ultimately, under China's administration, these territories became Special Administrative Regions, maintaining their existing administrative governance, economic structures, and even retaining their military forces. Additionally, representatives of each Special Administrative Region could participate in China's governance, and in case of financial difficulties, China's support would be available. However, one condition was implicit acceptance of becoming local administrative units of China. In other words, it meant acknowledging that Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan would no longer exist as separate countries.⁷

China has been pursuing the reunification of Taiwan in parallel with the conversion of Macau and Hong Kong into Special Administrative Regions. The transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong, which had been under British rule since the Opium War in 1842, occurred on July 1, 1997. According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration, the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will remain in effect for 50 years after the transfer of sovereignty (until 2047), with China's Communist Party having authority over diplomacy and military affairs. However, recent years have witnessed significant conflicts surrounding the 'one country, two systems' policy, such as protests opposing proposals to allow extradition of criminals to mainland China, leading to violent clashes with the police.⁸

Portugal returned its colony Macau, which it had ruled for 112 years since the Ming Dynasty, to China on December 20, 1999. Following the Carnation Revolution in 1974, Portugal announced its principle of relinquishing overseas colonies, and Macau was guaranteed autonomy as a Portuguese special territory. Although the "Macau National Security Law" has been

⁷ Weng, Byron S. J. 2002. "'One Country, Two Systems' from A Taiwan Perspective." *Orbis (Philadelphia)* 46 (4): 713-731.

⁸ John Lee. 2023. "Hong Kong Profile." *BBC News*, SEP 4. [Hong Kong profile - BBC News](#)

enforced since 2009, Macau has experienced relatively stable implementation of the 'one country, two systems' policy compared to Hong Kong.⁹

Taiwan has been in political, military, and ideological confrontation with China for about 70 years since 1949. China insists that Taiwan accept the principle of reunification, which assumes Chinese dominance, like Hong Kong and Macau. However, Taiwan views this as China's stance or assertion rather than a principle. Since President Biden took office, the United States has been transitioning from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity, aiming to use Taiwan as a card to pressure China in its Indo-Pacific strategy. Taiwan is perceived to seize this opportunity to assert its independence from China and break free from diplomatic isolation.¹⁰ According to the results of a survey conducted by the Election Study Center at National Political University on October 28, 2023, with over a thousand Taiwanese voters, 85.3% of respondents opposed China's proposed 'one country, two systems' policy for Taiwan's reunification. Additionally, 86.2% of respondents expressed support for maintaining the current status quo in the Taiwan Strait, while 83.7% believed that Taiwan's future should be determined by the Taiwanese people.¹¹

The Impact of China's Goal of Reunification with Taiwan on Korea

Korea shares many historical and political similarities with Taiwan, given its experiences with Japanese colonization, rapid post-war economic development, democratization, and security relations with the United States. These factors could contribute to Korea's affinity toward Taiwan, possibly resulting in increased support for Taiwan's democracy.¹²

On May 22, 2021, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and U.S. President Joe Biden jointly emphasized the "importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," making global headlines. This marked the first instance of both Korean and U.S. presidents mentioning the Taiwan Strait since Korea recognized the People's Republic of China as the "sole legal government of China" in 1992, severing diplomatic ties with the Taiwanese government.¹³ The historic statement of 2021 was issued in bilateral documents between Korea and the United States, both allies of Taiwan, and came at a time when tensions on the Korean Peninsula and U.S.-China relations were considered to be at their worst in 50 years, underscoring its additional

⁹ Sophie Williams. 2019. "Macau: China's Other 'One Country, Two Systems' Region." *BBC News*, DEC 19. [Macau: China's other 'one country, two systems' region \(bbc.com\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51444444)

¹⁰ LI, Yihu. 2020. "The 'one Country, Two Systems' Solution to Taiwan: Two Comparative Analyses." *China International Strategy Review* 2 (2): 270-287.

¹¹ Jaeyong, Jeong. 2023. "The Overwhelming Majority of Taiwanese Oppose China's Military Threats and 'one Country, Two Systems'." *Yonhap News*. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20231028026200009?input=1195m>.

¹² Timothy Rich. 2024. "South Korean Views on Cross-Strait Tensions." *Global Taiwan Institute*, Jan 10. <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/01/south-korean-views-on-cross-strait-tensions/>.

¹³ *U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement*. 2021. Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC. [U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement | The White House](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2021/05/22/us-rok-joint-statement)

significance.¹⁴ However, such support could potentially result in China's retaliation, which may include instigating conflicts to disrupt these efforts, including involvement from North Korea. At the time, China's response was naturally swift and fierce. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson warned South Korea and the United States to "stop playing with fire."¹⁵ Thus, our response to Taiwan could have significant implications not only for Korea's relationship with Taiwan but also for its relations with China, the United States, and even North Korea, necessitating a cautious approach.

Due to the US-China strategic competition, the geopolitical value of Taiwan is increasing. If China were to invade Taiwan under the pretext of rejecting its independence, Taiwan's security would be crucial to the United States, as it could threaten the US-led Indo-Pacific maritime order. Additionally, the US should enhance cooperation with Taiwan to prevent its technological prowess, represented by advanced semiconductor company TSMC, from falling into Chinese hands. Conversely, if Taiwan continues to reject independence and instead fosters its relationship with the United States, President Xi Jinping's ambitions for national reunification would be undermined. Therefore, efforts should be made to keep Taiwan within the scope of China's political and economic control.¹⁶

The problem lies in the fact that the US-China competition surrounding Taiwan is affecting the Korean Peninsula as well. Prior to President Donald Trump's declaration of a "trade war" against China in 2018, China had voted in favor of United Nations Security Council resolutions on North Korea sanctions eleven times. However, following that, as tensions escalated between the US and China, and Taiwan emerged as a key issue, simultaneously with South Korea adopting a friendly stance towards Taiwan, China's attitude shifted. In November 2021, China, along with Russia, submitted a resolution to the UN Security Council to ease sanctions on North Korea. Despite North Korea's repeated provocations in 2022, China not only refused to adopt additional UN Security Council resolutions but also rejected the adoption of a presidential statement. Ultimately, China has adopted a "Taiwan-North Korea linkage strategy," implying that if the United States does not back down on the Taiwan issue, they too cannot cooperate on North Korean denuclearization. If China were to invade Taiwan, the possibility of North Korean provocations would rapidly increase. In the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, the involvement of US forces stationed in South Korea would be inevitable, leading to a power vacuum on the Korean Peninsula. There is a saying that "nature, like power, abhors a vacuum." The power vacuum created by the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea could provoke North Korea's ambitions to fill it. While South Korea would respond firmly to North Korean

¹⁴ Lee, Chaewon and Adam P. Liff. 2023. "Reassessing Seoul's "One China" Policy: South Korea-Taiwan "Unofficial" Relations After 30 Years (1992-2022)." *The Journal of Contemporary China* 32 (143): 745-764.

¹⁵ "China: Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on May 24, 2021." 2021. *Asia News Monitor* [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on May 24, 2021 \(china-embassy.gov.cn\)](https://www.china-embassy.gov.cn)

¹⁶ Donggyu, Lee. 2021. "The Period of US-China Strategic Competition, Issues and Prospects of the Taiwan Issue." *The ASAN Institute of for Policy Study*: 1-14.

provocations, the presence of a power vacuum caused by the withdrawal of US forces could escalate tensions between North and South Korea.¹⁷ Thus, given that China's goal of reunification with Taiwan could pose a sustained security threat to South Korea in conjunction with North Korea, it is imperative for us to devise an appropriate response, and I will discuss the optimal response in this paper.

Enhancing Security Cooperation: Strengthening the Trilateral Alliance of South Korea, the United States, and Japan

The most fundamental response of South Korea to China's goal of reunification with Taiwan is to enhance security cooperation by leveraging the firm alliance of South Korea, the United States, and Japan to constrain China. Stephen M. Walt, author of "The Origins of Alliances," argues that nations typically form alliances to balance against perceived threats. Contrary to the view that the ideology or the relative power of the strongest country determines alliances, Walt argues that the perceived nature of the threat faced by a nation is the most important factor. This is the theory of alliances that he calls the "balance of threat."¹⁸ The alliance between South Korea, the United States, and Japan is an example of forming an alliance to balance against the perceived threat, 'China'.

On August 18, 2023, leaders of South Korea, the United States, and Japan gathered at Camp David to usher in a new era of trilateral partnership. They decided to collaborate in joint efforts, believing that the trilateral partnership enhances the security and prosperity of their peoples, regions, and the world.¹⁹ The White House, as well as foreign media, did not hesitate to use the term 'historic summit' for this Camp David summit. This reflects the significance of being the first independently convened summit among the leaders of the three countries, and the evaluation that the contents and implications of this summit for the future international order are significant. In a statement, the three countries called out China for "dangerous and aggressive behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims" in what appeared to be a rebuke of China's aggression in the South China Sea.²⁰ The US media is emphasizing the significance of the Camp David trilateral summit between the US, South Korea, and Japan, highlighting the Biden administration's strategy of containing China. The New York Times (NYT) reported in an editorial article published ahead of the Camp David summit that President Biden brought together the leaders of South Korea and Japan at Camp David amid escalating challenges and

¹⁷ Sunghan, Kim. 2024. "The Security of the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula are Inseparable." *Dong-A Daily News*, Mar 27.

https://www.chosun.com/opinion/chosun_column/2024/03/27/5BSICS77RNAWNODC7LONWD2SOM/

¹⁸ Walt, Stephen M. 2013. *The Origins of Alliances*. [New]. ed. Cornell University Press. doi:10.7591/9780801469992.

¹⁹ "Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, Republic of Korea, U.S." 2023. *White House*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>.

²⁰ Chetra Chap. 2023. "Camp David Agreement seen Likely to Fuel China's Aggression in S. China Sea." *Voa*, Aug 25. [Camp David Agreement Seen Likely to Fuel China's Aggression in S. China Sea \(voanews.com\)](https://www.voanews.com/news/2023-08-25-camp-david-agreement-seen-likely-to-fuel-chinas-aggression-in-s-china-sea-1234567890)

threats from Asia, particularly China. It also explained that the core agenda and focus of the Camp David summit of South Korea, the United States, and Japan were the joint response to China's rise and threats.²¹ Additionally, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in the United States argues that to address the threats posed by China, Russia, and North Korea, the United States and Japan should strengthen cooperation by including South Korea in the G7.²² As all three countries recognize, the trilateral alliance among the South Korea, US, and Japan will serve as the most fundamental and effective means of constraining China by strengthening security cooperation.

However, the biggest variable in the future of the US-South Korea-Japan alliance lies in the outcome of the US presidential election scheduled for November 5th of this year. This election, like that of 2020, is a contest between Biden and Trump, making it the first rematch election in nearly 70 years of US history.²³ If the result is Biden's reelection, there is unlikely to be a significant problem for the US-South Korea-Japan alliance, as it would continue with existing policies. However, if Trump is reelected, countries including South Korea should prepare for the 'Trump risk.' Trump, who campaigned with "Make America Great Again" in the 2016 election, pursued extreme policies of nationalistic protectionism after becoming president.²⁴ Specifically, the aspects affecting Korea include the potential withdrawal of US troops stationed in South Korea, increased burden sharing for defense costs, and the potential suspension of the strong alliance with the United States, and Japan. This signifies that the trilateral partnership painstakingly built during the Biden administration is at risk of crumbling.²⁵ However, Scott A. Snyder argues in his book "The United States-South Korea Alliance" that the weakening alliance between South Korea and the United States is argued to be detrimental to both countries. Examining the detailed reasons, firstly, if the US loses its effective and long-standing security partnership with South Korea and subsequently withdraws US forces from the Korean Peninsula, not only the Taiwan Strait but also US influence and power in Northeast Asia as a whole would decrease significantly. Secondly, as soon as China perceives the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea, it may consider it as a modification of its diplomatic and security policy in Asia-Pacific, increasing the likelihood of preparing for aggression against Taiwan. Lastly, the United States stands to sacrifice its interests in the Indo-Pacific region and see an expansion of China's

²¹ Geunchul, Kim. 2023. "Korea, U.S., and Japan Form 'Trilateral Alliance' in Response to Threats from North Korea... 'Historic', but Concerns Over Sustainability." *Newspim*, Aug

19. <https://www.newspim.com/news/view/20230819000069>.

²² Daguaym, Ji. 2024. "S. Korea, Japan 'should Normalize Bilateral Defense Relations': CSIS." *Korea Herald*, Apr 5. S. Korea, Japan 'should normalize bilateral defense relations': CSIS ([koreaherald.com](https://www.koreaherald.com))

²³ FiveThirtyEight and national polls. 2024. "Trump V Biden: Who's Leading the Polls?" *The Economist*, Apr 9. [Trump v Biden: who's ahead in the latest polls? | The Economist](#)

²⁴ BROOKE SEIPEL. 2019. "Trump: 'Make America Great again' Slogan 'was made Up by Me'." *The Hill*, Apr 2. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/437070-trump-make-america-great-again-slogan-was-made-up-by-me/>.

²⁵ Lee, John. 2021. "Th E Opportunity is there: South Koreans' Views of China and the Future of the US ROK Alliance." *Pacific Forum CSIS.Issues & Insights* 21 (WP6): I-14.

influence as Korea loses the foothold it provided on the Asian continent.²⁶ Consequently, even if Trump is re-elected and pursued his policies of prioritizing national interests, the trilateral alliance between the U.S., Korea, and Japan would not easily dissolve due to the reasons stated above, and it remains highly likely to serve as the most potent means of deterring China consistently.

Gray Zone Strategy Response: Establishing a Firm Response System

On December 14, 2023, two Chinese bombers (H-6) and four Russian bombers (Tu-95) intruded into the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) east of Ulleung island without prior notice.²⁷ China's military aircraft incursions into the KADIZ peaked at over 140 times in 2018, decreased to around 50 times in 2019, and then consistently repeated around 70 times annually from 2020 to 2023. The consistent intrusions into the KADIZ by China and Russia are interpreted as measures to assess South Korea's preparedness. Military officials stated, "The incursions by China and Russia serve to assess our air force's response capabilities, as well as to collect signals from various equipment and weapon systems, and there's also the possibility of checking infiltration routes in emergency scenarios."²⁸ In this way, a strategy that pursues one's own interests while suppressing the other party's reaction by using ambiguity in the borderline between war and peace, without relying on the explicit use of force, is called a gray zone strategy. In the 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the situation where countries like China and Russia challenge the international order was described as "a gray area" that is neither full-scale war nor complete peace. Many scholars consider this period as the inception of the concept of gray zone strategy.²⁹ During the Cold War period of nearly half a century after World War II, the most commonly utilized form of conflict was gray zone conflicts. Representative examples include Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent separatist rebellion incited in eastern Ukraine.³⁰

As previously explained, when applying Lykke's strategy theory to Taiwan, China employs the 'one country, two systems' "method" and the gray zone strategy as "means" to achieve the "objective" of Taiwan reunification.³¹ From the perspective of the Indo-Pacific region, including Korea, the "objective" of China, a major actor, is to weaken the traditional

²⁶ Snyder, Scott A. 2023. *The United States–South Korea Alliance: Why it may Fail and Why it must Not*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁷ Jongwon, Kim. 2023. "Ministry of National Defense "Chinese and Russian Military Aircraft Entering KADIZ, Severe Protest"." *Newspim*, Dec 15. <https://www.newspim.com/news/view/20231215000952>.

²⁸ Geunpyeong, Lee. 2023. "Every Year, KADIZ Goes in and Out 70 to 90 Times... the Intention Behind the Chinese-Russian Invasion." *The Joongang*, Jun 7. <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25168353>.

²⁹ Uk, Yang. 2020. "Gray Zone Conflict Strategy: The Concept of Gray Zone Conflict and its Military Implications." *The ASAN Institute of for Policy Study* 27(3): 259-280

³⁰ Hughes, Geraint. 2020. "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications." *Survival (London)* 62 (3): 131-158.

³¹ Lykke, Arthur F. 1997. "Defining Military Strategy." *Military Review* 77

(1). <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/MR-75th-Anniversary/75th-Lykke/>

regional order centered on the United States. And to achieve that objective, "means" (gray area strategy) are used along with "method" (strengthening A2/AD capabilities and expanding maritime jurisdiction).³² The characteristics and trends of this strategy exacerbate the limitations and dilemmas of traditional responses. Especially considering the geopolitical conditions surrounding the Korean Peninsula at the center of international order changes, the gray zone threats around the Korean Peninsula may present even more complex challenges. While there is no perfect solution to counter gray zone strategy, careful preparation is necessary considering the evolving nature of threats.³³

Based on the above case analysis, policy responses to gray zone strategies need to be pursued in three main directions. First, it is necessary to specify the nature of gray zone threats and anticipated threats in order to reduce ambiguity. One of the objectives of gray zone strategies is to inflict damage on adversaries without them realizing they are under threat or attack. To address this, accumulated information must be comprehensively analyzed, and periodic assessments conducted to ascertain the true nature of gray zone activities.³⁴ Second, imposing costs and losses on adversaries to raise the threshold for executing gray zone strategies and thereby inhibit their behavior is crucial. Economic response options offer opportunities to impose highly targeted costs with less risk of escalating into overt conflict than military responses.³⁵ Lastly, unifying national efforts and refining decision-making mechanisms are essential. Gray zone strategies exploit decision-making dilemmas to attempt to divide and weaken nations. Establishing dedicated organizations to manage and respond to gray zone threats, as well as applying a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, is necessary to integrate efforts from various government agencies and societal sectors.³⁶

However, although gray zone strategies are clearly non-military provocations, there is still a possibility that responses like the aforementioned could escalate into military provocations. Of course, since gray zone strategies primarily utilize non-military means or low-intensity military means, the likelihood of immediate escalation into direct conflict is relatively low. However, it is worth noting that in 2014, Russia employed a gray zone tactic combining operations by anonymous special forces with cyber, sabotage, and propaganda in annexing Crimea from Ukraine. Ironically, this ultimately led to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War,

³² Taejung, Kim. 2022. "Future Prospects and Policy Implications of China's Gray Zone Strategy." *Chinese Institute for Humanities and Social Studies at Kookmin University* 20(20): 117-151.

³³ Changgon, Kim. 2020. "Emerging Gray Zone Threats on the Korean Peninsula: Urgent Need for Proactive Campaigning." *Army Military Research Institute* (149): 91-130. doi:10.17934/jmhs.149.202006.91.

³⁴ Anthony Robertson. 2022. "What is Grey Zone Confrontation and Why is it Important?" *Australian Army*, Jun 18. [What is Grey Zone confrontation and why is it important? | The Cove \(army.gov.au\)](https://www.army.gov.au/what-is-grey-zone-confrontation-and-why-is-it-important/)

³⁵ Morris, Lyle J., Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe. 2019. *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone - Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War*: RAND Corporation.

³⁶ Changgon, Kim. 2020. "Emerging Gray Zone Threats on the Korean Peninsula: Urgent Need for Proactive Campaigning." *Army Military Research Institute* (149): 91-130. doi:10.17934/jmhs.149.202006.91.

the largest and most costly conventional conflict in Europe since 1945.³⁷ Additionally, it is analyzed that the armed conflict between Israel and the Palestinian armed group led by Hamas resulted from the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine and the gray zone strategy.³⁸ In particular, Microsoft's 2023 Annual Digital Defense Report released last October revealed the discovery of a cyber-attack organization called "Storm-1133" based in Gaza. This organization, suspected to be operating under Hamas, utilized sophisticated hacking techniques to infiltrate Israel's energy, defense, and private telecommunications sectors with malicious code.³⁹

As seen in the above cases, although the likelihood is low, there is still a possibility that gray zone strategies could lead to immediate direct military confrontations or invasions. However, just because such results occur, we should never fail to respond to China's non-military provocations or respond lukewarmly. Rather, these cases indicate the importance of actively responding to China's gray zone strategy, considering the potential expansion based on the adversary's ultimate goals and various possible scenarios. Moreover, as gray zone strategies can function as a means to combine with other forms of attack or create favorable conditions for such attacks, there is a need to establish a proactive response system from a long-term perspective.⁴⁰

Establishment of Military Response Plan Against Potential Invasion of Taiwan: NATO-style Nuclear Sharing

From Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 to President Barack Obama's administration from 2008 to 2016, relations between China and the United States were generally friendly despite some deviations. However, since 2018, when Donald Trump was in power, relations between the United States and China have worsened, and especially in 2019, when Trump signed a bill supporting the Hong Kong protests and Taiwan, the relationship between the two countries became extremely strained. As of 2024, it can be said that the new Cold War era between the United States and China has begun in earnest, and this is also related to many conflicts around the world.⁴¹ One of the numerous conflicts, and one that has recently drawn attention from around the world, is the Taiwan Strait front. Experts say that the world is currently divided into

³⁷ Galeotti, Mark, Inc Overdrive, and Overdrive ebook. 2023. *Putin Takes Crimea 2014: Grey-Zone Warfare Opens the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*. 1st ed. Vol. 59. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

³⁸ Dostri, Omer. 2020. "The Reemergence of Gray-Zone Warfare in Modern Conflicts: Israel's Struggle Against Hamas's Indirect Approach." *Military Review* 100 (1): 127. [The Reemergence of Gray-Zone Warfare in Modern Conflicts Israel's Struggle against Hamas's Indirect Approach \(army.mil\)](#)

³⁹ Kurt Knutsson. 2023. "How Hackers are Waging Digital Battle in Israel-Hamas Conflict." *FOX News*, Oct 12. [How hackers are waging digital battle in Israel-Hamas conflict | Fox News](#)

⁴⁰ Nari, Pyo. 2022. "China's Gray Zone Strategy and the Development of the Three Warfare: Implications for Korea." *National Diplomatic Institute of Foreign Affairs and Security* (10): 1-58.

⁴¹ Li, Xiaobing and Qiang Fang. 2022. *Sino-American Relations: A New Cold War*, edited by Qiang Fang, Xiaobing Li. 1st ed. Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.

four fronts.⁴² The first front is the European front between Russia and Ukraine, and the second front is the Israel-Hamas Middle East front. The Taiwan Strait is the third front, and the final fourth front is the Korean Peninsula front between South and North Korea. Regarding the third front, William Burns, director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), claimed that Chinese President Xi Jinping had instructed the military to complete preparations to attack Taiwan by 2027.⁴³ Indo-Pacific Commander John Aquilino also expressed the same opinion.⁴⁴ Reflecting this, an analysis of 24 Chinese invasion war games of Taiwan was conducted under the auspices of the U.S. CSIS, and the results concluded that large-scale casualties and loss of power through bloody air and maritime battles were inevitable.⁴⁵ In addition, a report was released saying that if China invades Taiwan and the third front is activated, there are concerns that the war could escalate into the fourth front, the Korean War.⁴⁶ In particular, it was analyzed that China and North Korea may use nuclear weapons in a limited way, which means that the risk of nuclear war throughout East Asia is increasing. When comprehensively reviewing the information so far, it is clear that the current global security situation is quite unstable. In particular, Korea should not simply dismiss China's invasion of Taiwan as a political or military problem of a neighboring country, but must keep in mind the possibility that it could lead to an escalation into the Korean War and make appropriate military preparations.

As mentioned earlier, in the event of China's invasion of Taiwan, there is a considerable likelihood that North Korea would invade South Korea. If North Korea were to initiate war on the Korean Peninsula, When the regime in North Korea collapses due to the retaliatory actions of South Korea and the United States, China cannot refrain from intervening to safeguard its interests. Moreover, if China were to invade Taiwan, it could target the U.S. military bases in South Korea and Japan, expanding the China-Taiwan front not only to the Korean Peninsula but also to Japan. Currently, the military agreements and alliances between the United States and South Korea are not suitable for addressing simultaneous conflicts with China and North Korea or for responding to limited nuclear attacks. If the current trends persist, China appears to be better prepared than the United States for waging wars on multiple fronts in East Asia and conducting limited nuclear attacks.⁴⁷ Considering these circumstances, the most reliable military

⁴² Minjung, Kim. 2023. "Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan Next?... Will the 'Third Front' really Become a Reality?" *The KBS News*, Oct 20. <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/pc/view/view.do?ncd=7797714&ref=A>.

⁴³ HOPE YEN. 2023. "CIA Chief: China has some Doubt on Ability to Invade Taiwan." *AP News*, Feb 26. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-taiwan-politics-united-states-government-eaf869eb617c6c356b2708607ed15759>.

⁴⁴ Ty Roush. 2024. "China Will be Ready to Invade Taiwan by 2027, U.S. Admiral Says." *Forbes*, Mar 20. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tyleroush/2024/03/20/china-will-be-ready-to-invade-taiwan-by-2027-us-admiral-says/?sh=4b9e8b0112c4>.

⁴⁵ CSIS: 'First Battle of Next War - Wargaming Chinese Invasion of Taiwan' 2023. Washington, D.C: Targeted News Service. [The first battle of the war.pdf](#)

⁴⁶ Janghun, Lee. 2024. "If China Invades Taiwan, Korea's GDP Will Lose 23%." *The Dong-A Daily News*, Jan 27. [China's Invasion of Taiwan\(donga.com\)](#)

⁴⁷ Markus Garlauskas. 2023. "The United States and its Allies must be Ready to Deter a Two-Front War and Nuclear Attacks in East Asia." *Atlantic Council*, Aug 16. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research->

response for South Korea to prepare for China's potential invasion of Taiwan is NATO-style nuclear sharing. The characteristics of 'NATO-style nuclear sharing' are summarized in that the United States is responsible for operational planning and decision-making, while allies provide nuclear weapons deployment facilities and are responsible for part of the delivery mission. The United States is currently deploying and operating tactical nuclear weapons in five NATO member countries (Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey). Ultimately, NATO-style nuclear sharing consists of the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in the region, projection of U.S. nuclear weapons using NATO national aircraft, and discussion of nuclear sharing strategies and operational policies through the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG).⁴⁸ The RAND Corporation, a diplomatic and security think tank, proposed during the October 30, 2023, "Enhancing Nuclear Assurance for South Korea" conference, the modernization of the 100 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons scheduled for decommissioning to designate them for "South Korea's security support," maintaining a posture that allows rapid deployment at any time. Moreover, they criticized the Washington Declaration of April 2023 between the United States and South Korea for its lack of specific implementation measures, emphasizing the need for clarity rather than ambiguity.⁴⁹

However, the biggest obstacle to military responses like South Korea's NATO-style nuclear sharing is China's reaction. In the past, when the United States deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in the Korean Peninsula, China responded in the forms of political, economic, and military retaliation, significantly straining relations between South Korea and China. A brief overview of this process reveals that on July 8, 2016, the decision was made by both South Korea and the United States to deploy a THAAD unit under U.S. Forces Korea. This decision was in response to North Korea conducting its fourth nuclear test on January 6 of the same year and launching the "Kwangmyongsong 4" rocket on February 7.⁵⁰ However, China expressed strong opposition to the decision made by South Korea and the United States. China argued that South Korea's inclusion in the U.S.-led missile defense system through THAAD deployment would enhance U.S. military influence and dominance in East Asia, disrupt the strategic balance in the region, and directly threaten China's security.⁵¹ Politically, the Chinese Foreign Ministry threatened to "inflict unbearable pain," and senior Chinese military officials spoke of "surgical strikes" against the area where THAAD was being deployed. Militarily, China exerted pressure on South Korea through military exercises with Russia, demonstrations of military strength, and the deployment of forces, warning against South

[reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/](#)

⁴⁸ Wootak, Lee. 2023. "Characteristics of NATO-Style Nuclear Sharing Operation Method and 'Korean Style Extended Deterrence'." *Yonhap News*, Apr

26. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230426132300009?input=1195m>.

⁴⁹ Yonhap. 2023. "100 US Nuclear Weapons should be Committed to Supporting S. Korea's Security Against NK Threats: Report." *The Korea Times*, Oct 30. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/04/103_362128.html.

⁵⁰ Sukhee, Han. 2019. "Resetting the South Korea–China Relationship: The THAAD Controversies and their Aftermath." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*: 539-557.

⁵¹ Taeho, Kim. 2017. "The Deterioration of Korea-China Relations and the Lessons of THAAD." *New Asia Research Institute* 24(4): 70-95.

Korea's excessive reliance on the United States. This was aimed at weakening U.S. military influence in the region and expanding China's influence around the Korean Peninsula. Economically, China implemented retaliatory measures such as bans on cultural and tourism exchanges, boycotts of Korean products by Chinese consumers, strengthened inspections of Korean companies and products related to food hygiene and firefighting, and discrimination against advanced technology industries, among others.⁵² As of December 2023, China is South Korea's largest trading partner, accounting for 19.9% of South Korea's exports and 22.4% of its imports. Particularly in terms of imports, South Korea relies on China more than twice as much as it does on the United States, at 10.9%, so economic retaliation is expected to have a significant impact on South Korea.⁵³ Despite these various forms of retaliation, South Korea must not overlook the need to prepare military responses against China's potential invasion of Taiwan, which poses a significant security threat. We just need to respond to China's various sanctions with appropriate measures. For example, it should rationally and logically respond by correcting distorted information through various channels such as the internet and social media. Moreover, within the framework of the South Korea-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA), South Korea should formulate medium- to long-term countermeasures against China's non-tariff barriers and protective trade measures. Additionally, since the economies of South Korea and China are structurally complementary, it is necessary to highlight the concentrated damage that Chinese companies will have to bear due to the implementation of economic pressure measures, improve the tourism market structure that relies on China, and diversify the tourism market.⁵⁴ Of course, the smartest approach may be to negotiate and reconcile with China through amicable dialogue, ensuring that neither side suffers harm. However, to adequately respond to threats not only from China but also from various forms of attack, including nuclear weapon from North Korea, South Korea must prioritize the formulation of military responses, starting with NATO-style nuclear sharing.

Conclusion: 'A Multifaceted Response Strategy'

China's persistent pursuit of reunification with Taiwan is expected to continue without abandonment in the foreseeable future. Moreover, ongoing tensions between the United States and China regarding the Taiwan issue will likely persist, potentially impacting South Korea's relationships with both China and North Korea. The information suggesting a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan by 2027 is not unfounded speculation but a situation that could pose serious security concerns for South Korea, given its close association with China and North Korea. In conclusion, China's goal of reunification with Taiwan could have a significant impact on Korea's security, so Korea needs to accurately understand the essence and execution of China's strategy

⁵² Changgon, Kim. 2020. "Emerging Gray Zone Threats on the Korean Peninsula: Urgent Need for Proactive Campaigning." *Army Military Research Institute* (149): 91-130. doi:10.17934/jmhs.149.202006.91.

⁵³ Mujae, Do. 2024. "Ranking of Korea's Export and Import Countries and their Respective Shares (2023)." *Tistory*, Jan 7. [Ranking of export, import countries and their respective shares \(2023\) \(tistory.com\)](https://www.tistory.com/entry/Ranking-of-export-import-countries-and-their-respective-shares-2023)

⁵⁴ Hyeonjung, Yu and Joo Jaewoo. 2017. "China's Economic Retaliation Against the Decision to Deploy THAAD and Korea's Response Plan." *The Korean Association of Area Studies* 35(2): 167-186.

and come up with a multifaceted response plan. This includes, firstly, strengthening the South Korea-U.S.-Japan alliance to deter China, secondly, firmly addressing China's gray zone strategies, and finally, preparing appropriate military responses in preparation for an escalation in the event of China's invasion of Taiwan.

The escalating strategic competition between the United States and China around the Korean Peninsula, along with the trend of expansionist policies including China's 'one country, two systems' policy, suggests a high likelihood that South Korea will be frequently exposed to threats from China. In particular, the recent Korea-US-Japan alliance and South Korea's active intervention in the Taiwan Strait have aroused China's anger and resulted in encouraging a strong alliance between China and North Korea. Ultimately, it is clear that the existing military threat posed by North Korea, along with China's various threatening strategies, will pose a real and ongoing challenge to national security. Therefore, South Korea must continue to strengthen its security and develop strategies and capabilities to effectively respond.

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