The purpose of this paper is to analyze the strategic triangle relations among the U.S., China, and Taiwan. The U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationship especially during Clinton administrations is analyzed using the Dittmer’s ‘strategic triangle’ theory. Through the analysis, this paper mainly discusses that the foreign policy making process by the U.S. administration and congress played an important role in shaping the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationship.

History Background

The Taiwan issue has emerged since the Chinese Communist Party founded People’s Republic of China in the mainland and drove out the Nationalist Party (國民黨) to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Accordingly, the Taiwan issue has become not only the domestic issue from the aftermath of Chinese Civil War but also the international
issue since the U.S. intervened in the Taiwan issue after the Korean War. The U.S. begun to protect Taiwan even more by sending the Seventh Fleet to Taiwan that was before excluded in ‘Acheson line declaration’ and signing the ‘Mutual Defense Treaty’ with Taiwan in 1954. During the Cold War, the U.S. defense policy toward Taiwan was closely related to the U.S. containment policy against China at international structure level.

On the other hand, there was a change in the U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship during the détente era. The reason for such change was that the U.S. needed to have cooperation from China for retreating from the Vietnamese War and to resolve economic and military pressure that came from continuing the U.S.-Soviet Cold War. As an initial step for improving its relationship with China, the U.S. announced ‘Shanghai Communique’. In this communiqué, the U.S. considered the Taiwan issue as a domestic issue of China and acknowledged the ‘One-China’ policy.

In 1979, as the U.S. normalized its relations with China, the relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan was cut off and the Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan was eventually abrogated. Although cross-strait economic ties have strengthened since 1990 and China became the biggest exporter to Taiwan in 2002, it does not indicate the improvement in cross-strait relation. Thus, there is still a conflict between China and Taiwan on both military and political aspects.
The Strategic Triangle Theory and the Pivot’ Domestic Politics

Lowell Dittmer suggested the strategic triangle theory upon analyzing three nations during the Cold War: the United States, the Soviet Union, and China (Dittmer 1981,491). The strategic triangle theory considers each of three actors as a national unit and investigates the aspect of triangular relationship that changes upon the interests of three nations.

The triangle relationship changes as a relation between two nations A and B influences the other actor C or a single nation A influences a relation between two nations B and C. Dittmer suggested the factors which could affect the interaction of triangle relation to be the value that is either positive or negative and the symmetry of relationship influenced by the power ratio. And lastly, by the value and the power ratio, the third player can be also affected by cross-strait relationship. He explained that the triangle relationship changes via these aforementioned three factors of value, power ratio, and a relationship with the third party. Dittmer categorizes these relations into three types: stable marriage, menage a trois, and romantic triangle.

First, ‘stable marriage’ refers to a case where two actors have amity and the other actor has enmity toward the two actors. The pattern of this stable marriage applies from 1949 to 1960s when the U.S. and the Soviet Union were divided into bipolarity. During this period, China and the U.S.S.R. remained in their friendly relationship through formal treaty and ideological affinity, and at the same time both nations had a hostile relationship with the U.S (Dittmer 1981, 491).

Secondly, ‘menage a trois’ is a relationship in which all three actors have symmetrical
amities. However, the nations need to be cautious relentlessly because of the inherent uncertainty of international relations. Since there is a risk for the triangle relationship to change due to the betrayal of one nation, all three actors are rather assumed to be in an unstable state.

Lastly, ‘romantic triangle’ consists of amity between one pivot player and other two wing players and enmity between two wing players. If a nation in the pivot position of romantic triangle is superpower and other two nations are a small power state, it is considered to be an ideal type to superpower. Therefore, the nation that plays the role of ‘pivot’ can maximize its profit and minimize its loss by absence of both amity and enmity toward other two actors. Dittmer explains that this romantic triangle applies to the détente era from 1970 to 1978.

During this period, the U.S. as the pivot established positive relationships with China and the Soviet Union and created a hostile relationship between those two nations through small conflicts.

Figure 1 shows different types of Dittmer’s triangle relationship.
The U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle Relationship

This paper suggests the following characteristics about the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationships. First, a romantic triangle with the U.S. as its pivot existed with conflicting China and Taiwan for a long period of time. In particular, the U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship was characterized by its "Dual-Romantic Triangle" in which both amity and enmity are present. This characteristic is quite distinguished from Dittmer’s analysis in which the triangle relationship is simply considered as either positive or negative. Therefore, the U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship can be considered to have both amity and enmity for its relationship due to the U.S.’ ambiguous foreign policy.

Secondly, while the triangle relationship was dominated by the international structure during the Cold War period, the post-Cold War triangle relationship is affected more by the domestic policies from three nations than by the international structure. Although the U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship cannot be fully independent from the international structure, it seems to be affected more by the change of U.S. foreign policy decided upon domestic policies. In particular, the U.S. domestic politics during Clinton administration played an important role on changing the triangle relationship. This paper showed the characteristic of the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationship to be that the relationship changes as the administration and the congress agrees or disagrees over China-Taiwan Strait issue during the Clinton administration.
Lee Teng-Hui’s Visa Issue and 1996 Missile Crisis

Cross-Strait relation in the 1990s was the most deteriorated relationship since the 1950s of Cold War period caused by political and military conflicts (Grarver 1997,74). In June 1995, the U.S. decided to issue a visa to Lee teng-hui (李登輝), and it was the first visit of the president of Taiwan to the U.S. As a result, China regarded the fact that the U.S. policy had shifted from “One China” to “One China, One Taiwan” as a serious threat and responded with missile test and military exercise in 1996.
Then why did the U.S. approve Lee’s visa and protect Taiwan against China’s provocation?

First, in May 1995, Taiwanese president requested for a US visa to visit Cornell University. The Clinton administration opposed Lee’s visit because the U.S. was maintaining unofficial relations with Taiwan. Also, Lee’s visit to the U.S. could cause an issue of questioning the legitimate status of Taiwan. It was a big risk for the U.S. because the administration did not want any deterioration in its relationship with China and this was the policy that guarantees diplomatic position of Taiwan in an unofficial relationship.

In May 2nd 1995, the U.S. House of Representative voted 396 to 0 on permitting Lee Teng-Hui the visa, and on following May 9rd, the Senate passed the law to grant Lee the U.S. visit with 97 to 1 vote. (H.CON.RES.53)1. Thus, the congress overwhelmingly welcomed Lee’s U.S. visit. Clinton administration did not want to accept Lee’s request. Nevertheless, Clinton administration permitted a visa to Lee on May 22nd 1995 by the pressure from the congress.

However, such approval of the visa from the U.S. provoked China. On July 18th, China launched missile tests near Taiwan Strait, and total six missiles were launched till July 23rd (Scobell 2000, 176). Even though China used its military method not as the intention for attack but as the way of expressing displeasure toward Lee’s visit to the U.S., American Congress considered this as a serious security threat in the Taiwan Strait.

The house introduced resolution titled “The sense of Congress regarding missile tests and military

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1 Concurrent resolution : (1) President Lee Teng-hui of Taiwan, a Ph.D. graduate of Cornell University, has been invited to pay a private visit to his alma mater and to attend the annual USA-ROC Economic Council Conference in Anchorage, Alaska; (2) there are no legitimate grounds for excluding President Lee Teng-hui from paying private visits; (3) the Senate of the United States voted several times in 1994 to welcome President Lee to visit the United States; (4) Public Law 103-416 provides that the President of Taiwan shall be welcome in the United States at any time to discuss a host of important bilateral issues(H.CON.RES. 53, May 9, 1996).
exercises by the People’s Republic of China” to call for Taiwan’s security (H.CON.RES.148).²

Despite the strong pressure from Congress and administration, China escalated tensions by launching another missile on March 8th 1996 (U.S. Department of Defense, News Briefing, March 11, 1996). As China operated such military exercise, the U.S. deployed two aircraft carriers Independence and Nimitz near the Taiwan Strait. This was possible due to a strong support from Congress.

In conclusion, permission of Lee’s visa in 1995 and Taiwan Strait missile crisis in 1996 were the times when the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationship changed from romantic triangle to stable marriage. Such change was determined through the foreign policy decision making of the U.S. administration and Congress. Although the administration was concerned that Lee’s visa would give a significant influence to the U.S.-China relationship, Washington eventually approved of Lee’s visa because of the congressional pressure. In addition, when 1996 missile crisis took place in Taiwan Strait, the U.S. was able to execute an active defense policy for Taiwan because the administration and the congress were in agreement.

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² Concurrent resolution: (1) to deplore the missile tests and military exercises that the People’s Republic of China is conducting from March 8 through March 25, 1996, and view such tests and exercises as potentially serious threats to the peace, security, and stability of Taiwan and not in the spirit of the three United States-China Joint Communiques; (2) to urge the Government of the People’s Republic of China to cease its bellicose actions directed at Taiwan and enter instead into meaningful dialogue with the Government of Taiwan at the highest levels, such as through the Straits Exchange Foundation in Taiwan and the Association for Relations; (3) that the President should, consistent with section 3(c) of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 immediately consult with Congress on an appropriate United States response to the tests and exercises should the tests or exercises pose an actual threat to the peace, security, and stability of Taiwan; (4) that the President should, consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, reexamine the nature and quantity of defense articles and services that may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability in light of the heightened military threat; and (5) that the Government of Taiwan should remain committed to the peaceful resolution of its future relations with the People’s Republic of China by mutual decision (H.CON.RES. 148, March 21, 1996).
Three Noes Policy and Taiwan Security Enhancement Act

After the Taiwan Crisis in 1996, the U.S.-China relation degraded because of the containment policy held by the U.S. Thus, there was a need for both American and Chinese administrations to recover the U.S.-China relationship, which was deteriorated after the Taiwan crisis. Therefore, Clinton administration tried to readjust its relationship with China through 1997 and 1998 Summits. During the U.S-China Summit on October 1997, Clinton publicly stated the “Three Noes Policy”, which “opposed the Taiwan’s independence, did not support ‘two china’, and did not support Taiwan’s admission to the UN”. In addition, Clinton adhered to same policies toward Taiwan on the 1998 Summit.

As a response, Congress strongly criticized “Three noses policy” to be an action to possibly elevate the U.S.-China relations. Soon Congress presented a resolution that has
administration to criticize its foreign policy line and to make notifications on its relationship with Taiwan. Also, Congress adopted “Taiwan Security Enhancement Act: TSEA”. This legislation, which was submitted to the Senate and the House, includes articles that strengthen military cooperation with the U.S. in order to enhance the security of Taiwan. The TSEA was not enacted, although the House passed H.R 1838 On February 1, 2000, by 341-70 (CRS arms sale 1990 47) Also, the Clinton administration strongly opposed stating that ‘TSEA deteriorates the security of Taiwan and possibly results in unintended and negative consequences that can affect the core interests of the U.S.’

Administration expressed with serious concern that ‘the U.S.-Taiwan military training and exchange’ and ‘establishment of direct communication system’ in Section 5 are just same as the requests from allies (CRS, RS20370, 2-5). Thus, the Administration did not approve TSEA (H.R 1838, S.693) because they thought it was a request beyond the U.S.-China communiqué and TRA.

The U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationship once again faced the Taiwan Strait crisis as Lee Teng-Hui expressed his idea of ‘special state to state ties’. On July 1999, Lee opposed China’s ‘One China’ policy by characterizing the cross-strait relation as ‘special state to state ties’ (CRS RL30341, 66.). During this period, the U.S. administration and congress were in disagreement over foreign policies for China and Taiwan. While Clinton administration

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3 Bill: Section5 of TSEA include several mandates that go beyond TRA.

Section 5(b): Development- The Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Secretary of State, shall develop a plan for the enhancement of programs and arrangements for operational training and exchanges of personnel between the Armed Forced of Taiwan for work in threat analysis, doctrine, force planning, operational methods, and other area(H.R 1838).
presented their Three Noes Policy to oppose the independence of Taiwan, congress showed their will to expand their commitment to protect through Taiwan Security Enhancement Act. Since Congress and Administration did not make much agreement in cross-strait foreign policy, despite of many bills and resolutions for protecting Taiwan, they could not actually commit them into foreign policy.

Figure 4. Three Noes Policy and Taiwan Security Enhancement Act
Conclusion

Throughout this paper, it was possible to see that the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationship changes depending on the U.S. domestic foreign policy decision making. First, this paper asserts that the U.S. shows strategic ambiguity of foreign policy in the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle relationship because no consent was made between administration and congress regarding the Taiwan issue.

This assertion provides a different perspective to approach the problem compared to the previous studies which state that the pivot state in a strategic triangle relationship actively utilizes the triangle relationship in order to maximize its national interest. In other words, this paper takes a further step from the previous study on triangle relationship which is based on ‘billiard ball model’ as a unitary actor and focuses on changes in triangular relationship depending on the U.S. domestic politics. Therefore, the U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship changed to be ‘stable marriage’ when the administration and the congress were in agreement during the U.S. foreign policy decision making, and it changed to be ‘romantic triangle’ when they were in conflict instead. Although the domestic politics in China and Taiwan partially influenced the triangle relationship, they were not able to result in the fundamental change in the relationship.

Nevertheless, this paper points out the influence of U.S. domestic politics toward strategic triangle relationship mainly based on Clinton administration and thus has its limit from the fact that it cannot conceive the recent U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship. Also, there have been partial changes in China-Taiwan Strait policy due to an increase in
strategic importance of China in recent U.S. congress. Therefore, it is not easy to
generalize the linkage between the overall change in the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle
relationship and the U.S. domestic policy based on the administration discussed in this
paper. However, this paper is meaningful from the fact that it investigated the changes
in triangle relationship via the U.S. domestic policy decision making, which is a further
step taken from the previous research where the investigation of the U.S.’ pivot state
foreign policy was done based on unitary actor. Thus, it is possible to provide a new
perspective if any future researches on foreign policy decision making of the U.S.-China-
Taiwan triangle relationship are to focus mainly on the domestic factors.
Reference


