

The U.S. Offshore Balancing Strategy and Secondary Partners in East Asia: The Dilemma Facing Japan and South Korea in a Taiwan Contingency

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On November 7, 2025, Prime Minister Takaichi's response during the House of Representatives Budget Committee became a major watershed for Japan's security policy. Prime Minister Takaichi explicitly pointed out that a Taiwan contingency could constitute a "situation of an existential crisis" for Japan and implied a stance that does not rule out exercising the right of collective self-defense. The current United States, no longer able to bear the massive costs of maintaining its post-Cold War "liberal hegemony" strategy, is increasingly leaning toward adopting a more restrictive and inward-looking "Offshore Balancing" strategy.

Shift in U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan: The core of the Biden administration's policy could be summarized as "Integrated Deterrence," which attempted to deter China's military adventurism through a multi-layered network combining allies and partner countries, substantially leaning toward a "strategic clarity" that strengthened defense commitments. However, the second Trump administration returned from a value-oriented strategic path to an extremely realistic policy orientation characterized by "transactional" features. For the Trump administration, Taiwan is not so much a protected symbol of democracy as a powerful "bargaining chip" for negotiations with China. The U.S. side is exerting severe cost-sharing pressure; the Trump camp had publicly demanded that Taiwan's defense budget spending should reach 10% of its GDP. This means that the United States has abandoned the "hegemonic strategy" of bearing costs itself to maintain the status quo, completely shifting to an "offshore balancing" strategy: minimizing its own burden while seeking a regional balance of power.

Offshore Balancing and Buck-passing: The offshore balancing strategy refers to a strategic restraint model where the United States abandons the "hegemonic strategy (liberal hegemony)" of personally stationing ground forces in major regions of the world to maintain order, and instead hands over the regional balance of power to major local countries (junior partners). The core mechanism of this strategy lies in "buck-passing". The United States no longer personally bears the costs of suppressing the rise of emerging hegemonic powers like China, but instead "hands them over" to geographically adjacent partners such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. U.S.



intervention will be limited to a scenario where the deterrence of these local countries fails and the regional balance faces complete collapse, serving as the "lender of last resort".

The Dilemma of Japan and South Korea as Junior Partners: The U.S. shift toward an offshore balancing strategy is forcing East Asia's junior partners—Japan and South Korea—to shake off their past "comfortable dependence" on security. For Japan, the offshore balancing strategy means the end of "cheap defense," and Japan is being forced to raise its own defense capabilities to a level close to "autonomy". On the other hand, South Korea's perspective is more pragmatic and multipolar. From the viewpoint of the Lee Jae-myung administration, the greatest threat remains North Korea, and getting entangled in a Taiwan contingency is often viewed as an "unnecessary risk". While South Korea takes the U.S.–ROK alliance as its keynote, it also aims to pursue a "balancing diplomacy" that does not excessively stimulate China, and attempts to adopt a buck-passing stance of "non-intervention" on the Taiwan issue.

When the influence of the United States as a balancer declines, Japan and South Korea will fall into a typical "security dilemma". The strategic options for the game are divided into: "Balancing (B)": paying military costs on one's own to confront China; and "Buck-passing (P)": pushing the responsibility to the other party while maintaining one's own relationship with China. As a result, neither country can choose the option of "cooperating to deter China," but instead choose to betray each other (mutually passing the buck), ultimately converging toward a "Nash equilibrium" that leads to regional instability. Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks mean that in this dilemma, Japan has taken the lead in declaring that it will adopt "balancing (B)". This makes South Korea confident that "Japan will bear an asymmetric burden," which consequently fuels South Korea's buck-passing. The U.S. offshore balancing strategy acts like a catalytic mechanism, widening the "threat perception gap" between Japan and South Korea to an unresolvable degree.

Policy Recommendations: As "Ukraine fatigue" spreads within the United States, the concept of the "Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List" (PURL) came into being, under which European and other countries "foot the bill" to purchase U.S.-made weapons and ship them to Ukraine. Facing this U.S. model of "total cost transfer," Japan should not merely silently endure the cost transfer from the United States, but needs to exercise strategic wisdom to transform the expenditures it shares into a strategic leverage to "keep the United States anchored in East Asia". Specifically, Japan could study a "Prioritized Taiwan Requirements List" (PTRL) scheme. For example, through U.S. Foreign Military Sales, Japan could procure certain U.S.-made weapons to strategically align with Taiwan's defense needs; or the Japanese side could bear the

costs of maintaining weapon production lines for Taiwan. This kind of concept that transforms financial contributions into guarantees for regional stability holds great value for strategic exploration.