

The Ominous Triangle: China-Taiwan-the United States relationship¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex issue of the triangular relationship between China, Taiwan and the United States. Due to its importance to both China and the United States, Taiwan has burdened the relationship between the two powers as long and as fierce as any. China considers Taiwan an integral part of its territory and has been unwilling to reject the use of force to settle the Taiwan issue. Under these conditions, Taiwan has chosen to balance China by aligning itself with the United States in order to avoid submission or destruction. Although the U.S. supports a “one-China” policy, it is strongly opposed to any move that could change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait by force. While both Beijing and Washington often emphasize positive engagement and dialogue, divergent interests of China and the United States over Taiwan, along with their contest for domination in East Asia, have remained a focal point of contention that could send the two powers on a collision course.

KEY WORDS:

cross-strait relations, power politics, strategic ambiguity, U.S. “pivot” to Asia

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Introduction

The origin of today's "Taiwan problem" dates back to the days of the Chinese Civil War when the Chinese Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang) fought with the Chinese Communist Party for control of China. Despite U.S. financial and material assistance and logistic support, the Nationalists were defeated and forced to retreat to Taiwan in 1949. Since then, China has remained divided in two separate political entities, the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. The two rival governments, each claiming to be the sole legal government of the whole of China, have shared a common stance that there is only "one China" and that Taiwan was a part of that China. What they have not agreed upon was the claim which government was the rightful ruler of the whole country. Since Beijing has never dropped its claim that the island was a part of its territory to be brought into the fold by persuasion if possible, by force if necessary, cross-strait relations remained strained and characterized by animosities, tensions, threats, and military crises.

As the Cold War divided the world into two spheres of influence, Taiwan became an important link in the U.S. anti-communist alliance system in East Asia. U.S. President Harry Truman considered Taiwan, along with the Philippines and Indo China, important for U.S. security and general stability in the Far East. Under this paradigm, Taiwan became a deflector shield against "red China" and communism in general. Although the Sino-Soviet split spurred the United States to switch recognition from the ROC to the PRC and establish diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979, Taiwan remained deeply integrated in the U.S. sphere of influence. Moreover, a few months later the U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act that would demonstrate U.S. determination to continue military support to its informal ally. Under U.S. protection, Taiwan began a process of economic, social, and political transformation and rose to the position of a respectable member of the international community.

With the end of the Cold War, the United States positioned itself as the sole superpower in the world. China was not satisfied with the outcome, yet had no choice but to adjust to the international system dominated by the United States. Meanwhile, it focused on economic growth,

modernization, and international cooperation, buying time to restore its power. Eventually, China's self-confidence increased rapidly and Beijing has begun to influence the regional affairs from a position of a great power. Its assertiveness along its periphery has made many Asian nations anxious and concerned of China's future moves and true intentions in the region, despite increased economic and political cooperation with China. The same is true for Taiwan. Although the relations between Taipei and Beijing are currently on the highest level in decades, longstanding political divergences overshadow beneficial cooperation in other fields. Moreover, Taiwan is still threatened by Beijing, which claims it may use force to retain the island as an "integral" part of China. The fact that Taiwan is an informal U.S. ally makes the island a highly sensitive issue in Sino-American relations, because a sharp escalation of tensions in the Taiwan Strait could provoke a U.S. show of force in support of its ally and thus send the two powers on a collision course.

Realism as a theoretical approach to the U.S.-China-Taiwan relationship

Realism is the oldest paradigm of international relations. Although realists constitute a diverse group, they share the core assumption that international politics is defined as a struggle for power. According to the realist paradigm, states are the most important actors in world politics that seek power, calculate their interests in terms of power and are motivated primarily by their national interests. The basic motive driving states is survival. No state can ever be certain another state will not use its offensive military capabilities. Realists assume that law and morality have a subordinate place in international relations, share a generally pessimistic view of human nature and believe that the international system is anarchic. Under these conditions, each state struggles to ensure its security. In sum, realists emphasize the constraints on politics imposed by human selfishness (egoism) and the absence of international government (anarchy), which require the primacy of power and security in all political life (see Donnelly in Burchill and Linklater 2013: 32).

In the international system, realists argue, states answer to no higher authority and are in constant conflict with other states. Hans Morgenthau writes that anybody who operates in international relations enters a conflict with others who also strive to achieve their interests by force (Morgenthau 1985). In their view, a gain to one party means a loss to the other. Regardless of variations, all realists tend to view power politics as a zero-sum game and anticipate conflicts of interests between the established major power and rising challengers. Thucydides and Machiavelli demonstrated that the quest for dominance in any competitive political environment is, by necessity, continuous and relentless, with all political entities, whether they be individuals or states, seeking to expand their power whenever they can do so without undue penalty because their circumstances simply permit it (Tellis in Shambaugh 2013: 82).

Some realists believe that a conflict can be postponed, and a rising peer competitor deterred in the short to medium term, but in the longer term the intrinsic imperative of survival drives states into prolonged – and dangerous – competition (Shambaugh 2013: 82). Since the world is composed of opposing interests, conflict among competing states is inevitable. Realists only disagree over the degree of its intensity.

Realists identify major powers that constitute the system's poles in the international system, as well as middle powers and smaller states that seek to define their relations with the major powers. The classic power transition pathway pits a rising great power against the status quo leading state and it expects that conflict –and perhaps war – will be generated as the rising state reaches parity with the declining lead state (Ikenberry 2008: 111).

When a major power is gradually displaced by a new rising power, whose ascent to primacy would challenge the existing international order, the international system becomes highly unstable. This is known in neo-realist thinking as *power-transition theory*. The term “power transition” comes from Kenneth Organski's classical work, *World Politics*. It refers to several important aspects of international relations. First, it is about a significant increase of national power in a big nation (in terms of its territorial and demographic size) as a result of its genuine and rapid economic development. Second, it is the impact of this growing power on the international system, especially on the hegemonic position of the

dominant nation in this international system (Lai 2011: 5). Power transition theory holds that the period when a rising power *approaches parity* with the established power is the most unstable and prone to conflict – what Organski and Kugler described as the “crossover” point (see Shambaugh 2013: 10-11). Historically, such great power transitions have been fertile ground for confrontation, since the established power typically resists the rising country's efforts to strengthen its military, seize territory and colonies, and otherwise remake its region into a sphere of influence in which the other countries must constrain their foreign and sometimes domestic politics in ways acceptable to the new hegemon (Weiz 2013: 9).

As a new rising entity challenges the existing balance of security in the system, the established power has to deal with the issue whether and to what extent this is a peaceful shift or a conflictual transition. The sense of strength and weakness upsets the balance of security in the international system and results in a security dilemma. According to classical realists, “structural anarchy,” or the absence of a central authority to settle disputes, is the essential feature of the contemporary system, and gives rise to the “security dilemma”: in a self-help system one nation's search for security often leaves its current and potential adversaries insecure, any nation that strives for absolute security leaves all others in the system absolutely insecure, and it can provide a powerful incentive for arms races and other types of hostile reactions (Holsti 2004: 54). As a result, a vicious circle of spiraling (in)security arises in the international system.

To confront a rising power, the dominant state can sustain its primacy through “balancing” and “strategic hedging” tactics. Realists differentiate internal balancing, which reallocates resources from other purposes to national security, from external balancing, carried out through alliances and other (formal and informal) agreements (Donnelly in Burchill and Linklater 2013: 38). Morgenthau observed that alliances constitute “the most important manifestation of the balance of power” in international systems (See Tow in Robinson and Shambaugh 1994: 119). Already Thucydides wrote that a state must care of its security by making alliances with other states. It is possible for a dominant state to engage with a rising power.

This engagement can be based on either balancing or containment strategy to serve as insurance against uncertain current and future

intentions of a rising power. Henry Kissinger emphasizes that the balance of power is the only way to ensure international peace. In other words, no single entity within the international system should be allowed to gain predominance over others. Thus, security is enhanced when power is distributed to limit or curb the quest for hegemony.

With respect to middle powers and smaller states, they seek either to align (bandwagon) with or against (balancing) a superior power. Bandwagoning means that a state aligns itself with a threatening power to either neutralize the threat or benefit from the spoils of victory (Kang 2007: 51). Conversely, a weaker state can balance a major power by aligning itself to another great power to avoid submission or destruction. A state's inability to provide for its own security forces it to rely on external assistance. Maintaining close relations with a powerful ally, a small state can increase its stake in the balance of power game and preserve its freedom and independence from absorption by a preponderant power. Realists argue that stability and order in the international system are the result of skillful manipulations of flexible alliance systems (Evans and Newnham 1998: 466).

Realists use a concept of power shift to explain the rise of China and the challenge this rise poses to the global domination of the United States. As rapid economic growth and technological modernization enabled China to expand its political and military power, some observers argue that this trend, if it continues, could undermine the U.S.-dominated unipolar international system and even dethrone the United States from a position of a sole global superpower. According to the realist paradigm, a gain for China would result in a loss for the United States.

That China might already be on the way to overtake the US raises a prospect of a power transition within the international system. Thus, whether China is a *status quo* power or one that seeks to revise the international system has become a critical issue in Sino-American relations. As China's rise includes not only economic and political power, but also the policy that enhances its military capabilities, the United States feels less secure and consequently threatened. Whether China's rise will be peaceful or violent is a question that preoccupies scholars and statesmen alike ... Scholars who examine the consequences of China's rise through

the lenses of either power transition theory or offensive realism predict a future of conflict (Fravel 2010: 505). Under these assumptions, the push to change the existing distribution of power in China's favor will raise the stakes between the two powers so high that this could send China and the United States on a collision course.

Many realists treat China as an assertive destabilizing power. From a regional perspective, many argue that Beijing is challenging Washington's interests in East Asia. They see China as a country that could become a global superpower accompanied by an aggressive foreign policy contradicting U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Some U.S. observers suspect that China's strategic ambition is to push the United States out of East Asia and become the dominant regional hegemon, akin to the Sino-centric order of China's imperial period (Bergsten et al 2006: 125). Henry Kissinger highlights that some American strategic thinkers argue that Chinese policy pursues two long-term objectives: first, to displace the United States as the preeminent power in the Western Pacific; and second, to consolidate Asia into an exclusionary bloc deferring to Chinese economic and foreign policy interests (Kissinger 2012: 499). In his writings, John Mearsheimer expounds his "iron law": that all powers seek hegemony, are discontent with balance of power, and therefore the United States and China are no exceptions. This presents, in his view, a grave and future danger to the United States and its own hegemonic position in Asia and the world. Aaron Friedberg essentially shares Mearsheimer's view that the United States and China are locked in a "contest for supremacy" (Shambaugh 2013: 11). Robert Kagan emphasizes that China aims "in the near term, to replace the United States as the dominant power in East Asia and in the long term to challenge America's position as the dominant power in the world (See Dou in Peng Er and Wei 2009: 12). Zbigniew Brzezinski anticipated that a strong China could seriously challenge U.S. interests in the region and might be much more tempted to resolve the issue of Taiwan by force, irrespective of America's attitude (Brzezinski 1997).

Whether China is a *status quo* power or one that seeks to revise the international system has become a critical issue in the United States. In recent years, a number of analysts argued that the rise of modern China resembles the rise of Wilhelmine Germany a century ago. Fareed Zakaria has written that "like Germany in the late 19th century, China is also growing

rapidly but uncertainly into a global system in which it feels it deserves more attention and honor. China's military is a powerful political player, as was the Prussian officer corps" (Zakaria 1996). Charles Krauthammer has written that "modern China is the Germany of a century ago – a rising, expanding, have-not power seeking its place in the sun" (Krauthammer 2010). As Wilhelmine Germany seized the opportunity to confront Britain as the ruling hegemon, some scholars and policy advisers argue that the perceived decline of U.S. power could encourage China to challenge U.S. hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.

The realist paradigm has its protagonists among Chinese scholars and its military establishment as well. This concept stems from ideological orthodoxy of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought. China may have discredited Maoist ideology, but the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has definitely not abandoned Marxist socialism or Leninist authoritarianism – and certainly has not abandoned the ideology of being a great power (Shambaugh 2013: 7). It has also remained attached to the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought that competition among great powers would inevitably lead to war. Although Marxism has waned in the post-Mao era, the perception that great powers are doomed to collide still persists in the minds of many Chinese leaders who in their youth have been socialized and imbued with Marxist notions such as hegemony, imperialism, exploitation, struggle, conflict, and the correlation of forces. Simply put, the generation of leaders schooled in Marxism and Maoism in China is sensitive to the notion and reality of power and conflict. This residual Marxist-Maoist legacy of viewing international relation as conflict and struggle is compatible to Western international relations theory of realism (Dou in Peng Er and Wei 2009: 12-13). Many younger Chinese policy analysts embraced the theory of offensive realism which holds that a country will try to control its security environment to the full extent that its capabilities permit. According to this theory, the United States cannot be satisfied with the existence of a powerful China and therefore seeks to make its ruling regime weaker and more pro-American. Chinese analysts see evidence of this intent in Washington's calls for democracy and its support for what China sees as separatist movements in Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Nathan and Scobell 2012).

Some leading strategists of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) believe that "hegemonism of the superpower(s) is still the long term threat to national

security" which may pose new security challenges to the PRC. It is implied that these superpowers are a "competing United States and Japan" (See Wang 1996: 45). Thus, hard-liners in the CCP and within the ranks of the People's Liberation Army urged Beijing to adopt a more assertive policy toward Washington. One prominent example of this assertive policy is a book, *Unrestricted Warfare*, published in 1999 by two colonels in the PLA. In addition to the military analysis, the underlying assumption of *Unrestricted Warfare* is that the United States is an implacable enemy of China and that someday the PRC must confront its adversary militarily (Carpenter 2005: 3). In a clear reference to the United States, in April 2013, the official *People's Liberation Army Daily* stressed that China needed to beef up its defenses to deal with a hostile West, bent on undermining it.² As insecurity can easily give rise to hostility, whether Chinese leaders will translate perceived U.S. provocations in an aggressive policy toward the United States remains the central question in a Sino-American great power game.

Why Taiwan matters to China

For China, Taiwan is an island that has a deep symbolic meaning. It is a vestige of the "century of humiliation" characterized by foreign intervention and Western imperialism. The widespread discontent experienced by modern China is largely attributable to the continuing memory of the humiliation it suffered at the hands of foreign powers throughout the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth century (Camilleri 1985: 3).

As a tangible reminder of China's division and its national humiliation, Taiwan evokes a sense of injustice inflicted by foreign powers. From Beijing's perspective, incorporating Taiwan to the motherland is justified, while the existence of Taiwan as a separate administrative authority represents an injustice. Accordingly, Beijing considers intervention by any foreign power in the Taiwan issue as interference in its internal affairs equal to the injustice and humiliation China suffered during the period of western imperialism.

2 "China points finger at U.S. over Asia-Pacific tensions", Reuters, April 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/16/us-china-defence-idUSBRE93F03P20130416>

China's memory of this period as a time when it was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by imperialists serves as the foundation for its modern identity and purpose (Wang 2013).

For more than six decades, Taiwan has remained an issue of nation building and competing conceptions of identity between Beijing and Taipei. Both Chinese sides agreed that Taiwan and the mainland were part of the same political entity. The disagreement was about which Chinese government was the rightful ruler (Kissinger 2012: 140). The key question about Taiwan is whether, in fact, it is an independent nation-state, or whether it is merely a part of China ... This disagreement over Taiwan's identity lies at the heart of the conflict, and is what differentiates Taiwan categorically from China's relations with other East Asian states (Kang 2007: 80).

Since the first emperor Qin Shi Huang formed the nucleus of united China more than two thousand years ago, China experienced invasions, dynastic change, national division, and violations of its sovereignty, but it always reverted to a unified state. Chinese "unity" as a result is equated in China's national consciousness with the height of the country's power and prestige, while division and disunity are associated with its lowest points of weakness and humiliation (Bergsten et al. 2006: 118-119). Thus, the recovery of Taiwan to the mainland has been a matter of cohesiveness of the Chinese nation. This fixation on the cycle of Chinese history has made the recovery of Taiwan seem like a sacred mission (Klintworth 2001). In Beijing's view, so long as Taiwan remained under a separate administrative authority receiving foreign and military assistance, the project of founding a "New China" would remain incomplete (Kissinger 2012:140).

Acting as a *de facto* independent state, Beijing also fears, Taiwan indirectly encourages separatist tendencies in regions on the mainland. If it declares independence, Taiwan could set a dangerous precedent. Under these circumstances, China's existing minority problems are likely to intensify because secessionist movements, for example in Tibet and Xinjiang, would be further encouraged (Ross 2002: 55). Thus, *de jure* independent Taiwan could become a serious crack in Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. China's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity are China's fundamental policy goals.³

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3 China's Independent Policy of Peace, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 18, 2003,

The Taiwan issue is also a challenge to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. The downfall of Communism held major implications for China. The regime in Beijing has lost its ideological foundations and tied its legitimacy to keeping China “whole”. If it turned out that the CCP is not capable to keep all of its territory under its control, confidence in the Party would be undermined. As Communism declined as a credible and unifying ideology, boosting China's prosperity, restoring its prestige and stature as a great power, and unifying the nation – that is returning Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan to the “motherland” – became critical issues to the CCP's accountability to lead and, arguably, essential elements of regime survival itself (Bergsten et al 2006: 119). Derek Mitchell, Asia specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, explains that for the Chinese psyche, the unity of the nation is equated to national greatness (Mitchell according to Marquand 2004). In this context, a loss of Taiwan would threaten its nationalist credentials to govern and would deal a severe blow to China's prestige and self-confidence, especially with its implications for the separatist movements in Tibet and the Muslim northwest (Tian 2006: 2).

Since few believe in Marxism-Leninism, the CCP also seeks legitimacy by invoking nationalist sentiments. Realizing that communist ideology was not popular enough to support their continued monopoly of power, leaders in Beijing played up themes of Chinese nationalism to support their rule (Sutter 2010: 18). The return of Hong Kong and Macao to the motherland was a major event that greatly enhanced national self-confidence of the Chinese people on the mainland. It has also boosted the power and prestige of the CCP. On the other hand, a *de facto* independent Taiwan enhances the sense of weakness, humiliation, and disgrace. It is also a living reproach to the PRC leadership. Thus, the regime in Beijing draws on the emotion of resentment in order to strengthen the Party and the state.

National stability, a strong voice in world affairs, and improved domestic economic conditions also serve as a source of legitimacy for the PRC. However, lack of political liberalization, strict party control, corruption, lack of social care, rural-urban imbalance, and growing wealth disparities amplify the sense of disaffection among the Chinese people. Despite being acknowledged for China's overall economic growth, there is little

indication that the CCP as a party is capable of dealing with some of the social tensions that this growth is creating (Westad 2012: 448). Thus, party-sponsored nationalism, which plays an important role in China's domestic stability, serves as a catalyst for discontent of the Chinese people.

Greater economic interaction between the mainland and the island also plays an important role in Beijing's Taiwan policy. China is Taiwan's largest trading partner and also the island's number one destination for foreign direct investment. Beijing hopes that the benefits of economic cooperation will lead to negotiation with Taipei on the future status of Taiwan and, eventually, end with reunification. For the central Chinese government, using Taiwanese investors to achieve their political goal of unification is the ultimate aim (Lee 2012: 118). Beijing has always hoped that Taiwan's investment in China would improve the climate for reunification as well as create disincentives to independence (See Bush in Shambaugh 2005: 172). PRC officials have explicitly stated that economic interaction with Taiwan is intended to promote unification (Roy 2004: 1). This...can be seen in one central official's statement: 'the main principle of Chinese government is "Peaceful reunification: One country, two systems" ... the purpose of attracting Taiwanese investment is to use economic strength for urging political reunification and using civic conversation for enhancing official communication' (Chun-Yi Lee 2012: 8). Given Taiwan's growing trade dependence on the Chinese mainland and the attractiveness of China's enormous market for Taiwanese entrepreneurs and investors, the PRC government is often purported to "use business to steer politics" or to "use economics to promote unification".

Finally, there is the question of Taiwan's geostrategic position. If it controlled the mainland and Taiwan, Beijing would have a strategic advantage over any country that could strive for power projection in the region. As a rising power, China believes that it must be able to maintain strategic advantage over anyone seeking to operate close to its shores. Thus, Taiwan will provide the People's Liberation Army with naval and air bases and give it a strategic depth that it currently lacks. The island is also important for the PLA's control of Japan's southern flank and the Luzon Strait, the waterway connecting the South China Sea to the Philippine Sea. Controlling the northern and southern waterways, China will have the advantage to settle on its own terms longstanding territorial and

sovereignty disputes with Japan, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries. All parties involved consider the disputed territories important due to rich fishing areas and possible natural resources like oil, gas and mineral deposits. Finally, this could enable China to project power onto the major trade routes through which half of the world's total trade passes. Advanced strategic positioning in the region would allow China to expand its sphere of influence and strengthen its position in East and Southeast Asia. According to one senior Chinese military theorist, Taiwan has "far reaching significance to breaking the international forces' blockade against China's maritime security. ... Only when we break this blockade shall we be able to talk about China's rise. ... To rise suddenly, China must pass through oceans and go out of the oceans in its future development" (See Dillon 2007: 2)

Under these conditions, Beijing is more than eager to reunite Taiwan with the mainland. Thus, it has adopted a policy of mixing military threats with peace overtures. However, China is aware that military action will prompt a reaction from other states, the United States in particular, and prefers peaceful reunification. Beijing proposed that Taiwan should return to the motherland under the Hong Kong model, namely, under the "one country, two systems" concept. According to that concept, Taiwan would become a special administrative region. It would enjoy a high degree of autonomy and would keep its military forces. Beijing also upholds that Taiwan's current social and economic systems, its way of life, and its economic and cultural ties with foreign countries would not change under the "one country, two systems" policy.⁴ A provision on setting up a special administrative region was added to the Constitution of the PRC in 1982.

Why Taiwan matters to the United States

The U.S. perception of the Taiwan issue is fundamentally different from the one that China has. One of the reasons why Taiwan matters to the United States is certainly an ideological one. The Americans deeply

⁴ A policy of "one country, two systems" on Taiwan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao/3602/3604/t18027.htm>

believe that democracy and prosperity at home depend on continued economic expansion and promotion of its values, such as free market, freedom, human rights, and liberal democracy abroad. To sustain these values throughout the world is deeply rooted in American ideology and foreign policy. Introducing market economy and liberal democracy to its society, Taiwan has become a respectable member of the international community. The United States praise Taiwan for that. For Washington, "Taiwan is the only place among Chinese-speaking people that enjoys true democracy and realizes the values that the U.S. also stands for – democracy, human rights and freedom."⁵ The United States often emphasize Taiwan's successful transition from authoritarianism to liberal democracy. Since it is rich, liberal, and democratized, some analysts believe that the island could be a role model for mainland China as it demonstrates an alternative model to Chinese communism.

There is also the question of economic interests. Despite having a population of 23 million, in 2011 Taiwan was the 10th largest trading partner, the 15th largest export destination for the United States and its 10th largest source of imports. Although there are a few issues that proved contentious, bilateral economic relations between the United States and Taiwan have been generally positive.

The relevance of Taiwan to the United States lies also in its geostrategic position. Taiwan is an important strategic asset for any power that wants to secure a "higher ground" in the region. The geostrategic value of Taiwan is in the fact that the island is part of the "first island chain", an arc stretching from the Aleutians in the north to Borneo in the south that locks the Yellow Sea, South China Sea and East China Sea.⁶ For the United States, controlling the arc means obstructing China's potential expansion from its shores deeper into the Pacific.

Many strategists emphasize that for now China is "contained" by a proximate chain of islands extending southward from Japan, through the Ryukyu's, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia. To get into the Pacific Ocean, China's naval vessels must go through one of

5 "AIT stresses Taiwan's 'undoubted' importance to US", *The China Post*, March 12, 2012, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/foreign-affairs/2012/03/12/334339/AIT-stresses.htm>

6 Interview with Lu Yeh-chung, assistant professor on the Department of Diplomacy at National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, November 2012.

the various choke points between these islands. If Taiwan were to become part of China, this would change. China's navy would no longer be hemmed in, and would be able to extend its reach to the "second island chain" – Guam, the Marianas and some other small islands in the central Pacific – not much of a barrier (Cooper 2011). Thus, Taiwan enables the United States to block China virtually at its gates.

The United States is concerned that in the hands of China Taiwan would serve as the main harbor for its naval expansion in the Asian waters and further, which could threaten its interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Taiwan's east-coast ports would give China's submarines a huge benefit. From Taiwan, they would be able to quickly get into deep water where they could not be detected and could proceed to the American west coast to show their wares and threaten the United States (see Cooper 2011).

Moreover, due to its proximity to the Western Pacific sea-lanes of communication that run from the Straits of Malacca to Japan, South Korea and eastwards, a *de facto* independent Taiwan enables the United States to maintain control of East Asian waterways, as well as China's domestic waterway linking the South China Sea to the East China Sea. In this way, the United States can keep China locked on its shores and maintain control of strategic waterways important for the free flow of commerce and naval maneuvers in the case of unexpected crises. Thus, the United States can much more easily secure its influence in this dynamic region.

Finally, by supporting Taiwan the United States sends a clear message to its other allies that it will stay committed to their security as well. Cutting off an old U.S. ally would transform the calculus of other allies who might plausibly wonder whether the U.S. commitment to their security is flexible as it was towards Taiwan. If the United States reneged on this commitment and allowed the mainland to reintegrate Taiwan forcibly into China, then America's commitment to Japan, as well as reliability in the eyes of its other allies in East Asia, would suffer grievous harm (Art 2008: 276). Since the United States is willing to "remain engaged" in the region and "keep credible economic and strategic commitments", abandoning Taiwan would certainly be counterproductive to its interests in East Asia. Taiwan is an important link in the network of U.S. security alliances.

Why Taiwan matters to the Taiwanese

It would be senseless to discuss the Taiwan issue without emphasizing the importance of Taiwan to the Taiwanese. After all, the Taiwanese care about Taiwan more than anyone else does. In the first place, there is the issue of political legitimacy. Although both the PRC and the ROC remain firm to the concept that there is one, undivided sovereignty of China, Taipei claims that the ROC is the sole legitimate representative of that sovereignty, not the PRC. Whether the ROC or the PRC is the legitimate Chinese government has been the main disagreement between Taipei and Beijing since 1949. Taipei does not oppose the possibility of unification, but it supports the idea of a country unified in its own image. That would mean reunification under Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People – nationalism, democracy, and the people's livelihood (or social welfare). This concept is contrary to Beijing's concept of "one country, two systems" which implies that the central government for the reunified China be under four so-called cardinal principles, namely, complete adherence to the Communist party leadership, devotion to socialism, guidance by Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought, and rule by a dictatorship of the proletariat (See Yu 1990: 197).

Taiwanese values and principles of democracy, freedom and human rights are incompatible with the political system of China. Taiwan has abjured authoritarianism and moved from martial law to the rule of law, experiencing impressive economic growth and political liberalization within the last three decades. Under these conditions, Taiwan is not willing to accept the supreme rule of the central government in Beijing, not even under the concept of "one country, two systems", although it implies that Taiwan may keep the existing capitalist system and its way of life "for a long period of time". Taipei is cautious about Beijing's promises, namely, for how long the PRC is prepared to exercise self-restraint, as well as how well it could manage the proposed capitalist enclave of Taiwan. Beijing's jurisdiction over Hong Kong made the Taiwanese pessimistic about the proposed "one country, two systems" model. Interference of the Chinese officials in many aspects of Hong Kong life in the past few years made the

Taiwanese less enthusiastic about the one country, two systems formula.⁷ Beijing's recent decision to restrain universal suffrage for the election of the Hong Kong's chief executive, which largely ignored the demands of pro-democracy groups that have staged several large protests calling for free and direct elections, breaks any illusion that Taiwan would one day willingly agree to the "one country, two systems" arrangement.

Finally, the Taiwanese still remember the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. For many Taiwanese, brutal repression of peaceful protests by the Chinese government highlighted the true nature of the Communist regime. The massacre was clear evidence of insurmountable differences between China and Taiwan.

A poll taken by the Election Study Center of Taiwan's National Chengchi University in 2012 showed that while there remains a significant difference between Taiwan's and China's political, economic and social conditions, 77 percent of respondents opposed unification and 14 percent were in favor. However, if there were little difference in conditions between Taiwan and China, 33 percent would support unification, with 58 percent opposed.⁸ Many observers believe that the only condition under which Taiwan could accept unification would be on the basis of the mainland's democratization, a prospect not immediately visible on the horizon (Bergsten et al. 2006: 137).

Another important factor is the issue of national identity. The mainlanders who fled to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War in 1949 regarded themselves as Chinese. However, a demographic shift on the island resulted with the birth of a new, Taiwanese, identity. With the passage of nearly six decades, most members of the émigré generation have died. Consequently, the number of people who identify themselves as Taiwanese has been increasing steadily in the last twenty years.

A series of polls taken over the last two decades by the Election Study center at Taiwan's National Chengchi University shows the sense of Taiwanese

7 For examples of Beijing's interference in Hong Kong life see "One Country, Two Systems: Human Rights in Hong Kong" by Emily Lau, *The Diplomat Blogs*, March 12, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/one-country-two-systems-human-rights-in-hong-kong/>; and Ted Gallen Carpenter, *America's Coming War with China: A Collision Course over Taiwan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 78-79.

8 "Chinese threats impede unification: US expert", *Taipei Times*, April 28, 2013, p. 3

identity is growing, while the sense of Chinese identity is declining. The last poll taken in December 2012, shows that the number of respondents who consider themselves as Taiwanese reached 54.3 percent, while the number of those who regard themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese decreased to 38.5 percent. The "Chinese only" faction fell to a miserable 3.6 percent.⁹

The increased sense of Taiwanese identity significantly decreased the chances of unification with the mainland. Nevertheless, that does not mean that a majority of Taiwanese support immediate independence; most of them still favor the status quo. However, as the Taiwan-born population increases on the island, the trend towards independence is likely to become greater.

The reluctance to unify with the mainland lies in the fact that for most of the Taiwanese, especially for the young, China is an alien, even threatening place. They fear (with good reason) that seeking formal independence would provoke a crisis, and further, that the island might lose the impressive quality of life that it has painstakingly built up over the decades in a war with the PRC (Carpenter 2005: 76). Under these conditions, favoring the status quo seems a right choice for most of the Taiwanese. In an analysis of polling data from Taiwan, Duke University political science professor Emerson Niou concluded that while China's threat deters independence, it also decreases the chances of unification. Asked if they would favor a declaration of independence if it caused China to attack Taiwan, nearly 30 percent of respondents said "yes", while nearly 60 percent said "no". However, if a declaration of independence would not cause China to attack, 70 percent would favor it, while 20 percent would not.¹⁰

Finally, there is the issue of economy. Taipei initially intended to use its economic muscle to gain political concessions from Beijing for recognition of its sovereign status. When this failed, it increasingly resorted to controlling the pace of cross-Strait economic interactions pending positive gestures from Beijing (Tian 2006: 3). Nevertheless, in the last two decades, Taiwan and China have built one of the most intertwined and

9 Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese as Tracked in Surveys by the Election Study Center, NCCU (1992-2012), <http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/english/modules/tinyd2/content/TaiwanChineseID.htm>

10 "Chinese threats impede unification: US expert", Taipei Times, April 28, 2013, p. 3

important economic relationships in Asia. Since Ma Ying-jou of KMT won the presidential elections in 2008, the restrictions on cross-Strait economic and political exchanges disappeared rapidly. Taipei and Beijing have signed a string of economic and technical agreements that have further liberalized and normalized cross-Strait economic relations in recent years. The most important documents signed since Ma's inauguration is the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in November 2009 and the controversial cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in June 2010. For Taipei, the ECFA is not merely a long-term mechanism that allows Taiwan to continuously expand lucrative cross-Strait business opportunities, but also a hope for Taiwan to have more opportunities for participating in regional economic affairs in East Asia so as to avoid being marginalized and isolated from the ongoing East Asian economic integration. President Ma pointed out that signing the ECFA with China was aimed at helping the Taiwanese to do business and thus strengthen Taiwan's competitiveness (Liou 2011:173).

It is evident that cross-Strait economic interaction has proved beneficial for the island. Taiwan runs a large trade surplus largely because of its surplus with the mainland. Although exports to mainland China traditionally involved taking advantage of cheap labor for final assembly and re-export to the west, the mainland Chinese market has become increasingly important as a source of final demand as well – a trend that has only intensified with the coming of the global financial crisis and China's increase in relative strength vis-à-vis Europe and the United States (Rosen and Wang 2011: 95 in Burdekin, Shen and Whited 2013: 7). Thus, the business community has become increasingly opposed to the idea of independence for Taiwan simply because the economic importance of China is too strong (see Kang 2007: 97). Utilizing traditional subcontracting arrangements with firms relocated to the mainland, parent firms in Taiwan provide intermediate materials to subcontractors and pay processing fees only for qualified final products, which they then export to world markets through networks outside the mainland. This strategy of capitalizing on a combination of the cheap labor of mainland China and Taiwanese production efficiency has proved successful and promises significant returns to both the investing and the invested parties (Tian 2006: 67). Those who support stronger economic interaction with the mainland see rapid development on the Chinese mainland as an economic opportunity that

may enrich individuals as well as Taiwanese society. Thus, they argue that the government should take on measures facilitating the growth of cross-Strait economic interactions (Wang et al. 2010: 160-161). After all, the business community has invested too much to risk everything by actively supporting Taiwan's independence.

Despite an active policy of rapprochement with the mainland, many in Taiwan have been cautious toward deeper economic integration with China due to possible negative consequences. Those who warn of speedy integration with the mainland emphasize that the integration, if uncontrolled, would endanger the domestic economy and marginalize it within the global trading system. For Taiwan's pro-independence advocates, deeper cross-Strait economic integration is viewed as a serious threat that may deprive them of the window of opportunity to seek permanent separation from the mainland. Accordingly, they have been intensifying their efforts to harden a sense of "Taiwanese subjectivity" in order to keep the Taiwanese people away from identifying with China or the Chinese again (Tian 2006: 153).

Many also fear that it would increase the island's political vulnerability. Some analysts argue that deepening cross-Strait economic ties is a potential threat to Taiwan's national security.¹¹ Taiwanese security planners are concerned that Taiwan's business – particularly its high-tech firms – may be indirectly helping to strengthen the PRC's military capabilities (Carpenter 2005: 80). Bush summarizes that growing economic interdependence concerns take three forms. First, some worry about the "hostage effect", believing that Taiwanese companies will become so dependent on the mainland that the island will become vulnerable to economic leverage from Beijing. The second concern is about the "fifth column effect". According to this view, Taiwanese businessmen on the mainland will become a lobby for the PRC and a tool that will help China accomplish its political agenda. The third is the "hollowing-out effect", or the concern that the movement of manufacturing across the Taiwan Strait will leave Taiwan economically weak (See Bush in Shaumbaugh 2005: 174).

11 For a detailed analysis see Denny Roy, "Cross-Strait Economic Relations: Opportunities Outweigh Risks", Occasional Paper Series, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, April 2004.

The public is also cautious about the course of economic integration with China. Although 56 percent thought Taiwan should strengthen its economic and trade relations with China, a clear majority – 67 percent – believed that if Taiwan's economy was overly dependent on China, then Beijing might use its economic leverage to coerce Taipei into making political concessions.¹² Since the end of 2009, the Ma government has made great efforts to explain the ECFA to Taiwanese people. Taiwanese people were afraid that the signing of ECFA denoted the end of Taiwanese product competitiveness with mainland products, especially agricultural products because signing the ECFA also means tearing down the tariff for importing mainland products to Taiwan (Lee 2012: 116). The occupation of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan and the related mass protests that happened in March and April 2014 revealed intense popular opposition to the proposed Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement with China.

The major concern of those in Taiwan who warn against speedy integration is not linked only to economic considerations. It is also, and maybe most of all, the fear that integration will endanger Taiwan's sovereignty and encourage Chinese military adventurism in the strait (Keng and Shubert 2010: 309).

China's ascent and the security of the Taiwan Strait

Following the end of the bipolar, Cold War world, Chinese leaders, scholars and policy advisers have embraced Deng Xiaoping's dictum that China should strategically adopt a low profile in international relations and bide its time while it modernizes and strengthens itself (See Ding 2009: 103). China accepted a new, unipolar system dominated by the United States and focused on economic growth, domestic stability, and global economic interchange, especially with the developed economies of Asia and the West. Beijing recognized that its economic and diplomatic

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¹² "Chinese threats impede unification: US expert", Taipei Times, April 28, 2013, p. 3

success placed it in a more prominent position to operate more actively within regional and world affairs (Sutter 2010: 103).

Leaving behind the low profile in the international system, China tries to portray itself as a responsible global player. Its goals, in the official formulations, are a "harmonious society" and a "harmonious world" (Kissinger 2012: 458). In 1997, China unveiled a "New Security Concept" emphasizing peaceful coexistence, mutually beneficial economic contacts, dialogue among states to increase trust, and the peaceful settlement of disputes as its core interests (Kang 2007: 84). Beijing's foreign policy documents and statements repeatedly affirm China's adherence to principles of peace, openness, development, equality and democracy among nations, cooperation, dialogue, consultation, justice, and win-win results (Bergsten et al. 2006: 128). China's new security approach seeks to ensure that China's rise is peaceful and that its economic development and military growth is not a threat to the region or the world. "Externally, the country will seek peace, cooperation, a win-win situation and a harmonious world", Chinese President Xi Jinping said when defining China's national security goals (Tiezzi 2014).

China's policy of gradual accommodation with as many states as possible enabled it to establish a new framework of cooperation with most of its Asian neighbors. This policy has provided China a strategic opportunity to enhance its regional position and create economic benefit for both China and its neighbors. Using what a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing, Shi Yinhong, has nicely called "smile diplomacy", during the 1990s China focused on making sure that its Asian neighbors did not fear it and increasingly, as aid, trade and investment began to be added to the smiles, that its neighbors welcomed it more and more.¹³ However, what had worked for the rest of Asia has not worked for Taiwan. Despite growing economic interdependence between the island and the mainland, in most other respects Taiwan has refused to accommodate Beijing's growing influence as its neighbors have (See Bush in Shambaugh 2005: 179).

As rapid economic growth and technological modernization enabled

13 Quoted by Dominic Ziegler in his special report for the Economist on China and its region, "Reaching for a Renaissance," March 31, 2007, in Bill Emmott, *Rivals: How the Power Struggle Between China, India, and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008), p. 43.

China to amplify its political and military power, Beijing has become increasingly confident that trends in national power are moving in its favor. During the last decade China has been building up comprehensive national power, expanding its role within the international system, advancing its military capabilities, and adopting new strategies in order to restore its prestige and stature as a great power capable of ensuring its interests. China has leveraged the obvious power of an economically vibrant and growing nation of more than a billion people to ensure that its interests are met with due respect by regional states, without accentuating its growing military power (although the region is clearly aware of this development) (Bergsten 2006: 127). Translating its growing military budget (nearly US\$ 132 billion for 2014) and military modernization into hard power, Beijing has been creating conditions that will serve its own interests. Using its growing naval and aerial might to more forcefully assert its vast claims over the oil and gas rich areas, important waterways and Parcel, Spratly and Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, including a recent declaration of an Air defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea, China seems to be engaging in a broad-based push to lay claim to the entire region. Given China's recent activities, it is evident that China strives to restore its great power status and in doing so has been, intentionally or not, moving toward regional hegemony.

Thomas J. Christensen summed up China's strategic goals, widely accepted by other specialists and commentators, to include regime security, preserving territorial integrity, and gaining prestige, power, and respect on the international stage (Christensen in Sutter 2010: 7). However, as a great power, it has to demonstrate it is capable of preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In doing so, it has to wipe out the vestige of its "century of humiliation", namely, to bring back Taiwan to the "motherland". Having recovered Hong Kong and Macao, China's concern over its "territorial integrity" is most associated with the (re) claiming of sovereign control over Taiwan and continued control of the restive western autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet (Bergsten et al. 2006: 119). As China considers Taiwan's continued separation from the mainland a lingering legacy of its "century of humiliation", return of the island to the "motherland" has become crucial to China's self-identity, honor, power, and prestige.

China's resolute posture toward Taiwan is evident in Beijing's persistent claim it may use force to retain the island as an "integral" part of China. While China has been publicly and formally willing to reject the use of force to settle other regional issues, such as the Spratly islands dispute, it has steadfastly been unwilling to do so in the case of Taiwan and indeed has been doing everything possible to make credible its threat to use force in order to stop Taiwan from declaring independence (Kang 2007: 93). To show that it is decisive in defending its policy of "one-China", Beijing took a crucial step that would codify its resolution to dissuade Taiwan from any possibility of formal secession. In March 2005, the National People's Congress passed the anti-secession law that gives the PRC the right to "employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity".¹⁴ The escalation of threats to use force was a clear response to President Chen Shui-bian's initiatives, namely, promoting a new constitution, pressing for referendums on issues related to Taiwan's sovereignty, and filling an application for United Nations membership for Taiwan. By legally mandating the use of force to prevent secession, the law is designed to clear up any uncertainty over whether China is willing to sacrifice peace to preserve territorial integrity (Lieberthal 2005). In December, the Chinese government sent another warning to the government of Taiwan, issuing a defense white paper that underscored the PRC's growing agitation about Taipei's pro-independence activities and a determination to halt them. The white paper warned explicitly: "Should the Taiwan authorities go so far as to make a reckless attempt that constitutes a major incident of 'Taiwan independence', the Chinese people and armed forces will resolutely and thoroughly crush it at any cost" (see Carpenter 2005: 111).

The menacing tone of the legislation and white paper, accompanied by more than 1,200 ballistic and cruise missiles poised just across the Taiwan Strait ready to punish any move toward formal independence has been explicit warning to Taipei that China was ready to take Taiwan back by force should its leaders challenge the *status quo* in the Strait. In addition to being part of a campaign of psychological warfare against Taiwan, the legislation was designed to eliminate any lingering ambiguity in Beijing's position. The Taiwanese people would be put on notice that if they continued to resist reunification and persisted in the "fiction" that

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14 The full text of the anti-secession law is available at: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005lh/122724.htm>

the island was a country separate from the PRC, they were now in direct violation of Chinese law (Ibid: 109). Due to prevalent opinion in Beijing that Washington has sought to encourage Taiwanese independence, China's harsh policy toward Taiwan also sent a direct message to the White House to curb Taipei's separatist tendencies.

Realizing that the risks of provoking Beijing were too great, voters and the business community in Taiwan have embraced a pragmatic policy toward China fostered by the KMT. Under these conditions, KMT presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou won the 2008 presidential elections with a landslide victory. The Ma administration has focused on continuing to improve cross-strait relations and strengthening "soft power" approaches to deterrence. As the military balance across the Taiwan Strait has already tipped in China's favor, Taipei believed that soft power is the only real weapon left for Taiwan. As cross-strait relations significantly improved, Taipei has cut its military spending to 2.1 percent of GDP, judging the current level of US\$ 10.5 billion sufficient to defend the island against China's efforts to force reunification with the mainland.

Despite economic interaction, and faced with a much stronger power across the Strait, Taiwan's main concern has become its survival as a *de facto* independent state. Thus, Taiwan has been careful not to neglect its informal alliance with the United States as a guarantor of its survival.

Considering the huge gap between Taiwan and China in terms of overall national power and military strength, there is not much Taipei can do to protect the island fully. From the rational actor perspective, the asymmetry between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait is so preponderant that it is very difficult for the weaker state (i.e., the ROC) to maneuver alone to get the upper hand, even when the stronger side (i.e., the PRC) is weakened by some internal and external disturbances (Wu and Huang 1995: 214-215). Thus, Taiwan relies almost completely on the United States to balance Chinese power. In doing so, Taiwan has placed its trust in perceived U.S. benevolence. As Taiwan struggles with its declining military preparedness, U.S. military analysts believe that Taipei may seek to develop closer political ties with Washington and to acquire additional U.S. arms and related military assistance (see Murray with Churchman 2013: 4).

Taiwan has always hoped that the United States would come to the aid of its ally if China decided to change the *status quo* in the Strait by force. Although the United States never specified it would come to defend Taiwan, does not recognize Taiwan as a sovereign country and, according to President Obama, “fully supports a one-China policy”, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 demonstrated U.S. determination to provide support to the island. The TRA codified U.S. policy of “strategic ambiguity”, emphasizing that “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means ... would be considered as a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States”.¹⁵ U.S. policy of “strategic ambiguity” kept both China and Taiwan on a tight leash, deterring both Beijing and Taipei from provocative actions that work against an eventual peaceful resolution of the impasse.

Meanwhile, deepening distrust of China's foreign policy, accompanied by the buildup of Chinese military forces and the threat they pose to U.S. interests in the region, resulted with a continuation of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in order to strengthen its defense capabilities. According to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense, the United States has provided Taiwan with more than US\$18 billion in defensive weapons systems since President Ma took office in 2008.¹⁶ In October 2008, a statement from then-presidential candidate Barack Obama stressed that the arms sale “helps to contribute to Taiwan's defense and the maintenance of a healthy balance in the Taiwan Strait”¹⁷ On 21 September 2011, Washington announced an arms sale package to Taiwan. It was the second deal in Obama's presidency after 2008, worth US\$ 5.3 billion (Tseng 2013: 153).

Besides arms sales, the United States also continued training and military counsel to Taiwan's armed forces. These moves are a clear reflection of the long defined U.S. policy that holds that strengthening Taiwan's defenses is crucial to the security and stability of the Taiwan Strait. Although Washington had welcomed the resumption of cross-Strait talks and cooperation, the rapid growth of China's military budget and buildup of its missiles opposite Taiwan resulted with concern among many U.S. policymakers in China's intentions toward the island.

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15 See “Taiwan Relations Act”, American Institute in Taiwan, Policy and Documents, available online at <http://www.ait.org.tw/en/taiwan-relations-act.html>

16 “Xi urges US to cease Taiwan arms sales”, *Taipei Times*, June 10, 2013.

17 “Obama welcomes arms package”, *Taipei Times*, October 10, 2010.

The rise of China's power has incited Washington to shift its attention and resources to the Asia-Pacific region. Seeing the Chinese initiatives as potentially leveraging China's economic power to achieve diplomatic and security gains in the region, the United States has decided to rebalance strategic, diplomatic, and economic priorities to preserve its hegemony. One of the clearest articulations of the rationale and logic behind the rebalance is the 2011 *Foreign Policy* article by then-U.S. Secretary Hillary Clinton where she described the Asia-Pacific region's importance as "a key driver of global politics". Given the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to America's future, Clinton said that "a strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership". Clinton emphasized six key lines of action: strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening U.S. working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.

Although the U.S. seeks to integrate China more fully within the current world order, deep distrust in Beijing's foreign policy has prompted Washington to respond to its muscular and military policy in the region. Thus, the pivot to Asia is a security switch aimed at discouraging China's efforts to reshape the world order by the use of force or intimidation. As the United States likes to think that everything that happens everywhere is a direct threat to its security, its strategic rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region has become a necessity for Washington. Under the Obama administration, the pivot to Asia represents a swing of the pendulum from "attempting to cooperate with China on global problems to pushing back against China's assertiveness and challenges to international law and rules" (Glaser 2012: 22).

Taking into consideration that the Asia-Pacific area remains the fastest-growing region in the world, the pivot has been followed by the push for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was incorporated into one of the six components. The TPP is the centerpiece of the Obama administration's regional trade initiative that reflects U.S. trade interests in the Asia-Pacific region. As of June 2013, 12 countries are participating in TPP negotiations (Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico,

New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam). The TPP is an example of "open regionalism", meaning that other Asia-Pacific countries willing to meet TPP standards will eventually be able to join the agreement. The TPP not only offers a clear economic advantage to the U.S., but also complements the grand strategy of American rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific. It will enable the Obama administration to help draft the blueprints for increased Asian integration and economic growth, cementing American leadership in the region.¹⁸

Under the new course, the Obama administration has focused more on the region to bolster U.S. defense ties with China's neighbors and expand U.S. naval presence in the region. The so-called "pivot" away from the Atlantic world, Middle East, and terrorism sparked political and security initiatives to reassure friends and deter potential adversaries. Among other things, it meant giving more visibility to troop deployments, including stationing forces in Australia and sending the navy on exercises in the seas around China despite shrinking U.S. defense budgets (Tucker 2013: 44). The shift also involved the stationing of Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore, plans to send aircraft to regular deployments to bases ranging from Australia to India, and expansions of existing airports and rebuilds of abandoned facilities. As alliances play a large role in U.S.' foreign policy success, improving ties with allies in the Asia-Pacific region accompanied by an array of military bases is Washington's best hope to rebuild its position in the region and to curb China's perceived hegemonic aspirations.

Although Clinton did not specify Taiwan *per se*, there was not much doubt that redefining and deepening old U.S. alliances and partnership in the Asia-Pacific included Taiwan as well. As a regional geostrategic pivot, Taiwan's sensitive location is potentially vulnerable for any power that wants to exercise regional hegemony. Its geostrategic position gives Taiwan a special role in defining access to important areas in the region and allows it to act as a defensive shield (See Brzezinski 1997: 40-48). Professor I Yuan emphasizes that the United States fears a rising China and a military imbalance in the Taiwan Strait. Hence, it has decided to move back to Taiwan. U.S. military personnel are spread throughout the island, trying to gain an understanding of the fighting capabilities and fighting will of the standing army in order to make necessary adjustments. They

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18 "Trans-Pacific Partnership: Time for Some American Hustle", *The Diplomat*, March 11, 2014.

advise Taiwan's fighting forces on how to harden the bunkers to be able to survive the very first round of shelling, especially to preserve the aircrafts. In this way, the United States is trying to help Taiwan to absorb the first strike in case of an invasion from the mainland.¹⁹ Thus, the United States most certainly will not abjure Taiwan. It is most likely that Taiwan will become a pawn in a great power game between Beijing and Washington.

As for Taiwan, it seems that increased U.S. engagement in the region has proved useful for the island. Tamkang University professor Edward I-hsin Chen concluded that as a result of increased U.S. activity in the region, Taiwan has been relieved from China's political pressure, has been affirmed as a partner, is supported as a strategic democracy, has received arms sales from the U.S., has expanded its international space and has improved its chances of joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Chen 2013: 2, 5). Despite recent good relations between Taiwan and China, Taipei still feels threatened by Beijing. According to professor I Yuan, since Beijing never gave up its military objectives, i.e. military conquest of Taiwan, Taipei is not in a position to trust China.²⁰

Increased U.S. engagement in Asia initiated a security dilemma in China as well. However, this dilemma has a different dimension in China. The regime in Beijing is deeply suspicious of U.S. intentions in the Asia-Pacific region and remains deeply fearful of encirclement and ideological subversion. Chinese leaders are convinced that the United States aims to block China's rise and, ultimately, undermine its one-party system of government (Friedberg 2012: 2). As Bergsten and others argue, many Chinese officials and elites are convinced that the United States will seek to slow or block China's emergence as a great power – whether by permanently separating Taiwan from the mainland, *de facto* if not *de jure*; depriving China of an adequate supply of energy for its development; or inducing change in China's political system. Indeed, Chinese internal documents commonly refer to suspicions that the United States seeks to “split (*fenhua*) and Westernize (*xihua*)” China ... Beijing's concern extends to the U.S. influence along China's periphery, in particular the potential for development of anti-China blocs led by United States (or others) that

19 Interview with professor I Yuan, research fellow at the Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, and an adjunct professor at National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, December 2012.

20 Ibid.

may seek to contain Chinese power or infiltrate and destabilize China's minority regions (Bergsten et al. 2006: 123-124).

After the Obama administration announced the pivot, Beijing revealed its discomfort with the planned increase of U.S. military presence in the wider region. The Ministry of National Defense in its annual white paper said that China had faced "multiple and complicated security threats" despite its growing influence, adding that the U.S. strategy meant "profound changes" for the region. "There are some countries which are strengthening their Asia Pacific military alliances, expanding their military presence in the region and frequently make the situation there tenser", the ministry said in a clear reference to the United States.²¹ In Beijing's view, the U.S. rebalancing strategy is a strategic move to curtail China's political influence and harm its interests. China's official Xinhua News Agency rejected the American "pivot", stressing that "the U.S. sees a growing threat to its hegemony from China. Therefore, America's strategic move eastward is aimed in practical terms at pinning down and containing China and counterbalancing China's development."²² Moreover, for Beijing this strategy is further evidence of the United States' encouragement of Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and other neighbors in territorial disputes with China. Finally, the shift of U.S. attention and resources to the Asia-Pacific region has been widely interpreted as strengthening relations with its formal and informal allies to encircle China and contain its rise. With respect to Taiwan, scholar Bruce Gilley argues that Beijing's fundamental interest in Taiwan is not ideological, but geostrategic: it wants to ensure that Taiwan cannot be used to encircle and threaten China (Gilley 2010). Under that assumption, China has become increasingly suspicious of U.S. intentions in its neighborhood. Beijing firmly believes that Washington seeks to keep the PRC weak and divided to obstruct China's rise (Tucker and Glaser 2011: 23).

Deep Chinese distrust in U.S. policy toward East Asia is also evident on the economic front. Although China recognizes greater interdependence and need for closer cooperation between the two countries, it is deeply suspicious of the TPP that includes not only trade and investment, but areas

21 "China points finger at U.S. over Asia-Pacific tensions", Reuters, April 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/16/us-china-defence-idUSBRE93F03P20130416>

22 "Beijing is wary of Obama's assertive China policy", *The Washington Times*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/nov/17/beijing-wary-obama-assertive-china-policy/?page=all>

like labor, intellectual property rights and environment in which China is relatively weak. China regarded this as an attempt by the United States to change the rules of the game by raising the bar for China. In a seeming rebuff of the TPP, President Hu reportedly stated that China prefers to work through the existing global trade architecture like the World Trade Organization (Zheng and Lye 2013: 52).

Increased engagement of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, military assistance to its allies, and ongoing U.S military consultations with Taiwan's armed forces continue to frustrate Beijing's efforts to gain control over Taiwan. Many Chinese officials and elites are convinced that Washington seeks to permanently separate the island from the mainland. China views U.S. involvement with Taiwan, particularly its arms sales and defense ties with the island, as an encouragement to Taiwanese independence forces and a fundamental obstacle to unification (Bergsten et al. 2006: 138). From Beijing's viewpoint, this policy represents a provocative interference in an internal Chinese dispute. Moreover, some hardliners in Beijing support the theory that the United States embraced the Taiwan issue not out of some high principle, but rather as one way to prevent China from emerging as a world power (see Sheng Lijun 2001). In the words of Luo Yuan, a retired general and deputy secretary-general of the Chinese Society of Military Science, the United States has long used Taiwan "as a chess piece to check China's rise" (Nathan and Scobell 2012). Under these assumptions, Chinese defense officials have continued to depict armed preparations against Taiwan as China's top military priority.

Conclusion

The administrations of both China and the United States often emphasize positive engagement and dialogues that lead to mutual understanding and trust. The United States still wants to encourage China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the existing security, economic and diplomatic order. Nevertheless, clusters of highly contentious issues eclipse cooperation between the two powers. Beijing and Washington are at odds over economy, ideology, politics, sovereignty, security, and foreign

policy. One of the most complex issues in that cluster is certainly Taiwan.

As Taiwan is important to both China and the United States, conflict of interests over the island put Beijing and Washington in a relationship plagued with perplexities. Moreover, a sharp escalation of tensions in the Taiwan Strait could provoke a U.S. show of force in support of its ally. In that case, only a slightest miscalculation could end in a militarized dispute between the two powers. While the political situation across the Taiwan Strait remains far from being resolved, military conflict between China and Taiwan is not inevitable. Were it to occur, however, it would very likely lead to serious political, and potentially military, conflict between the United States and China (Bergsten et al. 2006: 135).

China's recent behavior fostered a perception that Beijing was shifting to a more assertive regional policy and that it could quickly change its declared policy of "peaceful rise" toward a more confrontational one. The large-scale buildup of Chinese military forces directed at Taiwan, periodic threats by China of its determination to use forceful means to prevent Taiwan's independence, and China's assertiveness in the South and East China seas have raised deep mistrust in China's intentions. Moreover, as China grows stronger, uncertainty about what it will do next may only increase.

In the last decade China has demonstrated its willingness to cultivate closer economic, cultural, and social ties with Taiwan in order to promote peaceful reunification. However, increasing economic interests do not necessarily coincide with political interests. Trade and other economic relations are one element of cooperative relations. China has shown its determination to prevent Taiwan's *de jure* separation from the mainland. Beijing considers Taiwan an integral part of China, its sovereign territory, and thus its "core interest", similar to Tibet or Xinjiang. As the Chinese elite feels that China's status as a great power depends on unity, nation building, integrity, identity, political legitimacy, and national stability, the return of Taiwan to the "motherland" has become a critical measure to restore national greatness.

Moreover, Beijing wants to ensure that the island cannot be used to encircle and threaten China. The fact that Taiwan is a strategic U.S. ally

armed with advanced weaponry is in deep contrast to China's interests. Thus, it is not likely that Beijing will accept the resolution of the Taiwan issue that would permanently separate the island from the mainland any time soon. A Chinese defense white paper, released in April 2013, declared that China will "resolutely take all necessary measures to safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity".²³ Therefore, it seems that China is ready to prevent Taiwan's independence at all costs. Michael D. Swaine stresses that although China would prefer to avoid conflict over Taiwan, "this does not mean that it would be unprepared to go to war over the island" (Carpenter 2005: 118).

Finally, given China's increasing self-confidence about its growing economic and political power, and military capabilities, it is questionable for how long Beijing will be willing to tolerate Taiwan's *de facto* independence. Should it become clear that Taipei has foreclosed the possibility of future unification, there is little doubt Beijing would take military action, regardless of the potential political or economic price (Bergsten et al. 2006: 138). Given the sensitivity of the Taiwan issue, that would be the worst-case scenario.

It is certain that China and the United States do not intend to go to war, but they are preparing for an emergency. The United States and China are not only rivals, but also states that are deeply interdependent and would more likely choose cooperation over conflict. However, their mutual suspicion, contest for domination and conflicting interests undermine flourishing relations and that could drive them towards an open conflict. Both historical experience and contemporary politics have shown that increased geopolitical rivalry, military competition, or ideological divergence could overshadow the enmeshing bonds of commerce, trade, and military ties between the two powers.

As the United States seems resolute to retain its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, it will continue to frustrate Beijing not only with its increased engagement with the region, but with the informal alliance with Taiwan as well. Washington will stay committed to the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, simultaneously staying opposed to unilateral actions by either

23 See "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces", Information Office of the State Council, April 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm

side to change the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait. Although the policy of “strategic ambiguity” is not an ideal solution and allows miscalculation, a new U.S. policy on the Taiwan issue is not in sight. Thus, the United States will need to continue to exercise a policy of “dual deterrence” across the Taiwan Strait – encouraging decision makers in both Beijing and Taipei to remain patient, flexible, and constructive, and to avoid provocative actions that work against peaceful resolution of the impasse (Bergsten et al. 2006: 138-139).

As for Taiwan, the normalization of cross-Strait relations will remain the strategic objective. However, a more confident and decisive China calls for caution. Taiwan confronts the most basic threat to its security: a very large, powerful neighbor is determined to deprive it of its sovereignty (Cole 2006: 32). The informal alliance with the United States is thus a necessity. In order to control its own fate, Taiwan has no alternative but to maintain its military readiness and strengthen its strategic ties with major powers such as the United States (Wu and Huang 1996: 223).

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