

The China-Taiwan Conflict: Trademarked by Traditional Security

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Old-Fashioned Approach

Unfortunately, the world we live in is not completely altruistic. Within the international system, states will inherently pursue goals for their own self-interest. Survival comes first and foremost – thus, states will do as much as they can do secure their existence. One approach to this is through traditional security. The theory of traditional security is highly applicable to the conflict between China and Taiwan. Traditional security has been around for a very long time and has roots in Westphalia. It serves as the security and actions a government takes to physically protect the sovereignty and existence of its state. Generally, it has to do with measures which deter attacks on the state. Approaches vary but mainly have to do with building the confidence/security of one's own state, while also desecuritizing the other state.

The Rocky History

Off and on in the early to mid-1900s, China faced civil war between the Communist party and the Nationalists. The Nationalists, who were supported by the United States, eventually faced defeat and much of the party fled to Taiwan under the leader Chiang Kai-Shek. The People's Republic of China instilled the One-China policy in which the U.S. was not supposed to recognize Taiwan as its own sovereign state. There was an eventual shift to democracy in the 1990s. Eventually, the U.S. Speaker for the House of Representatives – Nancy Pelosi, went to Taiwan which, from China's perspective, violated their policy. Thus, China surged forth with military and political aggression towards both the United States and Taiwan.¹ The tensions have continued to rise as the U.S. (along with other allies) officially recognized Taiwan as a sovereign nation.

¹ De Witte, pg. 6

Fortification Against the Threat

China has refused to accept the parting of Taiwan from its homeland, and instead has chosen to induce fear mongering tactics on the state. In the beginning of this year, roughly 20 Chinese aircrafts crossed the [imaginary] buffer zone of the Taiwan Strait, and Taiwan responded by ordering more weapons from the U.S, along with attempts to further domestic production of weaponry.² China has clearly, and literally, crossed a boundary which in turn put the Taiwan into a defensive and threatened position. In order to feel more secure, Taiwan turned to stockpiling more weapons. This is an example of traditional security because the sovereignty and existence of Taiwan is under threat and in response, they have improved military tactics and weapons to secure the state from the enemy. Realistically, China is quite a worrisome foe to face due to their population size and military capabilities, so it makes sense for Taiwan to respond in a traditional manner. Small countries may be able to defend themselves from larger countries if they are able to have a stronger defense compared to offense, particularly with nuclear weapons.³ The procurement of more long-range missiles by Taiwan in attempt to ward off China's attack is a clear response to the sentiments of hostility. Although Taiwan may not want to use destructive military elements against China, if it comes down to national sovereignty and security, they would have no other choice.

The Security Carousel

Each time that China takes another step forward to intimidate Taiwan, Taiwan launches forth in a similar manner to increase their own security against China. If Taiwan was to sit and let China bully them, their existence would be at stake. On the other hand, if China was to let Taiwan become more and more secure, then they would not have a chance at winning back what is 'rightfully' theirs. A reduction in U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and a tougher PRC response to arms sales would be risky to whoever initiates the change.⁴ Since both states are attempting to secure their prospective existences and national interests against the other, they get stuck in a continual loop of trying to one-up each other. In reality, it is a perpetual motion of one step forward and one step backward – the security dilemma.

As China beings to gain on Taiwan, Taiwan does something to secure their stance, and it goes on and on. No state can ever feel entirely secure in a world with power competition, and so

² AP News, pg. 4

³ Glaser, pg. 189

⁴ Chen, pg. 222

the cycle of power and security accumulation is on.⁵ In traditional security, attention and focus is poured into military capabilities to guard territory, sovereignty, and the all-around existence of a state. Even when there is no immediate and daunting threat, there is always a looming sense of competition and the need to be more fixed than the. Traditional security emphasizes military capabilities to protect territory and sovereignty. In the China-Taiwan conflict, both sides, especially Taiwan, feel the need to enhance security. China's attempts to intimidate lead Taiwan to bolster its military, amplifying the security dilemma. Furthermore, China sees Taiwan as a part of its cultural and historical identity. When China makes a move to increase its own security, this can lead to misperception by Taiwan which then causes an escalation of the threat. If Taiwan takes a security measure by China as being a threat to their own state, then they will retaliate in their own way. This causes a pattern of increasing and consequential decreasing of one's own security.

Conclusion

Given these points, the China-Taiwan conflict is a great example of traditional security, being that it deals with threats of sovereignty, military capabilities, and the security dilemma. China is threatening the autonomy of Taiwan by using military might, and also by threatening physical violence with weapons. In response, Taiwan is increasing their security by obtaining more weapons and having nuclear in an attempt to prevent China from attacking. When both states attempt to counter the other's actions again and again, there is paradox in the form of a carousel – the security dilemma.

⁵ Herz, pg. 157

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