

China-Taiwan Impasse Conflict Analysis

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Introduction: Process, emotions, and identity play critical roles in negotiations. When not properly examined or appreciated, they can prevent effective conflict resolution; when properly understood, they can be used as tools to move beyond a negotiation impasse. Drawing on contemporary negotiation theory, this paper offers practical recommendations for the Biden Administration to craft an ambitious foreign policy to promote a more productive dialogue between the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan) to help resolve the status of Taiwan and its relationship with China. "The Problem" section introduces the historical and political context of the China-Taiwan impasse and articulates the specific negotiation problem. "Diagnoses" identifies the three main rational, emotional, and identity issues that currently prevent the establishment of constructive negotiation. "Tactics," proposes a theory-based strategy for addressing each diagnosis and recommends specific tactics the United States government (US or USG) can deploy to execute the strategy. The paper concludes with a discussion of "Moral Considerations" that the United States must navigate to address an important moral dilemma raised by the conflict and a "Summary" that highlights main points of the essay.

The Problem: The relationship between the USG and the PRC will shape international relations in the 21st century. How — and whether — two countries with such different histories, cultures, and political philosophies can navigate the challenges and disagreements of coexisting as "Great powers" will determine whether the global community will thrive through cooperation and agreement or deteriorate into hostility and antagonism. The status of Taiwan and its political, economic and military relationship with the PRC offers an increasingly urgent test of the

US-PRC relationship, representing the most politically persistent and militarily sensitive conflict since the geopolitical superpowers established formal ties over 40 years ago. This fundamental disagreement over Taiwan's sovereignty — which reflects profound conflicts between the countries' conception of independence, self-determination and human rights — has the potential to escalate at any moment into military confrontation. As Taiwan's most powerful benefactor and ally, the United States must do everything in its power to avoid such a disastrous outcome. However, avoiding violence is not enough. While promoting a sustainable peace in the Taiwan Strait, the US must also continue to promote democratic values and protect international allies, a particular challenge in an environment where US moral leadership has been called into question over its withdrawal from Afghanistan and its acceptance of Chinese restrictions in Hong Kong. Apart from its own challenges as an honest broker, the primary obstacle preventing the US from achieving this goal is that Chinese and Taiwanese policymakers are not negotiating effectively with one another. This paper suggests steps the President and his Administration should take to facilitate a lasting agreement between Taiwan and China, de-escalate tension between the US and China, and reassert US leadership in the global community.

Without historical context, it's difficult to understand why the United States remains so invested in Taiwan's future that it might be willing to harness its military might against a nation that contains the world's largest population, controls the world's second largest economy and maintains an army equipped with nuclear weapons (Bergsten 169). The United States has strong economic and political reasons to care about the future of Taiwan and protect it from becoming forcibly re-unified with China. These interests include 1) upholding the US's long standing commitments to allies in Asia in order to maintain credibility as a Great power in the region (and beyond), and 2) protecting the status of Taiwan as a thriving democracy to demonstrate

American support for universally recognized human rights, including the right of self-determination.

The US relationship with Taiwan is the outgrowth of historic American opposition to Communism around the world. Modern Chinese history can be said to have begun from the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), led by Mao Zedong, and the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), led by Chiang Kai-shek. Following World War II, the US supported the nationalist forces as they fought unsuccessfully for control of the country, retreating to the island of Taiwan in 1949 (Bergsten 170).

For decades following the defeat of the KMT, the US supported the government in Taiwan while isolating the PRC politically and economically. The US refused to recognize Communist control over the mainland. Politically, it blocked China from joining the international community by supporting Taiwan as the representative of China in the United Nations. Economically, the US imposed a trade embargo on China and its goods following China's entry into the Korean War ("U.S.-China"). Militarily, the US was the primary supplier of military equipment to Taiwan and established a mutual defense agreement under which the US promised to defend Taiwan if attacked (Hickey).

The growing size and importance of the PRC to the global community forced changes to US policy and challenged the US relationship with Taiwan. The US rapprochement with the PRC famously began as a result of the recognition of common interest — sports — through the vehicle of "ping pong diplomacy" when, in the early 1970's, the US national Table Tennis team received an official invitation to visit China (Andrews). China and the US finally normalized relations in 1979, when the US agreed to alter its official ties with Taiwan by adopting the "One China" policy, a diplomatic framework that affirms the PRC as the only legal government of

China and acknowledges China's position that Taiwan is a part of China (Hickey). At the same time, the US refused to abandon its relationships and commitment to Taiwan. While the US maintains strong economic relationship with the island and close political relationship with the government, the US military position toward Taiwan is one of "strategic ambiguity" (Hickey). This was codified when the US Congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which:

Promotes the maintenance of economic linkages and "unofficial" political ties [and] . . . provides a U.S. president with the option of going to war to protect Taiwan. It does not contain an iron-clad security guarantee. Unlike the mutual defense treaty, however, the TRA cannot be abrogated by a president – a president must seek Congressional approval to abandon Taiwan. (Hickey).

Essentially, the policy served as formal recognition that the great powers "agreed to disagree" about the status of Taiwan. Each party stated its position, but did not articulate the actions they were prepared to take to advance (or defend) it.

Diagnosis (Focusing on Positions, not Interests): For more than 70 years, leaders in Taipei and Beijing have made no progress to stabilize their relationship or resolve their disagreement over the status of Taiwan. While "strategic ambiguity" has prevented military escalation, it has also paralyzed negotiation and resolution, because it has permitted the parties to lock themselves into incompatible positions that limit their ability to negotiate constructively. In its current dynamic, the conflict between China and Taiwan seems intractable.

China insists that Taiwan is a "breakaway province" that must eventually be reunified with the mainland. In October of 2021, President Xi summarized China's position towards Taiwan, telling an audience, "The historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled, and will definitely be fulfilled" (Garcia). These remarks struck a slightly gentler note than his remarks in July of this year, when Xi harshly promised to "smash" any attempt at formal Taiwanese independence (Garcia).

On the other hand, the current Taiwanese government and a majority of Taiwanese people insist that Taiwan is *already* separate from China — regardless of whether independence is ever officially declared (“Taiwan Already”). In response to President Xi’s remarks in October, Taiwan President Tsai stridently claimed that “there should be absolutely no illusions that the Taiwanese people will bow to pressure.” She insisted, “This is because the path that China has laid out offers neither a free and democratic way of life for Taiwan, nor sovereignty for our 23 million people” (Cheung). Taiwan rejects unification. Separation is equally unacceptable to China.

This ideological impasse forms the heart of the conflict. By focusing on each other's positions, the two countries have painted themselves into separate negotiating corners that prevent them from working together constructively to resolve the dispute.

Diagnosis (Lack of Affiliation): Even if Taiwanese and PRC leaders began to appreciate each other's interests instead of their positions, the history of hostility between Taiwan and China presents obstacles to reaching agreement. The adversarial relationship of more than 70 years between the leadership of Taiwan and China has fostered suspicion, mistrust, and an entire “cultural infrastructure” that depends on the continuation of the conflict and the related conflicting positions. In June 2016, China suspended diplomatic relations with Taiwan, after newly-inaugurated President Tsai refused to accept that Taiwan and the mainland are part of a single Chinese nation (Hernández). This concept of “One China” stems from the 1992 Consensus, an agreement between Taiwan’s former governing party KMT and representatives of China’s PRC that became the basis for China-Taiwan relations (Hernández). When President Tsai refused to endorse the One China Policy, China cut off cross-Strait communication (Hernández). Without open channels of communication, trust between the two nations diminishes and the threat of military intervention escalates. The consequences of this dangerous new reality were

exemplified in October 2021, when scores of Chinese fighter jets and war-planes flew over Taiwan in what was labeled a “military exercise” but could also be viewed as an intimidation tactic (Tharoor). As such confrontations continue to escalate, the likelihood grows that miscalculation or misjudgment will lead to war. There is “very little insulation left on the wiring in the relationship,” Former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel observed, “and it’s not hard to imagine getting some crossed wires and that starting a fire” (Tharoor). The absence of affiliation among Taiwanese and Chinese leaders necessarily leads to a bad working relationship which ultimately makes the negotiation process more difficult.

Diagnosis (Using Identity Politics to Divide): A major obstacle preventing authorities in Beijing and Taipei from bridging their divide is that leaders of both nations are leveraging identity politics against the other in order to gain political support. By highlighting the differences between the PRC and Taiwan to establish national identity, both governments make it harder to acknowledge common ground and advance common interests as ethnic Chinese. PRC leaders reinforce the Chinese nationalist identity by perpetuating the narrative that the CCP restored Chinese power after centuries of humiliation inflicted by foreign imperialists (Yeung). The leaders then leverage this identity to mobilize popular support for the reunification of China and Taiwan. For example, in a recent October 2021 speech President Xi proclaimed that separatism was “the most serious hidden danger to national rejuvenation” (Garcia). For their part, Taiwanese DDP leaders have similarly worked to strengthen a distinct Taiwanese nationalist identity through a process of “de-sinicization” which includes the addition of “Taiwan Studies” to school curricula, promotion of Taiwanese literature, and insertion of the word “Taiwan” on passports (Chang). The widespread adoption of this new identity is reflected in how people from

Taiwan categorize their nationality. A 2015 survey conducted by the Institute in Political Science at the National Sun Yat-Sen University found that 74% of Taiwan's citizens consider themselves to be only Taiwanese whereas a mere 0.6% consider themselves to be only Chinese (Li).

Taiwanese leaders have cultivated a national identity by rallying their constituents around independence from China.

Tactics to Focus on Interests, not Positions: The United States is well placed to reframe the conflict and break the negotiating logjam. As a facilitator, the US should help Chinese and Taiwanese leaders establish a more effective negotiation process by supporting the transition from positional bargaining to interest-based negotiation. While the conflicting positions of the two nations leave them at an impasse, looking behind each country's positions to their interests creates room for possible solutions (Getting to Yes, 42). Taiwan's interests lie in sovereignty; they want to be able to exercise their right to self-determination, maintain their democratic political system free of PRC control, and grow their international ties (Bergsten 178). The PRC interests lie primarily in status; they want to overcome the shame of historical foreign subjugation, reinforce their current position as a global power on the international stage, and expand their economy by increasing cross strait trade and investments (Bergsten 171). Because each interest can be satisfied with many different positions, it should be possible, though challenging, to identify a solution that reconciles the interests of both parties. However, the interests mapped out above do not encapsulate the totality of major concerns on either side. The United States must develop a better understanding of these interests before leaders can begin to look for a solution.

As part of its facilitation, the United States can work to better understand the nuances of both sides' interests by taking steps to spark more dialogue with both China and Taiwan. For

example, the U.S. Department of State's Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs should organize outreach projects with the purpose of clarifying the interests of people in China and Taiwan, from government leaders to everyday citizens. The Office could bring together Chinese-speaking American bureaucrats, academics and businessmen to travel to China and Taiwan to gain better awareness of the current political atmosphere. Because members of this group would not be high-level officials, they would be able to speak candidly about the current conflict without the pressure or responsibility of representing the US or its foreign policy. Additionally, because participants' sole responsibility would be to gain a better understanding of each country's interests rather than to negotiate a solution, people in both China and Taiwan should likely be more willing to engage with them.

Tactics to Build Affiliation: The United States should encourage China and Taiwan leaders to build affiliation and strengthen their relationship (Beyond reason, 52). To achieve this goal, the U.S. needs to take more responsibility for mediating the dispute in order to reopen cross-strait communication channels. The Reagan administration's "Six Assurances" made to Taiwan outline that the United States "will not play any mediation role between Taipei and Beijing" (Blackwill). This policy was made in an effort to prevent the U.S. from becoming actively involved with the conflict. It has clearly been unsuccessful. Since the U.S. is already playing a critical role in the conflict and has a clear interest in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, it makes sense for the U.S. to promote the resumption of cross-strait negotiations and act as a third-party mediator. The U.S. has open communication channels with both Taiwan and China and should convey information between the countries.

Additionally, the United States should facilitate private meetings of subcommittees made up of Taiwanese and Chinese officials (Beyond Reason, 67). These representatives would work

together to brainstorm solutions for specific issues. Subcommittees could be established on divisive topics directly related to the conflict itself like international relations, trade, and sea control in the Taiwan strait. These committees would work to reduce the structural divide by bringing both sides of the table together in a private setting, where representatives do not have the pressure of making binding commitments. While representatives on both sides may be reluctant to publicly distance themselves from their official positions, they might be more willing to privately consider alternative interest-based solutions.

Tactics to Use Identity Politics to Unify: The Taiwan conflict will never be peacefully resolved until leaders of both countries agree that their citizens benefit from recognizing some elements of common identity (Negotiating the Nonnegotiable, 119). The United States is well placed to support efforts to push Taiwan and China to reverse the current path and deploy identity politics to achieve more inclusive relations. In order to do so, however, the United States must itself acknowledge the reality of the current political landscape.

First, policymakers must accept the reality of China's power and its opposition to Taiwanese sovereignty. Second, they must understand that simply abandoning support for Taiwan is not an option since it would irreparably damage America's reputation for moral and political leadership around the world, particularly in light of recent events in Afghanistan. Third, unity achieved by China through coercion or force against Taiwan is different from unity achieved through cooperation — the first should be prevented, the second encouraged. With this understanding, the United States should insist on peaceful unification across the Taiwan Strait while protecting human rights and democracy in Taiwan. This can only happen if the United States strengthens its current policy of public opposition to Taiwan's independence while simultaneously working with the PRC and, ultimately, Taiwanese authorities to develop and

publicize criteria for unification (Culver). These criteria must build on the painful recent experience in Hong Kong, where despite promises at the time the region was transferred to China, a policy of “one country, two systems” has given way to “one country, one system” (Editorial Board).

The United States must then prioritize improving the cultural relationship between Taiwan and China. Negative identity politics have trapped the two countries in a vicious adversarial dynamic (Negotiating the Nonnegotiable, 125). In order to escape this spiral, Taiwan and China must establish positive identities that are not defined in opposition to each other. As a third party facilitator, the United States can help foster cooperative relations by supporting bilateral cultural initiatives, such as education programs and cultural heritage projects. These initiatives increase person-to-person communication, create channels of dialogue, and promote collaboration on areas less polarized and sensitive than political relations. Cultivating positive interactions through art and culture builds mutual trust and empathy by establishing opportunities for bilateral engagement. These programs work to bridge the divide between the two populations with the goal of increasing public support for positive relations on all fronts, including political. Cultural engagement leads to a greater sense of unity, which ultimately decreases the power of identity politics on both sides.

Moral Considerations: When assessing how the United States should respond to the China-Taiwan impasse, policy-makers must grapple with the question of whether or not the United States has a moral obligation to protect Taiwan. On the one hand, some argue that any such obligation is outweighed by the obligation of the USG to protect its military from failure (Carpenter). Going to war with China over Taiwan means sending American troops to the frontlines of an explosive international crisis. The United States would be putting countless

American lives at risk for an overseas conflict where victory would be neither easy or certain. Moreover, the United States has a responsibility to reflect the will of its citizens and American sentiment is divided – over whether the US should threaten China by selling military equipment to Taiwan, let alone whether the US should intervene to defend Taiwan if China invades (Kafure).

Nevertheless, I believe the stronger moral argument lies in favor of a United States obligation to defend Taiwan. First, the United States has a responsibility to uphold its commitments. In 2016, President Obama argued this position in 2016 , “We, the People, recognize that we have responsibilities as well as rights; that our destinies are bound together; that a freedom which only asks what’s in it for me, a freedom without a commitment to others, a freedom without love or charity or duty or patriotism, is unworthy of our founding ideals, and those who died in their defense” (Young). Therefore, if the United States wants to maintain its moral standing, it needs to uphold its commitments to Taiwan.

The United States accepted two specific defense obligations in the 1979 TRA. First, the United States agreed to “provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character.” Therefore, if the United States ceased to sell defensive equipment to the Taiwanese military, leaders would violate this commitment. Second, the USG agreed to “maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security...of the people on Taiwan.” This promise is less absolute — the United States purposefully did not commit to defending Taiwan, but only to maintaining the ability to defend Taiwan.

However, while the United States has not made a public commitment of military action to defend Taiwan, the United States has made broad commitments in the past about the importance of protecting freedom and democracy around the world (Farquhar). Eisenhower touted this belief

in a 1953 speech, saying “As there is no weapon too small, no arena too remote, to be ignored, there is no free nation too humble to be forgotten...all free nations must stand together or they shall fall separately” (“Address”) His statements ring true today and the United States must reaffirm our commitment to freedom by defending Taiwan if China were to invade.

Summary: This paper uses the lens of rational, emotional, and identity-based negotiation theory to analyze the unstable status of Taiwan and the future of the China-Taiwan relationship. Drawing on the historical and political context of the impasse to explain the relationship between the three key players: China, Taiwan, and the United States, it identifies the obstacles to successful negotiation. These include a focus on positions as opposed to interests, lack of affiliation, and use of identity politics as means to create division. The paper then recommends how the USG can refocus the negotiation on interests, build affiliation, and use identity politics to foster unity. The tactics include (i) a new informal mechanism that sends Americans to engage citizens of China and Taiwan in order to better understand their interests, (ii) serving as a third-party facilitator of the negotiation process, and (iii) organizing bilateral cultural initiatives. The paper concludes with an exploration of America’s moral obligation to defend Taiwan and how that should influence the US role.

Appendix:

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II. Letter to Stakeholder

Dear President Biden,

I write to propose a more effective negotiation process for your Administration to resolve the status of Taiwan and establish cross-Straits stability between China and Taiwan. Specifically, while conventional policy wisdom argues that the doctrine of strategic ambiguity has maintained peace between China, Taiwan and the US in East Asia, I believe instead it has further exacerbated the current impasse by freezing diplomacy and preventing resolution of the conflict.

Applying modern negotiation theory taught by Harvard Professor Daniel Shapiro, the attached paper describes how the USG can facilitate a realistic if ambitious process toward resolution. The process deploys three techniques – reframing the negotiations from positions to interests, establishing greater sense of affiliation between the parties, and leveraging identity politics to help unify the parties.

I recognize the risks and challenges to your administration of pursuing this new approach. Recent PRC intervention in Hong Kong does not inspire confidence that China would honor commitments to respect human rights as part of a Taiwan transition. The fallout from US withdrawal from Afghanistan may, similarly, not inspire confidence that America will honor its commitments to Taiwan. However, the status quo is unsustainable and the potential military consequences would devastate the region, and, if the US intervenes, perhaps the planet.

Your expertise in foreign affairs makes you the right leader to prevent this crisis from escalating. I urge you to seize the moment.

Sincerely,

Linden Whitcomb Schrage