

Triangular Dynamics: U.S.-China Relations and Taiwan

The rise of China to the top echelons of the international system in a globalized world has multiplied and diversified the issues to be managed in U.S.-China relations. Nevertheless, one specific theme has demonstrated to be resilient to the passage of time, remaining as one of the most relevant concerns in U.S.-China relations and a matter of major interest to the international system in the 21st century: Taiwan. This paper explains the basic dynamics of this triangular relationship, suggests some conditions under which stability in the Taiwan Strait could be maintained, and explores the obstacles that might impede improvement in triangular dynamics.

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The relationship between the island of Taiwan and mainland China has been in a constant state of turbulent flux. Up to the Ming Dynasty, which governed China from 1368 to 1644 AD, the island had little contact with China. European countries, more specifically the Portuguese and the Dutch, entered and colonized Taiwan during the 16th and 17th centuries. It was under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 AD) that Taiwan came to be part of China in the form of a protectorate.² In 1895, as a spoil of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894, Japan colonized the island. Once World War II ended, and Japan withdrew from the island, Taiwan became part of the Republic of China, under Nationalist (Kuomintang) control.

During the civil war that ravaged China between the end of W.W. II and 1949 the United States supported the Nationalists, although ambiguously. When the Chinese Communists, under Mao Zedong, won the civil war in 1949, public opinion in the United States condemned the Truman Administration. The debate during those

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² Nevertheless, native uprisings were the norm during the Qing's reign over the island.

days centered on the question “Who Lost China?” Seen in the context of the early Cold War, it should not surprise then, that when the Nationalists, led by the head of the Kuomintang, Chiang Kai-shek, fled to the island of Taiwan escaping from Mao’s troops, the U.S. extended its help to Chiang’s anti-communist government. Chiang Kai-shek’s plan was to wait until the right moment to recover the mainland by an amphibious invasion. As it turned out, their new home ended up being a permanent one.

There was certainly an emotional link between the United States and Taiwan. Nonetheless, in 1950, the State Department had decided that it was not in their interest or capabilities to stop Mao from invading Taiwan –an attack which was to be expected.³ This posture changed significantly when, in June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, igniting the Korean War. This event proved, in American strategists’ minds, that communism was expanding aggressively. To protect allies *everywhere* was the new strategic calculus. This new grand strategy, and the consequent establishment of a treaty alliance in 1954, brought Taiwan into the West’s structure of containment against communism, *i.e.* Taiwan had gained a security guarantee from the U.S. –at least for the time being.

In certain ways this was a “Cold War illusion;” an illusion that came to an end during Richard Nixon’s tenure. Several conditions during the 1960s and 1970s

³ In the early Cold War, some American officials –the epitome was Secretary of State Acheson- thought China should be approached to create a Sino-Soviet split. These individuals were not successful, and the rapprochement would have to wait for another 20 years. See Warren Cohen, *America’s Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, Fourth Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

facilitated a shift in both U.S. and China's foreign policies. Some were strategically explicit, while others were arising from complex domestic considerations. The 1960 decade was complicated for Sino-Soviet relations. A former comrade ally had now displaced the U.S. as the most pressing security issue for China.⁴ Approaching the U.S. was a logical move to improve China's strategic position vis-à-vis the USSR and to prevent an eventual realignment between the U.S. and Russia. But the interaction with the Soviet Union was not the sole *leitmotif* for rapprochement. China wanted to positively transform its place in the world -e.g., by entering the United Nations. A "solution" to the Taiwan issue was also in the PRC's calculations. From the domestic side *"it is important to note that the Sino-American rapprochement came at a time when the Cultural Revolution and...Mao's continuous revolution have been declining."*⁵ The new image of the USSR and the ideological shock of Mao's fading continuous revolution shaped foreign policy-making in ways adepts of geopolitics may not appreciate.

But a change in Sino-American relations needed a twofold transformation. From the U.S. side, the Nixon Administration came into office also willing to pursue deep modifications in its international stance -which Nixon had announced in his electoral campaign. The theoretical foundation of its grand strategy was the existence of five major powers in world politics: the U.S., USSR, Europe, Japan and China. Plying in this scenario, and recognizing the USSR as the greatest foe, approaching China was a

⁴ The negative reactions of the Soviets to the Great Leap Forward; "Khrushchev's revisionism;" the 1969 border skirmishes; the dangerous assertiveness of the Brezhnev Doctrine; Soviet consideration of Mao Zedong as a danger in their search for "peaceful coexistence" with the U.S., *inter alia*, were some of the factors leading to a split.

⁵ Chen Jian, Mao's China and the Cold War (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 239.

reasonable move. Moreover, the U.S. wanted to improve its capacity to prevent a Sino-Soviet conflict. Washington was also willing to “*work together to settle arrangements throughout East Asia*” –basically, finding an exit to Vietnam, but also as a way to reduce the costs of heavy bombing in Indochina- while at the same time setting limits to communist expansion (Chicom) in East Asia.⁶ Finally, domestic politics, as preventing democrats from playing the China card first, influenced Nixon’s decision-making.

Thus, on 21 February, 1972, President Nixon went to China and met Chairman Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai: a Sino-American rapprochement had materialized.⁷ The dynamics initiated by this event reach up to the present day, significantly influencing triangular dynamics.

Despite normalization of relations with China, which were finally achieved in 1979, after 8 years of arduous negotiations, Taiwan was not “left alone in the jungle.” The Taiwan Relations Act, passed in 1979, allowed –or better, compelled- the U.S. to sell arms to the island to “guarantee” Taiwanese security.⁸ *Grosso modo*, these events represent the foundations of “strategic ambiguity” as a guiding policy to the U.S. on the Taiwan Strait. Strategic ambiguity consists in: “China is deterred from the use of force against Taiwan so long as American power and interests are engaged there and

⁶ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 50.

⁷ On rapprochement see: William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: New Press, 1999); Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1992) and James Mann, op cit.

⁸ The Taiwan Relations Act stated that: “the American recognition of the PRC rested on the expectation of a peaceful future for Taiwan...that the United States would provide defensive arms to the ROC so as to ensure that Taipei enjoyed a sufficient self-defense capability, and that the United States would maintain the capacity to resist any use of force or coercion that would threaten Taiwan’s security.” The support for the Act was overwhelming, with 339-50 in the House and 85-4 in the Senate. Harding, op cit., p. 86.

Taiwan does not declare independence; Taiwan is deterred from declaring independence due to credible Chinese threats to use limited but politically significant force in the face of any such declaration; and the United States is –or ought to be– dissuaded from tampering with this situation because it enables Washington to defend Taiwan, deal with China as a necessary and prudent on a range of issues, and minimize the possibility of war through miscalculation.”⁹

Although peace has reigned for quite a long time, history moves, and so will the triangular dynamics between the U.S., China and Taiwan. This *hot spot* –though cold for a while– has the potential to create a conflict in the Strait and destabilize the Asian region. But most relevantly, it can be, in a nutshell, a model of how China’s rise will fit in the overall international system where questions of regional war acquire a much more dangerous global scale. The importance of adroitly managing this triangular relationship should not be overstated. As Nancy Bernkopf Tucker observes: “Today confrontation in the Taiwan Strait represents the single most dangerous challenge for the United States in the world.”¹⁰

⁹ Robert S. Ross, “The Stability of Deterrence in the Taiwan Strait,” National Interest, No. 65, Fall 2001, p. 69. It must be said that this strategy has not been homogenous and strictly respected over time. Each new president since normalization has begun its tenure with an increased sympathy towards Taiwan in comparison to the previous Government. The example *par excellence* was the George W. Bush Administration, which devised a strategy of “strategic certainty,” in contraposition to strategic ambiguity. Nonetheless, every Administration –Bush’s is again an accurate case in point– ended up in strategic ambiguity as the overarching principle.

¹⁰ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 2009), p. 1.

Images and Interpretations of Triangular Dynamics

The normalization of U.S.-China relations –to which the unavoidable counterpart was de-recognition of Taiwan- was a complicated process. Congress, opposition politics¹¹ and public opinion (leaving Taiwan, “an old friend,” was hard for the American people) played a big role in retarding normalization from the American side.¹² Moreover, the aftermath of normalization was not without its critics.¹³ However, despite the complexity of policy-making on the issue of triangular dynamics, Americans have reached a position that, during stable times, tends to be quasi-consensual. A most accurate account of the U.S.’ posture towards triangular dynamics was given by Thomas Christensen, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs: “...the United States has an abiding interest in a stable and peaceful relationship across the Taiwan Strait...we look to Taiwan to adopt strategies toward cross-Strait relations that combine strength - both military and economic - with moderation...Without moderation, Taiwan's security will be compromised, no matter how much money Taipei spends on defense ...The United States has repeatedly made clear that the use of force would be unacceptable, and we have repeatedly called on Beijing...to reduce its armed threat to Taiwan...Taiwan's security is inextricably linked to the avoidance of needlessly provocative behavior...responsible leadership

¹¹ Illustrating is Henry Kissinger’s affirmation to Mao Zedong that: “If we had paid attention to them (domestic politics), Mr. Chairman, I’d never have been here on my first trip. Everything important has been done against their opposition.” William Burr, ed., op cit, p. 182.

¹² As Harding observes, “The American public, which had responded enthusiastically to the Nixon visit of 1972, now (1974) began to have second thoughts about China...by 1976 the proportion having favorable images of China fell to 20 percent...” Harry Harding, op cit., p. 47.

¹³ James Mann’s book, About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton, is a good example.

in Taipei has to anticipate potential Chinese red lines and reactions and avoid unnecessary and unproductive provocations.”¹⁴ It is difficult to find such an explicit and clear description of U.S. strategy; this is strategic ambiguity at its best.

But the American commitment in the Strait is not only sustained on strictly bilateral issues in the U.S.-Taiwan relation, but based also on more broad and varied concerns for U.S. foreign policy. Credibility of its commitments in Asia –being the most relevant the one with Japan-, the support for democracies, the importance of Taiwan as an economic partner of the United States, and evaluating China’s attitude in the Strait as a yardstick of its overall rise in the international system, *inter alia*, are some of the subjects behind U.S. security involvement in the Strait.¹⁵

China’s interpretations of triangular dynamics see Taiwan an integral part of her territory.¹⁶ In the words of Jiang Zemin: “Taiwan has been severed from the Chinese mainland since 1949. It remains the sacred mission and lofty goal of the entire Chinese people to achieve the reunification of the motherland and promote the all-round revitalization of the Chinese nation.”¹⁷ The “one China” principle is at the core of the matter, and nothing that diverges from this essential notion is

¹⁴ Thomas Christensen, “A Strong and Moderate Taiwan,” United States-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference, September 11, 2007.

¹⁵ See: C. Fred Bergsten, Charles Freeman, Nicholas R. Lardy, and Derek Mitchell, *China’s Rise: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), pp. 176-178.

¹⁶ As Bergsten et al. observe: “Taiwan represents something far more important than mere territory, It is the final piece in China’s attempts to overcome its ‘century of humiliation’ spanning the 19th and 20th centuries.” C. Fred Bergsten, et al., *op cit.*, p. 170. Jiang Zemin, Continue to Promote the Reunification of the Motherland, January 30, 1995.

¹⁷ Jiang Zemin, Continue to Promote the Reunification of the Motherland, January 30, 1995.

negotiable.¹⁸ There is also a strategic national security concern for Chinese strategists. Beijing fears that the island (sometimes named the “unsinkable aircraft carrier”) could be used as a strategic position for external powers to encircle, contain or even attack China. Finally there is the economic dimension: China and Taiwan are increasingly interdependent economically and the economic gains that China is getting from the commercial link with the island are substantial.

These are not just government perceptions. They are ingrained in Chinese people minds and in a certain nationalist ideology. As will be shown below, such a public dimension changes the equation for the CCP’s (Chinese Communist Party) decision-making.

Although China’s cross-Strait policy used to be focused on *reunification*,¹⁹ during Hu Jintao’s tenure there has been a process towards “peace, no independence” –i.e. maintaining the status quo- which has been preserved as the overarching strategy since then. In this context, China jealously keeps the use of force as a viable tool on which to draw upon should these principles not be respected.

Crossed interpretations –China’s image of U.S.’ interest in Taiwan and vice-versa- have “improved” qualitatively since the first decades of the Cold War; nevertheless, empathy is most of the times a scarce resource. It has been difficult for the U.S. to understand the sensitivity that Taiwan has in Chinese politics. At the same time, the PRC’s objective will to use force in the strait has been at times inaccurately

¹⁸ For the Chinese the one China principle supposes that “there is only one China, and Taiwan is a part of China.” The PRC “will never allow there to be ‘two Chinas’ or ‘one China, one Taiwan.’” Ibid.

¹⁹ Or at least explicitly focused; it should be acknowledged that despite current strategies towards Taiwan may vary, the ultimate goal of the PRC is reunification.

evaluated by the U.S. China, on the other hand, has been unable to grasp the essentials of American democracy; David Lampton makes the point in explaining Chinese policy-making during the 1995-1996 cross-Strait crisis:²⁰ “Whereas Americans can look at the preceding sequence of events and understand it as the incremental, unpredictable outcome of unanticipated electoral changes...Beijing saw it in a quite different light. It resembled a premeditated plot, a sequence of events that began with President Bush’s sale of 150 advanced jet fighters to Taiwan more than two years earlier and continued with the upgrading of the U.S.-Taiwan relations (the Taiwan Policy Review) in the fall of 1994.”²¹ Furthermore, the PRC has a tendency to overstate the influence of *asymmetries of interests* between China and the U.S. in the Strait,²² not seeing that triangular dynamics are not the only issue at stake for the U.S. in the Strait (see page 7).

Thus, although there has been some improvement in crossed interpretations, as will be shown below, there is still much to do in terms of mutual comprehension of the other’s aims in the Strait.

Finally, there are specific policies that each side would like the other to conclude. The most relevant are the ones linked to armaments. China would like the U.S. to stop selling arms to Taiwan, which as explained before are done under the Taiwan Relations Act. The U.S., on the other hand, would like China to stop its

²⁰ On the 1995-1996 crisis see page 10.

²¹David M. Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations, 1989-2000* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p. 50.

²² For example, during that same crisis, a senior Chinese diplomat told David Lampton: “It is bullshit that the U.S. will intervene...You are bluffing.” Which turn out to be dangerously wrong when U.S. sent two aircraft carrier groups to the region. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

deployment of missiles on Chinese coasts in front of Taiwan.²³ There are no signs of any near-term change on these.

Cyclical Dynamic or Learning Process?

One of the key points when analyzing triangular dynamics –and for that matter, in most of the complex issues in the international system- is to ask if there is evidence of a learning process in its management. The hunch here is that there *seems* to be some signs of a learning process in the management of triangular relations. A comparison between the 1995-1996 and the 2003-2004 cross-Strait crises can help to illustrate the point.

On May 1995, the Taiwanese President, Lee Teng-hui, was granted a visa to travel to the U.S.²⁴ Once in the U.S., Lee gave a defiant speech at Cornell University, his alma mater. He used the phrase “The Republic of China on Taiwan” –no doubt a sensitive phrase for China’s leaders- seventeen times.²⁵ As a response to this visit, between July 1995 and March 1996, China conducted a series of military exercises near Taiwan’s coasts, which consisted on “the largest and most complex amphibious manoeuvres ever undertaken in the Taiwan Strait.”²⁶ China’s motivation to act in this way was threefold: (a) coercive diplomacy would “discipline” anti-status quo

²³ See, Bonnie Glaser, “Chinese Missiles and Taiwan Theater Missile Defense,” American Foreign Policy Interests, December 1999, pp. 20-31.

²⁴ Chinese leaders were enraged with the prospect of an official visit by Lee to the United States: “The ministry (of foreign affairs) issued a strong protest on 23 May, which accused the US of ‘causing’ the creation of ‘two Chinas’, violating the ‘one-China’ principle of the three joint communiqués and jeopardizing Sino-US relations.” Bernice Lee, The Security Implications of the New Taiwan, Adelphi Papers No. 331, Oxford University Press, 1999, Chapter 4 p. 44.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

politicians in the island and dissuade Taiwanese citizens from supporting their postures; (b) It reaffirmed that China would not accept U.S. support to Taiwan's independence; (c) It was the outcome of Chinese domestic politics in which Jiang had a tough time managing hard-liners.

The U.S. response was to send two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region and to "warn" China that its actions were "reckless and provocative" and that there could be "grave consequences of any attack on Taiwan."²⁷ This was a serious crisis that presented a rapid escalation and it certainly was a bad prospect for the future of triangular relations.

While 2003 and 2004 were also difficult years in cross-strait relations, the mounting confrontation developed during this period was restrained without any use of military force or threats, as in the previous crisis. The comparison with the preceding crisis is interesting because the igniter of the confrontation was the same: Taiwanese domestic politics, which during 2003-2004 were as defiant to the status quo as Lee's actions had been, or even more.²⁸

Nevertheless, an important variable had changed qualitatively since the 1995-1996 crisis: Sino-American relations were relaxed and showed an optimistic outlook.

²⁷ Michael D. Swaine, "The PLA and Chinese National Security Policy: Leadership, Structures, Processes," *China Quarterly*, No. 146 (1996), pp. 313-314.

²⁸ Referendums and constitutional reforms were the core issues in Taiwanese domestic politics during this period. In the first half of 2003 Chen Sui-bian was campaigning for a referendum on participation in the World Health Organization (WHO) and a fourth nuclear plant. Beijing sees referendum proposals as prohibitive, since they think that any referendum can place a precedent for an eventual independence popular consultation. David Brown, "Pernicious Presidential Politics," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Oct. 2003), available online: http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/0303qchina_taiwan.pdf.

This was one of the factors permitting a peaceful development, converging in an adroit management of cross-Strait tensions.

During the 1995-1996 crisis U.S.' policy was not helpful. The visa given to Lee was issued by pressure from the Congress, while White House officials had assured the Chinese that *they* would not give Lee the visa –without explicit reference to what Congress could actually do, *i.e.* give him a visa by their own prerogative. Chinese leaders were not able to grasp the dynamics of democratic politics. Moreover, bilateral relations were strained since the Tiananmen incident, to which a Clinton Administration, with no coherent China policy, only made things worse. The 1990's were problematic years for Sino-American relations. Should a crisis in the strait occur, as it eventually did happen, Sino-American cooperation and bilateral management was not an option.

On the other hand, U.S. policy towards Taiwan during the 2003-2004 conflict was indeed encouraging from a Chinese perspective.²⁹ On December 2003, President Bush was publicly asserting a strong opposition towards Taiwanese anti-status quo policies.³⁰ The Administration had clearly understood the dangers of supporting such and “adventurous” leader as Chen Sui-bien. Moreover, as Christensen observes: “This assertive approach in Washington was noted in Beijing as well as Taipei as a force for

²⁹ The Bush Administration start-off was not so promising. In 2001, Bush publicly stated that the U.S. would do “whatever it took” to defend Taiwan, following the new preferred strategy of “strategic clarity.” David Sanger, The New York Times, April 26, 2001, Lexis Nexis. This policy was rapidly modified.

³⁰ “Bush against Taiwan referendum,” USA Today, December 10, 2003, p. 08a.

restraining President Chen's agenda."³¹ These positive dynamics were helped by broad good relations between the U.S. and China in world politics.

In conclusion, the convergence of both the U.S. and China on a status quo policy that permitted cooperation in restraining an eventual crisis, as during 2003-2004, and the recognition of both countries of the structural conditions that permitted this outcome, is a good prospect for the future management of tensions in the region. Sadly, prudence compels the analyst to accept that learning and optimism has its limits. Several obstacles can turn the whole picture upside down.

Obstacles for Improvement

The first place to start, but perhaps the most difficult one, is the macro-view of U.S.-China relations in the international system. Every single issue that involves these two countries must be seen through the lens of a vertical and dynamic scenario in which a country is rising *relatively* and the other is declining *relatively*.³² The basic assumption is that the broad relationship affects specific issues; thus, if the rise of China is accompanied by sustained positive and cooperative U.S.-China relations, the prospects for cooperation in the strait could be maintained or even increased. If, on the other hand, the rise of China establishes an aggressive competition between the U.S. and the PRC, the current positive context could negatively shift.³³

³¹ Thomas Christensen, "Taiwan's Legislative Yuan Elections and Cross-strait Relations", China Leadership Monitor, No. 13, Winter 2005.

³² For the notion of relative rise and decline, see Charles F. Doran, Systems in Crisis: New Imperatives of High Politics at Century's End, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001)

³³ Illustrating of the point in case is that: "One distinctive feature of [Sino-American] crises is that they all occurred at a time when...relations were antagonistic or in a state of "non foe, non friend." Wang Jisi and Xu Hui, "Pattern of Sino-American Crises: A Chinese Perspective," in Michael D. Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng, eds., Managing Sino-America Crises: Case Studies and Analysis (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2006), p. 134. The 1958 crisis

Grand strategies³⁴ in both countries could also change in the midst of vertical dynamics. If the U.S.' policy towards the region, and Taiwan specifically, would be modified, triangular dynamics could transform concurrently.³⁵ China could also change its policy in the strait -*e.g.* it could choose a return to a policy of aggressive reunification departing from its current status quo stance: cooperation in this context would be much more difficult.

In the short term, nevertheless, the biggest problems will probably be posed by domestic politics. Some of the patterns of the impact of U.S. domestic politics have been sketched above. The other two to consider are Chinese and Taiwanese domestic politics.

Chinese Domestic Politics

Two wide-ranging and inter-connected matters need to be highlighted in relation to Chinese domestic politics: nationalism and public opinion. Nationalism and public opinion have been playing increasingly important roles in Chinese foreign policy-making.³⁶ If nationalism, accompanied by an increment in public opinion influence,

exemplifies the role U.S.-China relations may have in a cross-strait conflict: "Mao's motivation in ordering shelling of the offshore islands during the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis was related to the U.S. invasion of Lebanon in July 1958 and the international tensions thereafter. He explained in an internal meeting: 'Honestly, this is an action we have been taking to aid the Arab people. This is meant to make the United States suffer. The United States has been bullying us for many years. When we have an opportunity, why don't we make them suffer a bit.'" Ibid.

³⁴ For the application of the term to China's rise see: Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2005.

³⁵ The U.S. could choose a more assertive and aggressive stance because it defines China's rise as a threat; it could decide for a process or withdrawal from the region because it feels it cannot cope with the costs of involvement in Asia, in between other possibilities.

³⁶ As Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen say: "As compared to that of the Maoist era, the domestic context of Chinese foreign policy in recent years has become both more important and more complex." Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen, "Domestic Context of Chinese

continues rising, Chinese political leaders will be less able to manage it and may need to accommodate to hard-line postures in specific circumstances.³⁷ This could ignite intra-party fractures which the leadership would find hard to suppress.³⁸ Intra-party divisions towards Taiwan could turn Chinese national politics in a negative force on the strait -even more if it is linked to U.S. support for Taiwanese independence- by also compelling the leaders to accommodate to a more hard-line intra-party stance.³⁹

Taiwanese domestic politics

In 1986, former Taiwanese President Chiang Ching-kuo launched a process of political reform that, ten years later, had established Taiwan as a democratic country. Taiwan's democratization has transformed the interplay between Taiwanese domestic politics, Chinese cross-strait policy, and U.S. strategy.

Leadership in Taiwan is now temporary, and so is Taiwan's policy towards the mainland. If an anti-status quo strategy -as the one followed, without much success, by Chen Sui-bian- pays electorally, some group in the political spectrum will pursue

Foreign Policy: Does Public Opinion Matter?," in David M. Lampton, ed., The Making of Chinese Foreign and National Security Policy in the Era of Reform (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 151.

³⁷ As Allen Whiting states: "At some point, assessing the risk of political loss through passivity may outweigh the risk of material costs in military action. Thus the perception of Taiwanese behavior and U.S. intentions can prompt Beijing to feel being 'backed into a corner.'" Allen Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan," International Security, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Autumn, 2001), p. 128.

³⁸ As Christensen notes: "Chinese elites are loath to appear weak and overly accommodating [on Taiwan policy-making]...Perceived high-profile weakness or failure on Taiwan policy could allow groups to turn allegedly patriotic fervor against the government. Such protests could provide real challenges to the government, which is very reluctant to crack down explicitly patriotic movements that employ nationalistic slogans..." Christensen, "Legislative..." p. 8.

³⁹ This trend was visible in the 1995-1996 crisis, as Shambaugh observes: "Jiang had no choice but to acquiesce to the 'stick,' backing the provocative exercises in July 1995 and March 1996 advocated by the PLA brass," David Shambaugh, "Containment or Engagement of China? Calculating Beijing Responses," International Security, Vol. 21, No. 2, (Fall, 1996), p. 191.

it. Change of moods in Taiwanese public opinion; particular leaders characteristics; *inter alia*, have the power in a democratic system to support certain policies that could wrench stability in the region and, consequently, place U.S.-China relations in a fragile situation.

Finally, prudence forces to acknowledge that entire periods in international relations are defined by simple, small and unexpected accidents.⁴⁰ In this sense, the role of accidents in the stability of the triangular relationship cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, accidents rarely act by themselves. They are mostly accompanied by big structural conditions that favor or constrain a conflict, such as the state of the relationship between the U.S. and China in world politics. As Kenneth Waltz, following Rousseau, observes: “that among particularities accidents will occur is not accidental but necessary.”⁴¹ In this sense, obstacles generated by accidents are to be expected; the crux of the matter is how to create the structural conditions to be able to manage them efficiently when they occur.

This complex web of issues conform the base of the triangular dynamics on which U.S.-China relations will have to adroitly navigate if they want to avoid a conflict over the Strait.

Concluding Remarks

Since the election of Ma Ying-jeou as President of Taiwan, in 2008, triangular dynamics have been more stable than ever. The United States maintains its policy of supporting the status quo by “strategic ambiguity.” China has strengthened its policy

⁴⁰ The inescapable example is the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which ignited, in a short-term causation sense, World War I.

⁴¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Man the State and War*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 2001), p. 182.

of “peace, no independence,” and Ma has proved to be a moderate leader, ready to deepen negotiations with the PRC while at the same time pursuing a status quo policy without senseless provocations *à la* Chen Sui-bien.

However, this should not be the moment to rejoice over the optimistic context.⁴² The three parties should make the most of this window of opportunity. China has been using its links with the Kuomintang to improve cross-Strait negotiations; the outcome to be pursued should be a peace agreement that protects cross-strait relations from the fragile dependence on both Taiwanese and Chinese domestic policies. On the other hand, both the U.S. and China should set cross-Strait stability as a core issue in the bilateral agenda, remembering that broad tensions in the bilateral relation can affect cross-strait stability and that third parties –in this case, Taiwan- can significantly define the character U.S.-China relations acquire in the next decades.⁴³

U.S.-China-Taiwan triangular dynamics are a special case in international politics. They are dependent on a series of variables that widely differ in origin, but are inextricably interconnected. This supposes that, having in mind the catastrophic consequences that mismanagement on the matter would bring upon the international system, triangular dynamics should be given special attention by the three parties involved. The tragedy is that, for now, peace and stability come by the hand of blurry ambiguity (see the concept of strategic ambiguity in page 5) -not a good companion

⁴² The recent dispute over the arms sell to Taiwan by the U.S. confirms that optimism is a fragile and always changing condition. See: Keith Bradsher, “U.S. Deal With Taiwan Has China Retaliating,” The New York Times, January 30, 2010.

⁴³ For the impact of third parties in U.S.-China relations see: David M. Lampton, Same Bed..., pp. 204-245.

of great power politics, and of always changing structural conditions. Nevertheless, if policy-makers, understanding the structural constraints and variables that move triangular dynamics, improve their learning process on cross-strait management, peace is not a delusional outcome.

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