

## Introduction: The "Taiwan Threat" Hypothesis

ANDREW D. MARBLE\*

As it has been for the nearly three decades since Sino-American rapprochement began, the Taiwan question remains the single greatest irritant and the most likely focus of armed conflict in what is arguably becoming the world's most important bilateral relationship.

—Jacques deLisle<sup>1</sup>

Taiwan . . . remains the most troublesome aspect of U.S.-China relations, and has real potential to bring the two powers into direct military conflict—a potential that is increasing.

—David Shambaugh<sup>2</sup>

Taiwan has the greatest potential for bringing China and the United States into military confrontation. Even if that confrontation falls short of full-scale war, it could ruin Sino-U.S. relations.

—Denny Roy<sup>3</sup>

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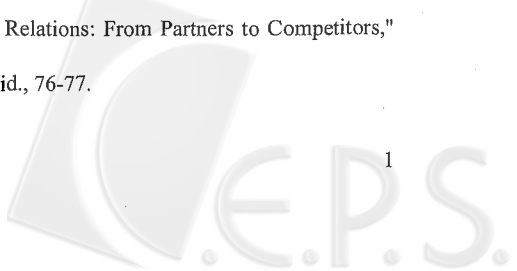
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<sup>1</sup>Jacques deLisle, "U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan: Sustaining the Status Quo," Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes, July 27, 2001.

<sup>2</sup>David Shambaugh, "Sino-American Strategic Relations: From Partners to Competitors," *Survival* 42, no. 1 (2000): 102.

<sup>3</sup>Denny Roy, "Tensions in the Taiwan Strait," *ibid.*, 76-77.



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As the preceding quotes testify, the "Taiwan Question" is an extremely important—and sensitive—issue in the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Succeeding administrations since the Nixon leadership have consistently taken great pains to treat this issue with the utmost caution and diplomacy.

On the one hand, Washington has provided arms of a defensive nature to Taiwan and has warned Beijing—via the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)—that "it is the policy of the United States . . . to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States,"<sup>4</sup> thereby warning Beijing of the possible repercussions to any use of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to determine Taiwan's final status.

On the other hand, U.S. presidents have both professed support for the principle of "one China" and proffered only carefully circumscribed military and political support to the island in order to discourage Taiwan from taking any moves that would incite China's wrath. Dennis Van Vranken Hickey has noted, for instance, that the 1979 House Committee on Foreign Affairs report that accompanied the TRA stated from the outset that "what would be appropriate action, including possible use of force in Taiwan's defense, would depend on the specific circumstances."<sup>5</sup> Even when the United States dispatched two air craft carrier groups to the Taiwan Strait during the 1996 missile crisis—the largest U.S. naval deployment in East Asia since the Vietnam War, then U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry also stated that ". . . any U.S. response to Chinese aggression towards Taiwan would depend on circumstances."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The Taiwan Relations Act, Sec. 2 (a) (4).

<sup>5</sup>*United States-Taiwan Relations Act*, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 96-26 (1979), as quoted in Dennis Van Vranken Hickey, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996: Implications for U.S. Security Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China* 7, no. 19 (1998): 409 n. 16.

<sup>6</sup>See Christopher Bodeen, "U.S. Doing Best for ROC, Lu Says," *China Post* (International Airmail Edition), December 19, 1995, 1, as quoted in *ibid.*, 407 n. 7.

For over two decades, Washington has been, for the most part, walking this tightrope of "strategic ambiguity"—providing warnings and expressions of support to both sides while not revealing how the United States would actually respond in the event of military conflict. To the surprise of many, therefore, in April of 2001, President George W. Bush had the following exchange in a televised interview with Charles Gibson, a reporter for ABC News:

**GIBSON:** I'm curious if you, in your own mind, feel that if Taiwan were attacked by China, do we [the United States] have an obligation to defend the Taiwanese?

**BUSH:** Yes, we do . . .

**GIBSON:** And . . .

**BUSH:** . . . and the Chinese must understand that. Yes, I would.

**GIBSON:** With the full force of American military?

**BUSH:** Whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself.<sup>7</sup>

Bush's remarks set off a firestorm of protests, with many charging the President with effecting a major change in U.S. policy. Beijing, to no surprise, quickly slammed this apparent shift in U.S. policy as a redirection "down a dangerous road."<sup>8</sup> Some domestic groups within the United States also sharply criticized Bush's policy articulation, arguing that should Taiwan provoke China—or even if Beijing should otherwise decide to attack Taiwan, the United States now seems committed to defending the island and bearing all the political, economic, and military costs that such a clash could entail. As one commentator warned:

Bush discarded [a nuanced foreign policy] and stated bluntly that the United States would do whatever was necessary to defend Taiwan from attack. Bush's statement replaces "strategic ambiguity with strategic clarity." . . . [Such a]

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<sup>7</sup>President George W. Bush tells ABC News' Charles Gibson about his first 100 days in office on Good Morning America, on April 25, 2001. Text of interview can be found at <[http://abcnews.go.com/sections/GMA/GoodMorningAmerica/GMA010425Bush\\_100days.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/GMA/GoodMorningAmerica/GMA010425Bush_100days.html)>.

<sup>8</sup>"Bush's Threat to 'Defend' Taiwan Is 'Very Dangerous,'" *People's Daily*, April 28, 2001, available at <[english.peopledaily.com.cn/english/200104/28/eng20010428\\_68865.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/english/200104/28/eng20010428_68865.html)>.

pledge to intervene to defend Taiwan increases the likelihood that the United States will someday end up in a catastrophic war with China.<sup>9</sup>

Responding to the heated reactions to Bush's statement, both the President and particularly the State Department have subsequently stressed on numerous occasions that the United States still calls for a peaceful solution to the Taiwan question. Bush has also emphasized that Washington continues to support the "one China" policy, clarifying for Beijing—and posing a warning to Taipei—that "a declaration of independence [by Taiwan] is not the one-China policy."<sup>10</sup>

One defense of Bush's "whatever it takes to help Taiwan defend herself" quote is that the statement was not a radical policy shift clearly in Taiwan's favor, but rather an attempt to move the tone of U.S. policy toward the cross-Strait issue back to the center. From this perspective, the interview was a case of a Republican president merely issuing a public statement of support for Taiwan to counteract Democratic president Bill Clinton's "Three No's" pronouncement—a statement that the United States would offer no support for Taiwan independence, no recognition of a separate Taiwanese government, and no backing for Taiwanese membership in international organizations in which statehood is a requirement—made in Shanghai in June of 1998.<sup>11</sup> This statement had raised sharp criticisms as well, being viewed by some in the policy and academic communities as an unprecedented and unnecessary shift toward a clearly pro-Beijing policy.<sup>12</sup>

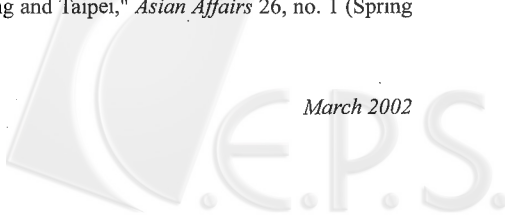
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<sup>9</sup>Ted Galen Carpenter, "Bush's Pledge to Defend Taiwan Goes Too Far" (Cato Institute, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>Bush April 25, 2001 live interview with CNN Correspondent John King. See Lexis/Nexis: CNN International Special Event, 11:30 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, April 25, 2001, Wednesday, Transcript #042500cb.k10.

<sup>11</sup>On the "Three No's," see, for instance, <<http://www.taiwansecurity.org/SCMP/SCMP-980701.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup>For one such criticism see Stephen Yates, "Promoting Freedom and Security in U.S.-Taiwan Policy," *Heritage Foundation Background*, no. 1226, available at <<http://www.heritage.org/library/background/bg1226es.html>>. For an alternative argument that the shift toward a more pro-China stance not only occurred much earlier (1996) but was also initiated by the U.S. Congress, see James C. Hsiung, "The U.S. 'All-Out Engagement' China Policy and its Implications for Beijing and Taipei," *Asian Affairs* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1999): esp. 28, 30.



Regardless of whether or not a major shift in U.S. policy has taken place, Bush's statement could be enough to create the perception that such a change has occurred—which, some argue, could have just as equally disastrous effects. The danger is that ". . . for the President to take a position that appears to suggest we [the United States] would use our own forces to defend Taiwan against Chinese attack is a dramatic shift, and could be read that way both in Beijing and Taipei."<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this special issue is thus to tackle the larger foreign policy question that will continue to plague the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangular relationship even long after this controversy over Bush's remarks has blown over: *What is the likelihood that the United States and China will come to a military confrontation over the Taiwan issue?* Stated in the most polemic of terms, should the United States be supplementing the "China threat" debate that first appeared in the mid-1990s<sup>14</sup> with considerations of a new "Taiwan threat"? Conversely, is any such concern merely a case, as argued by one China scholar, of many American analysts buying into "Beijing's tale of a Taiwan conspiracy to plunge America into war with China"?<sup>15</sup>

Rather than seeking to provide a definitive answer to this question, the goal of this introduction is more modest in scope: to highlight the complexity of this seemingly simple query. The main argument is that there exist four important dimensions of the "Taiwan threat" hypothesis—*empirical, subjective, normative, and causal*—that any discussion of this hypothesis must address. The seven articles that comprise this special issue will be reviewed in this context.

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<sup>13</sup>Time magazine correspondent Jay Branegan as quoted in "Why Bush Taiwan Comments Set Off a Diplomatic Scramble," *Time*, April 25, 2001, available at <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,107642,00.html>>.

<sup>14</sup>For a review of the origin of the "China threat" debate see Andrew D. Marble, "The PRC at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: Why the 'China Threat' Debate?" in Andrew D. Marble, ed., "The 'China Threat' Debate" special issue, *Issues & Studies* 36, no. 1 (January/February 2000): 1-18.

<sup>15</sup>Edward Friedman, "Chinese Nationalism, Taiwan Autonomy, and the Prospects of a Larger War," *Journal of Contemporary China* 6, no. 14 (1997): 10.

## The Empirical Question

From the empirical perspective, the "Taiwan threat" hypothesis is a probabilistic question concerning whether or not a specific event will occur. Policymakers, scholars, and even the business community wish to know "What are the odds that the Taiwan issue will bring about military conflict between the United States and China?" This topic has been the subject of countless analyses, and rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive and definitive answer, section one of this special issue—comprised of the first four articles—seeks to highlight the contours of part of the debate. *These four analyses examine the likelihood that the island will fulfill some of the key conditions which Beijing has previously stated would prompt China to use military force to "settle the Taiwan issue" once and for all.* Such conditions include if Taiwan seeks independence or prolongs unification (Emile Sheng), experiences severe domestic political or economic turmoil (Jih-wen Lin and Da-Nien Liu, respectively), or forms a close defense relationship with a third country (Richard Bitzinger).<sup>16</sup>

Emile Sheng's article approaches the independence/reunification question from the perspective of public opinion on Taiwan, drawing implications for likely actions by the ROC government. He notes that traditional articulations of public opinion—identifying a majority of support for the status quo with minority pro-independence and pro-reunification agitators on both ends of the spectrum—miss important nuances. More accurate is the characterization that people in Taiwan are either *rationally* or *affectively* predisposed to their preferences; affective supporters of either independence or reunification hold strong preferences for their views that do not fluctuate much despite external changes; rational calculators, however, change their attitudes with fluctuations in the surrounding environment. Applying this typology to public opinion polls on Taiwan reveals that (1)

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<sup>16</sup>These conditions have been highlighted, for instance, in Roy, "Tensions in the Taiwan Strait," 78. The main condition not taken up by this special issue is Taiwan's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Roy notes, however, that in recent years PRC statements have mostly centered on the unacceptability of formal Taiwan independence and foreign intervention.

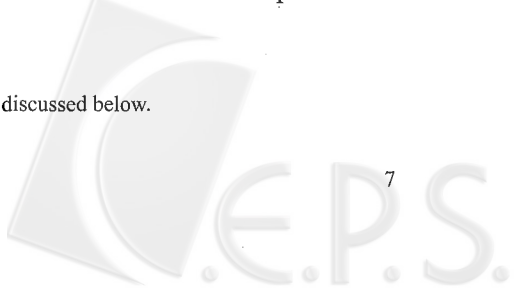
affective support for unification has decreased, (2) affective support for independence has increased, and (3) the number of those taking a rational approach has also increased.

Sheng does not believe, however, that the first two trends mean that Taiwan will increasingly adopt pro-independence policies. He argues that the decrease in affective unification supporters, when combined with an increase in affective independence supporters, should lead to more calm on the domestic scene as the nature of politics turns from being a combat between passionate unification vs. passionate independence supporters, to one of a minority of passionate independence seekers trying to rally a cautious middle-ground more concerned with means than ends. He adds that, given that the rational thinkers (now composing about one-half of the population) are the median and pivot voters on the island, the government cannot take provocative actions—either of a pro-unification or pro-independence nature—that will upset this group. Instead, Sheng argues that since taking power the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government has only pushed "localization" policies—such as adding the phrase "issued in Taiwan" to the ROC passport—that can be justified by plausible non-political reasons. To this argument, moreover, Sheng adds an institutional reasoning for moderation by the ROC government: in the December 2001 Legislative Yuan elections the "pan-Blue" (or unification-leaning camp) captured 50 percent of the seats while the "pan-Green" (or independence-sympathetic camp) garnered only 40 percent.

Sheng points out, however, that the 2004 presidential elections could prove a turning point in Taiwan's policies, noting that only if the DPP recaptures the presidency may the ROC begin to adopt policies that might raise the ire of the PRC. As another warning, Sheng states that some policy proposals from the individual level—such as DPP lawmaker Trong Chai's pushing for the passage of referendum laws permitting (reunification/independence) plebiscites—may occur despite the current cautious attitude of the DPP as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Sheng also argues that China could be tempted to be-

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<sup>17</sup>More implications of Sheng's analysis will be discussed below.



come more belligerent given that the increase in rational predisposition was due perhaps to PRC military exercises and threats of 1996. He warns the PRC not to push this strategy too hard, however, as excessive saber-rattling will only weaken the affective unification group and increase the number of those affectively supporting independence.

Jih-wen Lin, in turn, notes that while any moves toward independence can be firmly discouraged by external (i.e., U.S. and PRC) pressure, the threat of political instability on the island is more of a wild card. The soundness of Taiwan's political system depends for the most part on domestic factors that are less likely to be influenced by external actors, are more apt to change quickly as Taiwan continues to consolidate her democracy, and may thus prove destabilizing. Given the sudden fragmentation of the Kuomintang (KMT) in the post-Lee Teng-hui era and the corresponding rise of the People First Party (PFP) and the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), many observers both on and off the island are concerned about the potential for large-scale political chaos on Taiwan. The quick succession of premiers under President Chen Shui-bian has done nothing to dispel such worries of instability.

Lin thus examines the island's democratic stability, which he defines as the ability of a popularly elected government to make welfare-improving changes (i.e., to be responsive) while keeping itself irreplaceable (i.e., to endure). He examines the four main president-premier combinations since Taiwan adopted the semi-presidential system in 1997. Lin notes that both stability and responsiveness declined sharply as Chen took over the Presidential Office in May 2000. The Tang Fei cabinet under Chen was problematic given the ideological incongruence between the president and the parliament on many issues, regardless of the KMT-PFP coalition in the Legislative Yuan. Despite Chen's replacement of Tang with Chang Chun-ling and this new cabinet's less-confrontational operation style, the underlying fundamentals were the same as the Chen-Tang government.

The Yu Shyi-kun cabinet, however, has taken place in a new environment, and Lin is confident that this government will prove to be both increasingly stable and responsive. The first reason is that the president and the Legislative Yuan have finally gained a better understanding of the con-



tours of the power-sharing relationship in Taiwan's new democratic era. Second is the vast increase in seat share garnered by the DPP and the TSU in the December 2001 Legislative Yuan elections, thereby boosting ideological congruence. Third, now distinguished by the more radical TSU to the left, the DPP has become by default closer to the legislative median—i.e., closer to the status quo. President Chen, moreover, has been moderating his tone toward Beijing and, given that national security affairs are his exclusive domain, cross-Strait issues will unlikely weaken the government.

Lin's analysis suggests a variety of arguments of how this increasing stability is conducive to peaceful cross-Strait relations. First, the lack of political chaos on the island gives the PRC less excuse to invade the island. Second, political stability on Taiwan makes any such military action by the PRC more illegitimate and thus increasingly likely to be unacceptable to the international community, especially the United States. Third, while Taiwan's political structure can result in instability if both the executive and legislative branches are ideologically incongruent but neither is able to dominate the decision-making process, the inherent dangers in this scenario give strong incentives for any president—Chen Shui-bian included—to moderate policies and make changes in a slow and incremental manner.

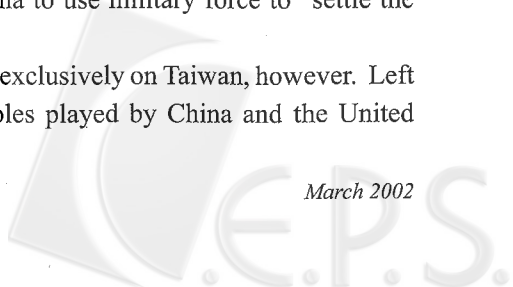
Moving then from the realm of political stability to the question of the island's economic health, Da-Nien Liu paints a dark picture of Taiwan's recent economic situation. He notes that the island has indeed experienced some of the worst economic indicators in the island's modern memory. These include unbalanced economic growth; the decline and exit from the island of such traditional industries as plastics, steel, and petrochemicals; competitive pressure from, and high levels of trade dependency on, the rising PRC economic juggernaut; and political difficulties in creating or joining regional trade agreements. Liu holds, however, that prospects for economic collapse are not great. The island possesses a significant reserve of economic strength due to decades of consistently high growth; Taiwan will reap the benefits of liberalization that World Trade Organization (WTO) membership brings; the island enjoys a solid high-tech foundation and an internationally recognized computer manufacturing base that together constitute a key link in the global production chain; and foreign di-

rect investment (FDI) or capital outflow has declined steadily since the mid-1990s. Liu points out that the key international, regional, and local economic institutions therefore predict that the island will enjoy positive growth rates in 2002, providing encouragement that the island's economy will indeed recover from the recent slump.

If neither political nor economic stability threatens to throw Taiwan's society into a chaos that might instigate military intervention by the PRC to re-impose order, what are the chances that increased security links between Taiwan and a third country—particularly the United States—may present a threat that in Beijing's eyes must be stopped by military means? Richard Bitzinger attacks this question from the perspective of the U.S. role in Taiwan's arms production and arms purchases. Despite being viewed with envy by other nations of Taiwan's size, the island's defense industry still faces severe production problems which force Taipei to look abroad for military support—via both arms and technology purchases. Bitzinger's analysis reveals two arguments why, generally speaking, China is unlikely to be spurred to military action by Taipei's forays abroad in search of military support. First is that the island has enduring deficiencies in terms of the defense industry's ability to absorb this foreign weaponry and technology—and therefore Taiwan's military is nowhere near being on a trajectory that would leave the PRC hopelessly behind. Second and more important, however, is that the U.S. and other arms suppliers have been careful to keep military support to Taiwan limited to what is necessary to help ensure the island's self-defense. This caution helps prevent military aggression on Taiwan's part, helps ensure Beijing that the balance of military power is not tilting too far in Taipei's favor, and saves "face" for China by not having to put up with a strong U.S.-Taiwan military alliance.

In sum, these four authors whose work comprises section one of this special issue are, in the main, quite optimistic. They do not believe that Taiwan is likely to fulfill some of the key conditions which Beijing has previously stated would prompt China to use military force to "settle the Taiwan issue" once and for all.

These four papers focus almost exclusively on Taiwan, however. Left out of the above analysis are the roles played by China and the United



States. What, for instance, are the actual determinants of any use of force by the PRC against the island? Clearly the PRC is not simply locked into responding along predetermined lines. Under what conditions, moreover, would the United States likely intervene if the PRC feels moved to attack? The remaining three dimensions will speak to these questions.

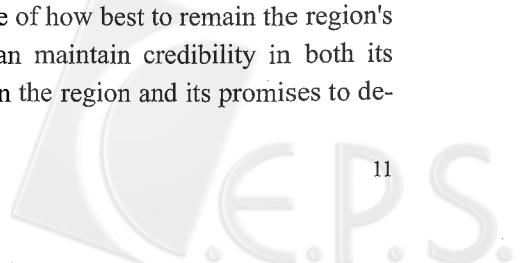
### **The Subjective Dimension**

A second important dimension is subjectivity: From which country's viewpoint should the issue be examined? All three—the United States, China, and Taiwan—are concerned with prospects for tension, military or otherwise, in the trilateral relationship; each, however, would ask slightly different questions and therefore interpret "threats" differently.

Beijing, for instance, may frame the question as: To what degree does Taiwan threaten to drag Washington into an issue (cross-Strait relations) that is not an American affair, thereby endangering U.S.-China ties? An alternative question Beijing may wish to ask is about an "American threat": To what degree is the United States likely to stop interfering in the cross-Strait relationship so the two sides can solve the issue without outside disturbance, thereby perhaps avoiding threats, or the actual use, of force?

Taipei, for its part, is bedeviled over many possible threats. Regarding U.S.-China relations, the question is usually turned around: How do warming/deteriorating ties between these two giants affect the island's interests? An alternative question is: Given that the PRC has never renounced the use of force as an option to settling the Taiwan issue, to what degree can Taiwan depend on the United States to counter the "China threat"?

While none of the articles takes up the question specifically from the PRC or ROC viewpoints, Alan Wachman examines the "Taiwan threat" hypothesis from the perspective of the United States. He argues that the United States views the question as one of how best to remain the region's hegemon, and of how Washington can maintain credibility in both its warnings to China not to upset peace in the region and its promises to de-



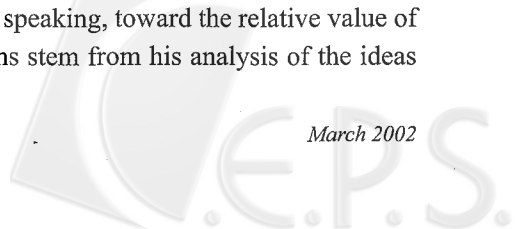
fend American allies in the region. When making policy vis-à-vis Taiwan, the United States does not consider the fact that the island is a democracy or that Taiwan owes its very existence to U.S. protection and support. Wachman thus articulates a set framework of issues that determine how the United States views the "Taiwan question" and thus how Washington would respond to any conflict between China and Taiwan.

Differences in country viewpoint, moreover, can have important ramifications for triangular relations. Emile Sheng reminds us that the differences between how Americans and those on Taiwan view the problem can make the Taiwan Strait a more dangerous place. On the Taiwan side, he argues that there has been a steady decline in numbers of the segment of the population which has traditionally been most concerned with both PRC military threats and the possibility of weakening support from the United States; he notes that at the same time there has also been growing public opinion optimism on Taiwan over the issue of U.S. support for the island. This optimism contrasts sharply, he warns, with the startling pessimism displayed by opinion leaders in the United States over the value of intervening to support the island in the event of tension with China. Differences in perception, moreover, often lead to unfortunate consequences in international relations.

### **The Normative Concern**

A third concern is a normative one. The term "threat" suggests that some injury may come about to something of value. That the Taiwan issue could "threaten" U.S.-China relations suggests that Washington-Beijing ties are either important or "good." Necessary, therefore, is to consider that different groups within any one nation can place different value on varying foreign policy options.

Andrew Marble's piece has sought to demonstrate the wide variety of such opinions that exist in the United States. He finds four main orientations that Americans hold, generally speaking, toward the relative value of China vs. Taiwan. These orientations stem from his analysis of the ideas



embodied in common realist and liberal arguments found in the relevant general academic and policy debates. Placed in order from least- to most-likely to be supportive of Bush's "whatever it takes to help Taiwan defend herself" quote, the orientations are as follows. The first is *international liberalism* which, when a choice must be made between the two, places regional peace and China's future democratization ahead of protecting Taiwan's democracy. Second is *international realism* which holds that U.S.-China relations should be determined solely by the logic of great-power competition—Taiwan has no inherent importance outside of this larger context. If expediency calls for sacrificing the island for the greater-power competition game that is international relations, then so be it.

While the deciding factor of the internationalist group is the international system, a second group, the sentimentalists, places a much larger value on Taiwan's achievements. The third orientation is thus *sentimental liberalism* which believes in, and actively seeks to promote institutional and other methods of, cooperative and pacific international relations and the democratization of China; at the same time, however, this perspective sees no reason to sacrifice an existing democracy (Taiwan) for the sake of a potential future one (the PRC). The fourth and final category is *sentimental realism* which argues that U.S. armed forces must protect the island because an expansionist PRC is a threat to American interests; this realist argument is, oddly enough, combined with liberal principled beliefs: that Taiwan's democracy, respect for human rights, and other accomplishments are themselves of value and thus worthy of protection.

Marble's analysis warns, however, that the above four categories reflect only general orientations. Other ideational differences about cause-effect relations (such as those embodied in strategy debates), principled beliefs, and the like can also result in the ultimate policy preferences within these four general categories being radically different. Also of note, moreover, is that ideational complexity also results in actors with radically different world views being united over a policy preference due to the intervening preferences imposed by ideas. By dividing like-minded people and bringing together normally opposing orientations, ideas can therefore help explain why politics makes for such strange bedfellows. Marble warns, in

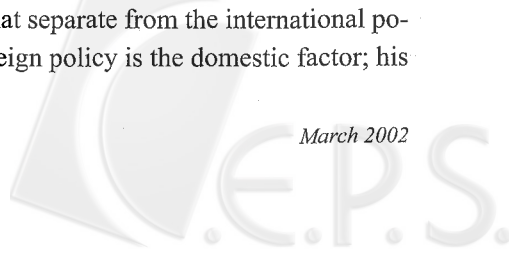
conclusion, that whether or not Taiwan threatens U.S.-China relations depends therefore on the ideas and values of the Americans to whom the question is posed.

### The Causal Focus

The fourth and final dimension is the cause of the "Taiwan threat." One view warns that the island could play the role of "troublemaker" by undertaking provocative actions that would instigate a war—or would at least highly strain relations—between the United States and China. This would be the so-called case of the "Taiwanese tail wagging the American dog"—with an actor (Taiwan), and the acted-upon (China and then the United States). The main opposing view would hold that in terms of international relations, Taiwan is a "shrimp among whales" and has very little ability to influence either its neighboring Great Powers or even the island's own future.

On the question of what would be the causal factor in any U.S. intervention in a cross-Strait conflict, Alan Wachman states firmly that Taiwan would not be at fault. He argues that all countries are responsible for determining their own national interests and actions. The United States is free either to intervene or to refrain from taking any action whatsoever in any Taiwan Strait crisis. This decision, moreover, cannot be known in advance. Wachman raises many examples that demonstrate how, despite commitments made or convictions held by many American presidents throughout history, the ultimate policy decisions made by the United States have depended on the state of many different variables at the time the decision was made. Thus he sees little chance for Taiwan to manipulate U.S. sentiments—including Bush's pledge to do "whatever it takes to help the island defend herself"—in a way that could drag the United States into a war with the PRC against Washington's own better judgment.

The article by Szu-chien Hsu adds yet another layer of complexity to the question of causality. He notes that separate from the international political determinants of a country's foreign policy is the domestic factor; his

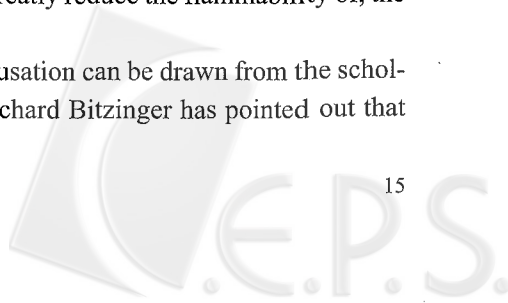


article examines how six characteristics of domestic politics in the PRC work to help shape and sometimes even determine Beijing's policy toward Taiwan. Chinese politics is marked by the unique factors of collective leadership, succession politics, a high level of bureaucratization, high levels of nationalism, legitimacy problems, and central-local (especially central-minority) tensions; Hsu's analysis shows how these factors help lead Beijing to adopt hawkish and inflexible policies toward Taiwan.

He draws from this analysis two arguments regarding the issue of what causes cross-Strait tension. First, given that the incentive matrix created by Chinese domestic politics leads the PRC leadership to tend toward a more combative and unyielding position over the issue of Taiwan, the PRC clearly shares in the responsibility for creating the "Taiwan problem" in the first place. A different set of domestic political institutions in China could result in Beijing adopting a more flexible and pacific stance toward Taiwan. As a result, the PRC would be less likely to characterize certain actions taken by Taiwan as provocative, thereby diminishing cross-Strait tensions and the chance for Sino-American conflict.

Interestingly, Hsu's second argument is that from the level of the individual, we should be cautious in blaming Chinese leaders as being personally responsible for cross-Strait tension. An example is illustrative. Hsu notes that political power is not institutionalized in China and therefore jockeying for power is always an undercurrent of collective leadership in the PRC. This means that no individual leader is likely to go out on a limb to begin under-the-table negotiations with Taiwan. Striking a deal with Taiwan requires some degree of deviation from the accepted policy stance—and this deviation, Hsu points out, would open up the leader to criticism and attack from others in the top leadership. From a policy perspective, Hsu's analysis opens up interesting research possibilities: future analyses could focus on examining and comparing the incentives and disincentives for leaders from all three countries—the United States, Taiwan, and China—to strike a deal to solve, or at least greatly reduce the flammability of, the "Taiwan issue."

A final insight on the issue of causation can be drawn from the scholarship found in this special issue. Richard Bitzinger has pointed out that



the United States is all but the sole supplier for Taiwan's defense needs, thereby making Washington in effect the *de facto* guarantor of Taiwan's security. One could extend this line of thinking to argue that if China allowed more variation in the provision of Taiwan's arms or general defense—or if Washington more actively pushed other countries to play a role in Taiwan's defense, any outside response to cross-Strait conflict would likely face a collective action problem. Put differently, a Taiwan that had to exert considerable effort in lobbying many countries in order to maintain her defenses could prove to be much more risk-averse. This point helps to reveal the complexity of attempting to determine causation: the behavior of all three actors in the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle is mutually influencing.

### Conclusion

Rather than seeking to provide a definitive answer to whether or not a "Taiwan threat" exists, this introduction has sought instead to highlight the complexity of this seemingly simple query. The main argument is that there exist four important dimensions of the "Taiwan threat" hypothesis—*empirical, subjective, normative, and causal*—that any discussion of this hypothesis must address. The seven articles that comprise this special issue all touch upon these dimensions from different perspectives. The authors do not, however, seek to provide a comprehensive or definitive analysis. Instead, this special issue hopefully helps to frame the debate and will encourage further efforts at understanding, and ultimately unraveling, the U.S.-China-Taiwan tangle.

