Will Political Liberalisation of Mainland China Reduce the Risk of Military Conflict in the Taiwan Strait?

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It is generally claimed that greater political liberalisation in mainland China would ease cross-straits relations and increase the prospects for a negotiated solution to the conflict between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC). As a matter of fact, the government of the ROC have signalled since 1991 the democratization of the PRC as a prerequisite for any unification settlement and both Taipei and Washington political line on mainland China consistently links promoting democracy in the PRC with bringing a more secure context to the Taiwan Strait.

Two arguments are frequently invoked to support this view: firstly, the democratic peace theory, which maintains that democracies tend to not fight each other; secondly, that both the ROC’s authorities and citizens would have more incentives to reach a unification agreement with a democratic regime than with an authoritarian regime.

Although I do agree with the second reason, it is argued in my paper that the above exposed stance misreads the eventual repercussions that a greater political liberalisation of the mainland could have on cross-straits relations under the current circumstances.

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1 An on-line English version of the Guidelines for National Unification can be found at (http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/index1-e.htm). Numerous examples of the constant emphasis placed by ROC’s government on the beneficial effects of mainland democratization on cross-straits relations can be found at (http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/english/macpolicy/policy10/olive98.htm#001). The most recent example of this stance is the third point of the “Call for International Condemnation against China” released by the Mainland Affairs Committee the 14th of March in reaction to the Anti-Secession Law (http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/english/news/05036.htm). Some recent examples of the stance of the Bush administration on this issue are the Human Rights Report 2004, released by the State Department the 28th of February (http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hr rpt/2004/index.htm) and the speech delivered by Vice President Cheney 15 April 2004 at Fudan University (http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040415-1.html).
This misinterpretation is caused by a flawed application of the democratic peace theory to the cross-strait conflict and consequently this essay is devoted to analyze the theoretical and political implications that a proper application of this theory may have for cross-strait stability.

To develop my analysis I have divided this paper into four parts. Firstly, it is discussed to which kind of political regimes democratic peace does apply, in order to emphasize that it does not apply to democratizing political regimes; secondly, it is analysed why democratizing political regimes are particularly prone to resort to military means to solve their disputes; thirdly, the probable consequences of a short term political liberalization of mainland China to cross-straits stability are developed; finally, the main political implications extracted from the three previous parts are presented.

To which kind of political regimes does democratic peace apply?

The democratic peace theory only applies to consolidated democracies, which tend to not fight each other due to structural and normative restraints (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson and Smith, 1999; Doyle, 1983; MacMillan 2004; Maoz and Russet, 1993; Russet, 1993).

On the one side, it is argued that democratic regimes have formal mechanism which constraint the mobilization of support required to open a military conflict. International challenges require political leaders to mobilize domestic support to their policies. Such support must be mobilized from those groups that provide the leadership the kind of legitimacy that is required for international action. Consequently, a democratic political system requires the mobilization of both general public opinion and of a variety of
institutions that make up the system of government, such as the legislature, the political bureaucracies and key interest groups. This implies that very few goals could be presented to justify fighting wars in democracies, since the population is not willing to bear the cost of engaging in military conflicts (Kant, 1795: 100). It also implies that the process of national mobilization for war in democracies is both difficult and cumbersome, therefore due to the complexity of the democratic process and the requirement of securing a broad base of support for risky policies, democratic leaders are reluctant to wage wars and the time required for a democratic state to prepare for war is far longer than for non-democracies (Maoz and Russett, 1993: 626).

On the other side, the normative argument postulates that democrats consider that they should not fight each other and democracies possess a facilitative mechanism that allows two democracies to resolve conflicts through the shared norm of non-violence and bargaining (Zinnes, 2004: 430-1).

Nevertheless, before eventually becoming a consolidated democracy the PRC must experience a democratization process.

**Democratization and the use of military force**

Comparative studies have collected abundant empirical evidence that depicts liberalising regimes as particularly unstable and as more prone to war than both democratic and authoritarian regimes (Adamson, 2001; Hensel, Goertz, and Diehl, 2000; Mansfield and Snyder, 1995, 2002a, 2002b; Ward and Gleditsch, 1995; Weitsman and Shambaugh, 2002). This relationship between democratization and military conflict rests on the institutional weakness of liberalising political regimes. When demands for
broadening political participation emerge in authoritarian regimes which lack the institutional prerequisites for effective democracy (the rule of law is poorly formed, state officials are corrupt, elections can be rigged, militaries or warlords may threaten to overrun electoral outcomes, and journalistic media are unprofessional and depend on the state or economic elites) these regimes are especially prone to engage in military conflicts because of two factors.

First of all, in the absence of legitimacy that mature democracies derive from institutionally established democratic procedures governments need to find and ideological basics for popular political support (Huntington, 1968). This ideological basis normally is a populist ideology manifest through nationalism (Snyder, 2000). Nationalism offers political elites a way to evade strict democratic accountability, while giving the appearance of being responsible to popular interest. Nationalism may also be useful for old elites who have parochial interest in the military or in national enterprises (Mansfield and Snyder, 2002a: 531-32).

Secondly, nationalist politics in a weakly institutionalised post-authoritarian setting may lead to international military disputes, since the civil authorities are more vulnerable to military and populist opposition pressure under this institutional framework.

With regard to the army solid empirical evidence suggests that military officers are, on the whole, prone to favour more aggressive policies than those preferred by civilians.\(^2\)

\(^2\) The “militarism” school points to three main reasons to support this theory: a) Parochial interests, since armed conflicts provide military elites with opportunities for higher budget as a group and for individual promotion (Posen, 1984; Vagts, 1937); b) perceptual biases, since military officers are more likely to see security strictly as a military problem, to exaggerate military threats, to hold a pessimistic view on the possibility of solving a crisis without resorting to military force, and to overstate the advantages of resorting to military force and to generate optimistic casualty, budget, and time estimations needed for
From this perspective it should not come as a surprise that, no matter whether democratic or authoritarian, states with weak civilian control on the military are on average more prone to initiate military action than states without it (Sechser, 2004). In relation to democratizing civil authorities, since they enjoy less control on the army they have an incentive to show the military elites that they stand firm on behalf of national security concerns, even if this requires triggering an armed conflict military, in order to avoid military intervention on politics.

With regard to political opposition and mass publics, their input on the international policy of the government is greater in a democratizing regimen that under an authoritarian regimen. Both groups simply seek to punish leaders who adopt controversial or failed foreign policies and the greater the political vulnerability of leaders, the higher the political costs to leaders for pursuing controversial or unsuccessful foreign policy actions. This situation may facilitate the outbreak of a military conflict when opposition elites and mass publics hold more hawkish diplomatic and military policy preferences than incumbent leaders. Under these circumstances free press and political parties can be used as channels for the expression of an aggressive popular nationalism.

In order to understand the radicalizing effect that democratisation may cause in the international policy of a transitional government it is necessary to reject the idea that popular participation in the decisión-making process necessarily leads to liberal and more tolerant identities and to an acceptance of pluralism in both domestic and victory (Sagan, 2003; Walt, 1987); c) decision-making biases, since they have been train to base choices on simplicity and directness avoiding excessive reflection, which can be fatal on the battlefield, and consequently are less enthusiastic with solutions such as diplomacy and negotiation (Brecher, 1996; Desch, 1999).
international politics. As it has been discerned by Hutt and Allee (2002: 771-772) when an international conflict involve ethnic co-nationals, democratic challengers are more than twice as likely to threaten force compared with non-democratic challengers. According to their data, democratic leaders in such scenarios stand a 14.4% probability of threatening force, whereas non-democratic leaders are predicted to threaten force only 6.5% of the time. They also find that both democratic challengers and targets are less likely to make concessions when they share ethnic ties with the population in the disputed territory. Democratic leaders in challenger states are 25% less likely to offer concessions when politically salient concerns with ethnic co-nationals are present. Democratic targets are nearly 30% less likely than their non-democratic counterparts to make concessions under similar circumstances (Hutt and Allee, 2002: 776). These findings put a caveat on the institutional restraints of democracies on military conflict, showing one kind of conflict where citizens are consistently willing to bear the cost of engaging in an armed confrontation. In addition, these results are consistent with the above exposed idea that democratic leaders become less likely to offer concessions when issues at stake are politically salient or when making concessions may be quite controversial domestically. This is particular relevant to our study since the conflict between the PRC and the ROC falls within this category.

Before focusing on our case study it may be useful to note that the above exposed causal logic of the democratization and war argument has been illustrated through the analysis of several historical cases such as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and Chile's initiation of the War of the Pacific in the 1870s (Abranson, 2001; Mansfield and Snyder, 2002b). In both situations the government was forced to intervene and escalate the conflict under the pressure of populist nationalism articulated by the urban public
opinion, the democratic opposition and the army. Turkish invasion of Cyprus is particularly illuminating, since Bülent Ecevit consented to invade Cyprus bearing in mind the misfortune of former Premier Minister Süleyman Demirel, who lost its post and all his political prestige for bowing to American pressure and not launching a military intervention in Cyprus in 1967 in defiance of overwhelming popular and military support for intervention.

What if China democratizes?

Political liberalisation in the mainland would draw cross-strait diplomacy from a top-down to a down-top approach, increasing the input of the population and also probably the input of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) on the Taiwan policy of the PRC. This means increasing the role of political actors which hold more inflexible views than the incumbent government on the Taiwan conflict. Under these circumstances it is quite likely that the decision makers will find themselves trapped by a belligerent nationalist rhetoric that emphasizes combating threats to the national interest because both the political opposition and their supporters have internalized this worldview. This may be particularly the case in the PRC, since the incumbent regime receive a large share of its legitimacy from nationalism and the successful appellation to a given source of legitimacy implies some constraints to the scope of political manoeuvre of the decision makers, at the risk of undermining its stability (Giddens, 1984: 184-193, Hutt y Allee, 2002: 759).

Going more deeply in the attitudes of the PLA officers towards the conflict with Taiwan, it seems confirmed that they have been consistently more prone to support the threat of

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3 The increase in the leverage of the army will be particularly high if the democratization of the mainland comes rashly through a weakly institutionalised regime.
using force or the actual use of force than the technocratic civil authorities (Bi, 2002; Chen, 1998; Lam, 1999: 171-178; Scobell, 2000). Furthermore, since Deng Xiaoping left the command on the Taiwan Policy of the PRC, the military authorities have frequently criticised the “dovish” Taiwan policy of the civil authorities to such an extent that they even asked for the resignation of high rank civil authorities such as Jiang Zemin, Qian Qichen and Wang Zhaoguo (Garver, 1997: 57-58; Kuang, 1996; Lo Ping, 1994, 1996; Swaine, 1996: 35; Whiting, 1995: 314; Ting, 1996).

This hawkish attitude of the military can be understood bearing in mind that an increase in the perception of the threat of Taiwan *de jure* independence and a more belligerent Taiwan policy by Beijing will be beneficial to the corporative interests of PLA for three reasons (Bi, 2002: 548-558; Garver, 1997: 61; You Ji, 1997: 298). First of all, these factors will enhance the political weight of the PLA, since the army will be the institution in charge of implementing this aggressive policy. In addition, this will contribute to improve their reputation and prestige, what is particularly relevant for the PLA at the moment, when it is quite difficult for the Chinese army to recruit qualified personnel, who is more willing to seek a job in the private sector. Moreover, this intensification in the tensions across the Taiwan Strait justifies a growth in the resources allocated to the army, such as an increase in the military budget. The last example of this situation has been the proposal of a 12.6 percent increase in the defence budget for 20054.

From this perspective, it is reasonable to expect the PLA to keep pressing for a more aggressive policy towards Taiwan and a process of political liberalisation could be particularly favourable for the success of this strategy.

4 “China proposes a 12.6 defense budget increase”, *People’s Daily*, 5-3-2005 (http://english.people.com.cn//200503/05/eng20050305_17561.html).
Taking a closer look on popular attitudes towards Taiwan, it can be confirmed the existence of a widespread movement of popular nationalism which supports a firmer Taiwan policy than that implemented by the government and criticizes what they see as the passivity of the authorities towards the Taiwanese pro-independence movement. Some signs of this belligerent nationalism are a growing corpus of popular nationalist literature, numerous active chat rooms, or the periodical requests for demonstrations against the Taiwan government made by several mainland associations, mainly student associations (Fang, Ma y Wang, 2002: 271; Xu Guangqiu, 2001: 157).

Even more revealing are some surveys conducted by different institutions on mainland China in the last decade, revealing a massive popular support for a firm Taiwan policy (Chen, Scheb y Zhong, 1997: 479; Lam, 1996: 116). The most recent accessible data have been collected by the Social Survey Institute of China and shows a fluctuating percentage of people willing to immediately retake control of Taiwan by force between 43 percent and 29 percent. In addition, those who support military action against the island's separatist forces should they seek independence in any form are consistently above the 80 percent and generally around the 95 percent.

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5 Some of the first examples of this nationalist literature touching the Taiwan issue are Xiao Weizhong and Zhang Shan, *Ezhi Taidu: bu chengnuo fangqi wuli* (Contain Taiwan independence: Do not promise to renounce to the use of force) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996), Qiao Bian, Song Qiang, Song Xiang, Zhang Xiaobo y Zhang Zangzang, *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu: lengzhanhou shidai de zhengzhi yu qinggan jueze* (China can say no—political and emotional choices in the post-Cold War era) (Pekin: Zhonghua nonggongshang lianhe chubanshe, 1996): 73, 221, 248) ; and Gu Qingsheng, Qiao Bian, Song Qiang, Tang Zhengyu y Zhang Zangzang, *Zhongguo haishi neng shuo bu Zhongguo keyi shuo bu xupin: guozi guanxi bianshu yu women de xianshi yingfu* (China can still say no—The sequel of China can say no. The variable of international relations and our realist approach) (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongshi, 1996): 38, 71, 73, 221, 248, 295, 298, 300.

6 “Rising Chinese Nationalism over the Taiwan Question”, Association for Asia Research, 14/5/2004 (http://www.asianresearch.org/articles/2048.htm).

After looking at the army and popular attitudes towards the Taiwan conflict, it can be argued that the present civil leadership of the PRC performs as a dyke containing the more belligerent attitudes of both groups on this issue. The most recent example of this behaviour has been the role of the new top CCP leadership fending off lower-level demands for a unification law, with a timeline attached, instead of the relatively flexible law that has been passed (Christensen, 2005: 10). In relation to this point is also important to note that before passing the Anti-Secession Law Beijing sent State Council Taiwan Affairs Office Director Chen Yunlin to Washington to consult in advance with the United States on the meaning of this law.

**Conclusion: political implications**

This article does not advocate that, since an authoritarian China is probably more peaceful than a democratizing China, Taiwan and the international community might contribute to the perpetuation of the existing party-State system in China. This article is trying to underline that, contrary to what is generally claim by US and Taiwanese policy makers, the political liberalization of the mainland does not necessarily imply the adoption of a more peaceful Taiwan policy by Beijing.

No matter that states have strong incentives to misrepresent their domestic political constraints when solving conflicts with other governments, taken into account the facts discussed in the paper, the stereotypes implicit in the democratic peace theory on the aggressive behaviour of the authoritarian authorities and the peace loving tendency of the people should be discarded. This is particularly the case in conflicts like the Taiwan conflict, involving territorial reunification in areas inhabited by co-nationals.
Bearing this in mind, the question of what kind of democratising path will be more helpful in avoiding the implementation of aggressive policies by the Chinese authorities and what can be done by the international community to facilitate this process takes great relevance.

Taking into account the political attitudes held by the different political actors of the PRC towards Taiwan, it seems that a top-down directed democratization, in which the liberalising civil authorities are not particularly vulnerable to army or popular pressure, will be more conductive to the maintenance of the Taiwan Straits Peace than down-top directed liberalization. Consequently, it will be positive for the maintenance of cross-strait stability an international China policy which collaborates with the socioeconomic development of the country and a gradual path of political liberalization.


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Swaine, Michael D., *China: Domestic Change and Foreign Policy* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1995).


