Democratization of the PRC and Military Conflict in the
Taiwan Strait (*)

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Mario Esteban
Assistant Professor,
Centre for East Asian Studies, Autonomous University of Madrid

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This article questions that China’s democratization would necessarily lead to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Strait conflict. Against the prevailing vision in Washington and Taipei, the belligerent character of transitional regimes and the irrelevance of the democratic peace theory to civil wars are highlighted. From this perspective, the article presents a credible democratization scenario which could facilitate the outbreak of a military conflict between Beijing and Taipei. Given the nationalist attitudes of China’s population and the PLA and the weakness of Chinese institutions, an abrupt and foreign promoted liberalization process is discouraged. The US and ROC governments are therefore suggested to promote a gradual from above political liberalization in China and not to take China’s democratization as the solution to the Taiwan conflict.

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Taking into account the nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime and the relevance of the Taiwan issue, it is surprising how little academic attention has been paid to the implications of an eventual democratization of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for war and peace in the Taiwan Strait (1). It is generally claimed that greater political liberalisation in mainland China would ease cross-straits relations and increase prospects for a negotiated solution of the conflict between the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) (2). As a matter of fact, Taipei and Washington consistently link promoting democracy in the PRC with bringing a more secure context to the Taiwan Strait. Two arguments are frequently invoked to support this view: the positive effects of Chinese democratization on Taiwanese willingness to negotiate and the democratic peace theory. However, a close analysis of these two arguments reveals that political liberalization of China, far from being the answer to the Taiwan Strait conflict, could increase the risk of a military clash. Even the establishment of a democratic
government in Beijing would not solve the cross-strait conflict, since the democratic peace does not apply either to civil wars or to conflicts involving ethnic co-nationals. This article will first present the official stance of the US and the ROC governments on the relationship between political change in China and the Taiwan Strait conflict, before questioning the two main arguments which support their posture. Finally, the political implications of a turbulent relationship between political liberalization in China and a peaceful settlement of the political discrepancies between the PRC and the ROC will be presented.

**The view from Washington and Taipei**

According to both the Chen Shui-bian and the Bush administrations greater political liberalisation in the PRC would increase prospects for a negotiated solution of her dispute with Taiwan (3). President Chen has stressed this point in numerous occasions, as in his 2005 address to the ROC national day rally, when he argued that Taiwan's security will offer the only protection for the safeguard of Taiwan people's life until “Chinese authorities commence political and democratic reforms”. In the same speech, he even depicted the democratization of China as a prerequisite to the “peaceful emergence” of this country and its authoritarian condition as “a challenge to the global community of democracies” (4). Along the same lines, Joseph Wu, head of the Cabinet's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), asserted that “improvements in cross-strait ties will hinge on China's democratization”, while addressing a seminar in Taipei marking the 10th anniversary of the March 1996 missile crisis (5). Consequently, it should not come as a surprise the following paragraph from a document released by the MAC on April 14th 2006, asking the international community to cooperate with Taiwan
in the promotion of political liberalization in China in order to facilitate a solution to the
Taiwan Strait conflict:

China’s democratization is key to the normalization of cross-strait relations and
has been a focus of international attention. With regard to this, Taiwan’s
successful experience of becoming a democracy, which has met the expectations
of the world community, can serve as a model for China in the future. The
international community should work with Taiwan to help accelerate China’s
democratization so that new progress in cross-strait relations can be made (6).

In addition, Taipei has signalled the democratization of the PRC as a prerequisite for
any unification settlement since February 1991, when the recently abolished Guidelines
for National Unification were passed.

The US government shares this view as it is illustrated in The National Security
Strategy of the United States of America, released by the White House in March 2006.
This document regards the spreading of political freedom in China as a contribution to
regional and international security (7). Also last Deputy Secretary of State, Robert
Zoellick, repeatedly underlined the necessity of democratizing China for ensuring a
more peaceful foreign policy from Beijing (8).

Two arguments are frequently invoked to support this view. First, it is upheld that
China’s democratization could increase Taiwan’s motivation to negotiate. Second, the
“democratic peace” theory maintains that democracies tend to not fight each other.

**China’s democratization and Taiwan’s willingness to negotiate**

Polls show that a high percentage of Taiwan’s population has conditional preferences
on what should be the political status of Taiwan vis-à-vis China, consequently, there is
ample room for domestic and foreign actors to influence on this issue (9). For example,
PRC’s political liberalization would have both direct and indirect effects on Taiwanese willingness to sit at the negotiation table with Beijing. In any case, a close observation of these effects suggests that the resolution of the Taiwan Strait dispute is far from being granted by the democratization of the PRC.

With relation to the direct effects, it can be argued that establishing a closer political relationship with a democratic regime would be more appealing to the Taiwanese people than with an authoritarian regimen. Some authors even consider that if China democratizes “it would swiftly become irresistibly attractive to Taiwanese” (10). Nonetheless, there are other factors, in addition to the authoritarian character of the CCP’s regime, such as the huge socioeconomic and demographic gap between the PRC and the ROC, which hinder closer political integration with the mainland in the eyes of the people of Taiwan. Due to those imbalances, Taiwan citizens are deeply concerned about the eventual impact of reunification on their living standards.

TEDS survey data clearly reflects how the domestic situation in the PRC influences the preferences of the people of Taiwan on the independence-unification issue. After the May 2005 National Assembly elections only 15.6 per cent of Taiwan voters supported or strongly supported unification with the mainland if the political, economical, and social situation of the two shores of the strait would be very different, however this percentage rose up to the 44 per cent if the political, economical, and social situation of China and Taiwan would be similar. Anyway, those who back unification with a democratic and prosper mainland China do not even make half of the population. This is the case because the PRC and the ROC are also separated by cultural barriers, discrepancies on values, norms, and beliefs. Moreover, objective differences such as socioeconomic imbalances are mediated through cultural discrepancies, such as
collective identities (11). This helps to understand why, despite of the socioeconomic
development experienced by China in last years and the fruitful economic interaction
between China and Taiwan, the number of Taiwanese citizens who support unification
if the two sides of the Taiwan Strait become similar in social, economic and political
terms has descended from 55 to 44 per cent, whereas those who disagree or strongly
disagree have risen from 31 to 38 per cent.

Cultural barriers between the two shores of the Taiwan Straits have become deeper
since the democratization of Taiwan, due to a combination of political cultural
reconstruction by Taiwanese authorities and generational variables. On the one side,
first Lee Teng-hui and then Chen Shui-bian have pushed for the de-sinization of Taiwan,
through the construction of a Taiwanese national identity as separate as possible from a
Chinese identity. In order to achieve this aim, new holydays have been proclaimed,
parks and streets have been renamed, Taiwan-centred textbooks have been published,
the study and recreation of local languages and costumes has been financed, history has
been rewritten, the word “Taiwan” has been added to the cover of passports, referenda
have been held, and the National Unification Council and the Guidelines for National
Unification were “frozen” (12). On the other side, the new generations of Taiwanese
voters are less bound by ethnic loyalties, less attached to mainland China, and more
prone to identify with Taiwan’s current issues than their elders (13).

These two factors have provoked a marked reduction in exclusive identification as
Chinese among the population of Taiwan, from 26.2 per cent in 1992 to 6.2 per cent in
2006 (14). This shift in the national identity of Taiwan citizens has been complemented
by a marked increase in electoral preference for a more assertively autonomous cross-
Strait and foreign policy. Most people in the ROC consider that it is their right to
determine the political relationship between Taiwan and mainland China and both the
blue camp and the green camp agree on considering that Taiwan should decide its own future without bowing to external pressure either from China or the US (15). In the words of President Chen:

   Out of respect for the principle of popular sovereignty, we should not set any positions, preconditions, or conclusions regarding the future of Taiwan, the future form of cross-strait relations, or other issues of serious concern to the nation. We should return the right to decide the future of Taiwan and the final say regarding cross-strait relations to the 23 million people of Taiwan (16).

On the contrary, most people in the PRC, not only the CCP, reject this view and uphold the One-China Principle, which insists that there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China, and the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China. From this perspective China's sovereignty and territorial integrity should not be fragmented and they advocate for a joint decision between the PRC and the ROC, which in practice would be a mainland-led decision due to her demographic, economic and military superiority (17). Consequently, even if China becomes a democracy, the disagreement on who has the right to determine the political status of Taiwan vis-à-vis China will remain at the base of the conflict.

In addition, due to the de-sinization policy implemented by ROC authorities and the political attitudes held by the younger cohorts of Taiwan voters, it seems that time is on the side of Taiwan independence in relation with political preferences on the island and (18). Accordingly, perspectives for an agreement are not particularly bright. Since objective and encouraging factors such as the positive socioeconomic development of the PRC and an overwhelmingly successful cross-Strait economic integration, have been unable to reverse this trend, what could make us think that the democratization of China would have more repercussion on the attitudes of the people of Taiwan.
The above raised question points us to the indirect effects that democratization of China could have on Taiwanese incentives to negotiate and in their position on the unification-independence issue. It could be argued that those both factors will be affected by if the US would decide not to support Taiwan in the wake of a PLA aggression. I considerer Washington will become far less likely to send troops to protect Taiwan against the mainland, if China become a consolidated democracy. Under this setting Taiwan authorities would be under enormous pressure to negotiate with the mainland and probably would do so. However, there is no reason to think that US authorities would shift to this position at previous stages of political reform in China, taking into account the high political cost that such movement would entail at the domestic arena, the US strong geostrategic interest in keeping China separated from Taiwan, and the negative signal that such movement would send to US allies in the Asia-Pacific region.

With relation to the impact of the military role of Washington on Taiwan citizens’ posture on the island’s political status, it has been demonstrated that their attitudes on that issue are mediated through their perception of the US commitment to defend Taiwan (19). Specifically, those Taiwanese who believe that the US will not intervene if Taiwan is attacked are 61 per cent less likely to support Taiwan independence, whereas US military role does not show statistically significant effect on the pro-unification and on the pro-status quo stands (20). This means that, while the perceived military threat from China behaves as an effective deterrence against de iure independence, it is unable to gain their acquiescence to PRC’s unification demands. If we take also into account that people tend to favor cooperative policy choices when they feel safe, it is far from clear that Taiwan citizens would tend to embrace a more conciliatory approach towards China in case they feel more threatened by Beijing (21).
So far, it has been argued that democratization of mainland China would not necessarily provoke a decisive alteration in the stand of the Taiwanese population on the independence-unification issue. Moreover, in the following sections how the democratization of China could favour the articulation of a more aggressive China’s Taiwan policy will be explained.

**The democratic peace theory**

It is generally claimed that the democratic peace is a dyadic phenomenon, since democracies are unlikely to combat with one another, but also as prone to fight with nondemocracies as nondemocracies are with one another (22). Consequently, after the democratization of Taiwan an eventual democratization of the PRC was quickly regarded in Washington and Taipei as a possible solution to the Taiwan Strait conflict. In fact, promotion of democracy is one of the two founding pillars of the US national security strategy as it was explicitly stated by President Bush in his preface to the 2006 National Security Strategy of the United States of America (23). This standpoint misreads the eventual repercussions that a greater political liberalisation of the mainland could have on cross-strait relations under the current circumstances. In order to avoid a flawed application of the democratic peace theory to the cross-strait conflict, it is required to answer the following two questions: to which kind of political regimes and to which kind of conflicts 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 (24). On the one side, it is argued that democratic regimes have formal mechanisms 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 (25). It also implies that the process of national mobilization for war in democracies is both difficult and cumbersome, due to the complexity of the democratic process and the requirement of securing a broad base of support for risky policies. Democratic leaders are therefore reluctant to wage wars and the time required for a democratic state to prepare for war is far longer than for non-democracies (26). 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 (27). 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 more prone to war than both democratic and authoritarian regimes (28). Some works on the security behaviour of a democratizing China have already mentioned that point, although only one has presented any scenario developing how this general theory could apply to China in her conflict with Taiwan (29).
Bachman distinguishes between different kinds of gradual and radical transitions to democracy and between transitions from below and from above. He suggests that a rapid transition might be better than a gradual transition to keep peace in the Taiwan Strait. With regard to the leading political force during the transition he does not reach any conclusion. In contrast with Bachman, I will argue that a gradual transition from above will be the best scenario for avoiding a military clash in the Taiwan Strait during the democratization of China.

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 (30).

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 (31). This ideological basis frequently is a populist ideology manifest through nationalism (32). 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 (33). This was the case in Southeast Europe, where populist and nationalist regimes tended to rise from the ashes of Communism (34). China could also face a similar fate due to the similarities of its social structure (agrarian society with increasing inequality of wealth), its institutional
framework (lack of organizations able to articulate popular interests outside of the regime), and its political culture (preference for sovereignty and territorial integrity over political freedom, for collective rights over individual rights, and for socioeconomic rights over political rights, and discredit on mainstream Western social models) with the countries of Southeast Europe. Moreover, due to China’s long and successful tradition of political elites earning popular support through nationalism, which is an important source of legitimacy for the incumbent regime, it is quite likely that Chinese political elites may be tempted to appeal to nationalism if they have to compete for popular backing in a more liberalized political arena.

Second, 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. Political liberalization in China would draw cross-strait relations from a top-down to a down-top approach, as it has already happened in Taiwan. This is of great concern under the present circumstances, since the nationalist discourse held by the army and the population is more aggressive than the discourse advocated by the civil authorities. 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 (35). 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 (36). 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.
China it is not an exception and army officers tend to hold a more aggressive nationalist discourse than the civil authorities, as it is reflected in their more hawkish position in foreign policy (37). No matter the issue, Taiwan, Japan, the South China Sea, proliferation, the PLA stance is usually rooted in a zero-sum game mentality connected with a persistent concern about relative gains.

Going more deeply in the attitudes of the PLA officers towards the conflict with Taiwan, they have been consistently more prone to support the threat of using force or the actual use of force than the technocratic civil authorities. 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. PLA figures have even asked for the resignation of high rank civil authorities such as Jiang Zemin, Qian Qichen and Wang Zhaoguo on these grounds (38). In some occasions the PLA has even been able to take the initiative in the formulation of the PRC’s Taiwan policy. In 1996, for instance, the conciliatory Jiang Zemin’s “Eight Points” were temporary shelved thanks to PLA pressure in favour of military deterrence through the stage of large-scale military exercises, including guided-missile tests (39). In addition, in 2001 military authorities were able to persuade the reluctant Jiang-Zhu tandem that a large-scale military exercise at Dongshan Island was necessary to minimize Democratic Progressive Party gains in the fall legislative elections (40).

The hawkish posture 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 (41). 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 14.7 percent increase in the defence budget for 2006 (42). 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, which entails the deterioration of civilian control on the military, could be particularly favourable for the success of this strategy.

Taking a closer look on popular attitudes towards Taiwan, it can be confirmed the existence of a wide-spread support for a firmer Taiwan policy than that implemented by the government. From this perspective, a significant sector of the population 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, and the periodical requests for demonstrations against the Taiwan government made by several mainland associations, mainly student associations (43).

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 (44). 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% and 29% (45). 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% and generally around the 95% (46).
Taking into account PLA 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 (47). 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. The technocratic elite of the CCP is acting as a buffer against the most belligerent nationalist manifestations of some sectors of the population, the army, and even the party, since their main source of legitimacy, eudemonic legitimacy, requires friendly relations with partners such as the US, Japan, and the EU (48).

**What if China democratizes?**

In order to understand the radicalizing effect that political liberalization can cause in the international policy of a transitional government or in a weakly institutionalized regime it is necessary to reject the idea that popular participation in the decision-making process necessarily leads to liberal and more tolerant identities and to an acceptance of pluralism in both domestic and international politics.

With regard to the military, political opposition and mass publics, their input on the foreign policy of their 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. Unfortunately, this is one of the most probable scenarios if China democratizes in the short term. Within this framework decision makers would find themselves trapped by a belligerent nationalist rhetoric that emphasizes national sovereignty, territorial integrity and combating external threats over a pragmatic approach to national interest. This could be particularly the case in the PRC, taking into account assertive people’s and military’s stand on the Taiwan issue and the large share of legitimacy that the incumbent Chinese authorities derived from nationalism, since the successful appellation to a given source of legitimacy reduce the margin of manoeuvre of the decision makers, at the risk of undermining its stability (49).

This is not to deny that such rhetoric, remaining rhetoric, is helping to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait, since serves as effective deterrence against a formal declaration of independence from Taiwan. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that higher political liberalization involves more room for mobilizing political opposition along nationalist lines, and therefore more pressure on the Chinese authorities to translate that belligerent rhetoric into politics.

Even if China became a consolidated democracy, this does not necessarily mean the end of the Taiwan Strait conflict, since democratic peace does not relate with all kind of conflicts. From mainland’s perspective, the Taiwan independence movement is a secessionist movement. Most of secessionist movements around the world fail, since states do not voluntarily give up what they consider their sovereign territory. Even consolidated democracies tend to reject a loss of territory, therefore, an eventual
democratic PRC still would be unlikely to recognize *de iure* Taiwan’s independence (50).

Along the same line, there is abundant empirical evidence indicating that democratic states tend to be particularly belligerent in international conflicts involving ethnic co-nationals living in other state. Democratic leaders stand a 14.4% probability of threatening force, whereas non-democratic leaders are predicted to threaten force only 6.5% of the time in such scenario (51). Both democratic challengers and targets are also 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, whereas democratic targets are nearly 30% less likely than their non-democratic counterparts to make concessions under similar circumstances (52). 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 the Taiwan Strait conflict, since falls within this category. It should not be therefore expected that China’s democratization would lead per se to less belligerent attitudes towards Taiwan in the mainland.

**Conclusion: political implications**

This paper has questioned that the democratization of China would automatically provide a peaceful solution to the Taiwan Strait conflict, through the presentation of a credible democratization scenario that would increase the risk of a military clash.
between Beijing and Taipei. This is not to claim that the democratization of China would inevitable lead to war, but to remind that democracy for China does not guarantee a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan issue.

China’s leaders and the general population have never given the impression that they are willing to negotiate over the “one China principle”. Therefore short of accepting this principle, it is difficult to propose that a peaceful solution is likely, whether China democratizes or not. Taking into account that the fast socioeconomic development experienced by China and the fruitful economic cooperation developed between the two shores of the Taiwan Strait have been unable of preventing a progressive de-sinization of Taiwan, it is hard to image that the democratization of China would produce a significant shift in the stance of the Taiwanese people on the independence-unification issue. In addition, although the stance of Taiwan’s citizens on the independence-unification issue and their incentives to negotiate with the mainland are mediated through their perception of US military role on the Taiwan Strait, it has been argued that PRC’s democratization would not have a significant impact on this factor.

Moreover, in case political liberalization would take place in China in the absence of or weak political and administrative institutions an aggressive and irredentist foreign policy could be promoted for making electoral gains. This could be particularly the case since the army, the population, and some political elites outside of the core of the regime hold more aggressive nationalist attitudes than the incumbent technocratic elites. The present article does not advocate that, since in the short term an authoritarian China is probably more peaceful than a democratizing China, Taiwan and the international community might contribute to the perpetuation of the CCP regime. This article is trying to underline that, contrary to what is generally claimed 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 governments 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 reworked. This is particularly the case in civil wars and in conflicts involving territorial reunification in areas inhabited by ethnic co-nationals.

From this perspective, the democratization of China could become the litmus test for US deterrence policy. So far Washington’s conditional commitment to defend Taiwan has decisively helped to keep peace at the Taiwan Strait, reducing both the risk of a formal declaration of independence by Taipei and a military attack from the mainland (53). Nevertheless, growing political liberalization in the mainland could translate into either unbearable pressure to the incumbent elites to implement a belligerent policy against Taiwan or into the ascension to power of new elites more willing to resort to force against the island. The success of US deterrence could not be taken for granted under this scenario. The fact that the PRC would have small possibilities of success in a direct military engagement against the US army does not mean that Chinese authorities would be able to take their chance under strong domestic pressure (54). Whether China will resort to force to solve the Taiwan conflict will not be decided by an analysis of the military balance of the contending forces and the related cost-benefit calculation. This point becomes crystal clear just imagining what could be the reaction of Beijing if Taiwan formally proclaims its independence: China would resort to force even if Washington would decide to back Taiwan militarily (55).
Bearing this in mind, the question of what kind of democratizing 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.

Considering the political attitudes held by the different political actors of the PRC towards Taiwan, it seems that democratization though transformation, gradual and from above, in which the liberalizing 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 liberalization (56). Consequently, it will be positive for the maintenance of cross-strait stability an international China policy which collaborates with the socioeconomic development of the PRC, with the institutionalization of its political system and with a gradual path of political liberalization (57).
1. Even the finest piece of scholarship on the repercussions that an eventual
democratization of China would have on the likelihood of a war involving Beijing, does
not tackle this issue in depth: Edward Friedman and Barret L. McCormick, eds., What If
China Doesn’t Democratize? Implications for War and Peace, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe,
2000.

2. The democratic peace theory is one of the pillars of both the Bush and the Chen
administrations’ China policy. Washington and Taipei also concur on the desirability of
preventing a PLA’s attack on Taiwan, since a military clash between the PRC and the
ROC would be extremely costly for the US too, either Washington fights Beijing or not.
On the one side, the cost to fight China for the US would be so obvious that it is not
necessary to get further into this point. On the other side, if Washington fails to support
Taiwan against a PLA attack, US credibility and influence in East Asia will be severely
undermined. Nonetheless, I am not equating US’s interests with Taiwan’s interests or
assuming that the US will act in interests other than its own in the Taiwan Strait conflict.

3. This view has been already challenged by David Bachman, arguing that even if China democratizes, most areas of conflict in Sino-American relations, including the Taiwan Strait conflict, will remain largely unaffected. See David Bachman, “China’s Democratization: What Difference Would it Make for U.S.-China Relations?”, Edward Friedman and Barret L. McCormick, eds., What If China Doesn’t Democratize? Implications for War and Peace, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2000, p. 195. The present article provides additional arguments and data for explaining why the democratization of China does not entail a peaceful resolution for the Taiwan Strait conflict. For example, Bachman does not discuss how the democratization of China might influence the position of the peoples of Taiwan on the reunification-independence issue.

4. The full version of the speech can be found at http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/4-oa/20051010/2005101002.html.

6. Mainland Affairs Council, Safeguarding Taiwan’s Democracy Opposing China’s Aggression (http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/english/macpolicy/d950414.pdf), p. 38. Many others examples of this stance of the ROC government on the relationship between the level of political freedom in China and the course of the Taiwan Strait conflict can be found at the web page of the MAC, such as the third point of the “Call for International Condemnation against China” released on March 14th 2005 in reaction to the Anti-Secession Law passed by the National People’s Congress of China (http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/english/news/05036.htm).


11. This explains why the per capita income gap has been successfully used by green politicians to scare voters, despite the Hong Kong and Macao experiences. Both Special Administrative Regions have improved their socioeconomic status under Chinese sovereignty, none of these regions pays taxes to Beijing, and even the central government has lent economic support to them, see Hao Zhidong, “Obstacles to


(http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/eng/data/data03-2.htm).

15. Robert Sutter, “The Taiwan Problem in the Second George W. Bush Administration – US Official’s Views and Their Implications for US policy”, Journal of Contemporary China, Vol. 15, No. 48, August 2006, p. 424. This is not to deny very well known inter and intra coalition discrepancies among Taiwan political elites on the unification-independence issue, however, these disagreements are not relevant for the central point of my argument.


17. See The Taiwan Affairs Office and The Information Office of the State Council, White Paper-The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue (http://www.china-


30. 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. 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 (Adamson, “Democratization and the Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy”, p. 287).


33. Mansfield and Snyder, “Incomplete Democratization” pp. 531-532.


45. Eric Teo Chu Cheow, “Rising Chinese Nationalism over the Taiwan Question”, Association for Asia Research, May 14th 2004 (http://www.asianresearch.org/articles/2048.html).


54. It would not be first time in history that the weakest side decide to initiate a military conflict due to domestic considerations. The Falklands War and the Third-Indochina War are good examples of this scenario.


56. Democratization processes can be divided into three main categories (transformation, replacement and transplacement) according to the importance of governing and oppositions groups in channelling the political transition to democracy, Samuel P. Huntington, “How Countries Democratize”, Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 106, No. 4, Winter 1991-2, p. 583.
57. This position questions that US foreign policy should bring about as soon as possible a rapid democratic transition in China as it is advocate, for example, in Bruce Gilley, China’s Democratic Future: How it Will Happen and Where It Will Lead, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 79.