Will Sino-U.S. Relations Eventually Lead to War?

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/05/29/will-sino-u-s-relations-eventually-lead-to-war/

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The relationship that has developed between the United States and China can be seen as both one of opportunity and a cause for concern. While the emergence of China as an economic fore-runner presents new and fertile grounds for trade, it can be seen as the first major post-cold war challenge to the United States' dominance both as the only global superpower and as a challenge to U.S. hegemonic dominance in the Pacific region. China has risen quickly and relatively peacefully; embracing globalisation, utilising domestic resources as well as its vast and growing population[1]. However, as China grows and its interests expand, it begins to challenge the United States on an economic level, as well as having an unsettling effect on an established post-cold war world order and U.S. strategic interests. As the title of this essay suggests, this unsettling affect has the very real potential of leading both sides down a path to war. In assessing the likelihood of the United States and China going to war, arguments have developed both for and against the hypothesis that Sino-U.S. relations will eventually lead to war.

It could be argued that there exist a number of key areas within the Sino-U.S. relationship to which a great amount of attention is paid by international relations thinkers and theorists. These key areas are the commonly understood most likely flashpoints which, if left unresolved diplomatically could lead to conflict between the two great powers. Traditionally, the foremost threat to peace is Taiwan; decades old U.S. commitments to the protection of Taiwan limp into the 21st Century, but with China's importance as a trade-partner becoming of increasing significance, the United States faces some difficult decisions with regard to its commitments to Taiwan. Equally, China and Taiwan must themselves assess the best means of their relationship with one another moving forwards, and whether reunification or pursuing sovereignty for China and Taiwan respectively, is still the best course of action.

Secondly, China prides itself on its "peaceful rise"[2], placing emphasis on its transcendence of the U.S. and USSR's paths to becoming great powers, in favour of peaceful development and cooperation with other states[3]. But China's sense of military insufficiency in comparison to the capabilities of the U.S., has spurred an increase in funding for the Chinese military[4] over the last 20 years. As with any military expansion, the build-up of Chinese military forces creates something of a security dilemma; in which the unintended effects are the build-up of other states military forces in the region, thus exacerbating the initial problem. Many realists have argued that this is a sure sign that China is building for a potential future conflict[5]. While some have argued that China's capabilities have been exaggerated, there is no ignoring China's growing military might[6]. If China wishes to avoid stimulating a cold-war-esque arms-race with the United States, it must utilise its soft power as a means of offsetting Western concerns; "If an adversary can be persuaded that all one wants is security (as opposed to domination), the adversary may itself relax"[7], equally, the United States must learn to approach China from a position of security, as opposed to seeing China as an over exaggerated security threat.

Thirdly, with China's economic rise has come the plundering of domestic resources for both manufacturing and energy purposes, this has led to a severe resource shortage and China is being forced to look elsewhere for significant amounts of oil and coal. With China facing direct competition for resources from the U.S. and other states, they are utilising diplomatic neutrality in buying oil from Iran, while they are developing diplomatic relations through coal deals with Australia. Some have argued that China's approach to energy acquisition is in fact amoral, with a dependence on oil, China can ill-afford to slow growth to support U.S.-led sanctions on Iran, but it must be wary of doing so and the wider impact it has on the Sino-U.S. relationship as the U.S. and the West put increased pressure on Tehran and its nuclear programme.

In assessing each of the factors that could lead to conflict, it is essential to take into account varying approaches to interpreting the effects of each factor; in-turn developing a richer understanding of the likelihood of a conflict arising. Through the differing lenses of Liberalist and Realist thought, it is possible to identify a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the factors that might contribute to war, and traditionally, these two schools of thought have been pitted against one another, and somewhat stereotyped, argues Charles Glaser, as "optimistic liberals against pessimistic realists"[8]. The archetypal liberal perspective argues that China will continue to rise peacefully, with the international system providing adequate space for both the U.S. and China to co-exist peacefully. China, argue liberals, has so far found the current international system rewarding and will not seek to overturn the international hierarchy to a system more to its liking[9]. As an antithesis, realists predict "intense competition"[10] between the U.S. and China. They argue that U.S. security concerns will be exacerbated by China's military build-up, and the U.S. will in-turn seek to secure strategic influence in the region strengthening the existing relationships with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, as well as looking elsewhere for influence; as can be seen with the development of relations with India. Cross-strait relations with Taiwan will also deteriorate as the ROC feels increasingly threatened by the PROC's growing military prowess. Archetypal perceptions of the future U.S.-Sino relationship however, only paint a two dimensional picture, and to fully explore each factor that could contribute to war, it is worth assessing more varied strains of international relations thought as well as the traditional theories; such as structural realism, which predicts a more positive future for the relationship (assuming dialogue-channels remain open), as well as neo-isolationism, that envisages drastic changes to U.S. foreign policy to prevent conflict in the region.

TAIWAN

Perhaps the most often speculated reason for which China and the United States may enter into conflict is the PROC's pursuit of a reunified China. Prior to 1949, the U.S. and China had a relatively close relationship, President Roosevelt promoted China as one of 'the four policemen' that would oversee a post-war world, but with the advent of communism following a brutal and bloody Chinese civil war, the United States felt they had lost a position of influence within Asia[11]. As a result of the new Mao-led communist regime in mainland China, Nationalist forces retreated to Taiwan and so developed the divide between the Taiwanese Republic of China, and the People's Republic of China on the mainland. Since the split, both China and Taiwan have developed in socio-economic terms but while China has sought reunification, Taiwan has instead sought official recognition from international bodies of its independence. The relationship between the United States and the China-Taiwan predicament has been particularly close since the 1954 Sino-American Mutual Defence Treaty, 1955 Formosa Resolution and the subsequent Taiwan Relations Act enacted by U.S. congress in 1979. More recently however, the U.S. has approached cross-strait tensions with considerations of a positive relationship with China, President Obama's self-declaration as the 'Pacific President' exemplifies the importance the U.S. places on the development of a working relationship with China.

The most effective means of analysing the likelihood of the cross-strait relations deteriorating into conflict is to view the objectives of the three sides involved. China's goals can be seen in two lights, both within traditional theoretical frameworks. Realists have argued that China ultimately seeks reunification with Taiwan via whatever means necessary. Nationalism remains a prominent force within Chinese politics, and following the previous humiliations of Japanese invasion and the annex of numerous territories, China seeks the great power status it once possessed, fundamental to that process is a reunified China. Other realists have argued that China's main concern with Taiwan is based on geo-political grounds. Taiwan is an ideal staging ground for military attacks on China's East coast, and as such, a hostile Taiwan leaves Beijing feeling profoundly insecure. However, some Chinese observers have assessed the impact of the continued militarisation of the Taiwan dispute, and the negative effects on its position in the wider Asian region, encouraging other nations to "rally behind the U.S. security shield"[12]. Liberals however, have argued against the notion that China seeks reunification at all. The recent thaw in cross-strait relations has indicated that Beijing is willing to engage politically with Taiwan. To that end, it could be argued that Beijing has little intention of reunification, but sees the value of Taiwan being neutral. This notion introduces the idea of 'Finlandisation'.

Taiwan has traditionally viewed the relationship with China as one of intense hostility, with the fires of both camps being continually stoked by nationalism, but in recent years, the Taiwanese approach to dealing with China appears to have shifted, and some might argue; matured. Following the election of Ma Ying-jeou as President of the ROC in

2008, Taiwan no longer vehemently pursues independence and internationally recognised sovereignty as it once did, it has if anything, taken a more vague approach to the subject. President Ma's famous declaration that Taiwan would pursue a "no unification, no independence and no use of force" policy highlights this vagueness, and it could be argued that this has served to appease previous Chinese concerns over Taiwan's intentions. But the current circumstances that have culminated in Taiwan stepping back from addressing the independence issue head-on, are dependent on domestic politics. Were President Wa's Kuomintang party to lose power to the rival Democratic Progressive Party, policy could easily revert to Taiwan's pursuit of independence which would most likely deteriorate cross-strait relations.

The U.S. is tied into the China-Taiwan relationship thanks to official commitments, common ideological ground and ultimately strategic interests. The United States' continued support of Taiwan both politically and through arms sales has allowed it a position of influence in South East Asia further to its existing influences, but with the advent of China as serious military contender, the United States is being forced to rethink its commitments to Taiwan. Realism argues that it is highly likely that there will be a conflict of sorts, be it a military or a hegemonic clash, the U.S. and China will eventually collide. The reasoning is varied, but it ultimately relies on the notion that as China grows it will seek to dominate the region in a hegemonic sense. As John Mearsheimer argued in 2002;

If China continues to grow economically and militarily, why should we expect China not to imitate the United States? Why should we expect that China won't want to dominate its backyard the way we dominate our backyard?…The United States has long wanted to be the hegemon in its own region, and to make sure that it has no peer competitors. If China becomes a hegemon in Asia, it is a peer competitor by definition…the United States will go to great lengths to make sure China does not become a peer competitor**[13]**.

Realists would likely argue that the recent warming in relations between China and Taiwan are merely signs that China is reintroduce Taiwan into Chinese control; "beneath Beijing's silk glove of détente is the iron fist of nationalism[14]".

The liberal take on the situation currently holds little ground in U.S. foreign policy circles[15], but it assumes that the PROC has little interest in unifying China, as it is not in the interests of China to engage in a military conflict with Taiwan, and subsequently the U.S.. Liberalists would point to the recent thawing in relations between China and Taiwan as a sign that the two nations can work cooperatively together, without the need of U.S. influence in achieving this thawing. But one liberal argument points to a more optimistic vision of future relations between China and Taiwan, and explains the recent thawing in relations as potentially the first steps towards the 'Findlandisation' of Taiwan. Bruce Gilley has argued quite convincingly that China should encourage a process of 'Finlandisation' in Taiwan in order to achieve its geo-political goals[16]. Stemming from the relationship between Helsinki and Moscow between 1951 and 1981, 'Finlandisation' encourages a healthy diplomatic relationship between two states, where one has significant interest over the other, but not so much so that the junior of the relationship becomes a puppet to the senior, allowing the junior state a level of independence and the senior state a sphere of influence. Applied to the China – Taiwan predicament, if hypothetically, Taiwan disassociates itself with the U.S., moving to the neutral ground, and refrains from speaking against the domestic governmental practices of China, this would alleviate Chinese concerns over the United States influence geo-politically, and in-turn China could afford Taiwan membership of international organisations, improved economic and social benefits, and less 'sabre-rattling'[17]. From the perspective of the United States, this could also act to slow China's military growth as without the need to defend a potential attack staged from Taiwan, China has less of a need to build its Navy and wider military on the East coast. This could in turn lessen U.S. concerns over Chinese military investment. As the U.S. seeks to build a better commercial relationship with China today, a reduction in the build-up of arms from China and less reliance from Taiwan allows the U.S. to take an arms-length approach to the China-Taiwan issue, addressing realist concerns that the U.S. could potentially be dragged into a conflict in South East Asia.

Were Taiwan to move closer to China, thought on how the U.S. should approach this can be split into two Realist perspectives. The Realist perspective argues two prominent theories, the first of which is the United States' traditional approach to the Taiwan issue; the U.S. should continue to support Taiwan politically and militarily so that Taiwan can effectively stand up to China thus enforcing the existing status quo, this selective engagement best

describes the United States' approach to the issue over the last ten years. The second strain argues a neo-isolationist approach that the U.S. should encourage Taiwan to develop its relationship with China so as to lessen the burden on both Taiwan and China's respective relationships with the United States and prevent the U.S. being drawn into a conflict in Asia.

Whether the United States would be likely to allow Taiwan to move closer to China is yet to be seen, while the U.S. would be de-intensifying the China-Taiwan issue through reducing its influence in Taiwan's affairs, it would be losing a strategically important ally, that has over the years played a significant role in U.S. foreign policy in East Asia. Of course liberals would argue that Taiwan is not the be-all and end-all in dealing with China, that there are other means of projecting influence within the region such as Japan and South Korea, and they would further argue that U.S. influence in the region would be better restricted; allowing Asian countries to dictate the future of Asia. To that end, a process of 'Finlandisation', were the U.S. to support it, would likely reduce the potential of the China-Taiwan issue developing into a war in which the U.S. and China would have to go head to head. However, the likelihood of the U.S. backing away entirely from Taiwan seems improbable, with President Obama reaffirming commitments to Taiwan in September 2011, Taiwan remains the most direct sphere of influence the U.S. has in the region.

MILITARY GROWTH

In 2009 former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said;

The areas of greatest concern are Chinese investments and growing capabilities in cyber-and anti-satellite warfare, anti-air and anti-ship weaponry, submarines, and ballistic missiles. Modernization in these areas could threaten America's primary means of projecting power and helping allies in the Pacific: our bases, air and sea assets, and the networks that support them**[18]**.

Former Secretary Gates outlined a concern that has been at the fore-front of Sino-U.S. relations over the last ten years, China has year on year increased is military expenditure by a significant amount. In the ten years between 2000 and 2010, Chinese military spending increased from $32.1bn to $114.3bn[19], and in March of 2011 China announced that it would be once again increasing its military spending, this time by 12.7%, higher than the 7.5% increase in 2010[20]. But can China's military growth be seen as an indicator of its willingness to go to war, or is it merely matching the military growth elsewhere in the region, as the U.S.A cosies-up to India, Japan and South Korea.

In 2011 a Chinese Parliamentary spokesman, Li Zhaoxing argued that in comparison to world standards "China's defence spending is relatively low"[21] in the wake of the announced spending increase, and he argued that China has always "paid attention to restraining defence spending"[22]. But these assertions will do little to offset the concerns felt in the region, as can be seen in India's 11.6% increase in spending[23], and also in the West. In plain terms, China is increasing its military expenditure, but remains far behind the U.S.A in terms of actual amounts spent, further to the fact that as a percentage of GDP; China now spends less (as a percentage of GDP) than it did in the early 90's. It is also often quoted that China has the largest armed forces in the world, but some have argued that the U.S. employs vast amounts of defence personnel and defence contractors, that alongside U.S. military personnel match China's numbers[24]. Finally, it is worth noting that China operates no overseas bases, with very limited numbers of military personnel working abroad[25]. Behind closed doors of course, China is looking to develop its potential to project power into its immediate region, and a challenge to that power remains the United States. In building its military might, China has a hope of going some way to counter the United States' strong regional presence but, as has been argued above, it remains distinctly behind the U.S. in terms of capabilities.

But many U.S. observers argue that China has pursued an aggressive and often provocative approach to flexing its military might that could lead to conflict. In 2007 China shot down a redundant communications satellite without any prior warning, only officially announced that it had done so a week later, giving foreign security agencies ample time to find this out for themselves. In January 2010 China once again showcased its technological advances by performing an anti-missile test; a warning that it has the technology to shoot down ICBMs. And the CIA has recently become aware of a newly-built naval base on the Chinese island of Hainan, that it predicts is capable of projecting a

significant naval force into the South China Sea.

It is difficult to deny that China wishes to showcase its new capabilities to the U.S., and it is equally difficult to deny the similarities to Cold-War behaviour seen from the U.S. and USSR, but some liberal thinkers have argued that China's military capabilities have been significantly over-exaggerated as a threat, and that the 'One Child' generation will negatively impact the readiness and quality of the People's Liberation Army[26]. The risk of over-exaggerating China's capabilities could itself exacerbate the tensions between the U.S. and China; Charles Glaser argues that if the U.S. fails to appreciate the level of security it has, and equally over-exaggerates China's military capabilities, the U.S. itself "may adopt overly competitive military and foreign policies"[27]. While Glaser goes on to argue that this is yet to occur, it could be argued that in analysing the previous quotes of Robert Gates and Admiral Robert Willard, this over-exaggeration has already begun. Donald Rumsfeld's words in 2005 further highlight the growing concerns in the U.S. "Since no nation threatens China, one wonders: why this growing (military) investment?"[28]

It is these words from Rumsfeld though, that highlight the United States' ignorance of the impact it has on China's military growth. As opposed to questioning why China feels the need to build arms when no nations threaten it, the U.S. should be working to develop a dialogue sufficient to quell China's fears of whom they feel threatened by. Be it the U.S. itself; supporting Taiwan and able to send its navy into the South China Sea in a matter of days, or India as it seeks itself to grow its military capabilities in the face of a growing China, it matters not which nation China feels threatened by, but more how to challenge the fear itself. From the Chinese perspective, China must itself now recognise that it holds a secure position, and must utilise this security to employ soft power and diplomacy where it has previously flexed its military muscle.

ENERGY

A third flashpoint that could, in the future lead to the cooling of Sino-U.S. relations is the prospect of an energy war. The industrialisation of many Chinese cities in conjunction with the growth of its manufacturing industry has put great strain on China's domestic resources, this strain cannot be and is not sustainable, and as such, China has been forced to look elsewhere to find the resources it needs to support growth. China's relationship with Australia, an often presumed U.S.-allied supporter of Taiwan, has grown in the wake of coal deals. In 2004 Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said that the U.S. should not assume Australia would support them in defending Taiwan, should China launch an attack[29]. Here China is moving challenging U.S. influence in Australia. China relies heavily on seaward imports of energy, with only one cross-border pipeline, China has placed a significant emphasis on protecting the means of energy imports reaching China. The development of its navy can be seen as an obvious tool to better police the seas around China into which most of China's energy imports flow. China also has energy interests further afield, with the development of a crude-oil pipeline through Burma, oil fields off the coast of Nigeria and the importance of crude-oil from Sudan and Angola[30], all areas with significant troubles or tentative peace, China must now project its forces further across the globe when it need to defend its interests[31]. In 2004, 45% of China's oil imports were estimated to have come from the Middle East with around 11% of all China's oil imports coming from Iran[32]. While the U.S. continues to enforce an oil embargo on Iran, and the EU sits on the verge of committing to an embargo of its own[33], China continues to buy more of Iran's oil than any other state[34]. The numerous energy agreements between Iran and China, set China's relationship with Iran in concrete for the next 30 years, and China's reliance on these oil and gas exports could place it on a collision course with the U.S. and the EU as they seek to impose further sanctions on Iran. If Iran continues to develop its nuclear programme, there is a likelihood that the U.S. will take further action beyond economic and trade sanctions, perhaps in the form of military action. If the U.S. were to use military force in Iran, with China aligned to Iran in terms of trade and energy, it isn't unthinkable that China would be forced to react to defend its interests in Iran. It could be argued that China's reliance on energy places it energy concerns above concerns for developing a healthy relationship with the United States, one could even argue that in their pursuit for badly needed energy, China is behaving in an amoral manner. China must take the responsibility to diffuse any potential conflicts between the West and Iran. While the current situation is beneficial to China in terms of the stake it has placed in Iranian oil, were the situation between the West and Iran to deteriorate further, China would be placed in an invidious position. Having ploughed billions of dollars into the development of Iran's oil and gas fields, as well as having a reliance on this supply for the next thirty years, China needs to protect its investment without resorting to armed conflict on Iran's behalf. It would be in China's much

greater interest if it were to utilise diplomacy in preventing a war between Iran and the West than having to get involved via proxy or any other means.

In sum, there exist a multitude of threats to peace in the Sino-U.S. relationship, all of which have some potential to lead to conflict. While Taiwan has most often been regarded as the most-likely cause of a war between the U.S. and China, and while most observers would agree that this remains a very real threat, the noises coming from both Taipei and Beijing are in fact positive. China may not have given up its desire to reunify with Taiwan, but appears to understand Taiwan's need to have a sense of identity and an element of independence. Equally, Taiwan appears to recognise that ultimately reunification may not be that bad a thing, and that it can achieve its goals of independence and a sense of identity, by adopting a 'Finlandised' model of how they conduct relations with China. This would not only appease China's concerns over Taiwan's 'special-relationship' with the United States, allow Taiwan to take a more positive, independent stand on the world stage, but also alleviate U.S. concerns that Taiwan could draw the U.S. into a conflict with China. What continues to exacerbate the China-Taiwan issue from the U.S. perspective is China's military growth. China will continue to develop its military until it feels secure, and the U.S. should concentrate its efforts alleviating this concern. As structural realism dictates; "when the security dilemma is mild…the international system creates opportunities for restraint and peace[35]" and equally from the U.S. perspective "a state will be more secure when its adversary is more secure, because insecurity can pressure an adversary to adopt competitive and threatening policies[36]". The one issue that stands out as a potential flashpoint though, is China's energy-dependent relationship with Iran. The United States appears adamant that Iran will not succeed in its pursuit of nuclear capabilities, regardless of whether Tehran insists they are peaceful or not, the U.S. will likely employ military means to prevent Iran succeeding. To that end, the onus is on China to diffuse tensions. If not, China will either be drawn into a conflict with the United States, or lose a significant amount of investment and infrastructure in Iran's oil and gas fields, as well as a significant supplier of much-needed energy for the next 30 years.

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Date written: Jan 2012