Taiwan's Democratisation and China's Quest for Cross-Strait Reunification

Political divergence has complicated China's quest for cross-strait reunification but has not made it completely impossible due to its authoritarian capacity to adapt to Taiwan's consolidated democracy. On the one hand, Taiwan's democratisation has fundamentally reshaped cross-strait relations from a one-level game between the *Kuomintang* (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to a two-level game. This has since unleashed political forces that could legally compete in Taiwan's local elections and undermine the stability of '1992 Consensus' as a precondition to China's long-term goal of reunification. On the other hand, Taiwan's democratic consolidation has reopened the door for the CCP to employ its *tongzhan* ('United Front') strategy to 'divide and conquer' the Taiwan populace in a war of position. Although the success remains unclear, it demonstrates the CCP's flexibility to capitalize on its single-party authoritarian state apparatus to gradually 'hegemonize' the dominant norms surrounding cross-strait relations and reshape Taiwan's local consent. This essay will first examine the complications of cross-strait politics due to Taiwan's democratic consolidation, followed by adopting a 'neo-Gramscian' approach to analyse China's counterstrategy against the process of political divergence.

In addressing the terms of reference, this essay refers to China as mainland China and the term is used interchangeably with the People's Republic of China (PRC) founded by the CCP in 1949. However, it does not refer to the Taiwan populace as 'Taiwanese'. The former refers to local residents who have acquired Taiwan citizenship, whereas the latter refers to those who have reimagined themselves as having a specific national identity in relation to their lived experiences of *bentuhua* (localisation) in Taiwan.

Complications to cross-strait reunification politics

Prior to Taiwan's democratisation, the cross-strait relationship was a one-level party-to-party interaction between Taiwan's single-party authoritarian KMT and China's CCP. This had ensured a necessary point of convergence in relation to their cross-strait win-sets. The KMT had shared with China a common goal of securing long-term reunification, although both diverged in terms of the legal representation of the reunified China. However, its implacable hostility with the CCP during the Maoist period and its failure to overcome communist forces in the mainland compelled the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek's leadership to temporarily withdraw to the renegade island. In order to quell pro-independent forces and cultivate the will of the Taiwan people towards long-term reunification under its rule, the KMT introduced several measures which culminated in the '2-28 Incident', the White Terror, and the 'Sinification' process to culturally reinforce a sense of Chinese national identity.[1] Thus, the KMT had at least shared with the CCP a common opposition to any possibility of Taiwan independence and the shared dream of reunification.[2] "As long as both regimes were authoritarian one-party states with shared histories wedged in their conflicts on the mainland," Hans Stockton notes, "the "one China" mythos remained their primary point of contention as each party fought to elevate its own sovereignty in a zero-sum game."[3]

Since 1986, however, Taiwan's democratic consolidation process has fundamentally altered the cross-strait relationship into a two-level game. Although the process remains incomplete, it is safe to say that the institutionalisation of electoral politics and other democratic mechanisms have gradually empowered the Taiwan populace to decide for themselves the fate of Taiwan. Importantly, this includes the KMT's 1991 amendment of the

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1946 Constitution, which permitted elections for the National Assembly and the Legislative Yuan, and the subsequent "Guidelines for National Unification," which allowed for a redefinition of cross-strait politics as a long-term reunification issue with no time limit depending "on democratic political change in China and popular acceptance by Taiwan's population," Malcolm Cook notes.[4] Currently, Taiwan's cross-strait politics is divided between the pro-unification and pro-China Pan Blue camp (the KMT, the People First Party and the Chinese New Party) and the anti-China and pro-independent Pan Green camp (the Democratic People's Party (DPP) and Taiwan Solidarity Union). However, the nature of Taiwan's electoral system of plurality voting has to date encouraged a two-party system, altering between the KMT and the DPP.[5] The CCP has to, therefore, deal with not only the KMT, but also the recurrent rise of DPP which has attempted to revise Taiwan's policies in the cross-strait reunification issue against China's wishes.

In this regard, it is important to note that Taiwan's democratic consolidation took place against the backdrop of an emerging national identity, which complicates cross-strait politics and exposes Taiwan to elite manipulation between political parties as a means to acquire electoral support.[6] This essay does not intend to dwell into the specifics of Taiwan's national identity conception but notes the failure of Chiang Kai-shek's suppression of the emerging national identity. Chiang's 'Sinification' campaign had not fit well with Taiwan's society, where the ethnic segments are not Han by birth or culture and where time apart from China has produced generations who are not part of the KMT's earlier struggle in the mainland and who are raised in an anti-Chinese Communist environment.[7] As a result, a sense of 'self' and 'the other' continues to inform a part of the populace of Sino-Taiwanese political differences. Consequently, Taiwan's democratisation "has created an institutional civil space in which a collective debate could take place on national identity that departed from Taiwan as solely a repository of high Chinese culture," Stockton notes.[8] This has allowed for local forces opposed to 'Sinification' and the oppressive CCP to contribute to the debate on Taiwan's national identity. The connection between national identity and cross-strait politics intersects when the pro-independent DPP under Chen Shui-bian attempted to reinforce *bentuhua* to create greater dissonance between Taiwan and China and to reimagine Taiwan as a nation in search of independence.[9]

Furthermore, the KMT's attempt to manipulate the national identity issue for electoral support has constrained itself from adopting explicit pro-unification policies in order to stay relevant in Taiwan's local elections. Under Chiang Ching-Kuo's leadership, the KMT had already begun to adapt through a campaign of 'cultural reconstruction' to embrace the non-Chinese ethnic voter-base.[10] His successor Lee Teng-hui, however, sought radical changes that officially closed the door for Chiang Kai-shek's military reunification and increasingly converged with the DPP towards the pro-independent narrative. This includes not only the aforementioned 'Guidelines for Unification', which altered the KMT's approach to supporting peaceful unification under the voluntary condition of China's democratisation but more importantly the perceived changing emphasis from 'Taiwan Only' towards 'Taiwan Independence' as Lee encouraged more state-to-state basis of cross-strait interaction. For example, the institutionalisation of Mainland Affairs Council and Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) in 1990 and 1991, a drive for Taiwan's UN membership in 1993, as well as the characterisation of Taiwan-China relations on a "special state-to-state" level during a German radio interview.[11]

This is not to suggest that Taiwan's national identity emergence has necessitated a dominant force actively seeking formal independence. Rather, the dominant forces have by far leaned towards a pro-*status quo* position, despite an increasing identification of 'Taiwanese' in national surveys.[12] The *status quo* position is best captured in the discourse regarding the '1992 Consensus'. During a 1992 meeting between the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) and SEF, both parties agreed to abide by the 'One China' principle of mutually encouraging cross-strait reunification, although they differed on the interpretation.[13] It is thus a position of mutual non-recognition whereby both parties agree to disagree, and therefore one which does not seek formal independence or overt reunification.

The dominance of the pro-*status quo* camp in Taiwan may be the result of a pragmatic populace to avoid the worst-possible outcome.[14] This can be due to China's increasing threats of military force since the 1995-6 cross-strait crisis to prevent Taiwan from slipping into formal independence, such as military muscle-flexing across the Taiwan Strait and the 2005 institutionalisation of anti-Secession law. Washington's ambivalent policy of 'dual deterrence' also creates uncertainty over its willingness to support Taiwan's formal independence.[15] Thus, Lee's failure in the

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2000 general election was partly the result of his inability to balance between the issue of emerging national identity and the stability of the cross-strait relationship regarding 'One China'.[16] The KMT's subsequent leader, Ma Ying-Jeou, in effect sought to learn from Lee's capitulation by pursuing a *status quo* oriented policy of 'no unification, no independence, and no use of force'.

However, Ma's overemphasis on cross-strait economic and cultural engagement has rendered him unable to manage the *status quo* position, which has contributed to his eventual downfall. The ability of Tsai Ing-wen and her DPP to secure legislative and executive dominance following the 2016 electoral general election was largely the result of Ma's mishandling of the cross-strait integration due to his undermining of parliamentary due process in the passing of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement.[17] This provoked the fear of Ma 'selling out' Taiwan's democracy, which engendered the 'Sunflower Movement' and instigated the KMT's biggest electoral defeat in the 2014 nine-in-one elections. Ma's subsequent resignation as president further harmed party solidarity and constrained the KMT's capacity to recover in the 2016 elections.

On the other hand, while the DPP has sought a pro-independent position during Chen's leadership, it has also learnt from his presidential downfall in pursuing an explicitly pro-independent stance and failing to manage Taiwan's cross-strait relationship with China. Thus, following leadership transfers, the DPP has also shifted towards a *status quo* position, but with an implicitly pro-independent tone. This position would emphasise the risks that come with over-dependence on Chinese economy, prefer policies that diversify Taiwan's political-economic relationships and minimise reliance on the mainland, as well as diplomatically re-framing the '1992 Consensus' in ways against the CCP's desired understanding.[18] For example, although Tsai emphasises on preserving the *status quo of* stability and peace, she has also increasingly emphasised Taiwan's democratic principles, remained ambiguous in recognising the '1992 Consensus' as a process rather than an agreement, and adopted the New Southbound Policy to diversify Taiwan's economy and reduce Taiwan's over-reliance on China.[19] In general, therefore, the *status quo* position has become a valence issue in Taiwan's cross-strait national debate, one where the majority of the electorate prefers a centrist line and where both the KMT and the DPP have increasingly shifted towards to garner electoral support.

Political divergence, due in part to Taiwan's democratic consolidation since 1986 and China's continued authoritarian resilience, has thus complicated the cross-strait reunification issue. This has unleashed anti-unification forces in Taiwan to legally compete in local elections and subvert the long-term processes of China's quest for reunification. Against this backdrop, however, China's single-party authoritarian system equips the CCP with a unique capacity to manage the problems of political divergence. The next section builds on a neo-Gramscian approach to analyse the CCP's party-state apparatus, the 'United Front'.

A Neo-Gramscian Approach: Cultural Hegemony and the War of Position

A neo-Gramscian framework builds on some of the precepts of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Central to his theory is the concept of a 'hegemonic' state, which Li Xing notes is the idea of "a dominant class" which "exercises power over subordinate classes by means of a combination of coercion and consent,"[20] or the idea of 'war of manoeuvre' and 'war of position'.[21] This distinction between the two instruments of hegemony is important, as the former implies an attempt to rule by force through a 'frontal assault'. The latter, however, insinuates a siege warfare mentality to gradually gain legitimacy over the 'universal' norms and interests of the society through the reproduction of social relations, ideas and institutions of the dominant class.[22] Roger Simon elaborates that such consent can be acquired "through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political and ideological struggle."[23] In advanced capitalist economies with a fully developed civil society (such as Taiwan), a social group must exercise consent before acquiring state power in order to exercise hegemony,[24] as this would ensure that the socio-political superstructure is maintained by stabilising "the ascendancy of a class at the limiting point of production compatible with its continuity."[25] In other words, consent is critical to the stability of the hegemonic class as it neutralises dissent without triggering a revolution that undermines the structural dominance of the system.

The aforementioned ideas are relevant to China's strategy towards Taiwan, as China has since increasingly adopted

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a 'war of position' through the use of its single-party authoritarian state apparatus, the United Front Work Department (UFWD). Commonly referred to as one of China's 'magic weapon', the CCP has attempted to weaken the integrity and sovereignty of the targeted state's political system by exploiting on 'rifts' among enemies, coalescing with a 'mass ally', and engaging in disinformation and propaganda campaign.[26] This includes "coordinated visits by sympathetic non-communist leaders, professional groups such as doctors and professors that they wanted to establish rapport with, and cultural exchange programs," as well as establishing "contacts with Chinese diaspora communities," June Teufel Dreyer notes.[27]

However, it is important to note that this strategy is only possible with Taiwan's democratic consolidation. Under the previous single-party authoritarian KMT leadership, the strategy could not succeed due to the KMT's antipathy towards communism and the suppression of Chinese communist interference in its process to cultivate an anti-communist, reunification force.[28] By the late 1970-80s onward, as the KMT began focusing on economic development and as the Chinese economy began opening up under Deng Xiaoping and transition from a revolutionary state to a developmental state, both parties started forming cross-strait economic and diplomatic relations. However, the mainland-Taiwan relationship was still strictly limited due to Taiwan's opposition to the *Tiananmen* crackdown. Taiwan's democratisation process soon engendered an increasingly vibrant civil society, which reopened the possibility of a war of position through the UFWD. The CCP's reconstruction of its domestic legitimacy from ideology to nationalism following the *Tiananmen* crackdown and the ending of Cold War also encouraged the development of overseas Chinese communities which can be mobilised to strengthen the party's legitimacy from abroad.

Other than cultivating party-to-party ties with the KMT, the CCP has been building a 'narrative of unfolding' to reshape the ideas surrounding the collective memory of Taiwan populace and compete with the opposing narrative created by pro-independent Taiwanese movements. This is done through the constant reframing of Taiwan-mainland political and national history[29] and other 'Sinification' processes such as cross-strait inter-marriages. The CCP is also alleged to be stirring up ethnic disputes through sponsored criminal organisations,[30] and befriending pro-China towns with attractive economic incentives and ignoring the pro-independent towns and government.[31] China's Central Party Research Office has further been accused of targeting several political figures from the KMT and DPP who had been marginalised to form a new pro-Beijing, party.[32]

Nevertheless, China's patronage policy toward wealthy Taiwan businesses to support the pro-Consensus KMT is declining in effectiveness, as its business-oriented approach is increasingly perceived to exacerbate Taiwan's social inequality and undermine its democratic processes.[33] There is also the aforementioned problem of the emerging pro-Taiwanese national identity. China's model of 'One China, Two Systems', too, has come under fire due to its increasing encroachment on Hong Kong's democracy, which has exacerbated distrust that Taiwan's democracy can prosper under an authoritarian regime.[34] As a result, the CCP has reformed its war of position by targeting the "three middles and the youth" and the "one generation and one stratum", which *Taipei Times* stated as "residents of central and southern Taiwan, middle and low-income families, small and medium-sized enterprises, and young people," on the one hand, and "the young ['independence by nature'] generation and the grassroots stratum," on the other hand, with the aim of "dispel[ling] misconceptions about China held by ordinary Taiwanese."[35]

Through such 'divide and conquer' strategy, China's UFWD has therefore sought to reshape the dominant norms and discourses in Taiwan to gain its consent for the '1992 Consensus' in the shorter term and cross-strait unification in the longer term. Although the success of which remains unclear, China has clearly shown its capacity to adapt to Taiwan's democratic consolidation by reinforcing a war of position to achieve hegemony in cross-strait unification politics.

However, this essay does not suggest that Gramsci's approach directly represents China's policy towards Taiwan, given that he had formulated his ideas in prison while China was already engaged in a civil war. Rather, China's evolving 'United Front' strategy conforms neatly with some of Gramsci's principles that deserves attention. This theoretical conformity may be informed by the historical connection after the Maoist period of Cultural Revolution when the CCP began re-permitting the translation of and embracing Western Marxist theories in the 1980s, including Gramsci's thoughts.[36] The essay also recognises that Gramsci's theory is built on the basis of an intra-state, class-

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based level of analysis,[37] whereas the cross-strait relationship is not class-based and falls within the grey area of inter/intra-state due to the differing interpretations on 'One China', which is beyond the scope of Marxism. However, given that the CCP's objective is to ultimate revise the cross-strait relationship into one of intrastate, Gramsci's hegemonic theory can still be partly applied to analyse the CCP's use of its single-party authoritarian state apparatus against Taiwan. Therefore, framing the *tongzhan* as a 'neo-Gramscian' approach informs both the point that the CCP's war of position does not sit neatly within the Gramscian School while inheriting some important elements of his principles.

Conclusion

To conclude, Taiwan's democratic consolidation has fundamentally altered cross-strait politics. It has reshaped the debate along the lines of national identity and opened the door to anti-unification forces that could legally compete to support policies against China's wishes. Nonetheless, China's single-party authoritarian nature has conferred the CCP a significant capacity to counter pro-independent Taiwanese movements and re-engage with Taiwan's populace through a war of position. Here, the neo-Gramscian approach is analytical rich as it elucidates the CCP's adaptability through a 'challenge-response' dynamism,[38] wherein external factors across the strait (i.e. Taiwan's domestic transformation) affect China's calculations in its attempt to secure the '1992 Consensus' in the shorter-term and achieve reunification in the longer-term. Although there are theoretical limitations, they do not invalidate the significance of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony in China's cross-strait strategy.

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