The Beijing-Taipei-Washington Triangle

Remarks to an Academic Seminar at the Miller Center, University of Virginia

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Charlottesville, Virginia November 16, 2013

We are gathered to consider whether the longstanding three-way games of one-upmanship between Beijing, Taipei, and Washington are being succeeded by a more virtuous geometry. For much of the past six decades or so, the Beijing-Taipei-Washington triangle was one in which an improvement in relations between any two parties was seen by the remaining party as threatening and therefore worthy of opposition. Thus the triangle was bounded by multiple potential zero-sum games, and the object of interaction between any two parties was to score points at the expense of the excluded party. But, as time has passed, intercourse between the three points of the triangle has ceased to have this necessarily negative dynamic. Sometimes an improvement in relations between two parties now clearly benefits rather than menaces the third and is so perceived. This raises the question of what might be done to increase the potential for mutual benefit rather than injury from improvements in relations between all three pairings among the parties.

As the weakest of the three points on the triangle, Taipei has always been the most apprehensive, with Beijing the second weakest and second most concerned. Once the strongest, Washington may now be switching places with an ever-more powerful Beijing. Be that as it may, the essential question before us is whether there are now ways in which improved relationships between Taipei and Beijing might reassure and benefit Washington, or improved relationships between Washington and Taipei might do the same for Beijing. Is there now an "inclusive" triangle in which the incentives for cooperation can be maximized and exploited? That is the question at the level of theory.

Let me now confess that, while some of my best friends are international relations theorists, as a practitioner, IR theories have never done anything at all for me, and geometry was never my best subject. Then again, the famous media personality who designed the apartment I bought in Adams Morgan in 2007 was into triangular rooms. My wife and I spent almost a year turning his misbegotten polygons into more congenial shapes. So I've recently learned more than I ever wanted to know about how to manipulate three-point geometries to benefit those present rather than to appease the nostalgia of those who have departed.

On the other hand, the last time I dabbled in strategic geomancy (战略风水) was nearly fifty years ago. At that time, I surveyed the global situation and independently decided that the U.S. confrontations with the USSR and China were not a linear expression but a potential triangle. I determined to prepare myself to be there when the U.S. finally drew an extension from itself to Beijing.

Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. I was lucky to be able to take part when Washington and Beijing first found each other. That was also when the Beijing-Taipei-Washington triangle was activated. Wrestling with it became a major feature of my life in diplomacy. The papers for this conference provide rich details about the internal struggles in Beijing and Taipei that produced successive restructurings of the Beijing-Taipei-Washington triangle. (There were plenty of similar skirmishes in Washington.) I will not recapitulate these accounts. Without waxing theoretical, I will instead lay out a candid view of how I have seen events push, shove, and pull the Taiwan problem over the years.

Prior to the 1971-72 Nixon opening to Beijing, the only relevant diplomatic geometry was that between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. There was none between Beijing and Washington, except in the fearful mind of Taipei, which – for more than twenty years – masterfully manipulated American politics to ensure that Beijing's views were not an angle to be considered in U.S. policies toward it or any other part of China. Taipei's one-sided game was a matter of principle; and damn the consequences. As Fred Ch'ien (钱复) put it to me in December 1970 while rejecting both my prediction that Taipei might lose its United Nations seat within a year and the suggestion that Taipei ought to think about how to remain in the organization after

Beijing was seated: 汉贼不两立，宁为玉翠不为瓦全. "The righteous cannot coexist with criminals. Better to be a piece of broken jade than a whole tile." (I have to say, this reminds me of today's Israel's defiant gamble that existing global and regional realities will not change to its disadvantage.)

The *Taiwan question* – that is the issue of what legal and political relationship Taiwan should have to the China mainland – is, of course, distinct from the *Taiwan problem*, which is how to manage, resolve, or mitigate Taiwan's *de facto* separation from the rest of China. There was no Taiwan issue before June 25, 1950, when Kim Il-sung launched his surprise attack to unify Korea and ended up dividing both his own country and China for what is now more than six decades.

Up to the outbreak of war in Korea, everyone had expected Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army (PLA) to pursue Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan, to which he had fled on December 10, 1949, and to complete the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China's civil war. In anticipation of this, on January 5, 1950, President Truman took public note of the fact that "for the past four years the United States and other Allied Powers have accepted the exercise of Chinese authority over [Taiwan]." He declared that the United States would not involve itself "in the civil conflict in China . . . [and would] not provide military aid or advice to Chinese forces" on Taiwan.[1]

Truman reversed that policy of non-intervention on the night of June 27, 1950, as part of the U.S. reaction to the Korean Communist attack two days before. He directed that "orders be issued to the Seventh Fleet to prevent an attack on Formosa [Taiwan], the National Government of China [i.e. Chiang Kai-shek] be told to desist from operations against the mainland, and the Seventh Fleet be ordered to effect this."[2] This U.S. intervention to halt the Chinese civil war vivisected China and laid the basis for Taiwan's evolution as a society distinct from other parts of China. The intervention ended long ago. The Taiwan problem lives on.

Twenty-one years after Kim Il-sung's tragic misjudgment, President Nixon's announcement that Henry Kissinger had secretly visited Beijing on his behalf created an instant diplomatic triangle

[1] http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=13678#axzz1W2UQuaXk

in the Taiwan Strait where none had been seen before. Chiang Kai-shek had manifestly lost his time-tested ability to block positive interaction between Washington and Beijing. Still, his regime believed that its survival as a polity and society separate from the People's Republic of China (PRC) hinged on U.S. diplomatic and military backing against Beijing. So, for the next thirty-four years, Taipei focused on extracting tokens of American affection that would sustain the island's morale and fend off reunification with the mainland, whether by force or peaceful means.

Taipei's lobbying was skillful and registered some notable successes, including a far-reaching policy-focused amendment to the Taiwan Relations Act, the nibbling away of the terms of U.S. normalization with the PRC through repeated minor upgrades in relations with Washington, escalating arms sales, and ever-less-subtle pledges of a unilateral American defense commitment that seemed at times less qualified politically than those enjoyed by U.S. mutual defense treaty allies. For its part, over this period, Beijing saw Washington, not the rival Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) regime in Taipei, as the key to blocking Taiwan independence and ensuring eventual reunification. The obsessive attempts of both Chinese parties to manipulate policies in Washington made the U.S. capital, not the Taiwan Strait, the final battleground of the unfinished Chinese civil war.

Beijing finally turned its attention seriously to Taipei, as opposed to Washington, only in 1999, when Lee Teng-hui (李登辉) advanced his "two-state doctrine" (两国论). Beijing correctly assessed this as a declaration of independence in disguise. Within a month, it had inaugurated a "two-handed policy" (两手政策) that simultaneously applied both hard and soft power (软硬兼施) by combining a massive Taiwan-focused military build-up targeted for completion in 2008 with a greatly expanded united front campaign of outreach to political, economic, and cultural elites on the island.

Despite decades of bluster about "liberating" Taiwan, Beijing had never before sought to build a capability to devastate the island or take it by force. The provocative pro-independence stance of the Chen Shui-bian (陈水扁) administration, elected in 2000 by a 39 percent minority vote, both

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[2] Notes regarding Blair House meetings, June 26, 1950., reproduced in "The Korean War and Its Origins, 1945-1953," http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/koreanwar/index.php

challenged the prospects for reunification and confirmed Beijing's suspicion that Washington would or could no longer constrain Taipei.

Finally, Taipei went too far, leading George W. Bush in December 2003 explicitly to rule out any unilateral change in Taiwan's status and implicitly to accept that Beijing and Washington had a common problem in preventing Taiwanese nationalism from provoking unwanted conflict in the Taiwan region. I suppose to IR theorists this is an illustration that one party to a triangular relationship can cause the positions of the other two to converge, if it is sufficiently annoying to both. In practical terms, the shift in U.S. policy at the end of 2003 strongly reinforced Beijing's up-to-then tentative conclusion that the answer to the Taiwan problem lies in influencing decisions in Taipei directly rather than through Washington and that the way to do this is with a combination of military build-up and united front blandishments.

One result of Beijing's shift in focus toward Taipei was the March 2005 Anti-Secession Law. This was immediately assessed by most American scholars as a possibly fatal blow to cross-Strait rapprochement. It was denounced by the G. W. Bush administration as a blow to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

But there was a Chinese logic to it that foreigners missed. A month later, both KMT Chairman Lien Chan (连战) and James Soong (宋楚瑜), another leader of the "Pan-Blue Coalition" in Taiwan, were being fêted on the mainland. Their visits to Beijing and the restoration of KMT relations with the CCP vindicated the PRC's united front policies, transformed cross-Strait relations, and marked a decisive turn away from the Washington-dominated triangular contentions of the past. In the eight years since 2005, the action has been almost entirely between Taipei and Beijing, not between either Chinese party and Washington.

Working first on a party-to-party basis and more recently through quasi-governmental exchanges, the two sides of the Strait have made impressive progress in building suprastatal frameworks for cooperation. These facilitate the integration of their economies and the opening of their societies to each other. By 2008, the "three links" (三通) -- originally proposed by China's National People's Congress as a sidebar to Sino-American normalization in January 1979 – were substantially established. Notably, this was done without reference to the United States, which

was, however, a silent beneficiary of it. There are now huge flows of trade, investment, and people across the Strait, including a lot of activities in which Americans take profitable part.

Since 2008, the KMT has once again been the ruling party in Taiwan, this time with party-to-party ties to the ruling party on the mainland, the CCP. President Ma Ying-jeow (马英九) has appropriately described cross-Strait relations as relations between different regions of the same country, a formula that implicitly excludes foreign participation in their crafting. Progress in cross-Strait economic and cultural ties is being made without consultation or other forms of involvement by the United States or any other foreign party.

It seems clear that the KMT understands that both the evolution of the status quo in cross-Strait relations and further reductions in tensions depend on decisions that can only be made by it with Beijing, not Washington. A diplomatic truce is now in effect, with neither side attempting to supplant the other's ties with third parties. This has at long last put Washington out of the Chinese representation ("ChiRep") business. Taipei continues to welcome American support for its presence in international organizations but increasingly pursues this objective through quiet consultations with Beijing and the organizations concerned, recognizing that transforming an issue into one between Beijing and Washington would more likely complicate than advance its agenda.

In practice, if not yet rhetorically, Taipei also seems to have altered its military strategy, including its approach to arms purchases from the United States. The military balance in the Taiwan Strait has shifted so decisively in favor of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) that it's no longer possible to sustain the fantasy that an island of 23 million people can balance the military power of a dynamic society of 1.3 billion. Whatever the answer to Taiwan's continued survival as a prosperous democratic society may be, it's not military. By 2020, according to a recent report from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense, the PLA may be able to overwhelm the island even in the face of armed U.S. opposition. This finding leads ineluctably to a judgment that cross-Strait challenges must be met by political rather than military means. Such a judgment is implicit in the fact that Taipei's defense budget has been shrinking, while Beijing's continues its rapid growth.

In the past, Taipei sought approval of weapons purchases from Washington as much or more for their political value as tokens of American politico-military support as for their contributions to its defense. Taipei still asks for advanced American weaponry, but there is now no money and not much oomph behind these requests. They hold Taiwan's military-industrial constituency in America in thrall to continuing dreams of a lucrative arms market. If realized, however, these sales would not have much, if any, effect on the military balance in the Taiwan Strait. With that balance now irreversibly in favor of the mainland, U.S. weapons transfers cannot boost the island's sense of security as they once did. Still less do U.S. arms sales serve to embolden Taiwan's political elite to defy Beijing or the logic of eventual reunification with the mainland, as Beijing long supposed they did.

If Taipei understands that U.S. gestures of support to it in the form of arms sales no longer have much political or military significance, it is not yet clear that Beijing has come to grips with this reality. It's easy to understand why the mainland doesn't like U.S. arms transfers to Taiwan, but punishing the United States for them is increasingly irrelevant to Beijing's objectives with respect to the island. Taipei makes its own decisions, now with more of an eye on Beijing's reaction than on Washington's. Yet, as recently as 2010, in response to a large U.S. arms sale to Taipei, Beijing suspended all military exchanges with the United States. Like their counterparts in America, some military officers and other nationalist elements on the mainland have yet to think through the implications of the diminished American role in shaping Taipei's approach to its burgeoning cross-Strait relationships.

Washington has never objected to any peaceful step forward in cross-Strait relations and, after the fact, has applauded every such advance as benefitting its own interests. America is manifestly neither a driver nor a serious constraint on Taipei's interaction with Beijing. If the importance of the connection between two points is measured by its practical consequences, there's not as much left of the old triangle as some imagine. The ultimate challenge to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait arises from the imperatives of Chinese nationalism. The inhibitions to reunification are to be found almost entirely in Taiwan's politics. Washington has very little influence and nothing useful to say about how the two sides interact politically.

Perhaps the recognition of this was behind what CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平`) is reported to have said to Vincent Siew (萧万长) in Bali six weeks ago. Mr. Xi had earlier tried

but failed to engage President Obama on the Taiwan problem during their tête-à-tête at Sunnylands, California. Mr. Xi was quoted as telling Mr. Siew that Beijing was ready to engage Taipei in "reciprocal negotiations on bilateral political issues … under the 'one China' framework" and that "the longstanding political division between the two sides will have to be eventually resolved step-by-step as it should not be passed on generation after generation."

This recognizes that the Taiwan issue is a challenge to cross-Strait Chinese, not American, statecraft and that Taiwan's future will be decided between Taipei and Beijing, not in Washington. And most of Washington is fine with that. As early as the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972, the United States affirmed "its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by … Chinese [on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait] themselves."

To turn briefly from reality back to theory, I have outlined a history in which triangles wax and wane and assumptions coalesce and cleave asunder, to paraphrase the mistranslated opening lines of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The Chinese is clearer. 话说天下大势，分久必合，合久必分. "It is said the logic of nature dictates that what has been long partitioned must come together and what has long been united must divide."

I am not sure this portentous thesis meets the standards of IR theory but it is a fair summary of the contending views among the passionate supporters of reunification or secession on the mainland and in Taiwan. At the moment, the trend is toward greater togetherness between the two sides of the Strait. Taiwan's electorate could yet replace this trend with renewed confrontation, this time under military circumstances that would be unprecedentedly disadvantageous to Taipei. Some in Beijing would welcome an excuse to use force and the dialectic the threat to do so could set in motion. But I doubt this will happen.

Despite cross-Strait divisions, there are many examples of similar interests and perspectives in Taipei and Beijing – some actual but many more potential. And new triangles that connect the two seem to be emerging. As examples, think of those implicit in the Diaoyu / Senkaku Islands problem, the South China Sea, or the various free trade zones being created to facilitate the supply-chain economics that seamlessly connect the mainland to Taiwan. Still others are suggested in some of the papers for this conference.

But if the sides of the triangle that connect Beijing-Taipei interaction to Washington are fading and no longer decisive, these lines are still substantial enough to make America relevant to cross-Strait relations. The United States benefits from improvements in these relations. It would benefit even more from an end to military confrontation between the two sides. That confrontation is sustained by political divisions that Taipei and Beijing have yet to address but must – as Mr. Xi has just pointed out -- eventually begin to work out. As they do so, they may yet find that they must call on Washington to lend credibility to the arrangements they craft. Thus the final relevance of the Beijing-Taipei-Washington triangle may be its contribution to its own dissolution.