

Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Dennis V. Hickey (eds.), *New Thinking about the Taiwan Issue. Theoretical Insights into Its Origins, Dynamics, and Prospects*, Routledge Politics in Asia Series, Oxon: Routledge, 2012, 238 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-68453-8 (hardcover).

The Taiwan question has long been one of the most complicated and intractable issues in world politics. For Beijing, it constitutes a 'core interest' as 'national reunification' is 'the sacrosanct mission' of the Chinese people. For many years after the Chinese civil war ended in 1949, relations across the Taiwan Strait were frosty and marked by hostility and crises, but in recent years relations between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan have improved substantially. After Taiwan's May 2008 presidential election, the new Kuomintang (KMT) president, Ma Ying-jeou, declared that cross-strait relations would change from 'confrontation, conflict and hostility' to 'reconciliation, co-operation and peace'. New agreements on direct shipping, flights and postal links have been reached. The most noteworthy pact is the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), signed in 2010. Between 2000 and 2008, under the two administrations of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) led by President Chen Shui-bian, cross-strait contacts, arranged by Beijing's Association for Relations across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and Taipei's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF), had been strongly curtailed. Still, it is worth noting that during these years, economic ties between the two sides were maintained and new connections opened, for instance charter flights across the Taiwan Strait and unprecedented visits to the mainland by senior KMT officials from Taiwan.

New Thinking about the Taiwan Issue consists of eight chapters together with an introduction and a conclusion, written by scholars from the USA, Asia (especially Taiwan) and Europe, on the basis of papers presented at two international conferences in 2009. In the introduction, the two editors provide an overview of the Taiwan issue and Taiwan-China relations from 1947 to 2008, marked by three stages: hot war (1949-1976), cold war (1976-1988) and cold peace (1988-2008). They emphasize that theories about international relations have been used as a tool to analyse current or historical relations between the two sides. The editors also point out that the contributions show the limits of realism for understanding China-Taiwan dynamics, while ideational and normative factors as well as domestic political variables are important.

Most of the eight chapters are valuable and well written. One of the most interesting is 'Envisioning a China-Taiwan peace agreement' by

Philip C. Saunders and Scott L. Kastner. The essay considers what a cross-strait agreement might look like, whether it might reduce the danger of military conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the barriers to an agreement and whether an agreement would likely endure. Dealing with such issues, the authors elaborate essential aspects of the many-sided Taiwan question, particularly the intertwining of the asymmetrical political processes on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. The core elements of a peace agreement are relatively straightforward: Taiwan would pledge not to seek *de jure* independence as long as China did not use or threaten to use force. As to the parties to an agreement, this represents one of the critical knots: Taiwan has long stressed its desire for equal standing in any negotiations with China, while the People's Republic of China (PRC) is reluctant to deal with Taiwan leaders in ways that suggest that China recognizes their status as officials of a sovereign state. Given these constraints, the semi-official representatives in SEF and ARATS are the most likely parties to a peace agreement. Another key question is whether an agreement would be binding in changing circumstances at the domestic level in the two polities. In Taiwan, an institutionalized democracy, future presidents would find it difficult to violate the provisions of an agreement without the support of key institutions, especially the legislature. Given China's authoritarian political system, the *de facto* restraint on PRC leaders is less clear cut, but it is worth remembering that leaders in an authoritarian polity may still be bound by public opinion. The critical point is that although PRC leaders may resist a formal agreement out of fear of implicitly recognizing Taiwan's status as a sovereign entity, Beijing may have much to gain from a formalized agreement.

Yuchao Zhu's chapter "'Democratic peace' or 'economic peace'? Theoretical debate and practical implications in new cross-Strait relations' is a valuable discussion of two theories relevant to understanding the Taiwan issue. The former suggests that a democratic China will most likely resolve the issue peacefully, while the latter implies that increased economic integration between the two sides will bring about a peaceful resolution. If the 'democratic peace' theory applied to this case implies that a democratization of China will increase the chances of a peaceful solution, the theory has a highly doubtful validity, especially because the increasingly assertive nationalism in China evokes a strong response in public opinion. The 'economic peace' theory could be more valid, but the actual spill-over from economic to political relations is never automatic.

Another very interesting chapter is Chengxin Pan's 'Normative convergence and cross-Strait divergence: Westphalian sovereignty as an ideational source of the Taiwan conflict'. The Chinese mainland and Taiwan do share much in common, as culture, language, ancestry, trade and cooperation and peace are often associated with sameness and commonality. However, it is often overlooked that a particular common ground between the two sides – their rigid notion of absolute sovereignty – is at the core of the dispute. Still, it is worth noting that since the '1992 Consensus' between Beijing and Taipei, the meaning of the sovereignty principle has become more elastic. The essay by T.Y. Wang and others, 'Structural realism and liberal pluralism: An assessment of Ma Ying-Jeou's cross-Strait policy', is a good analysis of how the new engagement policy toward China has generated much concern and debate on Taiwan.

Shiping Zheng's essay, 'Ethnic peace in the Taiwan Strait', is the one odd contribution to an otherwise valuable book. It is poorly written and marked by flawed reasoning. For instance, arguing that 'ethnic identity' is a key variable in understanding war prevention, he states that 'the mainland Chinese government has never really intended to use military force against another group of ethnic Chinese ... Thus the peace in the Taiwan Strait may be attributable to the ethnic identity of both sides of the Taiwan Strait as Chinese, more than other factors as geography and military balance of power' (p. 80). Zheng also argues that renunciation of the use of force against Taiwan would help strengthen the ethnic bond on both sides of the Taiwan Strait (p. 87), but the author does not consider whether Beijing's renunciation of the use of force actually points to the invalidity of his basic proposition about 'ethnic peace'.

As a conclusion, Scott L. Kastner summarizes the eclectic set of new insights from the volume. One theme running through all of the essays is the use of international relations theory (IR) to inform the analyses. Applying the term 'international relations' is loaded, however, in view of the Chinese Communist Party dogma that the Taiwan issue is an *internal* Chinese affair; but as documented in several contributions, IR is still useful in identifying puzzles and research questions relating to China-Taiwan relations.

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