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The Key Factors Driving CCP Opposition to Taiwanese Independence

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The Key Factors Driving CCP Opposition to Taiwanese Independence

By Connor Warshauer

Abstract

The CCP strongly opposes a formal declaration of independence from Taiwan, and has threatened military force should Taiwan take that step. This paper seeks to explain the underlying reasons for the CCP's aggressive policy. To do so, it uses a two-part methodology composed of a comprehensive engagement with existing secondary sources from the academic literature and four new interviews with experts in the field. The paper considers three main explanations for China's opposition to independence: nationalism, international geostrategic factors, and factors of domestic politics. It concludes that domestic politics, and specifically the CCP's perception that independence threatens its claim to legitimacy, constitutes the main driver of China's foreign policy toward Taiwan.

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Introduction

Upon first glance, the key factor driving the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s opposition to Taiwanese independence may seem fairly obvious. After all, official Chinese policy and rhetoric make it quite clear that the CCP views Taiwan as historically being a part of China that on principle belongs to the mainland. While this overt justification may indeed play a large role in the internal deliberations of party leaders, such a conclusion should not be automatic. Particularly given the significant domestic and international issues at stake in cross-strait relations, blindly accepting the official line on the CCP's opposition to Taiwanese independence risks naively missing the larger issues at stake.

Nor is the endeavor to fully understand CCP motivations regarding Taiwan a trivial academic exercise. While China's commitment to preventing Taiwanese independence cannot be doubted, the precise reasoning underlying that commitment has vast importance for both appreciating Chinese strategy and crafting a strategy in response. If China sees Taiwan as primarily a potential buffer state, efforts to significantly de-escalate tensions in the Asia-Pacific may meaningfully reduce China's need for aggressive posturing toward Taiwan. If, however, China sees the importance of Taiwan as primarily cultural or historical, such efforts will have little to no success. Similarly, China's response to a hypothetical grand bargain (Glaser 2015) involving Taiwan and the East and South China Seas would depend almost entirely on the main motivations driving CCP policy in Taiwan. Ultimately, attempting to predict the CCP's response to any potential US strategy regarding Taiwan will remain fruitless until the party's opposition to independence can be fully deciphered.

As a result, my research attempts to answer the following question: why is the Chinese Communist Party so deeply committed to preventing formal Taiwanese independence? This differs from an analysis of the CCP's strategy regarding Taiwan, which can be more easily determined (attempting to encourage reunification by making Taiwan dependent on China and isolated from the rest of the world). Moreover, this research question differs from looking at the surface level motivations behind such specific strategies. Rather, this research question looks at the deeper, primary factors that motivate the CCP's overall orientation toward Taiwan, and specifically, its firm opposition to formal independence.

Literature Review

Despite what may appear to be agreement that deep nationalism drives Chinese foreign policy toward Taiwan, the literature on the issue reveals serious divides. Three primary theories emerge, each with distinct subgroups. The conventional approach sees the CCP's deep commitment to preventing independence as a "sacred commitment." This theory adheres to the nationalist narrative, and sees the commitment to Taiwan as primarily principled, or born out of some sort of a-rational view of Taiwan's cultural importance (Moore, 2016). Even among scholars who agree that cultural considerations dominate, disagreement exists as to the precise character of those considerations. Most simply, some argue that CCP leaders see Taiwan as a historical part of China that can therefore never be separated from it (Mengin, 2020). Others point to Taiwan's specific history as the last refuge of the Chinese Nationalist Party, and therefore see reunification as necessary to finally conclude the Chinese Civil War (Marschik, 2018). Still others contend that the Century of Humiliation gives Taiwan specific importance as

an example of a piece of land that China has been denied control over by Westerners (Bergsten et. al, 2009). Finally, some argue that the CCP overemphasizes the importance of Taiwan because unification would unite the entire Han Chinese race under one government (Jacobs, 2008).

A second theoretical approach focuses on pragmatic international geopolitical concerns. Such theorists frequently refer to Taiwan as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” and emphasize its strategic importance for military operations (Nathan, 1996; Wallman, 2007). The potential strategic advantages that come from holding Taiwan include preventing further American containment, stronger positioning in the South China Sea, enhanced defensive naval capacity, and key positioning in maritime trade routes (Marschik, 2018). Different scholars emphasize different advantages in making the realist case for China’s commitment to Taiwan, with potentially crucial implications.

A final theoretical approach sees the CCP commitment to Taiwan as driven by pragmatic domestic considerations. Two clear branches of this thinking exist. The first version of the theory contends that the CCP fears a domino effect, in which Tibetan, Uighur, and Mongolian secession movements would be bolstered by the symbolic exit of Taiwan from China (Lee, 2011; Mengin, 2020). According to these theorists, Taiwanese independence would send a signal of CCP weakness and inability to control its borders that would make holding the rest of the country together nearly impossible. A second theory essentially contends that the Chinese public believes in the nationalist perspective that Taiwan belongs to China and that allowing Taiwan to become independent would be evidence of an inability of the CCP to govern effectively (Shirk, 2007).

Knowing this, CCP leaders fear a legitimacy crisis and popular uprising in the event of Taiwanese independence.

None of these theories are mutually exclusive, and some do contend that a combination of factors play significant roles (Friedman, 2007). Yet the possibility for overlap should not negate the real disagreement present in the literature. Adherents to the sacred commitments theory tend to downplay the importance of security considerations and vice versa. This paper intends to determine which factors really matter to China, and which cannot really explain the extent and nature of the CCP's opposition to Taiwanese independence.

Research Methodology

This paper proceeds using a two-part methodology. The paper relies primarily on the secondary sources that make up the existing scholarly literature on the China-Taiwan relationship. A majority of these sources come from the academic world, including multiple books and quite a few academic journal articles. One book comes from a former US diplomat who has since produced academic work, and a number of think tank reports have been consulted. While nearly all of these sources come from the field of international relations, a few sources from other disciplines, such as history, have been included.

The paper also relies on primary sources in the form of four qualitative interviews. Experts were contacted via email on the basis of the relevance of their research interests. Efforts were made to include experts from differing national perspectives due to the many parties with a

stake in the China-Taiwan relationship. These efforts saw success, as interviews were conducted with experts at universities in France, China, and the United States.

All interviewees received information on the nature of the research project before agreeing to participate. Some interviewees requested to see the quotations that would be used from their interviews and were provided with that information. No interviewee requested anonymity, requested the exclusion of any of their comments, or raised any ethical concerns at any point in the process.

This paper proceeds by categorizing the types of evidence that scholars have used to assess Chinese motivations with regards to Taiwan. It then analyzes the quality of the evidence supporting each of the different theories found in the literature. Finally, it concludes by assessing the relative strength of each theory on the basis of the amassed evidence.

Analysis

Types of Evidence

Determining the underlying motivations that ground Chinese foreign policy represents a uniquely difficult challenge. Often described as a “black box,” the Chinese foreign policy decision-making process allows few opportunities for Western observers to even ascertain which actors hold decision-making power, let alone the rationale those actors employ (James and Zhang, 2005). In this opaque context, researchers must do their best to use what little clues they have available to make educated guesses regarding Chinese motivations. While a litany of

potential methodologies exist to support such guesswork, four types of evidence emerge in the literature as most likely to yield glimmers of the truth.

First, researchers can look to rhetorical choices used in both the official public statements and the private writings and conversations of Chinese leaders. Evidence derived from the actual statements of Chinese officials has the advantage of offering the clearest and simplest window into Chinese decision-making. Serious questions can and should be raised, however, regarding the extent to which the public beliefs of Chinese leaders match their private beliefs. Because of China's one-party system, leaders essentially must tow the party line or abandon their political future. In this context, claims about genuine Chinese motivations that attempt to use statements as evidence can be grouped into three tiers of strength. The strongest claims derive from the rare public statements that express views counter to the party orthodoxy, because the ulterior motive of party conformity actually deters the speaker from making such statements. The next strongest claims derive from private statements, where officials may feel more comfortable speaking freely, although demands for conformity likely exist even behind closed doors. The weakest claims derive from public statements that conform to party orthodoxy, although even these statements should count as evidence particularly when specific phrases or words see frequent repetition.

Second, researchers can look to expert evaluation. This methodology essentially boils down to a form of intellectual modesty, recognizing that any individual researcher may be unable to single-handedly decipher Chinese motivation better than their peers. Additionally, solid academic research supports the notion that "groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often

smarter than the smartest people in them” (Surowiecki, 2005, pg. xiii). Specifically, Surowiecki finds that aggregating group answers to complex questions, like what motivates China, yields much more accurate results than taking any particular individual’s answer, no matter their qualification.

Third, researchers can look to contextual factors. This approach sees the question of the motivations grounding Chinese opposition to Taiwanese independence as far too narrow. Claims that use this approach use evidence based on how China typically behaves and argues that China probably behaves consistently with regard to Taiwan. For example, a scholar might argue that China has a generally revisionist orientation to the liberal order and that its foreign policy toward Taiwan must fit within its general revisionist orientation. The strength of claims derived from context depends heavily on the strength of the corresponding claim about context. If extremely strong evidence can be shown that Chinese leaders exhibit a generally pragmatic worldview, claims that China regards Taiwan ideologically would be significantly weakened. Even the strongest contextual claims cannot be considered conclusive, however, because they fail to account for the specific features of the Taiwan dispute, which has several unique characteristics that differentiate from all other policy areas.

Fourth, researchers can make inferences regarding motivations that derive from actions. Inferential evidence analyzes the strategic choices that China has made with regards to Taiwan, and attempts to determine what motivation sets would justify those choices. This evidence can be a powerful tool to rule out particular theories, as it can demonstrate a clear inconsistency between a potential motivation and actual behavior. Inferential evidence rarely can provide

positive proof for a particular theory, however, as multiple motivation sets could plausibly justify nearly any action. Furthermore, inferential evidence requires researchers to impose a certain view of rationality onto China, because researchers must use their personal judgment to determine which actions would be consistent with a given motivation.

The Conventional View

The conventional view on the motivations grounding CCP's opposition to formal Taiwanese independence contends that its leaders adhere to a nationalist belief that Taiwan is rightfully a part of China. Every different scholar understands the ideology behind this nationalism slightly differently. Some emphasize China's belief in Taiwan has historically been a part of China (Mengin, 2020), others emphasize retaking Taiwan as the final piece required to finish the Chinese Civil War (Jacques, 2009; Marschik, 2018), still others emphasize Taiwan's role in the Century of Humiliation (Bergsten et al., 2009), and a final group emphasizes racial unity (Jacobs, 2008). Despite disagreeing over the emphasis of these factors, almost all of these scholars would agree that each plays at least some role in Taiwan's particular place in Chinese nationalism.

Rhetorical Evidence

Because the nationalist theory closely mirrors the official Chinese explanation for its opposition to Taiwanese independence, it's no surprise that official Chinese statements largely support this theory. Moore (2016) cites seven different instances in which Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, made a statement on the Taiwan issue that justified China's interest in Taiwan on nationalist grounds. Specifically, Moore found that Chinese

leaders frequently referred to reunification as a “sacred commitment,” a loose ideological concept that he sees as unifying the various different strands of nationalist concern for Taiwan. Current President Xi Jinping appeared to espouse the same core philosophy in a 2019 speech in which he claimed that “unification between the two sides of the strait is the great trend of history” (Buckley and Horton, 2019). The evidence from official public statements seems to unequivocally support the nationalist theory. All of this rhetorical evidence, however, is of the weakest kind as it exclusively consists of public statements that adhere to party orthodoxy.

Expert Evidence

The nationalist theory appears to be the closest theory to achieving expert consensus. Moore interviewed 28 Chinese experts on cross-strait relations and asked them to assign percentages of emphasis to the different motivations of Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. Experts could, for example, put 80% of their emphasis on desires to end the Century of Humiliation and 20% on desires to achieve better access to maritime trade routes. Moore found that experts gave 49.4% of the total emphasis to nationalist motivations, significantly more than any other factor. Moore (2020) claims that one fourth of his sample of experts were “people who would be in the room at the PRC” while the other three quarters were “academics with their ears to the ground.” Moore did not quantitatively measure whether the government officials gave significantly different answers from the academics, but he says that the both groups primarily emphasized nationalist motivations.

Although Moore classifies the government officials as experts, their responses really provide private rhetorical evidence than expert evidence. Moore never identifies the identities of

his interviewees, so the government officials may have felt relatively capable of speaking freely, although they may still have felt some pressure to tow the party line either because they feared their responses would be discovered or because of a genuine desire to propagate the official narrative. As such, the responses from government officials should be understood as equivalent to evidence of the private conversations of government officials: medium strength rhetorical evidence.

The academic responses fit much more cleanly as expert evidence. These academics, all based in China, probably have access to some information and cultural understanding that Western observers lack. Moreover, their relative uniformity provides evidence that the nationalist theory is not only the conventional view, but the consensus view. Finally, the aggregation of their responses into a single average serves as exactly the type of group knowledge production that Surowiecki contends produces better results than individualized analysis.

Contextual Evidence

Some fairly strong contextual evidence supports the nationalism theory. One broad perspective contends that China must be seen as a civilization-state rather than a nation-state (Jacques, 2009). Jacques writes that “when the Chinese use the term ‘China’ they are not usually referring to the country or nation so much as Chinese civilization – its history, the dynasties, Confucius...and distinctive philosophy” (pg. 196). Viewing China as a civilization-state means that “China” did not begin with the founding of the PRC in 1949, but with the founding of the Zhou dynasty thousands of years ago. This classification has profound implications for its

modern day policy-making. Jacques notes that because the Chinese adopt this unique civilizational perspective, “there are no other people in the world who are so connected to their past” (pg. 197). The civilizational perspective creates a continuous view of Chinese history, amplifying the importance of historical China in the psyche of the Chinese people. The civilizational perspective also comes with a particular conception of the role of the state. Within a civilization-state, “the state, most importantly of all, has the sacred task of maintaining the unity of Chinese civilization” (pg. 199).

Viewed through the lens of the civilization-state, the nationalist narrative becomes extremely clear. Both the emphasis on the historical continuity of the Chinese civilization and the state’s primary goal of preserving unity make Taiwanese independence an absolute travesty from a civilization-state perspective. Indeed, Jacques adheres to the nationalist theory. Specifically, he believes the CCP sees Taiwan as “unfinished business, the only incomplete item on the Party’s civil war agenda” (pg. 299). According to Jacques, the historical conflict around China amplifies Taiwan’s status as a lost territory and therefore a threat to the state's primary objective of maintaining unity.

The International Geostrategy Theory

In a sharp break from the nationalist theory, the international geostrategy theory views CCP leaders as eminently pragmatic. Adherents argue that Chinese leaders value Taiwan primarily because of its inherent geostrategic value. Just as proponents of the nationalist theory disagree about the precise reason that Taiwan attracts nationalist fervor, different explanations for the primary geostrategic value of Taiwan exist as well. Common explanations include

China's desire to use Taiwan as a bridgehead to achieve broader regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, as a buffer against American containment, as an access point to maritime trade routes, and as an enabler of breakout capacity for its submarine fleet. The most prominent proponent of the international geostrategy theory actually contends that all of these factors play a role, and add up to making Taiwan an essential geographic resource for China (Wachman, 2007).

Rhetorical Evidence

Wachman provides by far the strongest defense of the international geostrategy theory in the literature, and he builds his case on rhetorical evidence. Citing a litany of PLA officials, he shows that the Chinese military has thought long and hard about the strategic value of Taiwan. For example, he cites Major General Peng Guangqian of the PRC Academy of Military Sciences as saying "Taiwan is a keystone for China to cross the Pacific and go out to the world. It is an important strategic space that affects national security and national rejuvenation, and affects China's external transformational links, trade links, and oil energy transportation links" (pg. 144). He also cites Lou Yuan, a Senior Colonel at the PRC Academy of Military Sciences, claiming that "only the seas to the east of Taiwan allow China direct access to the great strategic passages of the Pacific. If this opening to the sea is controlled by other countries, China's maritime development strategy will be severely hampered. However, if the two sides of the straight unify...China's maritime development strategy will vigorously flourish and rise." (pg. 30). These two excerpts represent only a small selection of Wachman's rigorous research, which fairly conclusively shows that the PLA has extensively examined the benefits of controlling Taiwan.

At a first glance, the rhetorical evidence for the international geostrategy theory far exceeds the rhetorical evidence for the nationalist theory. Because the international geostrategy theory does not conform to the official party line, and perhaps even runs afoul of it, the evidence from the PLA should be treated as highly genuine. Yet at the end of his book, Wachman makes a concession in the name of modesty that ultimately undermines much of his work:

One can be fairly certain that the most senior leaders in the PRC are well acquainted with the geostrategic arguments that are advanced about the centrality of Taiwan and its salience as a means of puncturing the U.S. island-based cordon. One does not know, though, whether it is the logic of that argument or some other that impels them to coercive diplomatic measures and an increasingly militarized stance toward Taiwan. One cannot know whether they are moved primarily by the nationalistic arguments that have been the mainstay of the PRC's declaratory policy or whether they...see the quest for sovereignty and territorial integrity as a means to grander strategic ends" (pg. 160).

Wachman deserves credit for honestly admitting what his evidence fails to prove. Yet this caveat is no mere asterisk at the end of his work, but a devastating concession. Wachman quotes almost exclusively from the PLA, rather than the PRC broadly, and provides no evidence that the PLA has shaped broader policy-making. Although the PLA undoubtedly wields tremendous influence, the exclusion of other decision-makers creates a clear bias toward the military justifications for taking Taiwan. The PLA would be negligent if they did not investigate the strategic concerns surrounding Taiwan, and simply noting that they have done so extensively does not amount to much of an argument that such concerns constitute primary drivers of policy.

Expert Evidence

Although no corollary to Moore's quantitative study of expert attitudes exists among advocates of international geostrategy theory, a significant number of scholars have voiced support for the Wachman's thesis. Cole (2008), reviewing Wachman's book, notes that

“Wachman does succeed in demonstrating that many of China’s current military strategists, both academics and military officers, view Taiwan’s importance in geostrategic terms.” Kastner (2010) adds that “Wachman does an outstanding job of weaving together a narrative showing that strategic concerns have often factored into debates and decisions concerning Taiwan.” Most enthusiastically, Nathan (2008) gushes that “Alan Wachman's answer to this puzzle is the most persuasive I have seen.” While nearly all these reviewers have some reservations about aspects of Wachman’s argument, some experts clearly do share Wachman’s overall view that international geostrategic concerns dominate.

Contextual Evidence

Contextual evidence does exist to support the international geopolitics theory, although its claims have been highly contested. Some scholars argue that China exhibits the characteristics of an offensive realist state, meaning that it acts aggressively in order to preserve its own security (Li, 2016; Mearshimer, 2015). If offensive realism does characterize China, then China would be expected to view international conflicts through the lens of its potential strategic gains and vulnerabilities. Realism would invalidate the nationalist view because it entails a purely pragmatic and non-ideological outlook. While it would not necessarily refute the domestic politics theory, realism would suggest that China sees international threats as larger obstacles to its survival.

This theory has many detractors, however. Meijer (2020) says that “China is not a revisionist power. Beijing is not trying to overthrow the system. Rather, China is engaged in a selective contestation of the international order in the Asia-Pacific and in general.” China has indeed participated in a number of multilateral agreements and benefited greatly from the

international order that it participates in. The realist worldview appears highly reductive and has difficulty explaining many of modern China's behaviors. Still, as a prominent theory in international relations that would greatly support the international geostrategy theory, it deserves consideration.

The Domestic Politics Theory

The third and final theory contends that the CCP's opposition to Taiwanese independence hinges not on foreign policy at all, but on domestic concerns. At first glance, the theory has much in common with the nationalist theory, because domestic politics theory proponents agree that the Chinese population as a whole holds deeply nationalist attitudes toward Taiwan. Whereas the nationalist theory holds that Chinese leadership shares those attitudes, the domestic politics theory envisions Chinese leadership as pragmatists who see their CCP rule as deeply threatened by a public backlash to letting Taiwan secede. As with both other theories, different scholars defend slightly different versions of the theory. One version of the theory, which could be described as the "domino theory," holds that Chinese leaders fear that formal Taiwanese independence could send a signal of CCP weakness that would foment further secessionist movements in other border territories (Lee, 2009; Friedman, 2011; Mengin, 2020). Scholars most frequently cite Tibet and Xinjiang as potential areas of concern, although Chinese leaders may also worry about Inner Mongolia, Hong Kong, and Macao.

A second version of the domestic politics theory might be called the "legitimacy theory." The legitimacy theory contends that the CCP believes that the broader legitimacy of their rule would evaporate if it failed to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence. Proponents of this

theory tend to see the potential legitimacy crisis posed by Taiwan as a self-fulfilling prophecy fueled by previous generations of Chinese leaders. Friedman (2007) describes Mao and subsequent leaders ratcheting up nationalism targeted at Taiwan in order to distract from the CCP's domestic troubles. Although Mao privately admitted that Taiwan did not historically belong to China, "a certain level of military tensions served Mao's interests...He wanted to keep a civil war alive" (pg. 122). This policy of using Taiwan as a diversion from domestic troubles continued beyond Mao. Ultimately, Friedman argues that "virtually all analysts agree, the CCP responded to a legitimization crisis by manufacturing causes for patriotic support. Taiwan, as in 1958, was targeted to serve domestic CCP purposes" (pg. 126). Unfortunately for the CCP, continually justifying its legitimacy on the basis of the Taiwan issue has predictably made its claim to legitimacy entirely dependent on the success of the party's Taiwan policy. The population has fully bought into the CCP's manufactured narrative that the primary purpose of the Chinese state is uniting China with Taiwan. Friedman writes that during the 1990's, "power holders in Beijing were continually under pressure to do more against Taiwan" (pg. 128). Such pressures continued into the twenty-first century and made it impossible for CCP leaders to back down: "Hu Jintao has had little room for maneuver in the direction of peace. 'No Chinese leader wants to risk being accused of 'losing' Taiwan on his watch'" (pg. 132). While not all adherents to the legitimacy theory see the historical progression exactly as Friedman does, the broad story of a manufactured legitimacy crisis aptly characterizes the theory's main thesis.

Rhetorical Evidence

Broadly speaking, public official rhetoric provides neither evidence for nor against the domestic politics theory. The domestic politics theory would expect to see nearly all public official rhetoric espousing the nationalist theory, because leaders have to uphold their image of defending and promoting Chinese nationalism. Yet because such rhetoric also obviously supports the nationalist theory itself, public official rhetoric provides little help to scholars deciding between the nationalist theory and the domestic politics theory. Glaser (2020) still sees a glimpse of evidence in Xi Jinping's speech at the National Party Congress. In the speech, Xi directly linked unification with Taiwan to "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Xinhua, 2017). Xi has predicted his defense of CCP stability on achieving that rejuvenation, and so Glaser sees that linkage as potential evidence that Xi sees unification with Taiwan as necessary for CCP legitimacy.

Shirk (2007) provides access to some private CCP rhetoric that strongly bolsters domestic politics theory. She interviewed two retired anonymous PLA officers about their worries stemming from a potential declaration of independence, and quotes one as saying "people have very strong feelings about the Taiwan issue. If leaders stand by and do nothing while Taiwan declares independence, the Chinese Communist Party will fall" (pg. 181). Notably, these officers actually tried to brainstorm ways that China could justify backing down, implying strongly that if not for domestic pressures, they would be happy to let Taiwan secede. Such statements provide nearly incontrovertible evidence that the domestic politics theory describes the mindset of at least these two officers. Shirk only interviews three PLA officers, however, and like Wachman, fails to show that their thinking has any influence in the broader PRC policy-making realm. Due

to that failure, rhetoric does not provide much evidence for the domestic politics theory more broadly.

Expert Evidence

Although Moore's study of expert opinion primarily supports the nationalist theory, it also provides some solace to defenders of the domestic politics theory. Moore found 28.5% of the experts' emphasis was placed on the domestic politics theory (21.2% for the legitimacy theory; 7.3% for the domino theory) in comparison to the 49.4% for the nationalist theory. When asked about how he interprets the steep division, he says that he "expects to see that complexity as a constructionist because that's the way the social milieu really is" (Moore 2020). Although that complexity certainly should not be downplayed, these results might also be interpreted as somewhat inconclusive. Moore chooses to bundle all the different strands of nationalist theory into one quantitative category, while separating two different versions of the domestic politics theory. If Moore had individually measured all four different versions of the nationalist theory, he might have found none achieved greater emphasis than the 21.2% of emphasis for the legitimacy theory. Moore's paper argues that the concept of "sacred commitments" unites the different strains of the nationalist theory and justifies their grouping, but one could also argue that concepts like "pragmatism" unite even the domestic politics theory and the international geostrategy theory. If the debate is conceived of as sacred commitments vs. pragmatism, both interpreted broadly, pragmatism likely accounts for over 50% of the emphasis (although 12% of the emphasis is unaccounted for in Moore's paper).

Unlike Moore, Shirk does not attempt a quantitative or aggregative survey of China observers. She does, however, quote nine different experts who defend the domestic politics theory in some fashion. Additionally, three of the experts contacted for this paper supported the domestic politics theory (Glaser, 2020; Mengin, 2020; Meijer, 2020). The interviewees for this paper were not selected randomly, and Shirk may have omitted quotations from interviewees that defended other theories. Still, significant expert support for the domestic politics theory clearly exists.

Contextual Evidence

Strong contextual evidence supports the domestic politics theory. Zhao (2008) describes Chinese leadership as adopting a philosophy of pragmatic nationalism. This philosophy

“does not have a fixed, objectified, and eternally defined content, nor is it driven by any ideology, religion beliefs or other abstract ideas. It is an instrument of the communist state to bolster faith of the Chinese people in a political system in trouble and hold the country together during the period of rapid and turbulent transformation from a communist to a post-communist society” (Zhao, 2008, pg. 3).

Zhao seeks to support this account of Chinese pragmatic nationalism with an appeal to history. He interprets Deng Xiaoping’s famous quote, that “a cat, whether it is white or black, is a good one as long as it is able to catch mice”, as pragmatism epitomized. Deng rejected ideological communism and instead advocated pragmatic market reforms that transformed China into an economic powerhouse. Zhao cites numerous modern cases of Chinese leaders choosing a pragmatic option over strict ideological adherence in foreign policy contexts. In one particularly illuminating example from 2001, after a US plane collided into a Chinese plane, the Chinese government took a strong public stance demanding an apology to stave off domestic nationalist

pressures. The US Secretary of State used the phrase “very sorry” to reflect that he found the situation regrettable, but did not actually apologize for the incident. Chinese leaders intentionally misinterpreted the phrase and accepted the non-apology, demonstrating their demand for an apology had been an act of pragmatic domestic politics rather than genuine nationalist anger.

Yeung (2019) adds further context to this view, showing that the CCP has frequently and consciously stoked nationalism to achieve legitimacy. Like all authoritarian regimes, the CCP faces the difficult task of justifying its rule to the public. Yeung argues that the CCP has historically relied on ideological legitimacy derived from communism and performance legitimacy derived from economic growth. Eventually, however, “in view of the shortcomings of both ideological legitimacy and performance legitimacy, the CCP regime realised that nationalism is the strongest weapon in legitimising its rule over the country” (Yeung, 2019). Yeung applies this broader thesis about the CCP’s operational style to Taiwan. Like Friedman, he traces CCP’s historical construction of both Chinese unity generally and Taiwanese reunification specifically as key elements of nationalism. He then concludes that the CCP opposes independence because it “translates to the CCP’s failure in unifying the territory and thus undermines the CCPs’ nationalist legitimacy” (Yeung, 2019).

Meijer (2020) and Mengin provide a similar account of the broader forces that dictate Chinese foreign policy. Meijer says that “the main goals [of foreign policy] are domestic goals. Ensuring the survival of the CCP and ensuring its continued legitimacy and stability; but other goals follow from this. One is ensuring territorial integrity - this applies to Taiwan, Xinjiang and Hong Kong and, to some extent, to territorial disputes in the South China Sea.” Meijer describes

not only Taiwan policy, but all Chinese foreign policy as primarily motivated by CCP concerns about legitimacy. Mengin similarly claims that “the main goal [of Chinese foreign policy] is to achieve domestic social stability.” These claims can essentially be seen as an affirmation of the pragmatic nationalist narrative. Zhao, Yeung, Mengin, and Meijer all agree that Chinese leadership, deeply concerned about its domestic vulnerability, crafts pragmatic strategies centered on stoking nationalism in order to quell domestic dissent. In doing so, it creates inviolable commitments for itself, such as the prevention of Taiwanese formal independence and ultimately reunification.

Inferential Evidence

Inferential evidence requires somewhat different treatment from the other forms of evidence. While each piece of rhetorical, expert, and contextual evidence directly supports one theory or another, inferential evidence often refutes theories rather than supporting them. Because inferential evidence primarily serves to challenge theories, this paper proceeds by assessing how well different theories can account for a variety of different actions that China has taken in the past and present.

Other Territorial Disputes

China disputes a wide variety of other territories besides Taiwan. In fact, China has been embroiled in at least twenty-three territorial disputes since 1949 (Fravel, 2005). Although some of these disputes, like the East and South China disputes, may be considered among China’s core interests, they do not rise to the level of Taiwan. Wachman contrasts Taiwan with other territorial disputes, noting that “one does not regularly read or hear, for instance, that the future

of China's 'rise' and development depends on recovering sovereignty over Diaoyutai, the islands in the South China Sea, or the territory that India governs as part of the state of Arunachal Pradesh" (pg. 29). On the contrary, China has actually reached a peaceful settlement in seventeen of its twenty-three disputes, often ceding more than half of the contested territory (Fravel, 2005). Clearly, China values Taiwan significantly over most of its other contested territories. A plausible theory of China's opposition to Taiwanese independence must be able to account for that behavioral difference.

Although Wachman brings intention to this difference, the international geostrategy theory greatly struggles to explain China's unique insistence in the Taiwan dispute. Although Wachman makes a convincing case that Taiwan holds strategic value, surely other disputed territories do as well. In particular, the South China Sea holds tremendous strategic value, both as a military access point and an economic hub. Ott (2019) calls its maritime routes "the busiest, most important, maritime waterways in the world." The vast reserves of oil in its waters could help China reduce its dependency on trade routes that flow through the US-controlled Strait of Malacca. China clearly recognizes this value, as it has acted aggressively to gain control of the contested islands, spending millions on artificial islands and ignoring international rulings. Still, as Wachman makes clear, Chinese leadership does not place Taiwan-level existential emphasis on the South China Sea dispute despite its importance. The international geostrategy theory lacks a compelling explanation for Taiwan's singular status as non-negotiable for the CCP.

Other territorial disputes pose an intriguing difficulty for certain versions of the nationalist theory as well. China has proved consistently willing to negotiate and even cede

territory taken by what China considers to be “unequal treaties,” wherein other nations forced the Qing dynasty to give up its territory after military defeats (Fravel, 2005). Fravel argues that this willingness shows a weakness in the nationalist theory: “For constructivists, the legacy of "unequal treaties" that ceded land to foreign powers in the nineteenth century and the central role of national unification in modern Chinese history suggest that conflicts over territory should be highly salient for China's leaders and basically non-negotiable” (pg. 47). China’s surprising willingness to back down in most other territorial disputes creates a problem particularly for versions of the nationalist theory that center on China’s historic claim to Taiwan or the island’s role in the Century of Humiliation. The unequal treaties ought to trigger the same historical memory of the Century of Humiliation that Taiwan does, and any territory at all should be sacrosanct if historical claims provide the main justification for the nationalist theory.

Claims that center on the unfinished business of the Chinese Civil War remain entirely consistent with China’s behavior in other territorial disputes, as Chiang Kai-Shek did not flee anywhere but Taiwan. The racial unity case may even be strengthened by China’s behavior in other cases, as nearly all border areas under dispute have non-Han Chinese ethnic majorities. Meanwhile, China’s claims to Han majority Hong Kong and Macao in the late 1990’s more closely mirror the fervor of China’s claim to Taiwan. The domestic politics theory also easily explains the difference between China’s claim to Taiwan and to other territories. Advocates would argue that the CCP spent half a century drumming up nationalist sentiment toward Taiwan, but not other islands. As a result, domestic political pressures do not require the CCP to fervently defend its other claims.

De Facto Independence vs. De Jure Independence

Taiwan enjoys full de facto independence from China. Despite not claiming formal independence, “it is administratively separate from China in either case, with its own government, its own currency, its own military” (Moore, 2016). Although China exercises absolutely no control over Taiwan under status quo conditions, it clearly considers de jure independence to be a much, much worse outcome. China frequently claims that it would resort to forceful unification should Taiwan declare formal independence. Mengin claims that under no circumstances would China fail to follow through on that promise. Glaser goes even further, claiming that “China would mount a response under virtually any circumstance even if they felt they didn't have the military capability, even if they believed the US would intervene and they would be defeated. They would have to mount the response to show their people that the party was defending Chinese sovereignty.” In the mind of Chinese leaders, de facto independence seems oddly closer to actual Chinese control than it does than to de jure independence.

The international geostrategy theory has no real way to explain this distinction. For strategic purposes, de facto independence represents no difference from de jure independence. One might argue that de jure independence closes the door on future unification, while de facto independence plays into the long-term strategy of the CCP. That explanation might justify Chinese statements on forceful reunification as a bluff, but not as a genuine strategy. Actually invading Taiwan because of a change in nomenclature would never fit the logic espoused by the international geostrategy theory, but both experts insist that China would do so.

The difference between de facto and de jure independence also provides a difficult challenge for the nationalist theory. The nationalist theory needs to develop an understanding of Chinese nationalism that justifies the claim that official independence wrongs China more deeply than de facto independence. Most of the plausible versions of the nationalist theory do not provide such a justification. The legacy of the Chinese Civil War and the Century of Humiliation cannot possibly serve as the explanation, because the anger elicited by those historical wrongs stems from Taiwan's current unofficial independence. De jure independence would not in any way worsen the offense of the Century of Humiliation, which supposedly already robbed China of Taiwan, nor render the already-unfinished Chinese Civil War any less finished. Racial unity does not seem a promising candidate either, as the Han Chinese still find themselves separated by very real immigration and border restrictions. No theory of nationalism can adequately explain why China would consider formal independence to be any worse than informal independence.

The nationalism theory could fall back on the same argument advanced by the international geostrategy theory: opposition to independence stems from its foreclosure of future unification. This argument deserves consideration, although not a single expert or academic source appears to support it. The theory would have to admit that China sees no actual difference between the status quo and formal independence, but rather just the loss of a future opportunity. This understanding would be quite different from actual Chinese rhetoric, which emphasizes that formal evidence would represent a genuine and distinct separation from the status quo. In contrast to the contrived version of the nationalist theory that can explain this difference, the domestic politics theory easily explains why de jure independence receives special attention.

Because the symbolic act of formal independence would be widely perceived within China, and because the CCP has spent years promising to prevent such independence, the domestic pressures to act would be enormous.

Conclusion

After reviewing all of the evidence for and against each theory, nobody can be surprised that a scholarly consensus has not yet emerged. Conclusions can still be reached, however. The international geostrategy theory has little to recommend it. Strong rhetorical evidence exists that the PLA has considered the geostrategic value of Taiwan, but no evidence suggests that such considerations have played a decisive role in policy-making. The theory enjoys the least support from experts and has the weakest contextual claims to back it up. Worse, the inferential evidence strongly suggests that the international geostrategy theory cannot explain China's behavior. China's willingness to acquiescence in other strategically important disputes and its firm insistence that formal independence would mark a significant departure from the status quo cannot be reconciled with the international geostrategy theory's core tenets.

Deciding between the nationalism theory and the domestic politics theory presents much thornier issues. Neither theory has particularly strong rhetorical evidence in its favor. The nationalist public rhetoric from Chinese leaders matches the expectation of both theories, and while Shirk has shown that some Chinese officials adhere to the domestic politics theory privately, no rhetorical evidence suggests that such adherence is widespread. Expert evidence provides the strongest case for the nationalist theory. Moore's quantitative study of 28 different Chinese experts showed that experts considered nationalist explanations of China's actions to be

stronger than any other explanation. Still, the small sample size suggests that interpreters should approach the study cautiously, especially since Shirk found at least nine experts who explicitly affirmed the domestic politics theory. Ultimately, the expert evidence shows fairly clearly that the nationalist theory enjoys more popularity among experts, but far from uniform acceptance. The domestic politics theory appears to be the clear runner up, and has enough support that scholars probably should not simply defer to the nationalist theory out of humility or respect for consensus.

The contextual evidence forms the beginnings of the real case for the domestic politics theory. Friedman, Yeung, Mengin, and Meijer all tell a similar historical narrative in which CCP leaders have historically weaponized nationalism to distract from domestic crises and found themselves forced to later act on that nationalism. These scholars make a persuasive case for this historical account, and back up their theory with well-researched examples and evidence. Furthermore, Zhao's similarly high-quality research shows that Chinese leaders have a propensity to adopt pragmatic attitudes toward nationalism, using it as a tool rather than blindly following it as an ideology. These narratives both make the legitimacy theory appear to fit like a puzzle piece into the broader context of Chinese politics and shed doubt on a theory that claims Chinese leaders act on the basis of strict ideological commitment. The civilization-state theory that grounds the nationalist theory, while persuasive in its own right, does little to suggest that the domestic policy theory might be incorrect. The civilization-state theory focuses primarily on the attitudes of the Chinese populous rather than its leaders, and so its conclusion that Chinese

citizens see unity as the primary goal of government arguably bolsters the legitimacy theory rather than detracting from it.

Finally, the inferential evidence strongly favors the domestic politics theory over the nationalism theory. While some versions of the nationalist theory can explain the difference between Taiwan and other territorial disputes, some of the most salient, like appeals to the Century of Humiliation, are contradicted. China's obsession with the difference between de facto and de jure independence is not irreconcilable with the nationalist theory either, but it forces a series of mental leaps and contortions in order to render the theory coherent. On the other hand, the domestic politics theory easily explains both, as the CCP has historically crafted a nationalist narrative, now accepted by the public, explicating and specifically concerning Taiwanese independence.

Ultimately, this paper concludes that the domestic politics theory correctly identifies the key driver of China's opposition to Taiwan. Chinese leadership is not monolithic, and both nationalism and geostrategy surely do play a role for some leaders. Domestic politics, however, are both necessary and sufficient to explain the vast majority of China's attitudes and actions toward Taiwan. Within the domestic politics theory, the legitimacy theory appears to enjoy far more support both from experts and the contextual evidence. While fears of domino secession may be a part of what the CCP fears from a Taiwanese independence movement, general discontent probably plays a much bigger role.

This conclusion has huge implications for policy-making and future research. Policy-makers in the US should be wary that domestic political concerns take precedence over

international strategic factors, and attempts to deal with China on a purely internationalist level will fail. On the other hand, understanding that domestic politics underlie China's concern with Taiwan opens up huge opportunities as well. Policy-makers in the US should realize that when attempting to persuade China to back down with regards to Taiwan, they need to allow China to save face domestically. The US can begin to strategize on how to reach agreements with China that give the perception of Chinese projection of strength but in reality ease tensions. The US should also realize that attempting to slow Chinese economic growth poses a real risk because it renders performance legitimacy non-viable for the CCP, and forces the CCP to stoke further nationalist sentiment toward Taiwan. To deter further crises, the US should try to ensure that CCP is not forced to strike Taiwan or fear losing its hold on power.

Future research can illuminate many of the questions raised here much further. Additional surveys of experts should be conducted to attempt to clarify the breakdown of expert opinion without any grouping mechanisms (different strands of nationalism theory should be kept separate). More research could also be done with regards to the version of the nationalist theory that attempts to adapt to the challenge posed by the importance of de jure independence. Researchers should interview Chinese officials, experts, and citizens who express nationalist sentiments to find out if they see de facto independence and de jure independence as fundamentally different and why. This research, depending on the result, could save the nationalist theory or put the final nail in its coffin.

Abbreviations

Chinese Communist Party = CCP

People's Liberation Army = PLA

People's Republic of China = PRC

United States of America = US or U.S.

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