

## Studie

# **Democratization of the People's Republic of China and Military Conflict in the Taiwan Strait**

Mario Esteban

## **Abstract**

This article questions whether China's democratization would necessarily lead to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Strait conflict. The belligerent character of transitional regimes and the irrelevance of the democratic peace theory to civil wars are highlighted against the prevailing vision in Washington and Taipei. From this perspective, the article presents a credible democratization scenario that could actually facilitate the outbreak of a military conflict between Beijing and Taipei. Given the nationalist attitudes of China's population and the People's Liberation Army and the weakness of Chinese institutions, an abrupt and foreign-promoted liberalization process is discouraged. It is suggested that the United States and Republic of China governments should therefore promote gradual political liberalization from above in China and not regard China's democratization as the solution to the Taiwan conflict.<sup>1</sup> (Manuscript received August 21, 2007; accepted for publication October 23, 2007)

*Keywords: China, democratization, Taiwan Strait, conflict*

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<sup>1</sup> Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Second Conference of the European Association of Taiwan Studies at Bochum University, 1-2 April 2005, and at the 64<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 20-23 April 2006. I would like to thank all the colleagues who made comments on my paper at those venues and also express my gratitude to Lauri Paltemaa and Bruno Coppieters. Acknowledgement is extended to Prof. Lu-hui Chen of National Chengchi University for making the survey data available that was collected for Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study (TEDS) from 2002 to 2005. Furthermore, I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their comments, which clarified and improved sections of the manuscript. All remaining errors are my own.

## Studie

# Demokratisierung der Volksrepublik China und militärischer Konflikt in der Taiwan-Straße

Mario Esteban

## Abstract

Im vorliegenden Artikel wird die Frage gestellt, ob eine Demokratisierung Chinas notwendigerweise eine friedliche Lösung des Konflikts in der Taiwan-Straße begünstigen würde. Vor dem Hintergrund der vorherrschenden Sichtweise in Washington und Taipei wird der aggressive Charakter von Transitionsregimen und die Irrelevanz der Theorie demokratischen Friedens für Bürgerkriegssituationen beleuchtet. Entsprechend wird in diesem Artikel ein stichhaltiges Szenario entwickelt, in welchem eine Demokratisierung den Ausbruch eines militärischen Konflikts zwischen Beijing und Taipei begünstigen könnte. Angesichts der in der chinesischen Bevölkerung und der Volksbefreiungsarmee verbreiteten nationalistischen Einstellungen und der Fragilität chinesischer Institutionen wird von einem abrupten, vom Ausland unterstützten Liberalisierungsprozess abgeraten. Vielmehr sollten die Regierungen der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika und der Republik China auf Taiwan einen graduellen Kurs politischer Liberalisierung von oben befürworten und in einer Demokratisierung Chinas nicht die Lösung des Taiwan-Konflikts sehen.<sup>1</sup> (Manuskript eingereicht am 21.08.2007; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 23.10.2007)

*Keywords: China, Demokratisierung, Taiwan-Straße, Konflikt*

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<sup>1</sup> Frühere Versionen dieses Artikels wurden auf der 2. Konferenz der European Association of Taiwan Studies im April 2005 an der Universität Bochum und auf der 64. Jahreskonferenz der Midwest Political Science Association im April 2006 in Chicago präsentiert. Mein Dank geht an alle Kollegen, die meinen Beitrag während dieser Konferenzen kommentierten, sowie an Lauri Paltemaa und Bruno Coppieters. Ich danke ferner Prof. Lu-hui Chen von der National Chengchi University für die Bereitstellung der Ergebnisse einer zwischen 2002 und 2005 für „Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study“ (TEDS) erhobenen Umfrage. Außerdem danke ich den beiden anonymen Gutachtern für ihre Kommentare zur Klarstellung und Verbesserung einiger Teile des Manuskripts. Alle verbleibenden Fehler liegen bei mir.

## 1 Introduction

If one takes the nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime and the relevance of the Taiwan issue into account, it is surprising how little academic attention has been paid to the implications of a democratization of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on war and peace in the Taiwan Strait. Even the finest piece of scholarship on the repercussions of China's democratization on the likelihood of a war involving Beijing only devotes a few pages to this matter (Friedman & McCormick 2000:111, 209-211, 218). This paper aims to fill this gap by tackling the issue in more depth, providing additional arguments and data to explain why the democratization of China does not entail a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Strait conflict.

In private, members of both the Bush and the Chen administrations have consistently claimed that greater political liberalization in mainland China would ease cross-Strait relations and increase the prospects for a negotiated solution to the conflict between the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC).<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, the democratic peace theory is one of the pillars of US foreign policy and of the Chen administration's policy on China. The democratic peace theory holds that democracies – mostly, liberal democracies – never or almost never go to war with each other (Doyle 1983a:205, 207-208).

Taipei officially and explicitly links promoting democracy in the PRC with bringing a more secure context to the Taiwan Strait. Two arguments are frequently invoked to support this view: the positive effects of Chinese democratization on Taiwanese willingness to negotiate and the democratic peace theory. However, a close analysis of these two arguments reveals that the political liberalization of China, far from being the answer to the Taiwan Strait conflict, could actually increase the risk of a military clash. The chance of a military conflict occurring is particularly big if political liberalization results in a democratization process, which is characterized by the incumbent authorities committing themselves to political change and the introduction of political competition through a multi-party system and elections.<sup>3</sup> Even establishing a democratic government in Beijing would fail to solve the cross-Strait conflict, since democratic peace neither applies

<sup>2</sup> The author conducted these private talks with Taiwanese and US officials in Paris in November 2004, in Chicago in April 2006, in Beijing in November 2006, and in Stockholm in April 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For a conceptual differentiation between political liberalization and democratization, see O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986.

to civil wars nor to conflicts involving ethnic co-nationals.

Washington and Taipei also concur on the desirability of preventing a People's Liberation Army (PLA) attack on Taiwan, since a military clash between the PRC and the ROC would be extremely costly for the US, too, whether Washington fights Beijing or not. On the one hand, the cost of fighting China would be so obvious for the US that it is hardly necessary to go into any more detail on this point. On the other hand, if Washington failed to support Taiwan against a PLA attack, then its credibility and influence in East Asia would be severely undermined. Nonetheless, I am not equating the United States' interests with Taiwan's interests or assuming that the US will act in any interest other than its own in the Taiwan Strait conflict. In fact, some friction between Washington and Taipei – which was provoked by President Chen's proposing a new constitution and a referendum “on whether to apply to the United Nations under the name Taiwan”, the celebration of Taiwan's first island-wide referendum, the suspension of the National Unification Council and the Guidelines for National Unification – has been publicly displayed by various US authorities, including President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack, former Secretary of State Collin Powell and former Deputy of State Richard Armitage (Dumbaugh 2005:14-15; State Department 2007; Swaine 2004:39-49).

This article will first present the official stance of the ROC and the US governments on the relationship between political change in China and the Taiwan Strait conflict before questioning the two main arguments which support their stances in the following sections. After analysing the direct and indirect effects of a democratization of China on the attitudes of the people of Taiwan vis-à-vis reaching a compromise with Beijing, it is argued in section three that the democratization of mainland China would not necessarily provoke a decisive alteration in the stance taken by the Taiwanese population on the independence-unification issue. Section four explains the foundations of the democratic peace theory. Taking these underpinnings as a starting point, sections five and six highlight the flawed application of the democratic peace theory to the Taiwan Strait conflict, since it is neither valid to transitional regimes and civil wars nor to conflicts involving ethnic co-nationals.

Finally, the political implications of a turbulent relationship between political liberalization in China and a peaceful settlement of the political discrepancies between the PRC and the ROC will be presented.

## 2 The View from Taipei and Washington

According to both the Chen Shui-bian and the Bush administration, greater political liberalization in the PRC would increase the prospect of a negotiated solution of its dispute with Taiwan. President Chen has stressed this point on numerous occasions, as in his 2005 address to the ROC National Day rally, when he argued that Taiwan's security offered the only protection to safeguard the lives of Taiwan's people until "Chinese authorities commence political and democratic reforms". In the same speech, he even depicted the democratization of China as a prerequisite for the "peaceful emergence" of this country and its authoritarian condition as "a challenge to the global community of democracies" (Government International Office 2005). Along the same lines, Joseph Wu, head of the Cabinet's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), asserted that "improvements in cross-Strait ties will hinge on China's democratization" while addressing a seminar in Taipei marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March 1996 missile crisis (*The China Post* 2006). Consequently, the following paragraph from a document released by the MAC on 14 April 2006 should not come as any surprise. It asks the international community to co-operate with Taiwan in the promotion of political liberalization in China in order to facilitate a solution to the Taiwan Strait conflict:

China's democratization is key to the normalization of cross-strait relations and has been a focus of international attention. With regard to this, Taiwan's successful experience of becoming a democracy, which has met the expectations of the world community, can serve as a model for China in the future. The international community should work with Taiwan to help accelerate China's democratization so that new progress in cross-strait relations can be made. (Mainland Affairs Council 2006)

In addition, Taipei has been signalling that the democratization of the PRC is a prerequisite for any unification settlement ever since February 1991, when the recently abolished Guidelines for National Unification were passed.

Although the US government has not made democratization a precondition for a solution to the Taiwan Strait conflict, it does share the general idea that promoting democracy in the world helps to create a more secure international arena and it regards the spreading of political freedom in China as a contribution to regional and international security (The White House 2006:41). More specifically, former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick underlined the

necessity of democratizing China for ensuring a more peaceful foreign policy from Beijing (Zoellick 2005).

Two arguments are frequently invoked by Taiwanese and American officials and by numerous researchers to support this view. First, it is upheld that China's democratization could increase Taiwan's motivation to negotiate, and second, there is the "democratic peace" theory, which maintains that democracies tend not to fight each other. This prevailing vision has encountered so little opposition that it has been taken for granted without being formally articulated in any academic paper.

### **3 China's Democratization and Taiwan's Willingness to Negotiate**

Polls show that a high percentage of Taiwan's population has conditional preferences regarding what should be the political status of Taiwan vis-à-vis China. Consequently, domestic and foreign actors have ample room to influence them on this issue (Benson & Niou 2004). From this perspective, the PRC's political liberalization would have direct and indirect effects on Taiwanese willingness to sit at the negotiation table together with Beijing. The following discussion of these effects suggests that the resolution of the Taiwan Strait dispute as a result of democratizing the PRC is still a very distant prospect.

With regard to the direct effects, it is generally argued that establishing a closer political relationship with a democratic regime would be more appealing to the Taiwanese people than with an authoritarian regime. Some authors even feel that if China democratizes, "it would swiftly become irresistibly attractive to Taiwanese" (Friedman 2000:111). Nonetheless, there are other factors in addition to the authoritarian character of the CCP's regime that hinder closer political integration with the mainland in the eyes of the people of Taiwan, such as the huge socio-economic and demographic gap between the PRC and the ROC. Due to this imbalance, Taiwan's citizens are deeply concerned about the possible impact of reunification on their living standards.

TEDS survey data clearly reflects how the domestic situation in the PRC influences the preferences of the people of Taiwan on the independence-unification issue. After the May 2005 National Assembly elections, only 15.6 percent of Taiwan's voters said they would support or strongly support unification with the mainland if the political, economical and social situation of the two shores of the Strait were very different. This percentage rose to 44 percent if the political,

economical and social situation of China and Taiwan were similar, however. Those who back unification with a democratic and prosperous mainland China do not even make up half the population, though. This state of affairs exists because the PRC and the ROC are also separated by cultural barriers, i.e. there are discrepancies concerning values, norms and beliefs. Moreover, objective differences such as socio-economic imbalances are mediated through cultural discrepancies, such as collective identities. This explains why the per-capita income gap has been successfully used by Pan-Green politicians to scare voters, despite the experiences of Hong Kong and Macao.<sup>4</sup> Both of these Special Administrative Regions have improved their socio-economic status under Chinese sovereignty, none of these regions pays any taxes to Beijing and even the Central Government has lent economic support to them (Hao 2006:57). The cultural differences also help us understand why, despite the socio-economic development experienced by China in recent years and the fruitful economic interaction between China and Taiwan, the number of Taiwanese citizens who support unification if the two sides of the Taiwan Strait become similar in social, economic and political terms has dropped from 55 to 44 percent, whereas those who disagree or strongly disagree have increased from 31 to 38 percent.

Cultural barriers between the two shores of the Taiwan Strait have become more pronounced since the democratization of Taiwan due to the reconstruction of political culture by the Taiwanese authorities and generation-specific variables. First, Lee Teng-hui and then Chen Shui-bian pushed for the de-sinization of Taiwan through the construction of a Taiwanese national identity that differs from a mainland Chinese identity as far as possible. In order to achieve this aim, new holidays have been proclaimed, parks and streets have been renamed, Taiwan-centred textbooks have been published, the study of local languages and the re-creation of local costumes has been financed, history has literally been rewritten, the word "Taiwan" has been added to the cover of passports, referenda have been held, and the National Unification Council and the Guidelines for

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<sup>4</sup> Taiwan party competition is organized along two informal political alliances: the Pan-Green Camp and the Pan-Blue Camp. The Pan-Green Camp comprises the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) and the Taiwan Independence Party (TAIP), whereas the Pan-Blue Camp comprises the Kuomintang (KMT), the People First Party (PFP) and the New Party (NP). The main difference between both camps is their stance towards China, members of the Pan-Green Camp being more prone to support independence than their counterparts in the Pan-Blue Camp.

National Unification have been “frozen” (Gold 2003:11-16; Lee 2005:15-28). In addition, the new generations of Taiwanese voters are less bound by ethnic loyalties, less attached to mainland China and more prone to identify with Taiwan’s current issues than their elders (Chang & Wang 2005).

These two factors have provoked a marked reduction in the number of Taiwanese people who regard themselves exclusively as Chinese, dropping from 26.2 percent in June 1992 to a mere 5.5 percent in June 2007 (Election Study Center 2007). This shift in the national identity of Taiwan’s citizens has been complemented by a marked increase in electoral preference for a more assertively autonomous cross-strait and foreign policy. Most people in the ROC consider that it is their right to co-determine the political relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, and both the Blue Camp and the Green Camp agree that Taiwan should decide its own future without bowing to external pressure from China or the US (Sutter 2006:424).<sup>5</sup> In the words of President Chen:

Out of respect for the principle of popular sovereignty, we should not set any positions, preconditions, or conclusions regarding the future of Taiwan, the future form of cross-strait relations, or other issues of serious concern to the nation. We should return the right to decide the future of Taiwan and the final say regarding cross-strait relations to the 23 million people of Taiwan. (*The Wall Street Journal* 2006)

On the contrary, most people in the PRC – not only the CCP – reject this view and uphold the one-China principle, which insists that there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China and the government of the PRC is the sole legal representative of the whole of China. From this perspective, China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity should not be fragmented and they advocate a joint decision between the PRC and the ROC, which in practice would be a mainland-led decision due to the PRC’s demographic, economic and military superiority (The Taiwan Affairs Office and The Information Office of the State Council 2000; Dittmer 2005). Consequently, even if China became a democracy, the disagreement about who has the right to determine the political status of Taiwan vis-à-vis China would remain at the base of the conflict.

In addition, due to the de-sinization policy implemented by the ROC’s au-

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<sup>5</sup> Not that I deny the very well-known inter- and intra-coalition discrepancies among Taiwan’s political elites on the unification-independence issue. However, these disagreements are not relevant for the central point of my argument.



thorities and the political attitudes held by the younger generations of Taiwanese voters, it seems that time is on the side of Taiwan's independence as regards political preferences about the island's political status vis-à-vis China. The perspectives for an agreement are therefore not particularly bright, an analysis shared by US and Chinese officials alike (Sutter 2006:422). Seen from this perspective, I would argue that since objective and encouraging factors such as the positive socio-economic development of the PRC and overwhelmingly successful cross-Strait economic integration have been unable to prevent the de-sinization of the national identity of the people of Taiwan and the decreasing support for unification with the mainland, there is no reason to believe that the democratization of China would have any further repercussions on the attitudes of the people of Taiwan.

The above question leads us to the indirect effects that the democratization of China might have on Taiwanese incentives to negotiate and Taiwan's position on the unification-independence issue. It could be argued that both those factors will be affected if the US decided not to support Taiwan in the wake of PLA aggression.

Many people in the USA think Americans might rightfully die to keep a democratic polity from being overwhelmed by a non-democratic polity, but very few of them feel they should die to keep a Taiwanese nation separate from a Chinese one. I therefore consider Washington will be far less likely to send troops to protect Taiwan against the mainland if China becomes a consolidated democracy. Democratic consolidation has been defined as a state of affairs in which democracy has become "the only game in town" (Przeworski 1991:26). In other words, a consolidated democracy is a political monopoly when this system of government is routinized and deeply internalized in social, institutional and even psychological life as well as in calculations on achieving success. There is therefore no popular demand for an undemocratic system of government and none of the main politicians advocates a change to an undemocratic regime (Linz & Stepan 1996:5; Rose et al. 1998:5). Of these three dimensions of democratic consolidation – behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional – the behavioural aspect has been particularly emphasized (Schneider & Schmitter 2004:61-62, 67-68).

If a consolidated democracy is established on the other side of the Strait, Taiwan's authorities would be under enormous pressure to negotiate with the mainland – and would probably do so, too. However, there is no reason to think

that US authorities would shift to this position at previous stages of political reform in China, taking into account the high political cost that such a movement would entail in the domestic arena, the USA's strong geostrategic interest in keeping China separated from Taiwan and the negative signal that it would send to US allies in the Asia-Pacific region.

With respect to the impact of Washington's military role on Taiwanese citizens' stance on the political status of their island, it has been demonstrated that their attitudes to that issue are mediated through their perception of the US commitment to defend Taiwan (Yang 2005). Specifically, those Taiwanese who believe that the US will not intervene if Taiwan is attacked are 61 percent less likely to support Taiwan's independence, whereas the US military role does not show any statistically significant effects on the pro-unification and pro-status quo stands (Yang 2005:100-102). This means that while the perceived military threat from China acts as an effective deterrence against *de jure* independence, it is unable to gain their acquiescence to the PRC's unification demands. If we also bear in mind that people tend to favour co-operative policy choices when they feel safe, it is far from clear whether Taiwanese citizens would tend to embrace a more conciliatory approach towards China if they felt more threatened by Beijing (Gordon & Arian 2001; Schafer 1999).

So far, it has been argued that the democratization of mainland China would not necessarily provoke a decisive alteration in the stance of the Taiwanese population on the independence-unification issue. The following sections will explain how the democratization of China could favour the articulation of a more aggressive Chinese policy on Taiwan.

#### **4 The "Democratic Peace" Theory**

It is generally claimed that democratic peace is a dyadic phenomenon, since democracies are unlikely to combat one another, but are also as prone to fight with non-democracies as these are with one another (Doyle 1983a, 1983b). Consequently, after the democratization of Taiwan an eventual democratization of the PRC was quickly regarded in Washington and Taipei as a possible solution to the Taiwan Strait conflict. In fact, promotion of democracy is one of the two founding pillars of the US national security strategy as it was explicitly stated by President Bush in his preface to the 2006 National Security Strategy of the United States of America (The White House 2006:ii). This standpoint misreads the repercussions that greater political liberalization of the mainland could have

on cross-Strait relations under the current circumstances. In order to avoid a flawed application of the democratic peace theory to the cross-Strait conflict, it is necessary to answer the following two questions: what kind of political regimes and what kind of conflicts does democratic peace apply to?

The democratic peace theory only applies to consolidated democracies, which tend not to fight each other due to structural and normative restraints (Buono de Mesquita et al. 1999; MacMillan 2004; Maoz & Russett 1993; Russett 1994). On the one hand, it is argued that democratic regimes have formal mechanisms which constrain the mobilization of support required to open a military conflict. International challenges require political leaders to mobilize domestic support for their policies. Such support must be mobilized from those groups that provide the leadership with the kind of legitimacy that is required for international action. Accordingly, a democratic political system requires the mobilization of both general public opinion and of a variety of institutions that make up the system of government, such as the legislature, the political bureaucracies and key interest groups. This implies that very few goals could be presented to justify fighting wars in democracies, since the population is not willing to bear the cost of engaging in military conflicts (Kant 1991:100). It also implies that the process of national mobilization for war in democracies is both difficult and cumbersome due to the complexity of the democratic process and the requirement of securing a broad base of support for risky policies. Democratic leaders are therefore reluctant to wage wars, and the time required for a democratic state to prepare for war is far longer than for non-democracies (Maoz & Russett 1993:626). On the other hand, the normative argument postulates that democrats consider that they should not fight each other, and democracies possess a facilitative mechanism that allows two democracies to resolve conflicts through the shared norm of non-violence and bargaining (Zinnes 2004:430-431). Nevertheless, before eventually becoming a consolidated democracy, the PRC must experience a democratization process, and it would be particularly prone to engage in a military conflict during that period.

If China became a consolidated democracy, this would not necessarily mean the end of the Taiwan Strait conflict, since democratic peace does not relate to every type of conflict. From a mainland perspective, the Taiwanese independence movement is a secessionist movement. Most secessionist movements around the world fail, since states do not voluntarily give up what they consider to be their sovereign territory. Even consolidated democracies tend to reject a loss of their

territory. A democratic PRC would therefore be unlikely to recognize Taiwan's independence *de jure* (Marhs 2000).

Along the same lines, there is abundant empirical evidence indicating that democratic states tend to be particularly belligerent in international conflicts involving ethnic co-nationals living in another state. There is a 14.4 percent probability that democratic leaders will threaten to use force, whereas non-democratic leaders are only predicted to do this 6.5 percent of the time in such a scenario (Hutt & Allee 2002:771-772). Both democratic challengers and targets are also less likely to make concessions when they share ethnic ties with the population in the disputed territory. Democratic leaders in challenger states are 25 percent less likely to offer concessions when politically salient concerns with ethnic co-nationals are present, whereas democratic targets are nearly 30 percent less likely than their non-democratic counterparts to make concessions under similar circumstances (Hutt & Allee 2002:776). These findings put a caveat on the institutional restraints of democracies on military conflict, showing one kind of conflict where citizens are consistently willing to bear the cost of engaging in an armed confrontation. In addition, these results are consistent with the above idea that democratic leaders become less likely to offer concessions when the issues at stake are politically salient ones or when making concessions may be quite controversial domestically. This is particular relevant to the Taiwan Strait conflict, which falls within this category, so it should not be expected that China's democratization would lead *per se* to less belligerent attitudes to Taiwan on the mainland.

## 5 Democratization and the Use of Military Force

Comparative studies have collected abundant empirical evidence that depicts democratizing regimes as particularly unstable and more prone to war than both democratic and authoritarian regimes (Adamson 2001; Hensel et al. 2000; Mansfield & Snyder 1995, 2002a, 2002b; Weitsman & Shambaugh 2002). Certain works on the security behaviour of a democratizing China have already mentioned this point, although only one has presented a scenario developing the way this general theory could apply to China in its conflict with Taiwan (Bachman 2000:214-218).

Bachman distinguishes between different kinds of gradual and radical transitions to democracy and between transitions from below and from above. He suggests that a rapid transition might be better than a gradual one if peace is to be

maintained in the Taiwan Strait. He does not reach any conclusions with regard to the leading political force during the transition. Unlike Bachman, I argue that a gradual transition from above would be the best scenario for avoiding a military clash in the Taiwan Strait during the democratization of China.

This relationship between democratization and military conflict rests on the institutional weakness of democratizing political regimes. When demands for broadening political participation emerge in authoritarian regimes like present-day China, which lack the institutional prerequisites for effective democracy (the rule of law is poorly formed, state officials are corrupt, elections can be rigged, the military or warlords may threaten to overrun electoral outcomes, and journalistic media are unprofessional and depend on the state or economic elites), these regimes are especially prone to engage in military conflicts because of two factors.

Before focusing on our case study, it may be useful to note that the causal logic of the democratization and war argument outlined above has been illustrated through the analysis of several historical cases such as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and Chile's initiation of the War of the Pacific in the 1870s. In both situations the respective government was forced to intervene and escalate the conflict under the pressure of populist nationalism articulated by urban public opinion, the democratic opposition and the armed forces. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus is particularly illuminating, since Bülent Ecevit consented to invade Cyprus while bearing in mind the misfortune of former Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, who lost his post and all his political prestige for bowing to American pressure and not launching a military intervention in Cyprus in 1967 in defiance of overwhelming popular and military support for it (Adamson 2001:287).

First of all, in the absence of the legitimacy that mature democracies derive from institutionally established democratic procedures, governments need to find an ideological basis for popular political support (Huntington 1968). This ideological basis is frequently a populist ideology manifested through nationalism (Snyder 2000:24, 45, 51). Nationalism offers political elites a way of evading strict democratic accountability, while giving them the appearance of being responsible vis-à-vis popular interest. Nationalism may also be useful for old elites who have a parochial interest in the military or in national enterprises (Mansfield & Snyder 2002a:531-532). This was the case in Southeast Europe, where populist and nationalist regimes tended to rise from the ashes of Communism (Carpenter 1997; Dahrendorf 1990:115-116; Tismaneanu 1992:285-287). China could

also face a similar fate due to the similarities of its social structure (an agrarian society with increasing inequality of wealth), its institutional framework (lack of organizations able to articulate popular interests outside the regime) and its political culture with the countries of Southeast Europe (preference for sovereignty and territorial integrity over political freedom, for collective rights over individual rights, for socio-economic rights over political rights and discredit on mainstream Western social models). Moreover, due to China's long and successful tradition of political elites earning popular support through nationalism, which is an important source of legitimacy for the incumbent regime, it is quite likely that Chinese political elites may be tempted to appeal to nationalism if they have to compete for popular backing in a more liberalized political arena.

Second, nationalist politics in a weakly institutionalized post-authoritarian setting may lead to international military disputes, since the civil authorities are more vulnerable to military and populist opposition pressure in this institutional framework. Political liberalization in China would draw cross-Strait relations from a top-down to a bottom-up approach, as has already happened in Taiwan. This is of great concern under the present circumstances, since the nationalist discourse held by the army and the population is more aggressive than the discourse advocated by the civil authorities.

With regard to the army, solid empirical evidence suggests that military officers are, on the whole, prone to favour more aggressive policies than those preferred by civilians. The militarist school points to three main reasons to support this theory: first, parochial interests, since armed conflicts provide military elites with opportunities to get higher budgets as a group and also win individual promotion (Posen 1984; Vagts 1937); second, perceptual biases, since military officers are more likely to see security strictly as a military problem, to exaggerate military threats, to hold a pessimistic view on the possibility of solving a crisis without resorting to military force, to overstate the advantages of resorting to military force and to generate optimistic casualty, budget and time estimations needed for victory (Sagan 2003; Walt 1987); and third, decision-making biases, since military officials have been trained to base their choices on simplicity and directness, avoiding excessive reflection (which can be fatal on the battlefield) and consequently are less enthusiastic about solutions such as diplomacy and negotiation (Brecher 1996; Desch 1999).

Seen from this perspective, it should not come as any surprise that states with weak civilian control over the military are on average more prone to initiate

military action than states without it, no matter whether they are democratic or authoritarian (Sechser 2004). As regards democratizing civil authorities, since they have less control over the army, they have an incentive to show the military elites that they can take a firm stand in national security concerns in order to avoid military intervention in politics, even if this requires triggering an armed conflict itself.

China is no exception here; its army officers tend to conduct a more aggressive nationalist discourse than the civil authorities, as reflected in their more hawkish position on foreign policy (Chen 1998; Li 2003; Stenseth 1998). No matter what the issue – be it Taiwan, Japan, the South China Sea or proliferation – the PLA's stance is usually rooted in a zero-sum game mentality connected with a persistent concern about relative gains.

Concerning the attitudes of the PLA officers to the conflict with Taiwan, these have been consistently more prone to support the threat of using force or the actual use of force than the technocratic civil authorities. Since Deng Xiaoping stopped directing the PRC's Taiwan policy, the military authorities have frequently criticized the "dovish" Taiwan policy of the civil authorities. PLA figures have even asked for the resignation of high-ranking civil authorities such as Jiang Zemin, Qian Qichen and Wang Zhaoguo on these grounds (Garver 1997:57-58; Kuang 1996; Lo 1994, 1996; Swaine 1995:35; Whiting 1995). On some occasions, the PLA has even been able to take the initiative in formulating the PRC's Taiwan policy. In 1996, for instance, the conciliatory Jiang Zemin's "Eight Points" were temporarily put on the back burner due to PLA pressure in favour of military deterrence through the stage of large-scale military exercises, including guided-missile tests (Jiang 1995; Scobell 2000; Lam 1999:171-178). The scant popularity of the "Eight Points" at that time was evidenced by the low-profile ceremony held for their commemoration that year – despite being in Beijing, Jiang Zemin was absent from the event and no military officer praised them either (Ting 1996). In addition, in 2001 military authorities were able to persuade the reluctant Jiang-Zhu tandem that a large-scale military exercise on Dongshan Island was necessary to minimize Democratic Progressive Party gains in the autumn legislative elections (Li 2003:78).

The hawkish posture of the military can be understood, bearing in mind that an increase in the perception of the threat of Taiwan's *de jure* independence and a more belligerent Taiwan policy by Beijing would be beneficial to the corporate interests of the PLA for three reasons (Bi 2002:548-558; Garver 1997:61; Ji

1997:298). First of all, these factors will enhance the political weight of the PLA, since the army will be the institution in charge of implementing this aggressive policy. In addition, this will contribute to improving its reputation and prestige, which is particularly relevant for the PLA at the moment as it is quite difficult for the Chinese army to recruit qualified personnel; people are more willing to seek jobs in the private sector instead. Moreover, this intensification of the tensions across the Taiwan Strait justifies a growth in the resources allocated to the army, such as an increase in the military budget. The latest example of this situation was the proposal of a 14.7 percent increase in the defence budget for 2006 (*China Daily* 2006). From this perspective, it is reasonable to expect the PLA to keep pressing for a more aggressive policy towards Taiwan, and a process of political liberalization that entails the deterioration of civilian control over the military could be particularly favourable for the success of this strategy.

Taking a closer look at popular attitudes towards Taiwan, the existence of widespread support for a firmer Taiwan policy than that implemented by the government can be confirmed. From this perspective, a significant sector of the population criticizes what they see as the passivity of the authorities towards the Taiwanese pro-independence movement. There are clear signs of this belligerent nationalism: a growing body of popular nationalist literature, numerous active chat rooms and the periodical requests for demonstrations against the Taiwan government made by several mainland associations, mainly student associations (Fang et al. 2002:271; Xu 2001:157).

What is even more revealing are some surveys conducted by various institutions in mainland China in the last decade, revealing massive popular support for a firm Taiwan policy (Chen et al. 1997:479; Lam 1999:116; Interview with Sheng Mingming, Director of the Research Center on Contemporary China at Beijing University, Beijing, 29 October 2002). The most recent accessible data was collected by the Social Survey Institute of China and shows the percentage of people willing to immediately retake control of Taiwan by force as fluctuating between 29 and 43 percent (Teo 2004). In addition, those who support military action against the island's separatist forces if they seek independence in any form are consistently above the 80 percent mark and generally around 95 percent (MacKinnon 1999; *People's Daily* 2000; Teo 2004).

Taking PLA and popular attitudes towards the Taiwan conflict into account, it can be argued that the present civil leadership of the PRC acts as a dyke containing the more belligerent attitudes of both groups on this issue. The most recent



example of this behaviour was the role of the new top CCP leadership in fending off lower-level demands for a unification law with a timeline attached instead of the relatively flexible law that was passed (Christensen 2005:10). In relation to this point, it is also important to note that before passing the Anti-Secession Law, Beijing sent State Council Taiwan Affairs Office Director Chen Yunlin to Washington to consult in advance with the United States on the meaning of this law. The technocratic elite of the CCP acts as a buffer against the most belligerent nationalist manifestations of some sectors of the population, the army and even the Party, since their main source of legitimacy, eudemonic legitimacy – which is based on the ability of the authorities to provide socio-economic benefits for the population – requires friendly relations with partners such as the US, Japan and the EU (White 1986:463).

## **6 What if China Democratizes?**

In order to understand the radicalizing effect that political liberalization can have on the international policy of a transitional government or on a weakly institutionalized regime, it is necessary to reject the idea that popular participation in the decision-making process necessarily leads to liberal and more tolerant identities and to an acceptance of pluralism in both domestic and international politics.

The input of the military, political opposition and the general public on the foreign policy of the government is greater in a democratizing regime than under an authoritarian one. All the groups simply wish to punish leaders who adopt controversial or failed foreign policies, and the greater the political vulnerability of the leaders, the higher the political cost of pursuing controversial or unsuccessful foreign-policy activities. This situation may facilitate the outbreak of a military conflict if opposition elites and the general public have more hawkish diplomatic and military policy preferences than incumbent leaders. Under these circumstances, the free press and political parties can be used as channels for the expression of an aggressive popular nationalism. Unfortunately, this is one of the most probable scenarios if China democratizes in the short term. Within this framework, decision-makers would find themselves trapped by a belligerent nationalist rhetoric that emphasizes national sovereignty, territorial integrity and combating external threats over a pragmatic approach to national interest. This could particularly be the case in the PRC, taking into account the people's and military's assertive stance on the Taiwan issue and the large

share of legitimacy that the incumbent Chinese authorities have derived from nationalism, since the successful appellation to a given source of legitimacy reduces the room for manoeuvre that the decision-makers have at their disposal at the risk of undermining its stability (Giddens 1984:184-193). Therefore, if China democratizes overnight, the materialization of either of these two more benign scenarios would be far from certain: a democratic China recognizing Taiwan's right of self-determination and a democratic China discarding the use of force as a legitimate means of solving the Taiwan Strait conflict.

This is not to deny that the PRC's nationalistic rhetoric is helping to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait, since it serves as an effective deterrence against a formal declaration of independence from Taiwan. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that greater political liberalization involves more room for mobilizing political opposition along nationalist lines and therefore more pressure on the Chinese authorities to translate that belligerent rhetoric into politics.

In addition, if China became a democracy at this time, the attitudes of the people of Taiwan to China and Taiwan's domestic politics would hinder the signing of an association agreement with Beijing. In this setting, people on the mainland would find it hard to understand why the people of Taiwan would not want to unify with a China that has become democratic.

## **7 Conclusion: Political Implications**

This paper has questioned the assertion that the democratization of China would automatically provide a peaceful solution to the Taiwan Strait conflict through the presentation of a credible democratization scenario that would increase the risk of a military clash between Beijing and Taipei. It has not been claimed that the democratization of China would inevitably lead to war, but these thoughts are a reminder that democracy in China will not end the danger of military conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

China's leaders and the general population have never given the impression that they are willing to negotiate over the one-China principle. Therefore, short of accepting this principle, it is difficult to propose that a peaceful solution is likely, whether China democratizes or not. If one considers the cultural barriers that have prevented the rapid socio-economic development experienced by China and the fruitful economic co-operation developed between the two shores of the Taiwan Strait from leading to a progressive de-sinization of Taiwan, it is hard to imagine that the democratization of China would produce a significant shift

in the stance of the Taiwanese people on the independence-unification issue. In addition, although the standpoint of Taiwan's citizens on this issue and their incentives to negotiate with the mainland are mediated through their perception of the USA's military role in the Taiwan Strait, it has been argued that the PRC's democratization would not have a significant impact on this factor.

Moreover, if open political competition took place in China in the absence of political and administrative institutions (or the presence of weak ones), an aggressive and irredentist foreign policy could be promoted to achieve electoral gains. This might well be the case since the army, the population and certain political elites outside the core of the regime have more aggressive nationalist attitudes than the incumbent technocratic elites. It is therefore convenient to reinforce the rule of law and the institutionalization of the regime before introducing open political competition at the higher levels of the system.

Whatever the case, the present article does not advocate that since an authoritarian China is probably more peaceful than a democratizing one in the short term, Taiwan and the international community might contribute to the perpetuation of the CCP regime. What this article has tried to underline is that contrary to what is generally claimed, particularly by Taiwanese policy-makers, the political liberalization of the mainland does not necessarily imply the adoption of a more peaceful Taiwan policy by Beijing.

Regardless of whether governments have strong incentives for misrepresenting their domestic political constraints when solving conflicts with other governments, if the facts discussed in this paper are taken into account, the stereotypes implicit in the democratic peace theory on the aggressive behaviour of authoritarian authorities and the peace-loving tendency of the people need to be revised. This is particularly the case in civil wars and in conflicts involving territorial reunification in areas inhabited by ethnic co-nationals.

Seen from this perspective, the democratization of China could become a litmus test for US deterrence policy. So far, Washington's conditional commitment to defend Taiwan has decisively helped to keep peace in the Taiwan Strait, reducing both the risk of a formal declaration of independence by Taipei and a military attack from the mainland (Kastner 2006). Nevertheless, growing political liberalization on the mainland could translate into either unbearable pressure on the incumbent elites to implement a belligerent policy against Taiwan or into the ascension to power of new elites more willing to resort to force against the island. The success of US deterrence could not be taken for granted

in this scenario. The fact that the PRC would have little chance of success in a direct military engagement with the US armed forces does not mean that the Chinese authorities would be able to take their chance under strong domestic pressure. It would not be the first time in history that the weaker side decided to initiate a military conflict due to domestic considerations – the Falklands War and the Third Indochina War are good examples of such a scenario. Whether or not China will resort to force to solve the Taiwan conflict will not be decided by an analysis of the military balance of the contending forces and the related cost-benefit calculation. This point becomes crystal clear if one imagines what Beijing's reaction might be if Taiwan formally proclaimed independence: China would resort to force even if Washington decided to back Taiwan militarily (Wang 2000:62).

Bearing this in mind, the question of what kind of democratizing path would be more helpful in avoiding the implementation of aggressive policies by the Chinese authorities and what can be done by the international community to facilitate this process becomes highly relevant.

Considering the political attitudes held by the different political actors of the PRC to Taiwan, it seems that democratization through gradual transformation from above, in which the liberalizing civil authorities are not particularly vulnerable to army or popular pressure, would be more conducive to the maintenance of peace in the Taiwan Strait than bottom-up liberalization.<sup>6</sup> This position discards the demand that US foreign policy should bring about a rapid democratic transition in China as soon as possible (Gilley 2004:69) and that elections above the village level must be promoted urgently (Zoellick 2005). On the contrary, it would be positive for the maintenance of cross-Strait stability if an international policy on China were developed that collaborated with the socio-economic development of the PRC, with the institutionalization of its political system, the consolidation of the rule of law and with a gradual path of political liberalization.

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<sup>6</sup> Democratization processes can be divided into three main categories according to the importance of governing and opposition groups in channelling the political transition to democracy: transformation, replacement and transplacement (Huntington 1991/2:583).

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