

Preventing Preventive War

Avoiding Inherent Dangers in the Cross-Strait Status Quo
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Preventive war, an old concept in international relations theory, is currently at the forefront of international politics. The American-led intervention in Iraq was controversially framed in preventive war terms: the coalition opted for military action to dispense of Saddam Hussein's regime before it could obtain nuclear capability or pass weapons of mass destruction on to terrorists. A less obvious, but perhaps more useful, application of preventive war analysis involves the international status of Taiwan.

Preventive wars are undertaken by states perceiving *closing windows of opportunity* or *opening windows of vulnerability*. In the cross-Strait case, the People's Republic of China (PRC) could determine that its window of opportunity for unifying Taiwan with the Mainland is closing if it estimates its ability to coerce the island is decreasing while Taiwan's independent identity and international support is increasing. Alternatively, Taiwan could conclude that it faces an opening window of vulnerability as the economic and military strength of the PRC increases and other countries attach relatively less importance on their relations with Taipei than on their ties with Beijing.

If the PRC undertakes military action against Taiwan, or if Taiwan formally declares independence from the Mainland, either would represent a decision to fight now rather than face a more costly conflict (or unacceptable terms of peace) in the future. In other words, *either action would equate to initiating a preventive war*. This paper advances a preventive war framework as a new approach for understanding, and avoiding, PRC-Taiwan conflict. Policy recommendations are outlined for the PRC, Taiwan, United States and Asian neighbors to ease the current diplomatic stalemate which presents the danger of preventive war across the Strait.

Preventive War and Cross-Strait Relations

A preventive war is one where the aggressor state is motivated by the fear and perception that its military power and potential are declining relative to that of a rising adversary. Thus, preventive wars are wars of anticipation fought to capitalize on transitory military advantages and avoid future disadvantages. Such wars are not always initiated by the stronger state: when the offense is perceived to have the advantage, weak powers may consider surprise attack, just as declining powers may consider preventive aggression. Incentives for preventive war are generally provided by shifts in relative power, the need to maintain credibility of deterrence, and calculations of alliance reliability.

In the case of the PRC and Taiwan, windows of opportunity and vulnerability are not strictly functions of military power. The balance across the Strait has important political and economic variables including domestic support for government policies, trade dependence, and political clout with third party nations. The reason preventive war analysis is so useful in examining the Taiwan question is that cross-Strait relations are witnessing dramatic change in these variables while the fundamental conflict between Beijing and Taipei's ultimate goals for the island's international status remain relatively fixed. PRC interests would be met by a "one country, two systems" solution that would mean an end to Taiwan's status as a quasi-state entity.

Taiwan interests, on the other hand, would be maximized by obtaining equality in negotiations with Beijing and making *de jure* its currently *de facto* rights as a sovereign member of the international community. The irreconcilable nature of these interests eludes compromise and continues to present serious danger of military conflict.

Given this grim situation, *why has preventive war not yet occurred?* Because the official status quo delays conflict and feigns stability as both sides continue to gain from the diplomatic *stalemate equilibrium*. The PRC is undertaking a process of rapid modernization in a time of relative peace and good relations with the United States, while receiving praise for joining international clubs like the WTO and respecting international norms and conventions. For Taiwan, the current situation allows it to reap the economic benefits of trade, maintain its autonomy, and acquire advanced defensive weaponry from the US.

But the stalemate equilibrium offers an awkward and fragile peace. Ironically, aspects of the current dynamic undermine the ultimate goals of each side regarding Taiwan's international status. Against PRC interests, the status quo prolongs Taiwan's *de facto* independence backed by US military support. Meanwhile, as the PRC becomes more integrated into the international economy and a variety of institutions, militarily threatening Taiwan becomes less of a credible option. From Taipei's standpoint, the increasing importance of the PRC on the international stage is making Beijing's position of greater weight in the diplomatic calculus of third parties. Indeed, Taiwan appears more diplomatically isolated now than ever. Meanwhile, deepening economic ties with the PRC are bringing Taiwan closer to the Mainland and further from determining its own political destiny.

The diplomatic stalemate equilibrium, with components of stability that contradict the long-term objectives of both sides, presents an inherent danger. When the complex mix of coercion, deterrence, international restraint, increasing military and economic power, and domestic politics no longer provides for a balance across the Strait, either side could consider its position on Taiwan's international status to be rapidly deteriorating. Moreover, a serious disruption of the cross-Strait balance need not be actual; it could instead be based on misperception or miscalculation. Should assessment of cross-Strait relations yield a conclusion by either side that the benefits of the status quo no longer outweigh the costs, the stalemate equilibrium would collapse into preventive war.

This raises the obvious question: *how can preventive war be prevented?* International relations theory tells us that preventive wars can be avoided by decreasing incentives to misrepresent (think Taipei's ambivalence toward One-China), reducing costly investments in reputation (think Beijing's threats of military action), and addressing commitment problems (think America's complicated mix of deterrence and reassurance toward both sides of the Strait and the hesitation of Asian neighbors to take on any diplomatic role). To meet these challenges, the current stalemate equilibrium must be managed so that changing cross-Strait variables reduce rather than heighten the chance of conflict. The policy recommendations below are thus meant to increase diplomatic flexibility and remove the specter of military confrontation in the short-term, so a compromise resolution on Taiwan's status can be reached in the future.

Policy Recommendations

Analysis of the cross-Strait dynamic as a case of preventive war suggests gradually moving away from the stalemate equilibrium with initiatives that discredit perceptions of closing windows of opportunity or opening windows of vulnerability. I outline below policy

recommendations for the PRC, Taiwan, United States and Asian neighbors for preventing preventive war across the Strait.

- People's Republic of China

Use the opportunity of Beijing's new position of strength and confidence to take a more generous, less militarily assertive position vis-a-vis Taiwan. This new diplomacy will save the PRC costly distraction from its economic development and greatly reduce suspicions about Beijing's strategic intentions. Such visionary action by Beijing would help ensure that China's modern rise is peaceful and would increase the Mainland's attractive power in Taiwan.

- Taiwan

Political parties in Taiwan should avoid engaging in united front tactics with Beijing against each other. National security is politics in any democracy, but should not be grounds for political slander or collusion with outside groups. United front tactics practiced by Taiwan's political parties give PRC leadership hope it can wait to have serious dialogue with Taiwan until leaders more to Beijing's liking come to power. Disavowing united front tactics will encourage more direct and productive exchanges across the Strait.

- United States

Avoid perceptions of abandoning Taiwan or supporting pro-independence forces on the island while encouraging more direct political dialogues between Beijing and Taiwan's elected leaders.

- Asian neighbors

Stop diplomatically ignoring Taiwan. Governments of the region can emphasize they value the continued existence of and relations with Taiwan's democracy. East Asian economic fora and integration efforts from APEC to ASEAN are being under utilized out of deference to Beijing. This represents a field of missed opportunities for PRC-Taiwan interaction and regional contributions toward peaceful cross-Strait relations. It would be better for Asian neighbors to recognize and build their good relations with Taiwan rather than diplomatically isolating it.

Conclusion

Various analytic frameworks have been applied to the question of Taiwan's international status. The concept of preventive war provides an alternative approach for understanding PRC-Taiwan conflict. The history of the Taiwan issue underscores how the delicate balance across the Strait involves more than military advantage – it depends on a complex set of political and economic factors in addition to traditional measures of military power. Analyzing cross-Strait conflict in terms of preventive war suggests why the PRC and Taiwan have not yet gone to war but remain on the verge of conflict. Ambiguity over first-mover advantage, common knowledge of the high costs of war, and relative satisfaction with the status quo have maintained a fragile peace across the Strait. But as long as the PRC and Taiwan's ultimate goals for the island's international status diverge, the current stalemate equilibrium is not stable in the long-term. Conflict is possible if not inevitable because political and economic variables are shifting dramatically, producing closing windows of opportunity and opening windows of vulnerability that can lead to preventive war.

It is therefore time to gradually transform the diplomatic status quo and define a more stable equilibrium. The policy initiatives above address longstanding challenges of information,

reputation and commitment. They would give Taiwan more international space, China a better external environment for internal development, and the region more security. In the new diplomatic equilibrium, trade and geography would peacefully bring the two sides closer together. And in time, the PRC and Taiwan may have more compatible political visions, so that unification can be a realistic choice for peoples on both sides. Preventive war across the Strait can thus be prevented, making possible much better relations between Beijing and Taipei than was the case between Washington and Baghdad.