A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION: THE CASE OF CHINA-TAIWAN CONFLICT[1]

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ABSTRACT

Up until the end of Cold War mainstream theories in the disciplines of International Relations and Peace Studies have overlooked the transformation in relations between actors but instead concentrated on either the constant state of conflict between units or radical changes from war to peace. Acknowledging major changes in their subject matters due to the changing conditions with the end of Cold War, both disciplines had to rethink their theoretical assumptions and renew their toolboxes. Accordingly, the constructivist turn in International Relations and the introduction of Transformational Approach to conflict in Peace Studies have brought the two disciplines closer. Similar to the Constructivist theory of International Relations that emphasizes changes rather than law-like regularities in international politics, the Conflict Transformation Approach in Peace Studies focuses on perennial transformation processes in conflicts. This paper through bringing together insights from the disciplines of International Relations and Peace Studies, analyses the cross-strait conflict between the People's Republic of China and Republic of China (Taiwan) within a constructivist framework, and from a transformational perspective by applying Hugh Miall's five-point model of conflict transformation (context transformation, structural transformation, actor transformation, issue transformation, and personal/elite transformation). Miall's five-point model is utilized in this paper to show that, despite serious crisis occurred in more than 70 years history of People's Republic of China-Republic of China conflict, the relationship of the parties has undergone a set of transformations on the way to reconciliation. Although the conflict, with serious disagreements on crucial issues, is far from being settled, the ongoing transformation creates room for negotiations and further reconciliation on issues that were previously regarded as non-negotiable.

Keywords: China, conflict transformation, constructivism, reconciliation, Taiwan.

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus is known for his belief in "universal flux, the continuous change and transformation of all things" (Kahn 2001: 147). He believed that nothing in the universe is constant or unchangeable except change itself. However, mainstream theories in both Peace Studies (PS) and International Relations (IR) have overlooked transformations in relations between actors and concentrated on either the constant condition of conflict between units or radical changes from war to peace. The classical realist assumption that human nature drives individuals towards a war of all against all and the structural realist contention that relations between states are inevitably conflictual in the anarchical system have dominated IR throughout the Cold War. Meanwhile, PS scholars have tried to devise mechanisms to achieve the absence of war without scrutinizing its long-lasting root causes and processes.

Acknowledging major changes in their subject matters near the end of the second millennium, both PS and IR had to rethink their theoretical assumptions and renew their toolboxes. This was a reflection on these two disciplines of a broad paradigm shift in social sciences towards constructivism. A constructivist theory of international politics turned attention away from constants like the state of anarchy and perpetual peace to changeable elements like power, identities, and interests. In PS, meanwhile, some acknowledged that existing approaches were unable to eradicate the underlying causes of conflict and prevent its recurrence. Along with this critique, the transformational approach proposed a more comprehensive treatment of conflicts. Rather than seeing conflict and peace as two sides of a coin with a result-oriented policy, subscribers of this approach viewed them as two extremes of a continuum. Therefore, they argued, a durable peace required transformation of various elements of a conflict, inclusion of all relevant actors, and a process-focused solution.

Informed by the developments discussed above in the two seemingly distinct academic disciplines, we argue that a constructivist approach to conflict can create a middle ground. In other words, transformation processes in relations between parties to a conflict can be better understood and explained within a constructivist framework. To demonstrate this, this paper discusses the transformation of the conflict between Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) using a Constructivist approach.

The rationale that has paved the way for this work is the nature of the mainstream approaches in the literature on Taiwan conflict. A greater majority of research that has been conducted so far attempted to find an answer to geopolitical questions of security and prevention of further escalation of the tensions into an armed conflict. Rather than surveying transformations from conflict to reconciliation and their peaceful resolution, most of the works have been on either what is required to deter the parties from resorting to force (Tsang: 2004; Christensen: 2010; Karim: 2010), the factors that drive the parties toward another crisis (Copper: 1997; Wunderlich: 2003; Ross: 2006; Fravel: 2007; Kastner: 2015; Crookes: 2016), or U.S. role in the shaping of the future of the cross-strait relations (Lee: 2011; Friedman: 2013; Chen et al.: 2017; You & Hao: 2018; Xiying: 2021). In this paper, however, it is argued that there is another side to the conflict, which can be revealed by looking into the transformations that have occurred since its outbreak.

The paper proceeds in four sections. In the first two sections, we develop a theoretical framework by surveying constructivist theory in IR and the transformational approach to conflicts in PS. In the third part, we introduce Hugh Miall's Model of Conflict Transformation while the last section applies this model to the Cross-Strait conflict between the PRC and the ROC through a Constructivist inquiry.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, developing a theoretical framework by combining Constructivist theory in IR and Transformational Approach to conflicts in Peace Studies and adopting Hugh Miall's model of conflict transformation to the Cross-Strait conflict between the PRC and the ROC.

International Relations Theory, Conflict and Peace

The emergence of IR as a discipline in the Inter-war period was accompanied by an attempt to solve one of humankind's most pressing problems. That is, the founders of the discipline held "the same moral purpose, which was to discover the causes of World War I so that future generations might be spared a similar catastrophe" (Burchill and Linklater 2013: 7). Despite this utopian beginning, IR's further development in terms of conflicts and peace followed a different direction. The realist tradition which underscored the constancy of the security dilemma, under the recurrent conflicts between self-interested states began to dominate IR, weakening idealist approaches arguing for the progressive nature of humans and society, and thus the possibility of cooperation and peace.

It is no surprise that, until the 1990s, research concentrated on peace drifted away from IR. Generally, mainstream theoretical traditions in IR have not proposed a comprehensive toolbox for creating peace. As Richmond (2008: 3) puts it, "realism offers an elite and negative peace based on inherency; liberalism offers a one-size-fits all progressive framework of mainly elite governance with little recognition of difference".

PS has emerged as an academic discipline in its own right as a result of the disenchantment with IR's potential for creating peace. Moreover, during the Cold War, it was mostly conducted by people having a background in pacifism or peace activism who were non-specialists in the field of international relations. On the other hand, the term peace itself was highly suspect and controversial in the US and the liberal-idealist outlook of PS to conflicts was marginalized under the Cold War security environment. All these reasons prevented PS from elevating to the level of a mainstream school of thought (Kelman 1981: 96).

It was the constructivist shift experienced in the 1980s that brought the two disciplines closer by providing new perspectives and insight on the way these social sciences are practiced. The contributions of the constructivists to the nature of interstate relations in the late 1980's and the early 1990's such as "the world is of our making" (Onuf 1989) and "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt 1992) became very popular and caused heated debate among IR scholars. Constructivists focused on the inter-subjective character of the international

relations by suggesting that international system is a social construction in which structure and agency are in a mutual interaction (Fierke 2013).

Similarly, the traditional conflict management and resolution mechanisms used by PS have become increasingly problematic with the end of the Cold War. The changing nature of the global context, interstate relations, and particularly the structure of conflicts required a new approach that embraced experimental methods and introduced a new vision and tools. In this regard, to combat the new threat environment, PS from a constructivist stance moved towards employing transformational approaches to conflicts.

Changing Approaches to Conflict After the Cold War

The main impetus for changing approaches to inter-state and intra-state conflicts and the emergence of a transformational approach was the changing conditions with the end of the Cold War (Ryan 2007: 9). The emergence of new conflicts, recurrence of previously settled ones, and, most importantly, genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia brought new approaches to the fore which contrasted with the previous ones. Meanwhile there was a shift in how international organizations in general and UN in particular approached conflicts. Ryan (2007) points out that two UN documents, namely An Agenda for Peace (Boutros-Ghali 1992) and Supplement to an Agenda for Peace (UNSG A/50/60: S/1995/1), played a significant role in the move away from conventional approaches to a new generation of peace-building work. Following failed UN peace-keeping missions in the early 1990s, local efforts and NGO work gained more recognition. Along with the transformation of UN peace missions, practitioners in the field and peace researchers began questioning conventional approaches, such as conflict management and resolution, criticizing them for being insufficient to describe how conflict is addressed and peace is envisioned. Consequently, all these developments emphasize the need for a transformational approach and proposed the conflict transformation approach to build a stronger platform in addressing the conflicts.

Conflict Transformation as a New Paradigm in Peace Studies

The transformational tradition was initiated by J. P. Lederach, who gained the necessary experience during his peace building activities in supposedly intractable conflict zones like Somalia, Nicaragua, and Northern Ireland (BBC 2003). Drawing on his years of experience in the field, Lederach defined conflict transformation as follows:

> Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships (BBC 2003).

The transformational approach to conflicts incorporates various necessary components and actions that were previously neglected and undermined by traditional conflict resolution methods. As an umbrella term, it

brought a new multidimensional vision in which peace building work should involve all actors and levels of leadership in society, set immediate, mid-term, and long-term goals and envision a shift from a conflict-habituated system to a peace system.

Despite some similarities with the previous perspectives in terms of conceptual understanding, purposes, and tools used in conflict transformation, this new approach is a unique departure in theory and practice from conflict resolution.

From a theoretical perspective, conflict transformation is a product of the constructivist approach to peace building which is different from both idealism and realism and cannot be understood within these paradigms. It rejects idealists' demonized view of conflict. Instead, conflicts are embraced as a natural occurrence in social relations. On the other hand, the state-centric and pessimistic view of realists are rejected as insufficient and erroneous. As an alternative, the transformational approach includes individuals, groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) along with their perceptions, values, and cultures, and takes a neutral view of conflict with the possibility of change.

From the practical standpoint conflict transformation is a departure from conflict resolution because of its realization as a drive for positive change in societies. The Peace practitioners were advised to "envision and respond" to conflict by transforming the destructive energy of the conflict into constructive change rather than avoiding it. They were advised to avoid trying to achieve peace quickly, and to focus on less radical improvements. Efforts of the practitioners for Peace building on the other hand should not be limited only in post-conflict settings but expended throughout all the phases of conflict.

Hugh Miall's Taxonomy

This paper employs the taxonomy devised by the renowned Professor of International Relations Hugh Miall (2004), who lays out a conflict transformation approach in his book chapter Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task. Miall (2004) proposes a framework of five types of conflict transformation: (1) context transformation, (2) structural transformation, (3) actor transformation, (4) issue transformation, and (5) personal/elite transformation suggesting that "positive peace" (Galtung 1996: 3) can be achieved through these transformations in conflicts.

The first transformation in Miall's taxonomy refers to changes in the context in which the conflict is taking place, which may drastically alter the conflicting parties' perceptions of the conflict situation and their motives. Global developments can influence the onset, continuation, or end of the conflict. These major global shifts include the end of the Cold War and the rise of extremism or far-right movements. Technological developments can provide one kind of context transformation that may lead to more transparency and communication opportunities.

The second transformation in Miall's taxonomy is Structural transformation which refers to changes in the structure of the conflict, such as the set of actors and their economic, social, and political relations. Structural transformation affects the relationship between the antagonists. In particular, this structure must be transformed if it involves structural violence, injustice, discrimination, inequality, or other human rights violations.

The third transformation in Miall's taxonomy is the transformation of actors which implies a change in the approach of actors to the conflict, such as changes in attitudes and behaviours. This often happens because of external or internal pressures or constraints. Actor transformation is also observed in power politics when the use of hard power becomes either too costly or the actors are convinced that soft power will be more viable.

The fourth transformation in Miall's taxanomy is the transformation of issues. It refers to changes in the positions of actors on key issues, which usually occur as a result of compromises reached in negotiations. According to Miall, issue transformations "concern the reformulations of positions that parties take on key issues at the heart of the conflict as well as the way in which parties redefine or reframe those positions in order to reach compromises or resolutions" (2004: 10). These transformations also rely on transformations in other dimensions from context to individual. Therefore, the socio-political trends discussed above should be considered as a part of issue transformations.

Actor and issue transformations are interconnected, and thus should be analysed with reference to each other. Actor transformations encompass changes in the parties' attitudes, behaviours, and power politics, as Miall (2004) notes:

> Actor transformations include decisions on the part of actors to change their goals or alter their general approach to conflict. This would include decisions to seek peace or to initiate a peace process. They also include changes in leadership, often crucial to the securing of transformation in conflicts. Also included are changes in the situation of the public constituencies and supporters of the respective political leaders (10).

The fifth and last of transformations in Miall's taxanomy is the transformation of individuals which refers to "personal changes of heart or mind within individual leaders or small groups with decision-making power at critical moments" (2004: 10). Although Miall's taxonomy fails to include changes in ordinary people, we believe that this can be vital. Considering the role that individuals play in societal changes, both individually and collectively, it is crucial to look into transformations in the larger public, not just elites. These transformations, which encompass changes at both grassroots and leadership levels, occur more in people with direct experience of the other side or with sufficient intellectual capability to see the big picture.

Miall claims that the theoretical frameworks established by the prominent representative of the transformation approach, J. P. Lederach, is too general in some cases and too parochial in others. Moreover, their approaches pose a challenge for connecting theory and practice as they are over-focused on the local

while overlooking the role of systemic and structural factors. This is not to downplay their path-breaking role as the foundation of the transformation approach. Rather, Miall's model is more practical as it encompasses different levels and areas of transformation. In the conflict considered here, his systematic approach allows us to operationalize and apply various transformations observed between China and Taiwan as well as external transformations that have affected the conflict.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the People's Republic of China-Republic of China Conflict Based on Miall's Five Transformations

Transformation of Context

The ongoing global and regional political and economic shifts have significantly affected the course of the cross-strait conflict between PRC and ROC. Various factors have caused these major shifts to occur. Regarding the global political context, on October 25, 1971, the PRC was admitted to the UN as the sole representative of China and gained veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNGA 2758: XXVI).

PRC's admission resulted from long-lasting political transitions and rising support for the PRC. During the 1950s and 1960s, it had been recognized by newly independent developing nations and several developed states, such as the UK and France. Moreover, domestic pressure on U.S. foreign policy, particularly in its fight against communism, had made it imperative to find an ally from the communist bloc. Consequently, once the U.S. administration acknowledged the necessity of building relations with China, President Nixon sent his security advisor, Henry Kissinger, to mainland China in 1971 on a secret assignment (US-China Institute 2011). Kissinger's China visit and meetings with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership paved the way for Nixon's visit in 1972 and initiated détente with the PRC, which ended in the recognition of the PRC as the official government of China and ended official diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (ROC) government in 1979.

Tenembaum evaluates this shift in international relations as a transformation of the world order from bi-polar to tri-polar as the PRC became an important player. Whereas obtaining a chair in the UN and its Security Council was arguably a by-product of the rise of the PRC, it also improved China's image further as it was a remarkable diplomatic victory for the PRC administration (Tenembaum 2011). Now that ROC was not a legitimate member of the UN, the U.S. had to take appropriate measures to protect the island against an invasion initiated by the mainland (American Institute in Taiwan 1979).

Another vital context transformation that significantly impacted the Taiwan conflict was the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Soviet Union had left the U.S. as the single hegemonic power without any equal rival. Robinson argues that the end of Cold War threatened Taiwan's existence – at least, those in Taipei had such insecurities – because the U.S. might have now compromised on the Taiwan issue in order to advance its rapprochement with the mainland. Moreover, Taiwan had already been abandoned by its historical allies, namely Saudi Arabia and South Korea. However, it should also not be

forgotten that the PRC was becoming a new global competitor. According to Robinson (1996: 1342-1343), besides U.S. interest in preventing the PRC from becoming another Soviet Union, Taiwan affected U.S. policymaking in several ways. Along with Taiwan's economic and military importance, the Taiwanese administration enjoyed diplomatic and cultural influence on the U.S. public and political elites, which had been established for decades. This enabled Taiwan to retain U.S. support with the help of its supporters within the country.

The economic dimension in the context transformation came to the fore with the global economic crisis, or Global Recession, which started in the U.S. before quickly spreading worldwide in 2008. While other leading economic powers were seriously damaged, the PRC managed to even slightly raise annual GDP growth rates. Moreover, in contrast to other developed countries, where foreign direct investment (FDI) fell significantly, China attracted enough investment to sustain its pace of development. Despite a substantial decline in Chinese exports, it began recovering no later than 2010 while its rivals were still staggering (Li et al. 2012: 1-6).

In this context, as Larus and Wu (2010: 10) suggest, Asia became the centre of the global economy as "the global financial crisis not only shook the global development structure but also shifted the global economic balance of power". In addition, China's multilateralism and good neighbourhood policy played an important role as the PRC helped its neighbours to resist the crisis through free trade agreements and regional organizations (Huang and Soong 2016). The PRC's rising economic power and tight engagement with neighbours to tackle the crisis boosted its soft power in Taiwan, as well.

Because the global financial crisis hit Taiwan's economy as demand for Taiwanese exports declined in the U.S. and China, especially for high-tech goods which bring enormous revenues, the ROC leadership had to turn to the mainland to restore the economy (Chow 2009: 5-12). Another factor pushing the island towards the mainland was the change of government in 2008, from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to the pro-reconciliation Kuomintang (KMT), following presidential elections.

Consequently, in 2008, the PRC and the ROC started to negotiate a free trade agreement that would help Taiwan's economy halt the pernicious effects of the crisis by increasing cross-strait exchange. According to Larus and Wu (2010), the signing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in 2010 was the crucial step towards the transformation of the conflict since the end of the Chinese Civil War. With the ECFA, Taiwan expected to increase exports to the mainland without trade barriers, such as tariffs and quotas, while attracting direct investment. Moreover, President Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT sought reconciliation with the PRC through economic cooperation despite opposition from DPP parliamentarians. For the PRC leadership, the agreement had more political than economic benefits as the ECFA was calculated to increase Taiwan's dependence on the mainland, thereby strengthening the PRC's leverage over the ROC (BBC 2010).

The change in the U.S. administration can be analysed as another context transformation. Up until now, U.S. administrations have maintained policies on the Taiwan issue that, according to Richard Bush (2016: 267),

"please neither Beijing nor Taipei and leave each anxious about American intentions. Many observers believe, with some justification, that this American ambiguity is part of a strategic design to deter either side from misbehaving". The strategic ambiguity of the U.S. One-China policy allows it to deepen relations with Taiwan enough to deter China. The policy did not change during Trump's presidential term either. Chen (2019) argues that Trump's policymaking had two noticeable trends. First, Trump followed a similar route to previous U.S. presidents by reassuring the PRC that America's One-China policy remained, with a denial of Taiwan's formal independence despite his more supportive and radical statements. Second, Trump's general political style created tremendous uncertainty among both the PRC and ROC policymakers.

The subsequent election of Joe Biden triggered concerns that the U.S. would begin to follow a more friendly policy toward China at the expense of Taiwan's survival (Louise 2021). However, Gregson, Hsiao and Young (2021) argue that, although Biden might seem entirely different from Trump, his administration is not expected to stray from the U.S.'s traditional Taiwan policy. In addition, as one of the makers of the Taiwan Relations Act, Biden might issue military measures to protect Taiwan in case of a Chinese attack (Ward, 2021). These analyses create more uncertainty than predictive power as to how China-Taiwan relations is influenced by administrational change in the U.S. That being said, it should be acknowledged that U.S. foreign policy towards China and Taiwan has been decisive at certain points throughout the course of the conflict, and thus has a transformational impact as U.S. involvement guarantees the survival of Taiwan as a de facto entity, inhibits a direct military action from the mainland, and creates room for dialogue.

Another recent development with implications for relations between China and Taiwan has been the Covid-19 pandemic. While Taipei has officially accused China of preventing Taiwan from accessing necessary assistance from the World Health Organization, China has offered support in the fight against the spread of the virus by providing vaccines (Reuters 2021). Although this offer has not been accepted, it is a positive development for the transformation of the conflict as it shows that both sides can take a constructive position on certain issues.

Transformation of Structure

The structure of cross-strait relations has seen substantive transformations since the mid-1980s. In 1987, recognizing the public interest to visit the mainland and private interest to do business in the world's biggest market, the ROC government lifted the ban on visits to the mainland to allow Taiwan's ethnic Chinese citizens to visit mainland relatives. Although only family visits via a third country were allowed, this decision kick-started a cross-strait exchange of ordinary people that later paved the way for the Mini Three Links policy in 2001. With this policy, the two sides agreed to allow some connections between Kinmen of Taiwan and Xiamen of China (Chen 2010: 421).

The interaction between China and Taiwan had long been a controversial issue politically for both sides. In 1991, to regulate cross-strait relations and build semi-official contact, the ROC government established the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF). This aimed to "entrust a private intermediary body to exercise public

authority to address issues arising from cross-strait exchanges" (Straight Exchange Foundation). At the time, a nongovernmental body was of utmost importance as the Chinese administration refused to hold official, government-level talks with the ROC. In December 1991, in response to this development, the PRC administration set up the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) to institutionalize exchanges across the strait. These bodies aimed to enhance cross-strait exchange and intergovernmental dialogue. After some eight years of dialogue, however, relations worsened and semi-official negotiations broke off in 1999 after Taiwanese president, Lee Teng-hui, attempted to propose a "two-state theory" (Matsuda 2015: 5).

The PRC nevertheless maintained its dialogue with the KMT leadership and other opposition parties in Taiwan. In 2005, the two sides established the KMT-CCP Platform. Despite the ruling DPP's pro-independence stance, the Chinese government was eager to continue secret talks to advance cross-strait exchange. This platform was thought to serve both sides' interests with its four chief mechanisms: talks between CCP and KMT leaders to accelerate reconciliation; a trade and economic forum to increase trade and enhance economic ties; engagement of the parties' regional branches to inform and involve civil society in the process; and a mechanism to ensure fair competition by protecting Taiwan's trade interests (Huang 2015: 108-109). Consequently, visits from the island and transport of goods between the two sides began through charter flights (Beckershoff 2014). The PRC's constructive position toward this exchange improved its image among Taiwanese people. As a result, Matsuda suggests, they regarded the KMT rule more favourably than the DPP's radical position in terms of the island's economy (Matsuda 2015).

Between 2008 and 2016, the structure of relations saw its most remarkable transformation as the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou won the presidential elections and the KMT took power after eight years of DPP administration. Beckershoff (2014) argues that this change in ruling party was partly caused by the activities of the KMT-CCP Platform. This institution was arguably established not to reflect the interests of civil society in both parties but rather to shape their desires in favour of reconciliation and minimize desire for Taiwan's independence. President Ma, who is a strong proponent of reconciliation with the mainland, took important steps towards rapprochement. This further developed as the two sides agreed to start regular flights between the mainland and the island in July 2008 (The New York Times 2008).

Transformation of Actors

Friedman (2007) presents a detailed comparative analysis of the PRC position on Taiwan under Mao Zedong, Den Xiaoping, and subsequent leaders. Based on popular discourses and CCP leaders' opinions, he suggests that Mao Zedong never actually wanted to annex Taiwan or use force against the U.S. military but to "keep a civil war alive" (122). Instead, Mao sought to manipulate Chinese public opinion and achieve mobilization for the Great Leap Forward. To strengthen nationalist sentiments among the Chinese people, Mao could create and make people internalize a demonized image of Chiang Kai-shek and the U.S., his supporter. This propaganda also helped Mao to present China as "the leader of the world camp of revolution" (122-123).

During Deng's administration, the PRC's position was "very different from Mao's policy of maintaining an atmosphere of military conflict" (Friedman 2007: 124) as he followed a considerably softer policy toward Taiwan. As the main priority of Deng's foreign policy was to convince others about China's peaceful rise, relations with Taiwan were based on subtle mutual consent to enhance economic ties. Along with the change of leadership in the CCP, China experienced serious turmoil in 1989 as Chinese people strived for democracy and freedom in Tiananmen. While Western democracies questioned their relations with the PRC, the Taiwanese government sought to benefit from its economic partnership with the mainland. Friedman (2007) argues that Deng's administration was also eager to let Taiwanese firms and investment enter China to support economic reform. The normalization of relations may have stemmed from changing perceptions of the mainland in Taiwan and vice versa.

However, changing international issues, particularly the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and domestic contexts, particularly the Uyghur and Tibet issues, made the PRC administration take more serious measures about Taiwan. During Jiang Zemin's leadership in China (1989–2003), cross-strait relations saw their most troublesome phase since the Chinese Civil War. Chen and Wu suggest that Chinese leaders experience two periods during their rule: transition and consolidation. For Jiang, the transition lasted from 1989 to 1996, when he remained under the influence of Deng and the CCP, whereas consolidation began after Deng died in 1997. For Hu Jintao (2003–2012), these two periods were 2002-2005 and 2006-2012, respectively. According to Chen and Wu (2017), the two periods affect relations with Taiwan as follows:

> As reflective of the general secretary's power position, the CCP's Taiwan policy tends to limitedly reciprocate Taipei's positive signals or aggressively retaliate Taipei's negative signals when the general secretary is in power transition; and the CCP's Taiwan policy tends to actively reciprocate Taipei's positive signals or limitedly retaliate Taipei's negative signals when the general secretary is in power consolidation. The difference between the two modes of responses is a reflection of the weaknesses/ strengths of the general secretary's power position (137).

Chen and Wu's arguments suggest that the more PRC leaders are free in decision making, the more they are inclined to interact with Taiwan, thereby tending to show more interest in peaceful transformation of the conflict. China's perceived image, on the other hand, has even greater implications for Taiwan's mainland policies and actor transformation on the island.

Having emerged as a modern democracy and held direct presidential elections since the late 1990s, Taiwan has seen actor transformations through changes in the ruling party. To construe these transformations, one needs to look at the reasons behind the socio-political trends that lead people to vote for KMT or DPP candidates. Among other external and domestic factors, Taiwanese people's opinions about the PRC, its influence on the island, and Taiwan's relations with the mainland are a significant component that dethroned the KMT at the beginning of the third millennium and have caused the alternating replacement of the KMT and the DPP every eight years.

Opinion polls conducted by the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University (1992-2021) illustrate major trends among Taiwanese people. Firstly, we will consider changes in Taiwanese national identity since the beginning of the 21st century. Until 2005, Taiwanese people identified themselves more as "both Taiwanese and Chinese". However, thanks to the DPP's identity policies during those years, the percentage identifying themselves as "Taiwanese" rose to catch up with the former group in 2005. Until 2014, the numbers identifying as Taiwanese increased despite insignificant falls from time to time, after which the identification as both Chinese and Taiwanese began to rise. According to the most recent data for 2021, over 63 % of respondents see themselves as Taiwanese while roughly 30 % see themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese.

Secondly, it is important to illustrate people's opinions on the cross-strait relations as Taiwanese people have been more inclined to maintain the status quo of the cross-strait relations. Recently, the number of people wishing to maintain the status quo indefinitely or maintain the status quo and move toward unification has declined whereas those preferring to move toward independence while maintaining the status quo has risen significantly. However, Taiwanese people predominantly cross out the immediate independence option.

Thirdly, people's party preferences are important. According to opinion polls, until 2000, Taiwanese people were mostly apolitical regarding support for political parties as the country had been ruled by the same party without direct elections. Following the missile crisis in 1995-96, people showed more engagement with politics, particularly thanks to the rising activism of the DPP. More people expressed support for the DPP during Chen Shui-bian's first term (2000–2004) than the KMT. However, support for the KMT overtook that of the DPP in 2004 and lasted until 2013. In 2017, support continued to be greater for the KMT than the DPP, although the percentage of the people expressing no support for any political party was also rising. Between 2017 and 2020, the support for the DPP rose sharply leaving that for the KMT in 2018. Although there has been a recent decline in the DPP supporters, perhaps due to the economic problems caused by the pandemic, the DPP has maintained its popularity by a large margin.

Considering current trends, the Taiwanese people have clearly not radically changed their minds about the future of the island. Two decades ago, Rigger (1999: 1) wrote that "most ordinary Taiwanese do not desire a concrete resolution ... the ideal future is the present, the status quo. Their goal is … one that will allow Taiwan to continue to imagine itself as Chinese while continuing to enjoy political autonomy". Taiwan's political parties therefore tend to lose elections if they adopt policies that would destabilize cross-strait relations. Under these conditions, as Morris (2019) argues, "the once pro-status quo party has become more polarized, fielding radical candidates who are close with Chinese officials, while the once radical pro-independence party has had to fill in the vacuum, becoming more pro-status quo".

In short, there has been a noteworthy actor transformation in terms of Taiwanese leadership positions toward the mainland. While Chiang Kai-shek and his successor claimed to be the ruler of both the island and the mainland, the first democratically elected president Lee Teng-hui realized that it was more important to maintain the status quo and take steps towards reconciliation with the PRC. This policy shift was also partly

influenced by China's rising positive image, which has continued since direct cross-strait links were established. Today, the effect of China's positive image can be traced in the election campaigns of Taiwan's leading parties. Despite the DPP's radical pro-independence position since 2016, the KMT has considered a proposal of a "cross-strait peace agreement" (Aspinwall 2019) and the DPP seems agreeable as long as the agreement passes a referendum. If this takes place during the new DPP administration, it will significantly transform the conflict.

Transformation of Issues

The key issues in the conflict are Taiwan's political status, cross-strait exchange, and the format of negotiations, with the first being the thorniest. According to the 1992 Consensus, the PRC and the ROC agreed that there is only One China. Ever since, however, both sides have interpreted this in their own ways. A study showed that Taiwanese people had no single correct understanding of this agreement. They either thought it implied that "Taiwan and China are two separate countries" or "ROC represents Taiwan, PRC represents the mainland, the two governments belong to the same country waiting for unification" (Wang et al. 2019). Moreover, despite this ambivalence about its meaning, an absolute majority regarded the consensus favourably. This ignorance has allowed both the DPP and the KMT administrations to manipulate public opinion. Until the current president, Tsai, Taiwanese leaders had accepted it with varying interpretations, but Tsai refuses to. This may damage her party in the next elections, given that Taiwanese citizens associate the status quo with the Consensus. Should the KMT candidate win, the new administration will probably return to the Consensus and interpret its implications in a traditional KMT way.

Cross-strait exchange has witnessed more notable transformations, particularly in the last three decades. Starting with indirect investment, followed by the exchange of goods, services, and direct investment, economic exchange across the strait has created some interdependence, which nowadays causes insecurities on the Taiwanese side. For instance, for nearly three weeks in 2014, a large group demonstrated against Ma Ying-jeou's mainland policies, claiming that Taiwan's security was under threat because it was becoming too dependent on China. The so-called Sunflower Movement was followed by a serious decline in Ma's popularity (Matsuda 2015) and KMT lost the presidential elections of 2016. Cross-strait economic exchange, however, is critical for Taiwan as the mainland is the leading importer of Taiwanese goods (Trading Economics).

The flow of humans, capital, and goods has intensified not only material but sociocultural exchange. That is, information carried across the strait by people, books, movies, songs, and other transporters has transformed the other side's public opinion and social environment. Prior to Taiwan's 2016 presidential elections, there were nearly 42,000 Chinese students enrolled in Taiwanese higher education institutes, although this fell to around 30,000 in 2018 (Mainland Affairs Council 2019). The Chinese leadership has adopted a policy to attract Taiwanese students to the mainland while preventing Chinese students from going to the island. In this sense, Leung and Sharma argue that the PRC administration provides Taiwanese students with equal rights and opportunities with their Chinese peers, such as scholarships, the same admission procedures, and future job opportunities. Moreover, only the most successful school graduates used to be admitted to Chinese

universities before. However, since 2017, all Taiwanese applicants have been assessed on the same basis as mainland candidates, which has encouraged more Taiwanese students to join the brain drain across the strait (Leung and Sharma 2018).

China is also interested in attracting academics and professionals in various fields from Taiwan to the mainland in order to establish and enhance ties. Several tempting measures have been introduced to keep Taiwanese citizens in China, including residence permits. These steps have created serious concerns in Taiwan, which regards this brain drain as a threat to Taiwan's economy and its sustainable development (Chen-ju 2018). Similarly, the PRC is also concerned that Chinese students educated in Taiwan will change their worldview in favour of democracy and freedom, and possibly become unwilling to return to China. Moreover, by sharing their experiences in Taiwan, they can cause trouble for China's authoritarian political system (The Economist 2019).

The third key unresolved issue between the two sides is the format of negotiations despite years of cross-strait talks between ARATS and SEF. However, there have been success stories. During Ma's presidency, the two bodies managed to sign 23 agreements aimed at facilitating cooperation in a number of areas, such as "transportation, tourism, judicial assistance, trade, investment and safety" (Chen and Cohen 2019: 5). Normalization of relations peaked in 2015 in the first and only meeting since 1945 of the two countries' leaders. Although the meeting between Xi Jinping of the PRC and Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan was seemingly more "symbolism, not substance" (Huang 2015), one should acknowledge the importance of this encounter because it showed that high-level talks are possible if both sides are willing to reconcile and compromise. However, the DPP's pro-independence stance and Xi's renewed pro-military discourse minimized the chances of official talks. The PRC still refuses to recognize Taiwan as a country and accept a government-to-government format in negotiations. In response, no Taiwanese administration is willing to join direct talks.

Transformation of Individuals

Other than politicians and opinion leaders, tourists, exchange students, academics and educators are those most likely to be influenced by cross-strait exchange. They therefore have considerable transformative power, which can operate in two directions. First, their way of thinking can be transformed through deliberate efforts, such as training, info-sessions, public media coverage, and negotiations for high-level leaders. A change of leadership may also contribute to the peace process if the new leaders are more eager to make peaceful decisions. Second, transformation may occur as a natural process without purposeful interventions through mutual interactions and exchanges.

The PRC citizens have long been exposed to state propaganda that distorts their views about Taiwan and Taiwanese people while Taiwanese people have been told various stories about the history and the ownership of Chinese territory. However, once the travel ban was abolished between Taiwan and the mainland, millions of people got a chance to visit the other side and see the reality. Thus, cross-strait tourism may promote future

reconciliation through the recognition of the cultural similarity of the two sides. Moreover, touristic exchanges are expected to correct misconceptions and transform mind-sets among both Chinese and Taiwanese people (Guo et al. 2006). For example, Pan, Wu and Chang (2018: 28) reported that "compared with Chinese citizens who have never visited Taiwan, tourists visiting for the first time are more likely to favour peaceful negotiation and a slow pace of change as a way of resolving the cross-strait confrontation".

Although tourists make up the largest group of people who experience individual transformations, Chinese students in Taiwan and Taiwanese students in China are also subject to changes of perception. Taiwanese students may become more resistant to the unification option after studying in China due to continued authoritarian rule. However, their image of the enemy across the strait also evolves to recognize a consanguineous society that gave them an affordable and quality education. Needless to say, Chinese students in Taiwan are more prone to changes in attitudes as they spend a few years in a modern democracy that offers equality, liberty, and other inalienable human rights. Whether Taiwanese or Chinese, these students' individual transformations will play an important role as they become future decision-makers at different levels.

Along with their influence on students, academicians and teachers are also likely to contribute to the transformation of the conflict as they attain more opportunities to learn about the other side through intensified cross-strait exchange. Academic research published by insiders on the conflicting societies across the strait can help them increase mutual understanding and eliminate misconceptions embedded in third-party approaches. Moreover, educators can perform as "transformative intellectuals" by shaping individuals' worldviews and collective memories (Hung 2018: 179-180).

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Conflict is not an unchangeable state but dynamic process that undergoes various transformations. This process is neither unidirectional from war to peace or vice versa. Like any type of interaction, it can witness numerous transformations, both positive and negative. A careful analysis of these transformations can enable peace researchers and practitioners to understand the nature of the conflict in order to develop a comprehensive strategy to achieve reconciliation.

A constructivist approach to conflict transformation rejects the myth about the constant endurance of enmity between the parties to a conflict. The recognition that the identities and interests of actors can change over time radically changes our approach to conflict. Similarly, as actors' identities and interests change, their attitudes towards the other side also change. This can lead to significant transformations in the course of the conflict.

As demonstrated in this article, there are many factors that change the attitudes of the conflict parties. These include transformations in the internal dynamics of the entities forming the parties, between the parties, or in a larger framework, that is, in the regional and global context. Examining the changes discussed in this article allows us to understand conflict as a constantly evolving process of transformation rather than a static

situation. Another consequence of this approach is to eliminate the long-standing gap between the disciplines of International Relations and PS by enabling the students of each discipline to benefit from rather than ignore each other's contributions.

This study brought together insights from IR and PS under one framework and applied to the conflict between the PRC and Taiwan. The analysis shows that the conflict over the island has ebbed and flowed, turning into belligerence at times. Nevertheless, cross-strait relations, overall, have reached a point where people can travel across the strait to visit, study, work, or invest in businesses in the territory of a historical enemy. This interaction between the parties is not limited to individuals. As illustrated, several initiatives such as the Mini Three Links, have created postal, transportation, and trade relations. Furthermore, the parties have established bodies to regulate semi-official and official relations. Despite a recent deterioration in relations, most of these achievements have been preserved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current situation of the conflict, with serious disagreements on crucial issues, is still far from being settled. Moreover, the changing global context and the new and more aggressive phase that the US-PRC relations have entered has the potential to deteriorate the achievements of the previous years on the way to solving the conflict between the PRC-ROC. However, as this paper claims, conflict is a dynamic process that undergoes various transformations both positive and negative. Therefore, the parties to the conflict should abstain from realizing the issue as a constant endurance of enmity and be open to negotiations. They have already achieved progress as some issues that were previously regarded as non-negotiable are put on the table. In this regard the negotiations between the PRC and ROC should proceed further without interruption and regarded as an opportunity to create an atmosphere of trust between the two states.

On the other hand, the absence of international effort for the peaceful resolution of the conflict creates a risk of escalation at any time. The recognition of the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan by the international community and the former's permanent member status and veto power in the UNSC have so far resulted in the exclusion of the issue from UN agenda. Therefore, an early warning mechanism, which is necessary to prevent any escalation turning into a large-scale warfare, is absent at the moment. Moreover, the international community should exert pressure on both sides to refrain the from actions and rhetoric that would undermine positive transformations achieved so far.

As it has already been noted, conflict is a dynamic phenomenon accompanied by numerous ebbs and flows without any regularities. Therefore, while conducting a study in conflicts, the researcher is recommended to abstain from making predictions. Rather than that, the positive developments that have occurred in the conflict should be taken as point of reference when designing peace building efforts. In the same vein, it should be understood that this paper does not claim that positive transformations depicted throughout the paper suggest that a peaceful resolution of the conflict is possible in the near future. Instead, it disagrees with the doomsday

scenarios, and call into the question the view that Taiwan conflict has come to a deadlock and no progress is possible.

ETHICAL TEXT

In this article, the journal writing rules, publication principles, research and publication ethics, and journal ethical rules were followed. The responsibility belongs to the authors for any violations that may arise regarding the article.

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