Student-led protest in Taiwan has created complications for the pact negotiated by the incumbent Kuomintang with the Chinese mainland to promote free trade in the service sector. This development provides an example of “involuntary defection” whereby a chief negotiator is unable to gain domestic approval (“ratification” as this term is broadly construed) for a cross-border agreement reached with his counterpart. It highlights the dynamics of two-level games introduced by Robert Putnam (1988). We saw other examples of such real or “near miss” involuntary defection when the U.S. Senate questioned strategic arms limitations negotiated by the president with his Soviet or Russian counterpart and more famously, when it declined to approve U.S. membership in the League of Nations. The probability of involuntary defection naturally increases as the number of domestic actors capable of blocking a foreign deal increases. This is a natural and inevitable outcome of the democratization process whereby political power devolves from the chief executive. Such devolution or decentralization of power of course means that the chief executive is in more difficult position to reach an accord with his foreign counterpart. In the parlance of two-level games, this chief executive’s “win set” – that is, his negotiation space considering his domestic constraints – becomes narrower. The probability of reaching a foreign deal that can be successfully ratified by important domestic stakeholders declines since as John Dunlap, the former U.S. Secretary of Labor, has remarked, every such deal requires three agreements: one across the table and one on each side of the table.

As a counterfactual example, would Xi Jing-ping have encountered more or less political difficulties in reaching a deal with Richard Nixon today on opening Sino-American relations compared to Mao Tse-tung in 1972? Similarly, would Chang Kai-shek have faced the same level of political challenge that Ma Ying-jouët has encountered in pushing through the agreement on liberalizing service trade across the Taiwan Strait? Other things being equal, it appears that a strong, authoritarian or politically secure leader is in a better position to make concessions to his foreign counterparts in order to facilitate the successful conclusion of such deals and this person is also in a better position to force domestic ratification (acceptance or acquiescence) of such deals. This logic explains in part why U.S. presidents have often been reported to put off controversial policy decisions – such as diplomatic recognition of China, ending the Vietnam and Iraq wars – until their second term when they will no longer have to face another election.

Does the stalling of the pact to open up service trade across the Taiwan Strait also indicate a basic shift in Taiwan’s politics, pointing to a deepening of partisan cleavage and popular sentiments? Past research seems to indicate that public opinion in Taiwan can change rather dramatically over a relatively short period of time (e.g., Wang 2013). Thus, it is too early to conclude whether Taiwan’s politics is poised to enter a new era of more partisan polarization or whether recent events just represent recurrent oscillations that tend to regress toward the mean if given enough time.

There are, however, certain extrapolations one may advance from cross-national research on public opinion and attitudes.

First, with modernization a society is likely to embrace increasingly post-material values and deemphasize material ones. Thus, one can perhaps argue that over time Taiwan will not be immune from a secular trend that leads its people to give more stress to personal expressions, including political expressions (Inglehart 1997). The student-led protest against the ratification of the free trade agreement in services may point to this long-term and basic transformation of the island’s politics, with a shift in popular sentiments that give more emphasis than before to post-material issues in general, including those pertaining to elderly care, environmental conservation, traffic congestion, and political corruption.

Second, compared to the advanced industrial countries, Taiwan’s people still show a greater concern for material concerns – or “survival” pursuits. Moreover, on many issues concerning personal liberty, civil rights, gender roles, respect for authority, and conduct that challenge traditional social conventions, the people still exhibit rather conservative, even intolerant, attitudes. It is thus important to consider democratic politics not only in terms of the institutions of competitive elections and universal suffrage, but also in terms of the conducive civic culture that sustains these institutions (Putnam 1993).

Third, with respect to many of their more basic values and attitudes (not just partisan identification with the Kuomintang and Democratic Progressive Party), Taiwan’s people share more in common with the other newly industrializing countries – including China – than the American people (Chan 2014). Even after having lived under a very different political regime, East Germans had also held views that were more similar to their West German counterparts than with their neighbors in the other communist countries.
There was thus a more enduring and basic common bond in “deeper” political culture that tied these people despite the differences in their avowed political ideology.

Fourth, it appears that public opinion in Taiwan is quite sensitive to external factors, especially Chinese and American policies. In other words, this opinion is malleable and subject to change. It is not set in stone. The most obvious example is reflected by the fact that while the majority of its citizens would ideally prefer independence, concerns about Beijing’s threat to use force in that event have inclined most to favor a policy of playing for time – preserving the status quo even though they are fully aware that China is gaining bargaining leverage with the passage of time. Thus, Beijing’s deterrence threat (against Taiwan independence) has worked in the sense of persuading the island’s public to oppose “rocking the boat.”

Fifth, the political contest in Taiwan can be seen as one pitting identity against interest. It is a contest that has been played many times in other settings. Should a voter in Ohio (or elsewhere in America’s rust belt) vote for “family values” or his/her “pocketbook”? Naturally, identity and interest can both evolve. Thus, with the passage of older generations and their replacement by younger cohorts, the sub-ethnic division between native Taiwanese and those whose parents and grandparents came from the mainland in the late 1940s should diminish in salience. With this development, political cleavages can be expected to realign along different dimensions. Many observers have remarked that the passage of time would dampen Taiwan people’s identification with the mainland (especially since the older generations of mainlanders, who came to Taiwan with Chang Kai-shek, have died and many of their descendants have emigrated). At the same time, however, older generations of native Taiwanese, those who had lived under Japanese colonial rule and who had tended to have the strongest feelings about Taiwan independence, are also passing from the scene. Both older cohorts are being replaced by younger generations for whom the matter of reunification and independence is less salient.

Sixth, instead of or at least coexisting with the cleavage revolving around reunification versus independence, political alignment may be developing along the division between, roughly speaking, international capital and domestic labor. Globalization creates relative as well as absolute winners and losers. Political contest is after all about the question of which segments of a society or sectors of an economy will have to bear the burden of adjusting to changing conditions (Simmons 1994). Owners of abundant and also more mobile production factors tend to benefit from open borders whereas those with the scarcer ones tend to be hurt by free trade. It so happens that large, internationally oriented firms (owners of capital) are concentrated in northern Taiwan whereas those farmers and small enterprises (catering to the domestic sector and facing competition from cheaper Chinese labor) are more numerous in southern Taiwan, thus not coincidentally delineating in general terms areas of strong KMT and DDP partisan support respectively.

Seventh, whether economic interests will trump political identity captures to a not insignificant extent the current partisan contest on Taiwan. Thus far, political accommodation with the Chinese mainland has been spearheaded by economic interests (Kastner 2009), with the government playing catch-up to the evolving reality of increasing economic integration with, even dependency on the mainland market. It appears until now that those forces favoring economic opening have prevailed over others that are more concerned with traditional national security and more interested in promoting the island’s political independence (Chan 2009). Economic intercourse with the mainland has deepened, even accelerated, during the administrations of Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, two advocates of Taiwan independence. Naturally, whether Taiwan can afford to turn away from the mainland market depends in part on the costs of substitution, most particularly the availability of the U.S. and Japan as alternative markets. KMT sources have depicted the student-led opposition to the cross-Strait accord in opening service trade as a retrogressive step, endangering Taiwan’s economic survival in view of the strong and inevitable forces of globalization (including putting Taiwan at a competitive disadvantage relative to nearby countries such as South Korea).

It would be interesting to undertake empirical studies to investigate whether this proposition is valid. Of course, those who have an abiding faith in the magic of the marketplace and the virtues of capitalism have long argued that a closed command economy was one of the fatal causes of communism’s collapse. At the same time, scholars writing in the tradition of dependency school have decried the phenomenon of neocolonialism whereby foreigners are able to achieve great and unwarranted political and economic influence through asymmetric trade and investment relations. Studies on Taiwan have thus far not been informed by or sought to inform such theoretical and policy debates.
As just implied, Taiwan provides an interesting case study for various theories on political culture, party systems, and international relations. For example, whether Taiwan’s politics is becoming more polarized has implications for its party system. A bimodal distribution of voter identification augurs more confrontational politics, and a departure from the Downsian predictions of politicians competing for the median voter (Downs 1957). It augurs political gridlock, a characterization that has often been used to describe Washington in recent years. As another example, if economic interests continue to enjoy an upper hand in promoting political and commercial opening to the mainland, Taiwan’s experience will tend to strengthen liberalism’s basic tenets about societal forces shaping government policies and this phenomenon will undermine realism’s contention that survival in an anarchic world would always be states’ paramount objective that trumps all other interests. A changing political culture focusing more on post-material values may deemphasize the importance of identity politics but it can also diminish the drive to pursue economic gains. One may also hypothesize that domestic divisions can even give Taiwan an advantage in bargaining with the Chinese mainland, as its negotiator will have less political space to compromise and this situation will in turn put pressure on its mainland counterpart to make concessions in order for any agreement to gain ratification in Taiwan. But as already remarked earlier, every cross-Strait deal will have to involve three agreements. Democratization, or at least a more pluralistic politics and a less authoritarian political system on the mainland, will also imply that whoever is in charge in Beijing will likely have a smaller win set in the future. This person will also be subject to greater domestic pressure, including those coming from his/her partisan opponents and political detractors, regarding his/her policies toward Taiwan. That is, the Chinese Communist Party is increasingly not a monolithic entity. It can also come under the sort of constraint that the DPP has imposed on the KMT on cross-Strait relations.

As a final thought, students of Taiwan politics can benefit from studies concerning the experiences of other countries that share circumstances roughly similar to the island. For example, how have Cuba and Cyprus fared, or going farther back in history, what were the decisive factors affecting Ireland’s struggle for independence? If one prefers more recent history, what lessons can one draw from the events in Ukraine and Crimea? Would modernization actually dampen nationalist sentiments or have the reverse effect (e.g., Scotland’s recent referendum on independence from the United Kingdom)? How effective have been external efforts at deterrence or abetment in such episodes? How successful have domestic contestants with divergent political agendas (e.g., nationalism or ethnic identity versus economic interests in cross-border commerce) performed in partisan competition, and what have been the key factors influencing the outcomes of past secession movements and civil wars in general? Under what circumstances does political partition or breakup promote peace or perpetuate conflict (e.g., India and Pakistan, North and South Korea, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Norway and Sweden, Singapore and Malaysia, the former Yugoslavia)? We have heretofore not drawn heavily from comparative, historical analyses involving other countries or from statistical analysis of empirical patterns derived from large cross-national data sets to inform the study of Taiwan. This study has therefore remained relatively isolated from the more theoretical and nomothetically oriented research in international relations and comparative politics.


*Prepared for presentation at the annual conference on Taiwan Democracy, Stanford University, Stanford, California, October 17-18, 2014
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9/22/2014, 2,383 words