The Floating Island: Change of Paradigm on the Taiwan Question

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China and Taiwan, as well as the US, have failed to adapt new practices in response to the paradigmatic changes in the sources and nature of the China–Taiwan conflict. Reflecting the tremendous political and social changes in Taiwan, China, and the world that have occurred during the past 10–15 years, the most prominent source of the China–Taiwan conflict has shifted from power to identity. This article discusses the change of social identity in Taiwan and the re-emergence of nativistic nationalism in the PRC identity. The authors suggest that policymakers on all three sides could begin to re-think the Taiwan issue by taking advantage of the ideas and methods pioneered by experts in the rapidly growing field of conflict analysis and resolution. In this article, the authors apply concepts related to identity used by practitioners in the field of conflict resolution to look at the deeper cultural issues of identity and suggest some more appropriate methods for intervention and resolution of this deeply rooted conflict.

Taiwan appears to be a floating island—with scholars and politicians on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and on both sides of the Pacific Ocean debating whether it is inevitably coming closer to China or moving in the opposite direction. Justification can be found for both conclusions. Economically, there is growing integration. Culturally, there is growing diversity that could support either political outcome. Politically, however, there is growing alienation.

Following the tremendous political and social changes in China and Taiwan under the influence of economic globalization and political democratization during the past 10–15 years, the most prominent source of tension and potential conflict between China and Taiwan is no longer the competition over power within an agreed ‘one China’. The source now is the hardening of distinctly separate political identities. In Taiwan, loyalties focus on a new democracy; in China, on a sense of
special national destiny. This is paralleled by a shift from how to reunify to whether there should be reunification or independence.

Mainland China, Taiwan and the US, however, have failed to respond to these changes with policies. There have been many small adjustments, but the policy frameworks of the three players remain basically unchanged. Mainland China’s approach to Taiwan is still the so-called ‘two hands policy’. One hand is a hard hand, threatening military coercion and diplomatic blockade. The other hand is ‘soft’, offering inducements to increase commercial trade and investment, as well as cultural exchanges. Beijing hopes that growing economic and cultural integration will eventually absorb Taiwan as it has Hong Kong and Macao. The only major policy adjustment Beijing has made in the past ten years is to give more emphasis to the ‘soft hand’—especially after its hard hand failed to influence Taiwan’s two presidential elections in 1996 and 2000.

Since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came into power in 2000, Taiwan’s China policy has become a source of growing tension, due to the DPP’s signature political platform favoring de jure independence. There is a growing disconnect between the DPP and the business community, between the several competing political parties themselves, and also between various groups of Taiwan citizens. There is growing debate over whether to persist in the avoidance or delay of engagement with the mainland, which has been the Taiwan government’s basic policy for more than 15 years under the previous ruling party—the Kuomintang (KMT), the Nationalist Party.

From 1949 to the present, the United States’ role in the conflict has been mainly as a balancer of power to maintain the status quo. There are only differences of degree in actual behavior between the Bush Administration and previous administrations, that is, selling weapons to Taiwan and providing technology and intelligence support to Taiwan to ward off PRC coercion, but stopping short of providing Taiwan with so much support that it might encourage Taiwan to take steps toward independence and undermine the status quo.

Deng Xiaoping’s framework for resolving the civil war through Taiwan’s joining the PRC under a ‘one country, two systems’ model is history. So is Lee Teng-hui’s approach to legitimating an indefinite extension of the status quo—de facto but not de jure separation, with two ruling authorities. As a product of this history, American policy is founded on two contradictions. It recognizes democracy but not self-determination for Taiwan, and it recognizes PRC sovereignty but is committed to opposing any attempt to use force to exercise this sovereignty. However, the change of conflict paradigm from power to identity calls for a thorough re-thinking of policy by all three parties. A new policy framework is essential for a peaceful win–win–win solution to one of the most complicated conflict arenas in the world.

Democratic identity in Taiwan

For most deeply rooted international conflicts, people tend to assume that the sources and the nature of the conflict have deep historical roots and will never
change. However, grand social transformation and dramatic political change sometimes cause new sources of conflict. The Taiwan question is such an example.

Since 1949, the conflict between mainland China and Taiwan has remained basically a civil war—albeit a ‘cold’ civil war—between two well-armed authoritarian political parties struggling over the leadership of China. The major controversy was the method and formula for reaching a shared reunification goal—a zero-sum conflict over which of the two political authorities would prevail. But during the past 10–15 years, the China–Taiwan conflict has evolved into a choice between reunification or independence. The Taiwan government has abandoned its long-term claim to be the rightful representative of all of China including the mainland. It has begun to call itself the ‘Republic of China on Taiwan’ representing only Taiwan, and claims equality as a political entity with the communist government on the mainland. It also has begun to accept dual diplomatic recognition.

Taiwan citizens face the implicit contradiction between supporting Taiwan independence and maintaining a strong Chinese identity—the question of whether they are citizens of Taiwan or culturally ‘Chinese’. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive, but more and more people in Taiwan now identify themselves as ‘Taiwanese’ rather than ‘Chinese’. Public opinion polls show that since 1992, the percentage of those who say they are Chinese has dropped from 44 to about 13% while those who say they are Taiwanese have risen from 17 to about 39%.

The issue of national identity has become an extremely hot issue in political and daily life in Taiwan, dominating public debate and constituting the primary issue by which parties establish their own identities and distinguish themselves. According to 1993 surveys by National Taiwan University,1 13.1% of respondents supported Taiwan independence while 39.1% supported unification. But in a survey conducted in 2000, 24.96% of respondents supported independence, 21.94% supported unification and 53.10% preferred maintaining the status quo. When respondents were asked in 1993 whether Taiwan should seek independence if peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait could be maintained, only 37.7% of the respondents agreed that Taiwan should be an independent country. In a 2000 survey, however, the percentage jumped up to 60.89%.

These survey results may indicate that no Taiwan political leader, whether the DPP’s Chen Shui-bian, Lien Chan of the KMT, or James Soong of the People’s First Party (PFP) will be able to compromise Taiwan’s identity and sovereignty, and both Beijing and Washington must address these realities.

Many scholars and officials from the PRC, however, refuse to accept the idea that the nature of the PRC–Taiwan conflict has changed and is based now on identity, citing two arguments: (1) Taiwan’s people are Chinese people. China is a multi-ethnic society with 56 ethnic groups among which Han people account for 91.02%, while 55 other ethnic groups make up only 8.98%. Most Taiwan citizens, including the Taiwanese whose ancestors arrived from the mainland prior to this century, are also ethnic Han. (2) All share the same cultural tradition with mainland Chinese. Some would claim that people in Taiwan are even more ‘Chinese’

than those on the mainland—given their greater understanding of and loyalty to traditional Chinese culture. For example, Taiwan still uses the traditional Chinese characters, while mainland China has used simplified Chinese characters since the 1970s.

Both of these arguments are well grounded in fact. However, they neglect these additional factors.

1. **More than 100 years of separate rule** have led to major differences in values and political and social systems. The long separation has made them two different groups of people, although they still speak the same language and follow similar social customs.

2. **Historical memory.** Scholars such as V. D. Volkan identify as elements in the development of group identity a ‘chosen trauma’ (the horrors of the past that cast shadows onto the future) and a ‘chosen glory’ (myths about a glorious future, often seen as a reenactment of a glorious past). Similarly, Galtung identifies chosenness (the idea of being a people chosen by transcendental forces), trauma and myths, which together form a syndrome: the Chosenness–Myths–Trauma (CMT) complex. This complex ‘is made up of key historical events that have been critical in defining a society’s identity and how it behaves in conflict situations’. For many in Taiwan, their key historical event is the ‘2–28 (28 February) Incident’ of 1947, when the Nationalist (KMT) government sought to assert the sovereignty of the Republic of China (ROC) over the island following the end of Japan’s colonial rule. In a brutal massacre, these mainlanders killed thousands of Taiwanese, leaving deep resentment toward mainlanders in the collective memory of the Taiwanese and planted the roots of the Taiwan Independence Movement. For many in Taiwan, the ‘2–28 Incident’ is their national ‘trauma’; and the dream of an independent Taiwan is the national ‘glory’.

3. **Taiwan’s isolation** in the international system due to successful PRC diplomatic efforts to prevent dual recognition or Taiwan’s membership in international governmental organizations since the 1995–1996 Strait crisis has tapped into the ‘chosen trauma’ fear of the mainland. Moreover, the growing perception of military threat from the mainland understandably has strengthened Taiwan’s sense of solidarity.

4. **The independence movement.** The DPP was made legal and grew rapidly in the 1990s under Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan’s first Taiwanese president. Given that promoting formal Taiwan independence is its major political goal, the DPP’s rise has greatly stimulated the debates over identity and made the cross-Strait relationship more dangerous. The DPP’s defeat of the KMT in 2000 through a historic peaceful popular election has strengthened the sense of self-determination. Voters believe their destiny should be decided democratically by citizens and not by history, culture or ‘deals’ between leaders of political parties or superpowers.

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5. *Rapid economic progress, and especially the progress in political democratization*, have strengthened the Taiwan people’s more positive self-image. The large gap in living standards and freedom levels between Taiwan and the mainland have added to a sense of special identity. Many in Taiwan believe that theirs is a very successful country with a well-developed economy and social democracy that compares favorably on any index with most members of the United Nations. They do not need to unite with any other country. Their achievements and contributions should be respected and they should receive an independent and honorable position in the international community, the family of nations.

6. *Demographic changes* have reinforced the shift of identity from ‘Chinese’ to ‘Taiwanese’ (*Taiwanren*). With the death of the mainland (*waishengren*) generation who arrived on Taiwan in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and intermarriage between their children and the locals, the ‘Taiwanese’ (*benshengren*), today’s younger generations have come to regard the island as their homeland and mainlanders as foreigners.

**Re-emergence of nativism in the PRC identity**

There is much discussion concerning the rise of nationalism in China since the end of the Cold War. Some scholars regard it as a consequence of Western pressures and hostility toward China in the 1990s; and some believe that the CCP has turned to nationalism as the sole ideological glue that can hold the People’s Republic together and maintain the Party’s monopoly in a global era of post-communism. Indeed both are factors, but there are much deeper roots than current events might suggest.

There is strong historical precedent for the current emphasis on *national pride rather than socialist ideology* in Chinese political education and propaganda campaigns. Chinese nationalism has long proved to be an extremely effective device for providing a sense of solidarity in times of social unrest and political uncertainty. Propaganda on ‘patriotism’ has an emotional ‘hook’ into the more broadly and deeply felt nationalism attached to historical territorial boundaries.

Ironically, the cultural side of the globalization process inspires both cosmopolitanism and greater loyalty to local culture. In both Taiwan and the mainland, there is interest in local cultural traditions. PRC intellectuals are exploring pre-communist roots for traditions that can forge a new national identity.

The special sensitivity of the Taiwan question is thus due to its intimate emotional connection with social identity as well as government legitimacy. A central myth of the communist narrative of modern Chinese history—that if not for the CCP’s successful revolution, China would have remained a weak, corrupt, and divided country—has been the most important justification for the CCP’s one-party reign. The KMT made similar use of this rationale regarding the recovery of the island from Japanese control in 1945, as the Republic of China emerged as one of the victors of World War Two. Thus, the fate of Taiwan remains highly symbolic in the Chinese memory of the nation’s recent past, even though the return to PRC control of the last two other colonies—Hong Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999—has served to assuage the sense of trauma under imperialism.

But even deeper lies the potent myth of a unitary Chinese state persisting for
thousands of years. Hopes for future glory rest on the assumption that a unified China will resume its ‘rightful’ place as a great civilization and world power. This is so central to the meaning of ‘Chineseness’ on the mainland that even discussing federalism or confederalism appears alien and threatening, even to Chinese democrats. The recent collapse of the Soviet empire and the shrinking of its power and influence was a shock and a threat to Chinese dreams of greatness.

For the majority of the Chinese population, acceptance of Taiwan’s independence would not only symbolize the continuation of China’s division and humiliation, but it would call into question the very nature of ‘China’. Mao gave up claims to Inner Mongolia to please Stalin, but the fate of the ‘incredibly shrinking USSR’ has made flexibility impossible today. China’s territorial integrity and sovereignty has become an issue of utmost importance for the CCP, and Taiwan represents a crucial test case in this regard. Taiwan’s independence would inevitably weaken Beijing’s claims to Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and even more importantly, Tibet. A kind of ‘domino theory’ holds that Taiwan independence would fuel separatism elsewhere, and this assumption presents a formidable obstacle to confidence-building talks with Taiwan on any arrangement short of full reunification.

Given this mindset, the Party’s Taiwan policy easily wins popular support and represents the mainstream social opinion; if there is criticism, it is that the Party is too soft on Taiwan and the US. Any Chinese government in the very near future, facing the serious challenges of leadership transition and pressures of societal transformation, will be loathe to take on the risk of a policy that might allow Taiwan’s independence.

Nonetheless, nationalism is a double-edged sword for the CCP, not an unmitigated blessing. Nationalism can help the authorities promote political solidarity in society by focusing animosity on external opponents rather than domestic leaders, as in 1999 when the NATO bombing of the PRC embassy in Belgrade precluded any demonstrations on the tenth anniversary of June Fourth.

But the rise of nationalism can also put pressure on the government’s policymaking. Despite traditional tight controls on debate over foreign policy, public opinion based on a ‘patriotic stance’ has special immunity. Thus, many people, including government and military officials, talk openly about Beijing’s perceived weakness in response to Western pressures, Japanese ‘misbehavior’ or Taiwan ‘rebellion’, inhibiting policy flexibility. Nonetheless, there is potential for policy change in the future. As China continues to gain international respect as symbolized by WTO membership and the Olympic hosting, leaders may regain room for pragmatic policy adjustment within the context of a more healthy, moderate patriotism.

Competing cultural frames: the ‘Hong Kong/Macao model’ as a ‘father–son’ relationship versus the ‘family of nations’

The concept and analogy of extended ‘family’ (jia, household), is central to understanding the national identity of Chinese people. Scholars of China consider the idea of family—literally, metaphorically, and as an organizing principle—as
central to the creation of the Chinese worldview. The Confucian tradition insisted that all of society, including the government, should be run according to the principles of the family. The family is the moral and political model for all organizations. According to Confucian thought, the biological bond between parents and children could not be matched by any other relationship. Filial piety, or loyalty to family, came to be the most powerful force to maintain order in society. Parental governance became the supreme standard for both family and state. Despite decades of communist attack on tradition and Westernization, family and filial piety still provide the moral basis for society and government in both China and Taiwan. For example, the Taiwan government cites loyalty and filial piety as the people’s foremost civic duty, while the CCP consistently portrays itself as the parent of the people. Parental governance entails two related pillars of Confucian thought: loyal obedience for children-subjects and firm benevolence for parental officials.

For the first 40 years of the post-1949 era, the ‘father–son’ relationship was an unstated but underlying paradigm for the cross-Strait relationship. Both sides accepted the paradigm; the question was ‘which is the father in the household?’ The CCP called on Taiwan to return to the embrace of its mainland parent while the KMT argued that it was the ‘father-party’ and the CCP should be the ‘son-party’, as the KMT and the ROC had a longer history than that of the CCP and PRC. But this is not an issue between the CCP and the DPP, and the two regimes now contend over whether there exists one family or two. Both Lee Teng-hui’s ‘special state-to-state’ theory and Chen Shui-bian’s ‘one country on each side of the Strait’ abandon the old ‘father–son’ paradigm. They regard the cross-Strait relationship as one between two families, two neighbors. For most Taiwan citizens, cross-Strait ties should not be a ‘father–son relationship’ as Beijing claims. They hope ties will move toward a ‘brotherly’ or ‘neighborly’ relationship between two equal members of the family of nations. Both sides need to think globally, not just locally.

It is not easy for Beijing or the mainland Chinese themselves to abandon this ‘one family’, communitarian thinking. This sentimental complex has been further fortified by the reversion of Hong Kong and Macao as prodigal sons returning to the father. Regarding Taiwan, Beijing rejects the British ‘commonwealth’ model for forming a ‘fraternal alliance’, as a potential solution. Taiwan is still regarded as a rebel and its challenge to mainland authority as illegitimate impiety.

The Taiwan side, especially the pro-independent activists, should realize that the commonly used phrase ‘blood is thicker than water’ still holds true in China. Any actions that deny the biological, cultural and historical bond between the people on both sides can only exacerbate tension during a time of transition to a new approach. To a great extent, however, the peaceful solution of the Taiwan question will primarily depend on whether Beijing can overcome the parent–child power struggle paradigm and adjust its policy according to the new reality of the

cross-Strait relationship. Beijing will have to recognize that the Hong Kong–Macao model will not work with Taiwan.

This recognition will require moving beyond the Deng–Jiang program. The ‘one country, two systems’ formula was originally conceived by Deng Xiaoping as a solution for Taiwan, and decisions were made later in the mid-1980s to implement it first in Hong Kong and Macao for their demonstration effect. But the formula best suits these entities with a colonial background and experience, including strong anti-Western sentiment and executive-dominated governance. Taiwan, especially since the demise of the KMT power monopoly, is a very different case. Also, Hong Kong’s Basic Plan for reunification, signed in 1984, reflects the international environment prior to the collapse of European communism. In fact, the 1 July 2003 massive demonstrations in Hong Kong protesting the draft sedition law, call into question the longevity of the model itself.

Looking to actual families as an example of changing times, one can see that in both mainland China and Taiwan, the traditional Chinese ‘big family’ has collapsed, though some people still miss the days when ‘four generations lived under the same roof’. Today, young people are fond of the ‘decentralized’ modern family—where nuclear families are related but independent. Regarding Taiwan, Beijing keeps saying that the Taiwan question is a family matter. Could politicians on both sides learn from current social change to modernize this ‘family’ issue peacefully and creatively?

**Human Needs Theory and the Taiwan question**

Human Needs Theory (HNT) was developed in the 1970s and 1980s as a holistic theory of human behavior. It is based on the hypothesis that humans have basic needs that have to be met in order to maintain stable societies. Adapted by John Burton and other pioneers in the field of conflict resolution, this theory proposes that individuals possess certain basic needs and they strive to satisfy those needs at any cost, even at the cost of personal disorientation and social disorder. It holds that deep-rooted conflicts are caused by the denial of one or more basic human needs, including security and development (material needs), but also identity and recognition. Non-material human needs cannot be traded or satisfied by power bargaining.4

HNT helps explain why the growing divergence of identity in Taiwan and China have paralleled the burgeoning economic links and social exchanges between the island and the mainland. From near-zero baselines in the late 1980s, bilateral trade has grown to $30 billion annually and investment has reached $80–100 billion. Hundreds of thousands of Taiwan citizens live semi-permanently in Shanghai and elsewhere on the mainland. Temple associations, Christian fellowship and cooperation, and other social and cultural connections have developed as well. Taiwan or Beijing leaders cannot ignore such powerful material and social interests, and important US economic interests are also enmeshed in this burgeoning trade and investment, providing incentives for creating new win–win–win approaches.

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HNT challenges traditional approaches to conflict. If a theory of needs were to become the dominant paradigm, it follows that coercive policies used to enforce social order would be changed in favor of policies aimed at fulfilling social needs.

In the present PRC–Taiwan political conflict, we find that Taiwan is striving at almost any cost to satisfy the needs of security, identity, and recognition. Refusing China’s reunification requirement, Taiwan, as the weaker side in the conflict, has suffered from diplomatic isolation and military pressure, including an arms race, causing many difficulties for Taiwan’s economic development and international participation. Yet Taiwan’s attitude seems difficult to change. It is a good example of Burton’s argument that non-material human needs cannot be traded or satisfied by power bargaining. That is also the reason why the political negotiations between Beijing and Taipei have been in deadlock for many years. The Chinese government has repeatedly asked Taiwan to return to the consensus on ‘one China’ and insists that this is the key point for settlement. Actually, the ‘one China’ here is the ‘one China identity’ that the Taiwan people have abandoned but to which the PRC clasps more tightly. Once again, as Burton argues, protracted conflicts are primarily over non-negotiable human needs.

Application of HNT would recognize and legitimate both the mainland Chinese’s and the Taiwan people’s needs. The needs of both must be met, not the needs of one at the expense of the other. This paradigm would help to move the conflict from zero-sum to win–win by overcoming the sense of mutually exclusive goals. Rather than fighting over the constitutional future of the island, with mutually exclusive political goals, the situation would shift to one in which both communities seek to fulfill their needs for security, identity, recognition, as well as development. These needs need not be satisfied at the expense of the other community, but are realized along with the other community’s needs. A stable and sustainable resolution would require conciliation based on recognition and legitimization of the basic needs of both sides.

While the Taiwan side complains that mainland China fails to understand the real feelings and needs of the people of Taiwan, the people of Taiwan should also pay attention to the real feelings and needs of the people of China. For many Chinese, the Taiwan issue is closely connected with their needs of security, identity, and recognition, as well as development. As we have discussed, the fate of Taiwan has become highly symbolic in the Chinese collective memory of the nation’s past humiliation and collective hopes for future glory. For the majority of the Chinese population, Taiwan’s independence would both violate China’s territorial integrity and sovereignty and damage its international standing. On the assumption that an independent Taiwan would become an ally of the US and Japan, there is also fear of a threat to national security, both economic and military.

HNT theorists posit that the resolution of basic human needs conflicts requires peaceful methods—that use of force and deterrence (e.g. against Taiwan independence) can only intensify such conflicts. Burton contends, ‘where basic needs are concerned, deterrence does not deter’.5 Richard Rubenstein has this observation:

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Rulers who believe that demands for identity and recognition can be ignored with impunity, or that subject populations can be deterred by force from asserting them, soon discover that they are mistaken. During the Vietnam War, ... massive air strikes did not blunt, and may even have encouraged, the Communist-led drive for independence from foreign domination (Fitzgerald 1972, esp. 548–584). The same lesson was taught the Soviet leaders in the case of the Afghan insurgency, and their Russian successors in the case of Chechnya.6

We submit that the above analysis is especially helpful for Beijing in rethinking its Taiwan policy. In the past decade, none of Beijing’s ‘hard hand’ measures against Taiwan has reached its objective, and most of these measures just played the opposite role of strengthening the Taiwan people’s alienations from the mainland. In Taiwan, Beijing was jokingly referred to as the ‘super helper’ of both Lee Deng-hui and Chen Shui-bian during the 1996 and the 2000 elections, as Beijing’s large scale military exercises and verbal warnings only gave them more votes than expected. Beijing should consider the fact that its diplomatic campaigns have successfully prevented Taiwan from joining international organizations as a state member, but have also justified seeking an independent international status.

Beijing may also get inspiration from the following thoughts of Burton: ‘Problem-solving at the social level—be it the small group, the nation-state or interactions between states—is possible only by processes that take the needs of the individual as the basis for analyzing and planning’.7 Taiwan’s change from dictatorship to multiparty politics has brought fundamental changes to the cross-Strait relationship: it is no longer as simple as the relationship between the two ruling parties, for the public in Taiwan is inevitably an important player in the interaction between the two sides. Political parties in Taiwan must answer to public opinion and are constrained by elections. Taiwan’s future—including the future of the DPP, KMT and PFP—will be decided by the voters of Taiwan. Beijing should realize that any attempt to resolve the Taiwan question that places the needs and interest of political parties or even of the total Chinese ‘big family’ before those of its individual members, must fail.

Matching sources of conflict with methods of resolution

Conflict resolution experience also teaches that continual clarification of the major underlying sources of a conflict is the key to selecting appropriate methods for intervention and resolution. By way of analogy, a physician needs to be able to identify the source of an illness to effectively treat the illness and needs to know which treatments are effective for which specific illnesses. Failure to match the treatment with the causes of the infirmity at best will leave the patient infirm and at worst will make the patient sicker. When sources of conflict change in a specific context, re-evaluation of practices and interventions is very important as some practices are less useful or even harmful for particular sources of conflict.

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Unthinking application of previous or inappropriate practices in a changed situation can even perpetuate conflict and generate new sources of conflict.

Why did the end of the Cold War fail to bring peace to the Taiwan Strait? Why did the economic boom and the general political relaxation that have occurred within both mainland China and Taiwan fail to bring the same relaxation to the cross-Strait relationship? Why have social exchanges and increasing economic interaction failed to promote political reconciliation between the two sides? The basic reason for these failures is that China and Taiwan, as well as the US, have failed to adapt new practices in response to the paradigmatic changes in the sources and nature of the China–Taiwan conflict.

Identity-based conflicts are often mistaken for disputes over material resources. Attempts to resolve such misdiagnosed conflicts generally fail, since the resolution efforts do not address the real underlying causes of the conflict. This helps explain, for example, why in the late 1990s the encouragement from the US towards Beijing and Taipei re-opening talks simply added fuel to the fire. The only practical result of US urgency was competition by Beijing and Taipei to prove the other more perfidious in the eyes of US ‘mediators’. Hence the first step in effective resolution is correctly identifying a conflict as an identity conflict. We must differentiate identity-based conflicts from those rooted primarily in political or economic interests, because the conventional approaches to handling interest-based disputes, such as legal mechanisms and conventional negotiation, often serve only to exacerbate identity conflicts.

The nature of conflicts in the post-Cold War period suggests new interpretations of problems and requires innovative solutions. To look ahead, there is no easy or quick solution to the cross-Strait impasse. The vast differences in values as well as political and social systems can be bridged only when the two sides have had adequate time to build up mutual understanding and trust. All three parties must persevere in pragmatic moves to create an environment conducive to harmonious interaction, with peace talks well down the road.