

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fit for purpose? ‘One China’ Policy and security in Sino-American relations

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Abstract

Nominally, the policy of the United States towards the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan is governed by the ‘One China’ Policy (OCP). However, the conditions under which OCP was originally formulated have long since given way to substantial growth in the economic and military power of the PRC and the democratisation of Taiwan. These changes raise several questions regarding the viability and applicability of OCP. Drawing on securitisation theory, this article examines discourses across three US presidential administrations to assess the trajectory of socio-political constructions of the PRC, Taiwan, and OCP. Three case studies suggest substantial challenges for OCP as a basis for maintaining desecuritized relations between the United States and the PRC. While discourses of ‘engagement’ prominent in the 1990s have lost ground, with presidential administrations increasingly but inconsistently drawing on OCP, in Congress OCP plays no role, while Taiwan is increasingly constructed as akin to the American self, serving as an identity proxy that highlights the otherness of the PRC. Polling supports the idea that OCP is not rooted in general American understandings of the region and consequently cannot serve to ground policy in a crisis.

Keywords: China; identity; One China Policy; securitisation theory; Sino-American relations; Taiwan; US foreign policy

Introduction

Developed in 1971 as a diplomatic fudge to facilitate Richard Nixon’s effort to normalise relations between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the United States, America’s ‘One China’ Policy¹ (OCP) occupies a central place mediating US relations with Taiwan and the PRC.² In the American context, OCP serves at least two functions. First, it provides a reference frame within which US and PRC policy actors can structure interaction. Second, and the focus of this article, OCP provides a discursive and political architecture for making sense of whether and how PRC claims to sovereignty over Taiwan constitute a security threat. OCP frames the question of contested sovereignty largely as an internal ‘Chinese’ matter in which US interests are confined to the *process* of resolving the sovereignty dispute (no use of force) rather than the *outcome*. OCP privileges maintaining the US approach to contesting sovereignty over Taiwan within the scope

¹For conceptual clarity, when I refer to ‘One China’ Policy or OCP I am specifically focused on an American approach to the problem of contested sovereignty over the island of Taiwan. The US approach is distinct from the PRC’s ‘One-China Principle’, which holds that there is a single Chinese state (PRC) that territorially includes Taiwan, thus rejecting any claim to Taiwanese self-determination.

²Shirley A. Kan, ‘China/Taiwan: Evolution of the “One China” Policy – Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei’ (Congressional Research Service, 2014); Lyle Goldstein, *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging Us-China Rivalry* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

of normal rather than security politics. Normal politics in this context means maintaining support for the unexceptional tools of diplomacy (e.g. negotiation) as well as strategic ambiguity – a refusal on the part of the United States to clearly indicate its response to military aggression by the PRC towards Taiwan.³ The goal of that approach is to maintain peace and stability in cross-strait relations by raising the PRC's risk calculations while preventing Taiwan from unilateral moves towards de jure independence. In short, normal politics means support for positioning the United States as a balance between the two sides to prevent radical, unilateral changes in the status quo.

The policy and political functions of OCP are interlinked; the policy function substantially depends on the success of OCP's discursive and political function. If the political function fails, policymakers confront a situation in which the policy framework for managing the practice of tri-lateral relations (OCP) is disconnected from how those same relations are understood within the US body politic. Thus, the central question this study raises is whether OCP does and can fulfil its anti-security political and discursive functions.

There is reason to raise the question. Scholars have argued that securitisation is rooted in specific social and political configurations.⁴ Thus, while OCP may have functioned to counter securitising moves in the past, changes in political context should prompt reassessment. In the case of the US–Taiwan–PRC triangle, the social, political, and economic context has diverged substantially from that of 1971. At the time, Taiwan was governed by an authoritarian Kuomintang party that still claimed sovereignty over mainland China. The PRC, governed by Mao, had a GDP less than 10 per cent of US GDP. Fast forward 50 years and Taiwan is widely recognised as a robust democracy, while the PRC has remained a single-party state with an economy rivalling that of the United States.⁵ These changes should prompt questions regarding the continued viability of OCP as a basis for keeping relations within the realm of normal politics. Growing concern over the prospect of military conflict across the Taiwan Strait adds real-world urgency to the issue.⁶

To preview the conclusion, I find that OCP does not function to counter securitisation of the PRC's claims over Taiwan. Congress and the public 'see' Taiwan as a kindred democracy to the United States. Thus, the premise at the heart of OCP – that the United States cannot or should not judge the contesting sovereignty claims over Taiwan – simply does not work any longer. Taiwan has been reconstructed as part of the democratic self that plays an important role in shaping American conceptions of the world. As a result, executive-branch policymakers are likely to face increasing pressure to depart from a policy of strategic ambiguity to one that offers explicit security guarantees to Taiwan, a trendline evident in President Biden's repeated explicit statements of support for Taiwan in the event of a war with the PRC.⁷

The paper proceeds in five sections. First, I lay out the analytical approach. Second, I discuss the roots and significance of OCP. Third, I address the methodology brought to bear on the case studies, which comprise the fourth section. Fifth, and finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the failure of OCP for US foreign policy.

³Nien-Chung Chang-Liao and Chi Fang, 'The case for maintaining strategic ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait', *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 45–60.

⁴Jarrod Hayes, *Constructing National Security: US Relations with China and India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵Linda Chao and Ramon H. Myers, 'The first Chinese democracy: Political development of the Republic of China on Taiwan, 1986–1994', *Asian Survey*, 34:3 (1994), pp. 213–230.

⁶On PRC military pressure, see Ned Price, 'Increasing People's Republic of China military pressure against Taiwan undermines regional peace and stability', ed. State (2021), available at: {<https://www.state.gov/increasing-peoples-republic-of-china-military-pressure-against-taiwan-undermines-regional-peace-and-stability/>}

⁷Francis Mao, 'Biden again says US would defend Taiwan If China attacks', BBC News (September 19, 2022); David Sacks, 'While pledging to defend Taiwan from China, Biden shifted on Taiwan independence: Here's why that matters', Council on Foreign Relations (September 22, 2022).

Securitisation theory and social identity

To analyse the public-facing aspect of OCP, I draw on the core insights of securitisation theory (ST) – that a state of security is the product of socio-political dynamics in which discursive security claims (securitising moves) are central to the transition of an issue out of normal politics into the exceptional realm of security politics.⁸ My use of securitisation theory here diverges from more straightforward applications that see scholars analysing the success or failure of securitising moves. Instead, the analytical focus here lies in the broader socio-political ecosystem with a particular interest on the availability of discourses that may counter securitising moves. Thus, OCP is conceptualised as a socially constructed narrative that shapes how policy elites and the public understand relations between the United States, the PRC, and Taiwan; establishes boundaries of action; and legitimates policy responses.⁹

The political changes – notably the democratisation of Taiwan – in the region suggest the possibility of a significant interaction between OCP and identity. Literature on the relationship between identity and securitisation as well as substantial work on ontological security indicates an important role for social identity in shaping security constructions.¹⁰ The scholarship suggests that identity of self and other plays a crucial role in understanding threats and appropriate responses more generally, and that identity is activated by discourses of security in constructions of threat. These identity-based narratives may reinforce OCP-based constructions in the American context if the PRC and Taiwan are seen as a singular Chinese Other or may undermine OCP if alternative identities, such as shared democracy, are activated. To underpin this assessment, I harness social identity theory (SIT) to securitisation theory.

Initially developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner,¹¹ SIT focuses on how identity derived from group membership shapes the social behaviour of individuals towards fellow members of the ingroup as well as towards members of outgroups.¹² Originally, the approach focused on the role ingroup–outgroup dynamics plays in driving social conflict. Over time, as scholarship has expanded to explore the rationale and ramifications of group membership, SIT has become a primary theoretical vehicle for understanding social cognition.¹³

While SIT addresses a range of social group processes, most relevant to the argument here is self-categorisation. Self-categorisation refers to the process by which individuals partition the world into ingroups and outgroups.¹⁴ Cognitively, these groups are represented by context-specific prototypes. Once activated, these prototypes define the group, prescribing the

⁸Thierry Balzacq, 'The three faces of securitization: Political agency, audience and context', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2 (2005), pp. 171–201; Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde, and Ole Wæver, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

⁹Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁰Hayes, *Constructing National Security*; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹¹Henri Tajfel and John Turner, 'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict', in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1979); John C. Turner, Michael A. Hogg, Penelope Oakes, Stephen D. Reicher, and Margaret S. Wetherell (eds.) *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

¹²Michael A. Hogg, Dominic Abrams, Sabine Otten, and Steve Hinkle, 'The social identity perspective', *Small Group Research*, 35:3 (2004), pp. 246–76; Rupert Brown, 'Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems and future challenges', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 30:6 (2000), pp. 745–78.

¹³Michael A. Hogg, 'Social identity theory', in Peter J. Burke (ed.), *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2006), pp. 111–136.

¹⁴Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, 'Social identification, self-categorization and social influence', *European Review of Social Psychology*, 1 (1990), pp. 195–228; Michael A. Hogg, 'Social categorization, depersonalization, and group behavior', in Michael Hogg and R. Scott Tindale (eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 56–85; Craig McGarty, *Categorization in Social Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999); Henri Tajfel, Michael G. Billig, Robert P. Bundy, and Claude Flament, 'Social categorization and intergroup behavior', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1 (1971), pp. 149–78.

attitudes, norms, feelings, and behaviours of ingroup and intergroup relations: ‘Social categorization of the self ... actually transform[s] self-conception and assimilate[s] all aspects of one’s attitudes, feelings, and behaviors to the ingroup prototype; it changes what people think, feel, and do.’¹⁵ Hogg and others suggest that self-categorisation also reduces social and behavioural uncertainty.¹⁶

The influence of identities on perceptions is not predetermined. People hold multiple identities simultaneously. Thus, identities need to be activated to be influential. These activations do not float freely; they are tied into existing understandings of self in the context of relevant others. Discourses are crucial to both activation and the resonance of those activations. As Hopf notes: ‘Discourses themselves are institutions. A discourse of the nation daily defines who is inside, and who is outside, the national community. This discourse operates like an institution insofar as it daily guides, implicitly and explicitly, each actor’s sense of herself as a member of that community, or as an outsider looking in.’¹⁷

To summarise, security politics – which give rise to security practices in the international system – are a product of security claims made by political actors to target audiences. These actors draw on a range of socially rooted discursive tools to make their claims, and among the most powerful of these tools is identity. Identity, when activated, reshapes understandings of the world in foundational ways. When actors are able to activate identities and align their security claims with those identities, the potential for successful securitisation or desecuritisation is enhanced.

This approach stands in some contrast to the substantial literature grappling with the future of Sino-American relations.¹⁸ With the exception of a fairly limited corpus of constructivist scholarship,¹⁹ much of this work explicitly or implicitly relies on a material-rationalist ontology: that the conditions shaping Sino-American relations are largely rooted in flows of wealth or balances of military power, and that these factors express themselves independently of policymakers’ beliefs or society’s understandings. Conflict over the status of Taiwan occupies a central place in terms of efforts to assess current and future relations.²⁰ Realists point to the consequences for credibility and the material balance of power in the region of a conflict for the United States.²¹ Institutionalists look to the role of sovereignty (and recognition thereof) or international law.²² Those of a more neoliberal focus look to economic interdependence to mediate possible conflict,²³ though others point out that Taiwan might spoil the pacifying effects of Sino-American interdependence.²⁴ Adopting a narrower analytical lens focused on American foreign and security policy, analysis identifies alliance

¹⁵Michael A. Hogg, ‘A social identity theory of leadership’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5:3 (2001), pp. 184–200.

¹⁶Scott A. Reid and Michael A. Hogg, ‘Uncertainty reduction, self-enhancement, and ingroup identification’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31 (2005), pp. 804–17.

¹⁷Ted Hopf, *Reconstructing the Cold War: The Early Years, 1945–1958* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 23.

¹⁸Aaron L. Friedberg, ‘The future of U.S.–China relations: Is conflict inevitable?’, *International Security*, 30:2 (2005), pp. 7–45; Charles Glaser, ‘Will China’s rise lead to war? Why realism does not mean pessimism’, *Foreign Affairs*, 90:2 (2011), pp. 80–91.

¹⁹Anisa Heritage and Pak K. Lee, *Order, Contestation and Ontological Security-Seeking in the South China Sea* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Evelyn Goh, ‘Institutions and the great power bargain in East Asia: ASEAN’s limited “brokerage” role’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 11:3 (2011), pp. 373–401.

²⁰Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.–Taiwan–China Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

²¹John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Taiwan’s dire straits’, *The National Interest*, 130 (2014), pp. 29–39.

²²Lung-Chu Chen, *The U.S.–Taiwan–China Relationship in International Law and Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); John Franklin Copper, *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province?* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Mikulas Fabry, *Recognizing States: International Society and the Establishment of New States since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²³Erich Weede, ‘The capitalist peace and the rise of China: Establishing global harmony by economic interdependence’, *International Interactions*, 36:2 (2010), pp. 206–213.

²⁴Kean Fan Lim, ‘What you see is (not) what you get? The Taiwan question, geo-economic realities, and the “China threat” imaginary’, *Antipode*, 44:4 (2012), pp. 1348–73.

dynamics,²⁵ shifting domestic political dynamics within the United States,²⁶ or the role of foreign policy in constituting the American polity.²⁷

Drawing on securitisation theory and social identity theory, this study seeks to explore the discursive terrain that has informed US constructions of the PRC and Taiwan during past security crises.²⁸ The specific focus, as I discuss in the next section, centres on the function of OCP and identity in public and policy elite worldviews. Such an approach brings forward a premise that action springs from socially constructed meaning.²⁹ Furthermore, it emphasises the politics of how China and Taiwan are given meaning in the United States and contributes to a literature focusing on how discourse produces international behaviour.³⁰ My approach, drawing on the distinction between securitising actor and audience in ST as well as a long analytical tradition in foreign-policy analysis, also probes the divide between elite and public perceptions of foreign policy with respect to the PRC and Taiwan in an effort to understand policy stability in a crisis.³¹

Identity and securitisation: OCP versus democracy

When the United States officially recognised the People's Republic of China in 1979, PRC leadership conditioned reciprocal recognition on relinquishment of official ties with the Republic of China on Taiwan. The challenges of this demand for US policymakers were substantial. Governments on Taiwan and mainland China claimed exclusive sovereignty over all of China, generating the prospect of continued strife in the region. The United States had long-standing ties with the government of Taiwan that would be politically difficult to cut. The strength of these ties is reflected in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, an unusual Act of Congress seeking to constrain the foreign policy of the president by preventing unilateral changes of policy and committing the United States to provide defence capabilities to Taiwan sufficient for self-defence.

The solution for US policymakers seeking to balance PRC demands against the political impossibility of abandoning Taiwan in the context of mutually exclusive sovereignty claims was what would become the One China Policy. OCP finds its origins in the Shanghai Communiqué, the result of Nixon's breakthrough diplomatic visit to the PRC in 1972.³² On the subject of Taiwan, the US position in the Communiqué holds:

The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.

This position, reflected directly or indirectly in future communiqués, established American strategic ambiguity in the region: by refusing to take a position on which government actually represents

²⁵Iain D. Henry, 'What allies want: Reconsidering loyalty, reliability, and alliance interdependence', *International Security*, 44:4 (2020), pp. 45–83.

²⁶Nien-chung Chang-Liao and Chi Fang, 'The case for maintaining strategic ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait', *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:2 (2021), pp. 45–60.

²⁷David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

²⁸This approach is sympathetic with Galtung's later emphasis on the role of meaning-making as a crucial factor in political violence. Johan Galtung, 'Cultural violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 27:3 (1990), pp. 291–305.

²⁹Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

³⁰Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Twisting tongues and twisting arms: The power of political rhetoric', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:1 (2007), pp. 35–66; Frank Schimmelfennig, 'The community trap: Liberal norms, rhetorical action, and the eastern enlargement of the European Union', *International Organization*, 55:1 (2001), pp. 47–80.

³¹Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, 'A bottom-up theory of public opinion about foreign policy', *American Journal of Political Science*, 61:3 (2017), pp. 543–58.

³²Department of State, 'Joint statement following discussions with leaders of the People's Republic of China'; Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976: Office of the Historian, 1972.

'China', the United States avoids encouraging either side to take escalatory risks while the commitment to peace suggests the United States may get involved in the event of hostilities but offers no indication of the shape or scope of that involvement.³³ It is, in short, a policy device for avoiding conflict between the PRC and the United States over Taiwan.

OCP is more than a policy; it is also a discursive frame that enables American political leaders and society to make sense of Taiwan and the PRC.³⁴ Put in terms of securitisation theory, OCP functions as a discourse for maintaining Sino-American relations within the realm of normal politics (desecuritized relations). OCP also provides an identity-based frame, one in which Americans would understand Sino-Taiwanese relations as essentially an internal 'Chinese' (a distinct social/cultural/political Other) matter in which the United States should have limited (or no) involvement. Reconceptualising OCP as a narrative raises a crucial question: to what degree is OCP rooted in a general shared American public common-sense understanding of proper relations between the United States, the PRC, and Taiwan (rather than a preserve of the policymaking elite)?³⁵

If public understandings of the region are rooted in OCP, then observers should expect a substantial degree of continuity between daily and crisis policymaking. If OCP anchors public understandings, policymakers seeking to keep Sino-American relations within normal politics have potent discursive tools upon which they can draw to counter efforts by other political actors to shift understandings of the region through securitisation that would result in relational change. However, if OCP does not enjoy a central place in how the public makes sense of the region, then policymakers will be unable to draw on it to defend the status quo when policymaking is exposed to public scrutiny – as in the case of acute action by the PRC (e.g. military exercises) or by political entrepreneurs (e.g. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022). Without the touchstone of a widely accepted worldview, those seeking to maintain the status quo (normal politics) are left without potent tools in the discursive competition to make sense of the PRC.

As the preceding discussion suggests, OCP as a narrative framework for making sense of the PRC–Taiwan nexus exists in conjunction with alternative narrative frameworks. Scholars have noted the significance of democratic identity as a sense-making framework in American foreign policy.³⁶ Given changes in Taiwan's governance over the three decades – first free and fair elections to the legislature in 1991–2 and for president in 1996 – an alternative, democratic identity-based narrative framework would be a significant possibility. Thus, the democratisation of Taiwan makes it possible for securitising actors in the United States to represent Taiwan as being like the Self, potentially facilitating securitisation of the PRC and attendant extraordinary measures. The presence of a potentially competing narrative framework that would enable securitisation of the PRC highlights the stakes for OCP as a framework intended to maintain status quo relations with the PRC.

No discussion of narrative frameworks in American foreign policy towards the PRC would be complete without addressing 'engagement' – the idea that economic interdependence would integrate China into the American-led global order. Thus, engagement served the same discursive purpose as OCP: a bulwark to maintain Sino-American relations within normal/desecuritized politics.³⁷ As others have noted in detail, engagement became embedded within the

³³ Charles Chong-Han Wu, 'The end of Washington's strategic ambiguity? The debate over U.S. policy toward Taiwan', *China Review*, 21:2 (2021), pp. 177–202.

³⁴ McCourt similarly disaggregates 'engagement'. David M. McCourt, 'Knowledge communities in US foreign policy making: The American China field and the end of engagement with the PRC', *Security Studies*, 31:4 (2022), pp. 593–633.

³⁵ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, 'Taiwan expendable? Nixon and Kissinger go to China', *Journal of American History*, 92:1 (2005), pp. 109–35; Ted Hopf, 'Common-sense constructivism and hegemony in world politics', *International Organization*, 67:2 (2013), pp. 317–54.

³⁶ Hayes, *Constructing National Security*.

³⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, 'The failures of the "failure of engagement" with China', *The Washington Quarterly*, 42:2 (2019), pp. 99–114.

foreign-policy establishment in the United States but was eventually displaced by competition-oriented perspectives.³⁸ Scholars date the demise of engagement as a guiding principle for foreign-policy elites to roughly 2017. The cases I present here suggest that as a public discourse constructing the PRC and legitimating US policy, engagement lost traction substantially earlier. Questions about the efficacy of engagement and its interaction effects with OCP and rival discourses merit substantial attention. However, the scope of such inquiry requires (at least) a paper-length treatment and are thus beyond the scope of what is possible here.

To conclude this section, I want to preview my findings from the cases below. Unlike engagement, OCP remains an active discourse. However, my analysis suggests that while OCP may continue to facilitate Sino-American relations as a diplomatic boundary object,³⁹ it cannot support policymaking in a political or security crisis because of the underlying departures from the initial conditions upon which it was built and the absence of grounding in the worldviews of the American public. Conversely, securitising moves with respect to the PRC rooted in democratic identity are very prevalent, and public opinion is shifting in ways that suggest growing understanding of the PRC as a threat to Taiwan as a valued referent. Democratic identity facilitates the understanding of Taiwan as existentially valuable by reconstructing Taiwan as part of the democratic self. When Taiwan is threatened, identity linkage means that in a significant way so too is the United States. Thus, the operation of OCP in everyday US policy provides little guidance regarding US policy in a crisis involving the PRC and Taiwan.

Methods

Securitisation theory places primary emphasis on the discursive construction of security. However, the speech act might never make use of the words ‘security’ or ‘threat’. Rather, political action is produced in a discursive, meaning-making exercise with the logic of security at its heart. This theoretical architecture foregrounds the acts of argumentation and interpretation. Discursive representations tie together to construct the meaning and significance for specific audiences at specific times. Using securitisation theory as an analytical framework requires the analyst to directly engage with the political discourses to ascertain the presence, content, and orientation of securitising moves. Because I am interested in the role of OCP as a foreign-policy discourse, my examination focuses on the public utterances of policy elites in the executive branch as well as political leaders in Congress. These actors occupy privileged institutional spaces, granting their speech greater security gravitas (what ST refers to as ‘social power’)⁴⁰ as well as establishing the field of representation contestation – which discourse prevails in terms of constructing the self, other, and security relations between them.

A careful look at the security discourses of US decision makers should reveal patterns of narration (such as identity invocation) and the relationship between this narration and US policy. To do so, I build on Chilton’s discourse analytical approach,⁴¹ focusing on how OCP is (or is not) deployed in discourses as well as how the PRC, Taiwan, and the United States are discursively represented. In line with the theoretical approach outlined above, I pay particular attention to the presence and role of identity discourses.

To do so, I examine public speeches, press conferences, and interviews given by the US president, secretary of state, and secretary of defense. To locate these texts, where possible I searched online speech and press archives as well as major media outlets using ‘China’ and ‘Taiwan’ keywords. Where such searches were not possible, I read every significant foreign-policy document available

³⁸ McCourt, ‘Knowledge communities in US foreign policy making’.

³⁹ Susan Leigh Star, ‘This is not a boundary object: Reflections on the origin of a concept’, *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 35:5 (2010), pp. 601–17.

⁴⁰ Buzan, de Wilde, and Wæver, *Security*, pp. 32–3.

⁴¹ Paul Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 111–16.

for the period of the crisis and out to one month after the resolution of the crisis.⁴² A similar approach was taken with respect to Congressional speech, substituting the Congressional Record for relevant executive-branch resources. It is, of course, not possible to include every document within the universe of material I reviewed. Consequently, the analysis below draws on these data to produce specific passages that illuminate the role of OCP and identity in the social construction of policy and security discourses. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for data transparency; any scholar wishing to confirm my analysis can easily and directly access the underlying data sources.

Cases

Case 1: 1995–6 Taiwan Straits crisis

Over the second half of 1995 and the first quarter of 1996, the PRC undertook a series of increasingly aggressive military exercises and missile tests in response to a visit by Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to the United States (1995) and Taiwan's first direct presidential elections (1996). The US policy response in 1995 was restrained. President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Warren Christopher sent private letters to Chinese president Jiang Zemin and foreign minister Qian Qichen respectively, and the US aircraft carrier *Nimitz* cruised through the Taiwan Strait in December.⁴³

An apparent lull in the crisis ended on 5 March 1996, when Beijing announced a new round of nuclear-capable M-series missile tests in the run-up to the Taiwanese presidential election on 23 March.⁴⁴ Unlike the 1995 tests, which took place in the open sea 80–100 miles from Taiwan, the new tests would target waters much closer to Taiwan, potentially blockading the principal Taiwanese commercial shipping ports of Keelung in the north and Kaohsiung in the south.⁴⁵ Five days later, on 10 March, PRC leaders announced a new round of live-fire naval and warplane exercises that would close a significant portion of the Taiwan Strait and last through the presidential election.⁴⁶ In contrast its response to the PRC's 1995 war games, the Clinton administration reacted by sending two aircraft carrier battle groups, the *Independence* and *Nimitz*, to the waters near Taiwan.⁴⁷

Striking in this case is the importance of democracy and absence of OCP for constituting the parties to the conflict and making sense of the stakes. In both Congress and the Clinton administration, democracy was at the heart of security discourses. In Congress, critics of the Clinton administration clearly felt that shared democracy with Taiwan and the absence of democracy in the PRC was a potential discursive weapon. For Representative Peter King (R-NY), democracy lay at the core of why Taiwan mattered so much to the United States:

*Taiwan's greatest achievement, however, has been its attainment of an open, democratic society ... In March 1996 the President, heretofore elected by the legislature, will be elected by popular vote. This will mark the first time in the history of China that a President has been democratically elected.*⁴⁸ (Emphasis mine.)

⁴²Media sources include the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. Online archives include speeches and press conferences collated across sources including official department websites (White House, Departments of State and Defense), the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, and the Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents.

⁴³James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999).

⁴⁴Reuters, 'World news briefs; China announces tests of missiles near Taiwan', *The New York Times* (March 5, 1996).

⁴⁵Patrick E. Tyler, 'Beijing steps up military pressure on Taiwan leader', *The New York Times* (March 7, 1996).

⁴⁶Patrick E. Tyler, 'War games off Taiwan to expand, Beijing says', *The New York Times* (March 10, 1996); Patrick E. Tyler, 'China says maneuvers will last through Taiwan's elections', *The New York Times* (March 16, 1996).

⁴⁷Patrick E. Tyler, 'China warns U.S. to stay out of Taiwan feud', *The New York Times* (March 12, 1996).

⁴⁸Representative Peter T. King (R-NY), 'The United States must stand with Taiwan', 141 Congressional Record E1790-E1791 (September 14, 1995).

Not only was Taiwan a democracy, like the United States it was a groundbreaking democracy, the first in Chinese history. King went on to characterise the PRC reaction to this historically momentous occasion:

Unfortunately ... Taiwan's economic might and its *embrace of democracy* have *enraged* the PRC which has reacted *aggressively* ... The PRC's response to President Lee's visit has bordered on the *hysterical*. (Emphasis mine.)

Having laid the groundwork for constructing China as a threat based on its non-democracy, King completed the securitising move by arguing that the Chinese posed an existential threat not only to Taiwan but directly to broader US interests:

If the PRC is successful in carrying out this extortion and *subverting the democratic process in Taiwan*, the United States will only be *encouraging further PRC aggression* in the region ... and we will be severely marginalized as a Pacific power. In short we will have allowed the PRC to establish Asian hegemony. (Emphasis mine.)

King's approach to China would set the pattern for ensuing efforts to securitise China. In October 1995, Representative Elton Gallegly (R-CA) made similar arguments while urging President Clinton to take a strong stand:

It must be made clear by the President that our support for the freedom and democracy of Taiwan cannot be compromised ... They [Taiwan] are a strong democracy committed to the freedoms enjoyed and promoted by the United States and other democracies throughout the world.⁴⁹

In 1996, Representative Gerald Solomon (R-NY) likewise situated governance as the foundation of a securitising move:

The editorial [to be included in the Congressional Record] alludes to the obvious differences between *Communist* China and *democratic* Taiwan in terms of human rights, democratic development, and economic performance. The only area left out is foreign policy orientation. Taiwan is unabashedly pro-Western and pro-United States. Communist China is unabashedly the opposite. It is a *rogue regime*, an enemy of freedom and yes, an *enemy of the United States*.⁵⁰ (Emphasis mine.)

Similarly, Senator Paul Simon (D-IL) left no doubt as to the connection between governance type and the threat posed to the United States:

Mr. President, the best way to avoid force or to avoid giving a *dictator and a dictatorship the appetite that will not be satisfied with conquering one area* is to make clear that that will be resisted by the community of nations. I am not talking about the use of American troops, but I think American air power clearly ought to be brought to bear if such an eventuality should take place.⁵¹ (Emphasis mine.)

To counter these claims, the Clinton administration and allies did not turn to OCP. Instead, the administration turned to a concept the president pioneered in 1994 to justify reversing course on granting Most Favoured Nation trading status to China: engagement.

⁴⁹ Representative Elton Gallegly (R-CA), 'Supporting Taiwan', 141 Congressional Record E1957 (October 17, 1995).

⁵⁰ Representative Gerald Solomon (R-NY), 'China and Taiwan: The obvious differences', 142 Congressional Record E32 (January 5, 1996).

⁵¹ Senator Paul Simon (D-IL), 'China, Taiwan, and the United States', 142 Congressional Record S1634-S1636 (March 7, 1996).

To those who argue that in view of China's human rights abuses we should revoke MFN status, let me ask you the same question that I have asked myself ... Will we do more to advance the cause of human rights if China is isolated or if our nations are engaged in a growing web of political and economic cooperation and contacts? I am persuaded that the best path for *advancing freedom* in China is for the United State to intensify and broaden its *engagement* with that nation.⁵² (Emphasis mine.)

Engagement reappears in 1995 as administration officials sought to prevent securitisation of China. On 29 June 1995, Assistant Secretary Winston Lord explicitly referenced engagement:

That [containment] is emphatically not United States policy. We seek to *engage* China, not contain it. Containment would imply that we treat China as an enemy [which would be] a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁵³ (Emphasis mine.)

A little over a week later, state department spokesman Nicholas Burns again called on engagement to defuse an effort to securitise the PRC:

Q What would you say to those who say that Vietnam would be an important ally as a hedge against Chinese expansionism?

MR. BURNS: Oh, I wouldn't put it in those terms. I wouldn't put it in those terms at all because we have a policy towards China which is grounded in *engagement* ... That was a decision made at the beginning of this Administration ... that that should be the proper posture for the future of U.S.–China relations.⁵⁴ (Emphasis mine.)

In a major foreign-policy speech in July 1995, Secretary of State Warren Christopher again invoked engagement:

The second element of our Pacific strategic is our policy of *engagement* with the other leading powers of the region ... especially our former cold-war adversaries ... With its vast population, its geographic reach, its rich history of cultural influence across Asia, its growing military power and its new economic dynamism, China is just unique. As we shape our policy and as we conduct our diplomacy with China, *we must not allow short-term calculation to divert us from pursuing our long-term interests.*⁵⁵ (Emphasis mine.)

These sentiments were echoed in a major speech on US policy in Asia by Secretary of Defense William Perry.

China is becoming a major world power. As China does so, it is inescapable that China's interest will sometimes harmonize and sometimes conflict with those of the United States. The government of the United States recognizes this fundamental fact. Our response to it as a policy of comprehensive *engagement* with China.⁵⁶ (Emphasis mine.)

⁵²Bill Clinton, 'The President's news conference', The American Presidency Project (1994), available at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=50241>.

⁵³Elaine Sciolino, 'In warning to U.S., China cracks down on 2 dissidents', *The New York Times* (June 29, 1995).

⁵⁴Nicholas Burns, 'U.S. Department of State 95/07/06 daily press briefing', United States Department of State, available at: http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/briefing/daily_briefings/1995/9507/950706db.html.

⁵⁵Warren Christopher, 'U.S. national interest in the Asia-Pacific region', Address before the National Press Club, Washington, DC (28 July 1995), available at: <http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/950728.html>.

⁵⁶William Perry, 'U.S. Strategy: Engage China, not contain it', United States Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1023> (October 30, 1995).

Perry emphasised the critical core of engagement: the long-term promise of democratisation in China:

In the long run, change is coming to China. For example, while Beijing still abuses human rights activists, market reforms are leading to the rapid development of laws that place increasing constraints on government and ultimately will empower citizens to defend basic civil rights.

Indeed, there was already evidence that the promise of democratisation was being realised:

While the ruling Communist Party often practices politics in the old Cold War ways, there is growing experimentation at the village level with democratic elections ... The direction of these changes suggest it is more likely than not that long-term change in China will favor our interest. *Seeking to contain and confront China can only slow down the pace of this change.* (Emphasis mine.)

Later in 1996, Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA) mounted a rare Congressional defence of the administration's desecuritized approach to China. Like members of the Clinton administration, Nunn focused on engagement and its promise on long-term (democratic) change:

American engagement is essential ... by engaging in dialog about our mutual interests and our grievances, by speaking in clear terms in this dialog; by participating in China's development; by greater military transparency between our countries; by helping to educate China's next generation of intellectuals ... its evolution is more likely to be in directions favorable to peace and stability in the Pacific as well as to American interests ... Even were China to embark a process that we would call democratization, the development would be a lengthy one.⁵⁷

Two crucial points stand out in the case. First, references to 'One China' are absent. This suggests that the Clinton administration and congressional allies felt the concept either did not or would not resonate with Congress and the American public as a basis for legitimating a non-confrontational/desecuritized approach towards the PRC. Second, democracy plays a crucial role in constructing the situation. Critics of the administration in Congress sought to securitize the PRC by highlighting the non-democratic nature of the PRC, usually in contrast to the emergent democracy in Taiwan. In an interesting twist, the Clinton administration *also* turned to democracy – drawing on the potential for future democracy in the PRC promised by the policy of engagement.

Case 2: 2003–2004 Taiwanese 'defensive referendum'

In the 2000 presidential campaign, George Bush was harshly critical of the Clinton administration's engagement policy. Consequently, when Bush took office he was rhetorically entrapped.⁵⁸ When a potential crisis in relations emerged – tensions around efforts by Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian to introduce a referendum on cross-strait relations – the Bush administration had to look for other rhetorical tools if it wanted to resist efforts to securitize the PRC.

The core of the tension lay in a new referendum law passed in 2003. Chen, hailing from the Democratic Progressive Party, has broken the Kuomintang hold on the presidency. Greater Taiwanese autonomy was part of the DPP's political platform, and a defence referendum called by Chen to coincide with the 2004 presidential elections was understood by the PRC as an effort

⁵⁷ Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA), 'The relationship between the United States and China', 142 Congressional Record S1285 (February 23, 1996).

⁵⁸ Schimmelfennig, 'The community trap'.

to pursue this agenda.⁵⁹ From the outset, the Bush administration looked to OCP to legitimate its efforts to pressure Taiwan not to follow through on the referendum. In a November press conference, Secretary of State Colin Powell invoked OCP as the basis for dealing with the emerging crisis:

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, are you prepared to receive Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao soon, and are you making preparations to talk about Taiwan?

SECRETARY POWELL: We look forward to his visit and receiving him, and you can be absolutely sure that we will be prepared to discuss Taiwan. As we always do, we reaffirm to our Chinese guests that our 'one China' policy remains our policy; it's founded on the three communiqués, as well as the Taiwan Relations Act, and we do not support independence for Taiwan.⁶⁰

The appeal to OCP was a regular feature of administration rhetoric. At another event, when prompted by a reporter regarding tensions between the PRC and Taiwan, Powell responded almost verbatim:

QUESTION: Is the rhetoric between Taiwan and China over the referendum getting alarming to you at all?

SECRETARY POWELL: No, not alarming ... we reaffirmed to the Chinese again today, and we will when Premier Wen is here next week, that we remain totally committed to our One China policy, founded on the Three Communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act, and we do not support an independent – we do not support independence for Taiwan.⁶¹

Not surprisingly, this language appeared in President Bush's press conference alongside PRC premier Wen Jiabao. In response to a question about cancelling the defence referendum, Bush pointed to the 'One China' policy:

The United States government's policy is one China, based upon the three communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act. We oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo. And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose.⁶²

Notable here is Bush's framing of Taiwan's referendum purely in terms of the central maxim of OCP: Taiwan does nothing to alter the status quo. The idea that the referendum might be an expression of Taiwan's emerging democracy is absent. A background briefing by a senior administration official after the Bush/Wen press conference did engage in some rearguard recognition of Taiwanese democracy, positioning the Bush administration's approach as a defence of Taiwan's democracy

⁵⁹ Mily Ming-Tzu Kao, 'The referendum phenomenon in Taiwan: Solidification of Taiwan consciousness?', *Asian Survey*, 44:4 (2004), pp. 591–613; Bradsher, 'Taiwan passes independence referendum law', *New York Times* (27 November 2003); 'China again warns Taiwan about seeking independence', *New York Times* (28 November 2003).

⁶⁰ Colin Powell, 'Remarks with Macedonian prime minister Branko Crvenkovski after their meeting', United States Department of State, available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/26644.htm> (November 25, 2003).

⁶¹ Colin Powell 'Remarks after meeting with King Abdallah of Jordan', United States Department of State, available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/26924.htm> (December 5, 2003).

⁶² George W. Bush, 'President Bush welcomes Premier of China to the White House', United States Department of State, available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/27017.htm> (December 9, 2003).

by ensuring stability in the region: ‘The President’s top goal is preserving the peace in the Taiwan Strait. We are in no way abandoning support for Taiwan’s democracy or for the spread of freedom.’⁶³

The idea that hewing to OCP preserved Taiwanese democracy was an odd inclusion considering the omissions by Bush and Powell. A press conference with White House spokesman Scott McClellan suggested a possible explanation: a disjuncture between the Bush administration’s advocacy for democracy globally, popular understanding of Taiwan as a democracy, and the ‘One China’ policy:

Q Scott, on the same issue, the Taiwanese make the point that the referendum they have proposed is not about independence, the word doesn’t appear in it; it’s about the Chinese missile build-up on the coast facing Taiwan ... could you tell us, separate from the issue of independence, why is the President opposed to a referendum in a freely held Chinese state on a question of missile build-up?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President talked about some of this in the Oval Office. You heard from him directly. It is our view that the recent statements and proposals coming out of Taiwan that you bring up would imply a desire to change the status quo, and we oppose any unilateral attempt to change the status quo, for the very reasons I was just stating.

Q Can you imagine any other areas around the world where the President would not favor a democratically-held referendum?

MR. McCLELLAN: This has been a longstanding policy and it remains the same.⁶⁴

McClellan would go on to field multiple questions regarding the disparity between Bush administration advocacy for democracy in the rest of the world and its approach towards Taiwan. Notable throughout is McClellan’s implicit retreat to ‘One China’ and emphasis on status quo. Later in December, responding to a question about the apparent contradiction in the Bush administration’s policy, McClellan echoed the argument (mentioned above) made by a senior administration official in the briefing after Bush/Wen summit:

The President’s priority is to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, in order to safeguard Taiwan’s democracy, to promote the spread of personal freedoms in China and spare the region the scourge of war. That’s the President’s priority. We support Taiwan’s democracy ... The President’s uncompromising position on Taiwan security is the clearest proof of his administration’s commitment on that. And the President made it clear to Premier Wen that the United States would fulfill its obligations to help Taiwan defend itself, as called for under the Taiwan Relations Act.⁶⁵

However, others in the administration continued to emphasise OCP. Powell, responding to a question about Taiwan ‘hearing the message’, invoked OCP:

the President spoke so clearly and forcefully in support of our “One China” policy and based on the three communiqués and our responsibilities under the Taiwan Relations Act ... The message was heard and received, and we will see how Taiwan works itself through the referendum idea a little later on in the spring.⁶⁶

⁶³White House Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Background briefing on President’s meeting with Chinese Premier Wen’, United States Department of State, available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/27182.htm> (December 9, 2003).

⁶⁴Scott McClellan, ‘Press briefing by Scott McClellan’, White House Office of the Press Secretary, available at: <https://www.pressency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-briefing-scott-mcclellan-239> (December 9, 2003).

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Colin Powell, ‘Secretary Powell’s press conference’, United States Department of State, available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/28008.htm> (January 8, 2004).

Congressional discourses stood in stark contrast. Representative Scott Garrett (R-NJ) constructed the referendum as a defensive measure undertaken by a fellow democracy and long-standing US partner:

Taiwan's democracy is modeled after ours and its economic prosperity depends much on the mutual trade between Taiwan and the United States ... despite the lack of formal diplomatic relations, Taiwan is a close ally of our government ... Taiwan's planned March 20 referendum, contrary to what Chinese leaders have said about it, is designed to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait ... I feel the 23 million people of Taiwan have a right to hold such a referendum. We mustn't allow China to intimidate Taiwan with talks of overtaking Taiwan by force and other verbal threats.⁶⁷

Garrett's comments in many ways are the mirror image of those presented by the administration. The problem for Garrett is PRC bellicosity, and the responsibility of US policy is to position itself as a bulwark in support of Taiwan (in the name of stability, a twist on the argument made by McClellan and others). While Allen stops short of making a securitising move, he is clearly laying the groundwork for one: identification of a referent object (Taiwan, existentially valued because of shared democracy) and a threat (PRC).

Others in Congress echoed Garrett's framing. Representative Chris Bell (D-TX) advocated support for 'efforts by the Taiwanese President and people to facilitate a peaceful, stable, and democratic environment in East Asia. Despite continued aggression by the People's Republic of China, Taiwan has maintained grace and sensibility.'⁶⁸ Bell goes on to explicitly identify the PRC as a threat to stability in the region and to Taiwan specifically:

This referendum ... constitutes an effort to prevent *Mainland China from using force and unilaterally changing the status quo*. China has never renounced the use of force in the Taiwan Straits and has 496 missiles targeting Taiwan. (Emphasis mine.)

In a defence of Taiwan's 'Peace Referendum', Senator George Allen (R-VA) likewise underlined shared democracy and explicitly links the fate of Taiwan through shared democracy to a core element of the ontological security of Americans:

Taiwan, our ally and friend, is a democracy. Its people have every right to hold their referendum this March 20. Taiwan's referendum law is a basic democratic right that the United States should support rather than denigrate. The future of Taiwan must be determined peacefully, with the express consent of the people of Taiwan. *Since its establishment, the United States has been the foremost champion of liberty and democracy in the world. We can, therefore, not afford to tell the people of Taiwan not to hold a referendum.* There can be no double standard when it comes to exercising democracy.⁶⁹ (Emphasis mine.)

As in the 1995–6 crisis, the domestic political dynamic sets members of Congress – invoking shared democracy to identify Taiwan as a valued referent object and/or situating the PRC as a threat – against the presidential administration seeking to minimise damage to the Sino-American relationship. Unlike in the Clinton administration, the Bush administration had no ability to leverage against the discursive power of an imagined future of shared democracy. Perhaps reflecting the discursive weakness of OCP (particularly in the face of repeated questions of administration hypocrisy), 'One China' policy appeals on merit appeared to give way to a claim that OCP would promote stability which in turn would defend Taiwanese democracy. The instability of OCP discourse and specifically the shift to the claim that OCP served to defend Taiwanese democracy

⁶⁷ Scott Garrett, 'Taiwanese referendum', 150 Congressional Record E91 (February 3, 2004).

⁶⁸ Chris Bell, 'Taiwan', 150 Congressional Record E109 (February 4, 2004).

⁶⁹ George Allen, 'Taiwan's Peace Referendum', 150 Congressional Record S647 (February 5, 2004).

suggests that as a basis for desecuritisation or policy legitimisation it lacks political and popular resonance.

Case 3: 2016 Taiwanese election and ‘the call’

At the start of 2016, DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen won Taiwan’s presidential election. At the end of that year, President Tsai called then president-elect Donald Trump to congratulate him on his victory in the 2016 election. The call was seen at the time as an unprecedented step by Trump with the potential to roil Sino-American relations.⁷⁰ The call also drew attention to Trump’s willingness to question OCP as a basis for Sino-American relations. As a year, 2016 holds two focal points allowing for insight into the role that OCP plays in constructing American understandings of the PRC and Taiwan.

Sampling discourses over an entire year also offers a suggestion regarding the durability of these constructions in the interstices between focal-point events. However, much of the discourse does not rise to the level of public attention. Furthermore, the lack of acute crisis means specific securitising moves will be absent. Thus, in contrast to the previous two cases this section focuses on prevailing discourses that may reveal the common-sense understandings of the area and thus provide a foundation upon which securitising moves may be constructed in a future crisis.

The Obama administration largely ignored Taiwan, perhaps due in part to election-year domestic focus. The election of Tsai passed without comment at the time. Nearly two months later, in a press briefing after a trilateral meeting between Obama and the leaders of Japan and South Korea, administration officials were pressed on the administration’s stance regarding Taiwan and cross-strait relations. In response to a question about possible US concerns regarding cross-strait relations, National Security Council Senior Director for Asian Affairs Kritenbrink invoked OCP:

President Obama will make very clear that we remain committed to our One-China Policy based on both the three joint communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act. I’m confident he’ll also make very clear that we have welcomed the historic progress in Cross-Strait relations over the last eight years, and we’d like to see that progress, that peace and that stability to continue.⁷¹

Apart from a passing mention by President Obama in September highlighting Taiwan’s democracy during a press conference in Laos – ‘And we know that democracy can flourish in Asia because we’ve seen it thrive from Japan and South Korea to Taiwan’⁷² – Taiwan and cross-strait relations did not figure substantially in executive-branch discourses. In the election year, both Democratic and Republican platforms addressed Taiwan. Perhaps not surprisingly given it was the party in power with a need to maintain balanced relations with the PRC, the Democratic platform invoked OCP:

We are committed to a ‘One China’ policy and the Taiwan Relations Act and will continue to support a peaceful resolution of Cross-Strait issues that is consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan.⁷³

⁷⁰F. Brinley Bruton, Abigail Williams, Ed Flanagan, and Eric Baculinao, ‘Donald Trump’s call with Taiwan president was no surprise: Official’, NBC News (3 December 2016).

⁷¹Office of the White House, ‘Press briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes, and National Security Council Senior Director for Asian Affairs Dan Kritenbrink’, The American Presidency Project, available at: {<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-briefing-principal-deputy-press-secretary-eric-schultz-deputy-national-security>} (March 31, 2016).

⁷²Barack Obama, ‘Remarks in Vientiane, Laos’, available at: {<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-vientiane-laos>} (September 6, 2016).

⁷³Democratic Platform Committee, ‘2016 Democratic Party Platform’ (2016), 44.

The platform likewise makes little mention of China, aside from a brief reference to China as one of several countries undertaking unfair trade practices.⁷⁴ In contrast, the Republican platform devoted a substantial paragraph to Taiwan. It makes no mention of OCP and substantially emphasises Taiwan's democracy while making an explicit promise to support Taiwanese defence in the event of PRC aggression:

We salute the people of Taiwan, with whom we share the values of democracy, human rights, a free market economy, and the rule of law. Our relations will continue to be based upon the provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act, and we affirm the Six Assurances given to Taiwan in 1982 by President Reagan. We oppose any unilateral steps by either side to alter the status quo in the Taiwan Straits on the principle that all issues regarding the island's future must be resolved peacefully, through dialogue, and be agreeable to the people of Taiwan. If China were to violate those principles, the United States, in accord with the Taiwan Relations Act, will help Taiwan defend itself.⁷⁵

Perhaps significantly, the platform's discursive defence of Taiwan came before an excoriation of the PRC:

China's behavior has negated the optimistic language of our last platform concerning our future relations with China. The liberalizing policies of recent decades have been abruptly reversed, dissent brutally crushed, religious persecution heightened, the internet crippled, a barbaric population control two-child policy of forced abortions and forced sterilizations continued, and the cult of Mao revived ... The complacency of the Obama regime has emboldened the Chinese government and military to issue threats of intimidation throughout the South China Sea, not to mention parading their new missile, 'the Guam Killer', down the main streets of Beijing, a direct shot at Guam as America's first line of defense.⁷⁶

The language constructs China as an authoritarian menace and, while stopping short of claiming a direct military threat to the United States, does suggest a militarised threat with the commentary regarding Guam.

The differences in the two platforms are substantial. The presence of 'One China' in the Democratic platform, as the voice of the party in power, suggests that OCP serves as architecture for cross-strait policy. The greater focus on Taiwan in the Republican platform as well as emphasis on democracy and absence of OCP (particularly contrasting against subsequent substantial criticisms of the PRC) suggests Republicans believe OCP does not resonate with public understandings, which rather are constructed through a sense of shared democracy and Taiwanese independence.

Taiwan broke into the headlines on 2 December when president-elect Donald Trump took a congratulatory call from Tsai, an event that had not occurred since normalisation of relations between the United States and the PRC in 1979. Shortly afterwards, Trump suggested policy based on OCP was negotiable and predicated on agreement with the PRC on other issues: 'I don't know why we have to be bound by a "One China" policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade.'⁷⁷

These two events prompted President Obama to offer some of the most substantive comments of his presidency on Taiwan and the cross-strait relationship. He noted that OCP speaks to a core aspect of PRC identity:

⁷⁴Ibid., 12.

⁷⁵Republican National Convention, 'Republican Platform 2016' (2016), 48.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Tom Phillips, 'China "seriously concerned" after Trump questions Taiwan policy', *The Guardian* (12 December 2016).

But understand, for China, the issue of Taiwan is as important as anything on their docket. The idea of one China is at the heart of their conception as a nation ... This goes to the core of how they see themselves.⁷⁸

Obama's observation suggests OCP in US policy is principally a tool for desecuritising relations with China and targeted primarily at the PRC, not the general American public.

In January 2017, president-elect Trump repeated his position that OCP in policy would be open for review based on Chinese reciprocity on trade issues.⁷⁹ Again, Trump's willingness to treat OCP as a bargaining piece vis-à-vis the PRC suggests it is not a discourse that resonates or is rooted in US public conceptions but is rather a discourse primarily valued by leaders in Beijing and the public in mainland China.

Taiwan figured more prominently in Congressional speech throughout 2016. Across speakers, a clear pattern emerges: Taiwan as a democratic, independent state. OCP plays no role in Congressional statements on Taiwan or cross-strait relations. Representative Ted Lieu (D-CA) set the mould in the first comments of the year addressing Taiwan. Lieu sought to draw attention to:

our close ally Taiwan as it prepares to conduct free, fair and democratic presidential elections. On January 16, 2016, the Taiwanese people will go to the polls in a tremendous display of the core democratic principle of self-determination ... I ask my colleagues to join me in wishing Taiwan a successful democratic and independent election.⁸⁰

Three points stand out here. First, Lieu labels Taiwan an 'ally' of the United States, seeking to establish it as trustworthy and independent of the PRC. Second, the repeated invocations of Taiwan's democratic character established Taiwan part of the same democratic community as the United States. Third, the appeal to self-determination/independence as another means of distinguishing Taiwan from the PRC. All three points operate in distinct contrast to OCP.

In early February, Representative Kenny Marchant (R-CA) made very similar points in the aftermath of Taiwan's election:⁸¹

I rise today to congratulate Dr. Tsai Ing-wen on her victory in the Taiwanese presidential election held on January 16, 2016 ... as well as the people of Taiwan for this historic vote that signifies so much for the continuing strength of democracy in Taiwan ... We are bound by the values and principles we share; and the peaceful and free election on January 16 once again demonstrates that Taiwan's robust democracy is an example to the rest of the region. The free and democratic system that has been established over the decades is a testament to the commendable dedication and determination of a free Taiwanese people ... I urge my colleagues to remain committed to the security of Taiwan.

Other members of Congress pointed to Taiwan's status as the 'only democracy in the Chinese speaking world'⁸² and claimed it as a 'staunch ally of the United States, one who shares our common values of freedom, human rights, and civil society'.⁸³ In sum, across all of 2016, 28 distinct

⁷⁸ Office of the White House, 'The President's news conference', The American Presidency Project, available at: [<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1139>] (December 16, 2016).

⁷⁹ Peter Nicholas, Paul Beckett, and Gerald F. Seib, 'Trump open to shift on Russia sanctions, "One China" Policy', *Wall Street Journal* (January 13 2017).

⁸⁰ Ted Lieu, 'Supporting Taiwan's democratic elections and right to self-determination', 162 Congressional Record E19 (January 7, 2016).

⁸¹ Kenny Marchant, 'Congratulating Dr. Tsai Ing-Wen on her election as president of Taiwan', 162 Congressional Record E79 (February 1, 2016).

⁸² Sean Patrick Maloney, 'Commemorating the 105th anniversary of the Republic of China (Taiwan)', 162 Congressional Record E1370 (September 27, 2016).

⁸³ Pete Sessions, 'Celebrating the National Day of Taiwan', 162 Congressional Record E1313 (September 20, 2016).

entries (out of 40 mentioning Taiwan in some way) in the Congressional Record directly referenced Taiwanese political society (democracy, freedom, liberty, shared values (with the United States), and human rights.

Democracy discourses were not exclusive; often they intermixed with discourses emphasising economic relations between Taiwan and the United States. For example, Representative Jim Costa (D-CA), in commemorating the 37th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act, noted, 'The Republic of China (Taiwan) is not only our close economic and security partner but a friend with whom we share many principles and values.'⁸⁴ Others constructed Taiwan exclusively in economic terms. An exemplar is Kurt Schrader's (D-OR) tribute to the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA):

Congress enacted the TRA as a way to increase trade and investment opportunities with Taiwan while also strengthening regional security efforts ... Nationally, Taiwan is our ninth largest trading partner. They are also our seventh largest source of international students; a group that contributed almost a billion dollars to the U.S. economy in 2014 alone.

These alternative constructions are important because they may coexist with policy predicated on OCP more easily than the democracy discourses. That said, across the entire Congressional Record no member of Congress mentioned OCP. This absence suggests the OCP has little if any resonance in Congress as a key audience assessing presidential security discourses and that members of Congress did not believe it would resonate with their constituents.

Public opinion

In this section, I address public opinion in the context of the cases as a means of assessing shifting constructions of Taiwan and the PRC as well as the possible role of OCP. At the outset of the 1995–6 crisis, China was not a central concern for the public. In a June 1995 poll – prior to the start of China's first military exercises – only 6% of respondents indicated that China was the most serious foreign-policy issue facing the United States.⁸⁵ In August 1995, despite two months of Chinese military exercises, the public was ambivalent towards China. Roughly equal numbers saw China as a friend (25%) and an enemy (24%), with a plurality (45%) indicating China was neither a friend nor an enemy of the United States.⁸⁶ This stood in stark contrast to views of Taiwan. In the same poll, a large majority of Americans (64%) felt Taiwan was a close ally (14%) or a friend (50%).⁸⁷

As Congressional securitising moves gathered force, public opinion began to shift. By the end of the first week in November, respondents felt China was essentially tied with North Korea in terms of perceived military threat to long-standing US ally Japan.⁸⁸ While there is no pre-crisis poll to compare this result to, the comparison is significant. In the eyes of Americans, China was perceived to be as aggressive as North Korea, a state against which the United States had deployed military force for nearly 50 years. The response – particularly compared to the disengagement evident in early polls – suggests a significant shift in threat construction was occurring among the public.

This shift, however, was unstable, and public opinion was not coherent. In January, during the lull in the crisis, polling indicated that the public had a marginally favourable view of China. A slight majority (49%) indicated that they viewed China favourably while 45% felt negatively

⁸⁴ Jim Costa, 'Commemorating the 37th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act', 162 Congressional Record E504 (April 18, 2016).

⁸⁵ NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll: Federal Budget, Question 43. Usnbcwsj.060895.R24a' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1995).

⁸⁶ Louis Harris & Associates Poll: August 1995, Question 40. Usharris.100295.R1m' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1995).

⁸⁷ Louis Harris & Associates Poll: August 1995. Question 35: Usharris.100295.R1h' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1995).

⁸⁸ Today, 'Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll: 1996 Election / Republican Proposals. Question 23: Usgallup.95nov6.R28' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1995). China was indicated by 42 per cent; 43 per cent indicated North Korea.

towards China.⁸⁹ Responses to a February poll regarding US military involvement in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan demonstrated strong American unwillingness to use military force in the region. Only 29% of respondents felt the United States should fight in the event of a Chinese assault on Taiwan.⁹⁰ A similar number (26%) felt the United States should send an aircraft carrier to decrease China's influence on Taiwan's election.⁹¹

At the same time, however, there is significant evidence that Americans were broadly sympathetic to Taiwan. In the February Harris poll, 62% of respondents indicated they thought of Taiwan as a separate and independent country, and 56% supported a Taiwanese bid for United Nations membership even if doing so angered China.⁹² Over two-thirds (69%) felt that Taiwan should reunify with the mainland only if the Taiwanese desired. Only 2% supported Beijing's contention that Taiwan should be reunited under any circumstances, and 18% said reunification should never occur.⁹³

In March, public opinion resumed its trend towards support of the Congressional position. A poll in the second week of March showed a 10-point swing in US perception of China towards the negative. Now, Americans by an 11-percentage point margin (54% to 43%) viewed China negatively.⁹⁴ By contrast, Taiwan's favourability remained high at 64%.⁹⁵ The public also reversed its position on sending aircraft carrier battle groups (CBGs) to the region, approving by a margin of 54% to 35% Clinton's aircraft carrier deployment.⁹⁶ The public also became markedly more willing to deploy US forces to counter China, suggesting Congressional securitising moves were gaining traction. While respondents in February overwhelmingly (65%) refused to fight China if it attacked Taiwan, by March the numbers were nearly even; 43% of respondents favoured the use of force to help defend Taiwan to 46% against.⁹⁷ The hardening of US opinion against China indicates that the Congressional securitising move – grounded in the democratic identity of the public – had been remarkably successful. While OCP was absent from presidential and congressional discourses, polling indicates Americans understood the PRC and Taiwan as very distinct entities. The public reaction to events suggests OCP does not provide a foundation for American crisis foreign-policy-making in the region.

Because the events of 2003–4 and 2016 did not rise to crisis levels, polling data for those cases is limited to the regular polling various organisations undertake to understand American public opinion on the PRC, Taiwan, and cross-strait concerns. In the 2003–4 case, polling generally shows Americans were positively disposed towards Taiwan. A 2004 poll showed a majority (77%) of Americans felt Taiwan a somewhat (44%), very (26%), or most (7%) important ally or friend to the United States.⁹⁸ At the same time, a majority of Americans had a mostly (38%) or very (16%)

⁸⁹Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll: 1996 Election. Question 105: Usgallup.96jan.Q38' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹⁰Louis Harris & Associates Poll: February 1996, Question 11. Usharris.030896.R5' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹¹Louis Harris & Associates Poll: February 1996, Question 10. Usharris.030896.R4' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹²Louis Harris & Associates Poll: February 1996, Question 8. Usharris.030896.R2' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹³Louis Harris & Associates Poll: February 1996, Question 9. Usharris.030896.R3' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹⁴Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll: Foreign Countries. Question 24: Usgallup.960307.Q22i' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹⁵Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll: Foreign Countries, Question 30. Usgallup.960307.Q22o' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹⁶ABCNews/Washington Post Poll: March Political Poll, Question 110' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹⁷Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll # 1996-9603008: Politics/1996 Election, Question 106. Usgallup.96mr15.R46' (Ithaca, NY: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996).

⁹⁸Committee of 100 Poll: December 2004, Question 10. Uszogy.05china .R11' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2004).

unfavourable opinion of the PRC.⁹⁹ In a different poll, 86% of respondents felt Chinese military power was an important (46%) or critical (39%) threat to US vital interests.¹⁰⁰ The polls suggest widely divergent understandings of Taiwan and the PRC by Americans. This conclusion is supported by the only poll I have been able to locate specifically addressing the OCP, also conducted in 2004. In that survey, 77% of respondents indicated they would support Taiwanese independence. Only 14% agreed that the 'One China' Policy should be maintained as a framework for negotiations between the PRC and Taiwan.¹⁰¹

Polling addressing these questions – American understandings of Taiwan and the PRC – is absent in 2016. Proximate polling tells a story like that of 2003–4. A 2014 feeling-thermometer poll showed a substantial majority (69%) were neutral (31%), warm-feeling (21%), or very warm-feeling (17%) towards Taiwan.¹⁰² In 2017, a favourability poll had 73% of respondents holding either mostly (60%) or very (13%) favourable views of Taiwan.¹⁰³ As in 2003–4, understandings of the PRC diverged substantially. In a 2014 poll, the PRC ranked second in terms of states posing the greatest threat to the United States in the future, just behind post-Crimea invasion Russia.¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, a 2017 poll showed a slight majority with a favourable opinion of China, 50% favourable to 48% unfavourable, though PRC favourability is 23% behind that of Taiwan.¹⁰⁵

These polls tell a consistent story: Taiwan and the PRC are understood as distinct entities by the American public, with Taiwan understood in favourable or friendly terms while the PRC is understood largely in unfavourable or threatening terms. Indeed, in a 2019 poll, respondents ranked China as tied with Russia as the greatest future threat to the United States.¹⁰⁶ The polling suggests that OCP has failed to penetrate common American understandings of the region regardless of the effort of some presidential administrations to draw upon it to legitimate policy.

Conclusion

The relationship triangle between Taiwan, the United States, and the People's Republic of China has been one of the defining dynamics in East Asia since the Kuomintang lost the civil war in 1949. As the PRC has grown in economic and military strength, the relationship has grown more difficult to manage for the United States as it seeks to maintain cross-strait peace and stability by preventing unilateral changes in the status quo. The One China Policy has been the primary mechanism by which US foreign-policymakers have balanced competing domestic and international demands. The question at the heart of this study is whether OCP can support maintaining the United States–PRC–Taiwan relationship triangle within the realm of normal politics. I find that a substantial disjuncture has grown between OCP's policy and political/discursive functions: while OCP plays a predominant role in policymaking, it is not anchored in general American understandings of the region, Taiwan, or the PRC. Consequently, while OCP has served to structure policymaking, its continued policy viability will be increasingly untenable.

⁹⁹Gallup Organization Poll: February 2004, Question 28. Usgallup.04fby09.R23m' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2004).

¹⁰⁰Gallup Organization Poll: February 2004, Question 54. Usgallup.04fb009.R25a' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2004).

¹⁰¹Committee of 100 Poll: December 2004, Question 29. Uszogby.05china.R30' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2004).

¹⁰²Chicago Council on Global Affairs Poll: 2014 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy, Question 139. Uskn.2014ccga.Q19x' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2014).

¹⁰³Gallup Organization Poll: February 2017, Question 54. Usgallup.022017.R19u' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2017).

¹⁰⁴Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll: April 2014. Question 18: Uspsra.071414.g.R096b1' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2014).

¹⁰⁵Gallup Organization Poll: February 2017, Question 37. Usgallup.022017.R19c' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2017).

¹⁰⁶Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll. Question 2: 31116681.00001' (Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion, 2019).

The first indicator of OCP's core weakness lies in the inconsistency with which OCP is discursively deployed by presidential administrations. The Clinton administration barely referenced it to manage the 1995–6 crisis, choosing instead to draw upon the concept of engagement and the potential for future mainland Chinese democratisation it offered. Rhetorically trapped, the Bush administration could not rely on engagement and instead turned to OCP. The Obama administration, with an important caveat, also relied on OCP even as president-elect Donald Trump openly questioned it. The caveat lies in Obama's admission that the wellspring of OCP lies with the PRC rather than in the United States. Across the cases but particularly in 2016, members of Congress rarely if ever refer to OCP as a basis for policy in the region, suggesting it is an artifact of foreign policy. Taken together, these cases suggest OCP cannot support maintaining the United States–PRC–Taiwan relationship triangle within the realm of normal politics. Thus, while OCP provides a policymaking architecture for keeping peace and stability in cross-strait relations, it does not provide effective politico-discursive tools for pushing back against securitisation.

The second indicator of OCP weakness lies in polling. Americans consistently understand Taiwan and the PRC as distinct entities and construct Taiwan in much more favourable terms. The only survey speaking to OCP and Taiwanese independence shows overwhelming support for Taiwanese independence at the explicit expense of OCP. The tendencies suggested in the polling data as well as in the discourses – many of which highlight Taiwan's democratic identity – make it far more likely that other elements of threat construction in the United States (e.g. shared democratic identity) will play a more significant role in making sense of United States–PRC–Taiwan relations. As they study the region with an eye towards anticipating behavioural dynamics in a crisis, scholars and policymakers would be well served to keep the substantial limitations of OCP as a basis for policymaking in mind.

As matters stand, it is difficult to envision an alternative to OCP that would simultaneously allow policymakers to counter efforts to securitise the PRC (that is, to maintain Sino-American relations in the realm of normal politics) over Taiwan while maintaining the diplomatic status quo in the region. The democratisation of Taiwan fundamentally undermined the socio-political foundations of OCP – that the contest between the PRC and Taiwan was between two authoritarian regimes with indistinguishable sovereignty claims. In that context, domestic pressure from Congress and a public receptive to security claims based in democratic identity will continue to push security politics in US increasingly out of alignment with OCP as a policymaking architecture, while leaving US policymakers without an obvious replacement that can serve a similar function.

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