

East Asia Hotspots - Caught in the Middle: US-China-Taiwan Triangular Relations
Transcription

Richard Haddock:

Welcome to the East Asia Hotspots podcast, where we invite you to join us for chats with experts and scholars from around the world to talk about contemporary issues in East Asia. I'm the lead facilitator, Richard Haddock, with the George Washington University. Support of this podcast comes from the US Department of Education's title six grant for East Asian studies at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.

Richard Haddock:

Our partners at the Elliott School that helped make this podcast happen are the Sigur Center for Asian studies and the GW Institute for Korean studies. The views and opinions expressed in these podcasts are those of the speakers alone and do not reflect the position of the NRC. Through these podcasts we want to encourage dialogue about diverse perspectives in East Asian studies. Check on our website at nrc.elliott.gwu.edu for all our podcast episodes and info about East Asian studies at the George Washington University. Now, let's start the conversation.

Richard Haddock:

Welcome everyone to the East Asia Hotspots podcast brought to you by the East Asia National Resource Center at the George Washington University. I'm Richard Haddock, and I'll be interviewing today, Hung-Jen Wang, Associate Professor of Political Science at the National Chengchi University in Taiwan, and recently elected secretary for the Taiwan Society of Japan Studies.

Richard Haddock:

His research focuses mainly on post and non-Western international relations theories, Chinese foreign policy and cross straight relations. Dr. Wang is the author of the book *The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations Scholarship*, and coauthor of *China and International Theory: The Balance of Relationships*.

Richard Haddock:

He's also published several journal articles and written book chapters that further examined China as a modern nation of state and its policies in line with international relations theory. Dr. Wang is currently an East Asia voices initiative fellow at the East Asia NRC, at the Elliott School of International Affairs. Hung-Jen, welcome.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Thank you very much. Hello, Richard and hello everyone. It's my pleasure to be here today. I am really happy to share my experiences and some ideas with all of you about Taiwan, China and the United States. The three actors, the relations between these three actors.

Richard Haddock:

That's great. So, actually our first question is exactly on that. The research currently with the NRC concentrates on these triangular relations between the US, Taiwan and China, especially since 2008. What motivated you to undertake this project, and what are some key trends within triangular relations from 2008 that you think will be important to watch now and in the future?

Hung-Jen Wang:

It's a very good question. So, I think for practical reason, actually I live here in Taiwan. The survival of the Taiwan is actually connected of course to my life. It's quite important for people here in Taiwan to know about Taiwan's real situation in Asia Pacific region or in the global society, international society.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So, probably since the 1949, the situation between Taiwan and mainland China, I mean, we can see the several different ages over relationship development between the two sides. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. During the past few decades, actually the United States, even if this country is not actually geographically located in Asia, but it has a great say in the situation between Taiwan and the Mainland China.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So, that's a political reason for me to try to... I think I spent all my academic life to understand the real situation between United States, Taiwan and the Mainland China. And how can we explain the situations between the three actors or probably, how can we solve the problems between Taiwan and mainland China?

Hung-Jen Wang:

Is quite from the political reasons, but for the academical reason. Examples students, actually I will say that I'm a student of international studies, because right now I am teaching Asia security courses or the relevant courses in my university, in the department of political science. For the academic reasons, I think that is quite interesting to understand the situations, especially after 2008.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So I think Richard, you asked a key point of here, because this year 2008, I think is really key year here in our discussion. Because in 2008, we know that China just held Olympic Games. I mean, after 2008, because of these international events, Chinese people, I think that they suddenly had a greater confidence in their nation.

Hung-Jen Wang:

They saw that right now, they are greater power in the world. They can hold these kinds of international events. So they have this ability to involve the international governance, for example,

2008 we know that we have at least financial crisis starting from the United States. They went through the Europe and come back to Asia. But during that period of time, the performance over Asia countries to be evaluated higher than that of United States or those European countries.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I think because of this financial crisis, probably some Asia countries, especially China thought that, I mean, they have more competence in their ability to deal with these kind of a similar financial crisis. It's unlike 20 years ago, Mainland China are the only to be the victim of this kind of international crisis.

Hung-Jen Wang:

And after 2008, probably 2010, we know that the Mainland China already become the second largest economic entity in the world. That means that they beat Japan as the number two in the world. I mean, in terms of its economic performance, economic growth. So the only country ahead of Mainland China is the United States. So I mean, 2008 is quite important for people like me studying international politics.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So I think these kind of are the two major factors motivated me to undertake this project about Mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States. You mentioned about key trends, I mean, from 2008. From my point of view, I think there are several things we can measure about here. The first thing I just mentioned that, because we noticed that 2008 is a key year, is a crucial year in history.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I mean this event influenced, I will say the configuration of our current power politics, and the regional order in Asia. Configuration means that, I mean, the arrangement of those different powers in our current international societies, such as the arrangement between mainland China and the United States. We will say the two major countries or two greater powers since 2008, they start to compete with each others in terms of economic competition, in terms of military competition, in terms of the technological competition.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I think since 2008, until so far, or probably we can expect in the future, in next year, in 2020, in 2022, and so on. This competition will continue between these two great powers, China and the United States. That's the first point. And the second point, I think since 2008, we have seen the rise of right wing state leaders in Asia, such as Kim Jong-un in North Korea, Abe in Japan, who just resigned as a prime minister. Park Geun-hye, the previous president in South Korea and the most recent Xi Jinping, in China.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So, I mean, since 2008, we see, I will say that extremist or the right wing voices rise to influence our international parties as well as international order. So that's, I think the second trend we will expect in the future. So continue to influence our lives, especially political lives or economic life. Especially when we talk about the relationship between China and Taiwan and the United States. I have four points here.

Hung-Jen Wang:

The third trend, I think, especially during this time, I mentioned that China just held Olympic Games, I mean, in 2008. China just held Olympic Games, and the Chinese people have a strong confidence since then about its nation. And in 2010, China passed Japan as the world's second largest economic entity.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Even right now, I think if you go to China, I think they are quite proud about their economic performance, their technological performance, their military performance, because they always think about these kinds of a hundred years of humiliation from the Western countries. So that means they have at least the motivation to try to be strong, to try to be autonomous nation state in the world. So they try to be presenting this self-image in front of the western powers.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So that's probably the reason why in China, the society still support at least a strong leadership, Xi Jinping to rule these countries. So we heard about that Xi Jinping properly, we are not stepping down going it's a second term has ended up. I mean, he probably will continue to his governance in China, but this actually received a strong support of the society he may have where it's not actually a democratic country to elect it's a leadership.

Hung-Jen Wang:

The last point here, I will like to stay that because right now we, we are expecting the new leadership in the United States, actually from the Democratic Party. So I think probably Obama's Asia Policy will come back again probably I think we can expect to these new, or maybe this old, the revival of Obama's Asia Policy in Asia, of course, and also influence the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So that's kind of the things that we can expect, because of this kind of a revival of Obama's Asia Policy will emphasize the multilateral framework in Asia. That's quite, will be a good opportunity for Taiwan's government to try to see how Taiwan can play a crucial role in promoting these multi-lateral framework. For example, I mean, Taiwan has been good to model in democracy. Taiwan

has a good economic performance and the Taiwan has a new South part of the policy during the past four years.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Those kinds of things already provide a good foundation for Taiwan to become a part of a regional multilateral framework. So probably in this sense, I mean, Taiwan and the United States could cooperate with each others. In that sense means that, I mean, Taiwan can put more power to, for example, I would say bargaining power to negotiate with the leadership in mainland China, to talk about more, I mean, probably to define more about Taiwan and China's future with the issue, I mean, a future. So probably that's my answer for your first equation.

Richard Haddock:

Yeah. Thank you for laying out those four trends onto China-Taiwan relations. Since president sign one was elected into office in Taiwan in 2016 relations across the street have been chilled. From China's actions from poaching Taiwan's diplomatic allies to even sending military planes repeatedly into Taiwan's air defense identification zones.

Richard Haddock:

How would you generally characterize the current state across straight relations? Is it all chilled or are there other elements at play and how do we get here? And then secondly, how do you see Taiwan and China relations advancing in the future?

Hung-Jen Wang:

Thank you. I would say that the current state of cross-Strait relations, I mean that means Taiwan and mainland China, can be characterized as, in quite an academic jargon, called a stalemate or political deadlock. That means us so far we do not have a healthy dialogue between Taiwan and mainland China, not only between the governmental sides, but also from the societal sides.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So far, of course, because of this pandemic issues. So the exchange of the people between the two sides has been decreasing. So that's a kind of a problem for this political deadlock. It's not healthy. Some people will say that it is approaching the brink of war in the current cross-Strait relationship.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I'm not so pessimistic, but I don't think right now we are developing toward a healthy direction, actually, in my view, I think it is true that the political dialogue between leaders in two sites in both Taiwan and China is already deceased by the economic and the social exchanges can be very active as long as we can experience it through the current period of COVID-19 issues.

Hung-Jen Wang:

That means for the political, part-time kind of see the continuous still luck in the future, but probably the societal exchange could be much better after, I mean, in the post COVID-19 period. In terms of your question, how do we get here? I think many factors, at least I could think about 10 contribute to the Cohen to political deadlock.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Their luck for is I think China's self assertive of behavior. For example, in Hong Kong, they have this kind of a new national security roles, impulse on Hong Kong people that kind of make, many people in Taiwan feel about the potential reunification with mainland China if that happened probably the Beijing will treat Taiwan people the same as the way they treat the Hong Kong people. So the Hong Kong issues and the Xi Jinping situation, China's behavior in South China sea, and of course, Xi Jinping it's government. I mean, they are oppressive control in governing people.

Hung-Jen Wang:

We heard about that over bad news. How Beijing have this kind of oppressive control, such as monitoring people's information to control their opinions, control the use of internet. And so on, I mean more and more, especially Taiwan's young people or young generations, they cannot except to China. So this kind of behavior, not to mention that Xi Jinping in the early 2019, Xi Jinping gave a political speech to Taiwan's people.

Hung-Jen Wang:

He said that the both sides probably to work together, to think about this one country, two system, we supposedly Taiwan proposal. And so on, I mean but the point is China's government. They always try to use this idea or principles one country, two system, to try to convince Taiwanese people to be United with mainland China in the future.

Hung-Jen Wang:

But to be honest, if you ask the young people here in Taiwan, they cannot accept all these. So one China, one country, two system, they are afraid of at least idea proposed by Chinese governments and the more and more young people, which are the ones who have more autonomy in Taiwan's international popular patients. They would like to participate more in the regional organizations, international organizations. And so I think probably that's the reason why we get here right now.

Richard Haddock:

Yes, definitely a complicated and long set of issues that help us inform how the situation is today onto a US-China relations in the last four years or so, maybe even a little bit longer. Us-China

relations have not exactly been at a high point either from trade disputes, to different views about the future of Hong Kong to even global public health issues.

Richard Haddock:

As we're experiencing now related to COVID, tensions are high and seem to have been high for some time. What do you see are some of the main drivers of this tension and how is Taiwan caught in the middle?

Hung-Jen Wang:

Thank you. It's a good question. And I think I would like to propose four points to probably to explain, of course you can have more points or to explain these situations, especially Taiwan's caught up in the middle between the two major powers. For me or from my view points, I think the big problem is that two great powers they have a different views.

Hung-Jen Wang:

They have a different understandings of each other. Of course they know, I will say that they know the language. I mean, they know the other side, what the other side is talking about in terms of language. But I think behind the two countries, I mean each country, they have a different history, different culture, different philosophy, different view, or different worldview and in many ways are different.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I mean, this kind of the way to understand that each others' kind of also prevent each others from truly understanding the meanings of the behavior or the actions from the other side. So probably that's where conflict arrived from. The four point I would like to specify here is that for example, the first point, I would like to say China and the United States, of course, Taiwan kind of on the same side with the United States. We see these two group we will probably see two different regime types.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So even if in the Chinese constitution, Chinese people states that, China is a democratic country. Is Like North Korea also say this democracy turn in their constitutions, but actually we it is probably is well known that China is not actually a democratic country or it's not yet a democratic country.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So far we, at best we can say that China is in authoritarian regime, even if it's not a warfare darts. So from the view of a democratic countries such as the United States and the Taiwan, I mean, it's a really hard for democratic countries to engage with authoritarian regime in a healthy way.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So, I mean, there are a lot of things that need to do from the view of a United States and Taiwan and mainland China to be reformed or to be improved a lot in terms of legal system. So my point is that they are two different regions and, but the Chinese people, they can not accept these two that is a better to become a democratic countries.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I mean, Chinese people, they will say that they are a democratic country with Chinese characteristics. For example, it sounds like it cues to other people, right. Or to the international societies. So far what we see is that because the Chinese system or the Chinese government is not yet a democratic institution. So far we see a lot of things, such a violation of human rights issues in their country. So it cannot be accepted to, for the international societies just to see these rigid type of, so we can file that.

Hung-Jen Wang:

It's quite easy to, for international societies to have some issues with mainland China. So that's for the first point. And the second point is that, we have been observing more and more assertive behavior or regional behavior from the Chinese government. As I just mentioned about these South China Sea issues, China's still claim it's their territory. You mean for those territories are quite disputed with those Southeast Asia countries, but China behavior in good times, quite a braver, or they have a so much confidence in claiming their territories.

Hung-Jen Wang:

But to those countries who suffer from these issues, they will be very worried about Chinese future behavior. If they would take any military action to solve those territorial disputes or not. Especially since 2008, I mean, these assertive feelings or these negative feelings from the Chinese side has become a threat to many countries in the region. Not to mention that to the threat to the United States and Taiwan. So that's a second a point.

Hung-Jen Wang:

And a third point is about trade conflict. We will see in that a serious confrontation between China and the United States. Some people will say that it's a trade war, but I think at least it's a trade confrontation between these two greater pounders. So I don't think that's inevitable or not.

Hung-Jen Wang:

The fact is that China has trade surplus with the United States. So how to solve these problems is quite tricky. But I think that the main point sometimes, I hear from the views from the United States is that because so far, the markets is still not the big open in Chinese societies. You may even lay adapt to this liberal market system and China by its nasty over open, the information is not very transparent. For example, to those Americans businesses or International business companies in China.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So that's kind of become the third important issue contributed to the increasing tension between China, and other countries, such as the United States and Taiwan. Finally, to PRC China, to mainland China, they still claim that Taiwan is part of China. But to the United States, I mean, Taiwan has become quite successful model in Asia or democratic countries to show China that how a Confucianist society like Taiwan could be integrated well with the liberal democracy in East Asia.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Not to mention that an audience read on the news just happened several days ago. The Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo just mentioned that the United States never recognized that Taiwan is a part of the China. So I mean different recognitions over the status core, kind of a prevents, the two countries, China and the United States, to work together quite smoothly. Those are four points I want to mention about, and to answer your question.

Richard Haddock:

On the flip side, and you made mention to this a couple of times, US-Taiwan relations are arguably at their highest point since after 1979. And that could be evidenced by consistent US military arms sales to Taiwan in the last couple of years. and several acts of legislation from US Congress such as the Taiwan Travel Act, and currently proposed the Taiwan Relations Reinforcement Act. So what factors in your view, explain this development in the US-Taiwan relations?

Hung-Jen Wang:

I think it's a long story for this current result. Some people in Taiwan they will argue with that because in the past or four years, we have a strong support from President Trump, also because of a different leadership type. So President Trump kind of show its strong commitment to Taiwan's role in the region and to Taiwan, the performance of Taiwan as a Southern countries in the international society.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So in the past four years, Trump, I mean his administration has shown it's great support to Taiwan as well as its people here in Taiwan. But from my point of view, I think is not only Trump, but is also bipartisan consensus and its support. Taiwan has spent a lot of efforts in the past at least of four decades into international society.

Hung-Jen Wang:

It tried to demonstrate or approve is a selfless as a normal country so as a sovereign country in the world. So the fact for me is that Taiwan actually is already a de facto country in the world. And

of course, a very good friend of many people in the United States, a very good friend of US Congressmen and so on.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I mean, we have a lot of good friends. Also we have a lot of good friends from the United States. So I mean they understand Taiwan's performance in the past few decades, or they understand that it's not easy for Taiwan to transfer from an authoritarian regime to a Democratic countries that has been called as a model in Asia. So it's not easy to complete this process. So right now many people in Taiwan, will show our thanks to these strong support from the bipartisan sides.

Hung-Jen Wang:

And of course from my view, Taiwan also deserves getting respect from other countries in the world to be equally treated for its economic, political, and the cultural contributions to the world. Not to mention during the current period of pandemic time, Taiwan has offered its medical supplies as well as its experiences to the international societies. On the other side if Taiwan to be ignored from the international society it will be very abnormal or it will be very unhealthy for international societies without Taiwan as a part of it.

Richard Haddock:

With recent US elections in mind, a question for many is how would a Biden administration conduct its foreign policy? So how do you think Biden team would affect triangular relations between the US, Taiwan and China, and what aspects of US foreign policy would change or stay the same with the current Administration's approach?

Hung-Jen Wang:

I think it will change a lot, but of course in the beginning especially in the, probably in the first year, in the beginning of Biden's term, we will not see a dramatic change or dramatic differences from that over previous administrations. But in the long-term I think the change will be definitely different. The current administration has an ambitious plan to try to influence the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Sometimes about leadership's representation right, from my observation side, I think by Biden as a politician, especially if we examine is a past performance as a Senator is kind of a long time record already there, we can see that this new president is very admired, maybe nice person. I'm not saying that Trump is not nice, but I am saying they have a different style.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So that's probably the key points for these leadership is not so aggressive or not so unpredictable, then probably we can look back it's past record in order to predict the future influence, and what kind of a policy influence this a new leadership bring about to Taiwan or to mainland China.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So far from my understandings, especially I'd read some policy analysis articles from Biden's national security team. I found that the key scene is that they would like to go back to normality. Of course, it always depends on how do you define this term "normality"? But from my understanding, they probably will go back to maybe similar like that Asia Policy, had it been made in Obama period of time. And on the other hand, the way they treat China or the way they recognize China is quite different from the current administrations. They'd recognized that China is a major power, even if not a greater power.

Hung-Jen Wang:

They'd recognize that China probably is a threat, but it's not a threat like that Soviet Union in the Cold War, they are different threat. In the currency situation, China is a major trading partner with the United States and the from these ideas I mean, Biden and his team recognized that they need to co-exist with mainland China.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Even if it's a threat or it's a big challenge to the development of the United States. So I mean, the way they define China is very different from the way the current Administration define. So just at this point, we can probably expect that they would use more healthy or more dialectical approach to engage with the Mainland China, not to try to decoupling with Mainland China.

Hung-Jen Wang:

They will have a more engagement, have more conversation, have more probably more official meeting with mainland China and their people to have at least, they have more way to exchange the idea from both sides instead of just demonstrate very strong and ambitious strategies toward the other side. So probably that's a key point that we can find this space to analyze the future influence that will bring up Taiwan or mainland China.

Richard Haddock:

So looking towards the future, what trends do you think will have the most significant impact on triangular relations, such as public health management related to COVID or technology development? If you could pick a few trends you think we should watch, what would they be?

Hung-Jen Wang:

I will pick up a security and a defense. Right now I think COVID-19 as a pandemic issue, it will go through quite sooner or later, I think. In terms of technologic development so far, we see actually

Huawei as a bigger telecom companies, but it's already have a new way to deal with the low challenges from the United States.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So far, I don't think that these technological competition will be a big issue to influence these triangular relations, it is just a technical issue. It's not a fundamental issue between these three actors. I think in the most dangerous thing here is about security and defense issues because so far the Chinese government are still blame United States that they violate the Three Communiques.

Hung-Jen Wang:

I mean the one part of a commitment that the United States in history promised the Chinese government in terms of not selling arms, military weapons or arms to Taiwan. I think that's a big issue right now. Chinese government still care about this commitment, still care about its promise, especially in the past half a year, people in Taiwan, I think we will receiving more and more signals from mainland China, from Beijing.

Hung-Jen Wang:

There's a high possibility for Beijing government to take a military action over Taiwan. So that's a reason why we continue to buy more and more advanced military weapons from the United States. But unfortunately the United States is the only country in the world can sell arm weapons to Taiwan. That's quite unfortunate, I mean we will feel kind of isolated from this side.

Richard Haddock:

So for students or other learners tuning in who would like to learn more about triangular relations between the US, Taiwan and China, where do you suggest they start? And are there any resources you recommend?

Hung-Jen Wang:

Regarding academic book or if you want to have more in depth analysis, I have a book published in 2013, *The Rise of China and The Chinese International Relations Scholarship*. In my book, for example, chapter seven, I describe these triangle relations in detail.

Hung-Jen Wang:

So that's probably the one people who are interested in this topic can refer to. And of course other books such as, maybe famous American scholar, Robert Sutter, his famous book, *Chinese Foreign Relations*. In his book the chapter seven mentioned about US relations with Taiwan. This book has very detailed explanations.

Hung-Jen Wang:

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One more book from Harry Harding, another famous US scholar, is the 1992, book of *Fragile Relationship, The United States and China since 1972*, this is a classic book all for historical background regarding how Taiwan – actually its official name is the Republic of China – how this Republic of China, Taiwan history has a strong connection between People's Republic of China and the United States. This book, from Harry Harding, has a very detail analysis for these political issues.

Richard Haddock:

That's great places to start. And both professors, Robert Sutter and Harry Harding have been affiliated with GW. So thank you for pointing out some of the faculty at our university. Well, thank you so much, Hung-Jen Wang for a great discussion about triangular relations.

Richard Haddock:

I think it's an important set of relationships that we all should keep in mind as we move forward, especially those who are interested in international relations and foreign policy. So thanks again for joining us and tune in next time.

Hung-Jen Wang:

Thank you very much.

Richard Haddock:

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