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# UNDERSTANDING TAIWAN INDEPENDENCE AND ITS POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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## Abstract

Taiwan's democratization has placed Taiwan independence as one of the most important issues for its domestic politics and for the security balance in the Taiwan Strait. Surveys have been conducted regularly to track shifts in Taiwanese public sentiment on this issue. This article presents a new measure of the Taiwan independence issue and shows how voters' preferences can be influenced.

## Introduction

Ever since the establishment of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan, the independence versus unification question has been one of the primary issues by which political parties in Taiwan establish their identities and distinguish themselves from one another.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the independence/unification debate has consequences beyond Taiwan's domestic politics, because China has consistently vowed to use military force against Taiwan if it declares formal independence. The shift in political power in Taiwan's domestic politics after the 2000 presidential election has created greater uncertainties for China over Taiwan's official policy on the matter. In September 2003, President

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1. See John Fuh-sheng Hsieh and Emerson M. S. Niou, "Salient Issues in Taiwan's Electoral Politics," *Electoral Studies* 15:2 (1996), pp. 219–30; Tse-min Lin, Yun-han Chu, and Melvin J. Hinich, "A Spatial Analysis of Political Competition in Taiwan," *World Politics* 48:4 (1996), pp. 453–81; Emerson M. S. Niou and Philip Paolino, "The Rise of the Opposition Party in Taiwan: Explaining Chen Shui-bian's Victory in the 2000 Presidential Election," *Electoral Studies* 22:4 (2003), pp. 721–40; and Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

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Chen Shui-bian further heightened tension across the Taiwan Strait by calling for a new constitution to be drafted by 2006. The development of the Taiwan independence problem thus has consequences that go beyond Taiwanese domestic politics; the issue could also easily upset the delicate security balance in the strait.

In this context, an accurate and reliable measure is needed to regularly track shifts in Taiwanese public sentiment.<sup>2</sup> The standard approach has generally been to measure the independence/unification variable one-dimensionally, with preferences for unification or independence at the extremes and preservation of the status quo representing the centrist position. Based on previous survey results, however, the unidimensional measure has proved unsatisfactory because most of the respondents opted for ambiguity by indicating their preferences near the center of the scale. To arrive at a better understanding of people's preferences, we need to explore the conditions under which individuals would be willing to abandon the status quo position in favor of independence or unification.

This article offers a new method to discover the general public's actual preferences on independence versus unification. It then shows that preferences on the Taiwan independence issue could be shaped by a mix of domestic and international factors. These findings help illustrate the interplay between public opinion and policy-making.

### The Challenge of Measuring Preferences on Independence vs. Unification

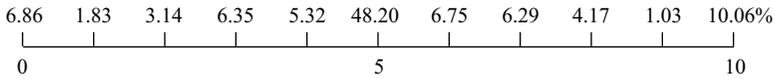
Researchers in Taiwan have experimented with various methods for measuring Taiwanese preferences on the independence-unification question. There are two commonly used measures. The first measure asks respondents to pick a point from 0 to 10, with 0 standing for independence as soon as possible and 10 for unification as soon as possible. The wording of the survey question runs thus:

(Measure 1) The issue of unification and independence is a much discussed topic in our society. Some people advocate that Taiwan should declare independence at once; some believe that Taiwan should seek unification with China as soon as possible; and there are others standing in between these two positions. Suppose the view that Taiwan should declare independence at once is at one extreme, represented by a score of 0, and the view that Taiwan should seek unification with China as soon as possible is at the other extreme, represented by a score of 10. What is your position on this issue on this scale?

Based on the 2001 survey conducted by the Taiwan Election and Democratization Studies (TEDS) at the Academia Sinica,<sup>3</sup> 23.5% of respondents posi-

2. For an overview of the evolution of survey questions on the Taiwan independence issue, see Shelley Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity: A Critique," *Pacific Affairs* 72:4 (1999–2000), pp. 537–52.

3. See the 2001 TEDS survey, at <<http://www.sinica.edu.tw/as/survey/srda/english/>>.

FIGURE 1 *Taiwan Independence Versus Unification on an 11-Point Scale*

SOURCE: 2003 *Taiwan National Security Survey*, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

tioned themselves at 4 or less, 48.2% chose the middle point of 5, and 28.3% picked 6 or higher (see Figure 1).

The second measure tries to represent respondents' preferences on a six-point scale. Respondents are asked to express a preference for independence now; unification now; status quo now, independence later; status quo now, unification later; status quo now, decide later; or status quo indefinitely. The design of this question attempts to separate those in the status quo category who actually have a first preference for either independence or unification but have, for some unspecified reason, reservations about the timing. The wording of the question and the distribution of preferences are thus:

(Measure 2) Regarding the relations between Taiwan and mainland China, there are a number of different views presented on this card. Which position best represents your view on this issue?

1. seeking unification with China quickly (2.95%)
2. seeking independence from China quickly (3.03%)
3. maintaining the status quo now and seeking unification later (21.62%)
4. maintaining the status quo now and seeking independence later (12.20%)
5. maintaining the status quo now and deciding what to do later (40.54%)
6. maintaining the status quo indefinitely (14.09%)

The design of each of the two measures described above is based on the assumption that preferences on the independence/unification issue can be represented on a unidimensional space. The differences in their design reflect the different approaches to disaggregating and interpreting the pro-status quo majority. Both measures reveal that most of the respondents are not yet ready to seek a resolution of the independence/unification issue. Instead, they prefer to wait for some of the uncertainties to clear up before deciding which way to move. These two measures are unsatisfactory, however, in that they fail to specify the conditions that might prompt respondents to choose either independence or unification.

Why do people in Taiwan have difficulty deciding between independence and unification? What factors might influence respondents to move away from the status quo and toward either independence or unification? The common sense answer is that since Taiwan and mainland China were divided by civil war,

the division is only temporary and the two sides should unite when mainland China becomes more compatible with Taiwan economically, socially, and politically. But after more than five decades of separation, unification looks to be an ever-more challenging, if not impossible, task. As a result, many people are attracted to the idea of Taiwan becoming an independent country, but only if China would not use force to prevent that result. In brief, for a lot of people, preference for uniting with mainland China or becoming an independent country is largely dependent on the costs of achieving one goal or the other. If the costs of uniting with mainland China were low, then unification would be more acceptable, and vice versa. Likewise, if the cost of becoming an independent country were low, then independence would be more acceptable, and vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

To arrive at a complete understanding of the conditionality of preferences, I use survey data to trace respondents' preferences when they are given the option of considering the hypothetical cases of (1) becoming independent at high and low cost or (2) unifying with China at high or low cost. In a survey sponsored by Duke University and conducted in December 2002, respondents were asked the following questions:<sup>5</sup>

- Q1. If the act of declaring independence will cause mainland China to attack Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan independence?
- Q2. If the act of declaring independence will not cause mainland China to attack Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan independence?
- Q3. If great political, economic, and social disparity exists between mainland China and Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan unifying with China?
- Q4. If only small political, economic, and social disparity exists between mainland China and Taiwan, do you favor or not favor Taiwan unifying with China?

About 26.7% of respondents favored independence even if that implied war with China, but 72% of respondents expressed a preference for independence if China would not attack Taiwan. Based on responses from these two hypothetical questions, we can classify respondents into three categories (see Table 1): (1) supporting independence even under unfavorable conditions (25.8%),<sup>6</sup> (2)

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4. The earliest attempt to explore the conditions under which respondents would move away from the status quo toward either independence or unification was in Naiteh Wu, "National Identity and Party Support: The Social Basis of Party Competition in Taiwan," *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology*, Academia Sinica, Taipei, 74 (1993), pp. 33–61, and Naiteh Wu, "Liberalism and Ethnic Identity: Searching for the Ideological Foundation of Taiwanese Nationalism," *Taiwanese Political Science Review* 1:1 (1996), pp. 5–40.

5. The 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey was designed by a group of political scientists from Taiwan, sponsored by the Program in Asian Security Studies at Duke University, and conducted by the Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan. The survey was conducted December 27–30, 2002, with a total sample size of 1,225.

6. Not included are those who supported independence even if war might break out between China and Taiwan but did not support independence if no war were to break out.

TABLE 1 *Preferences on Independence (%)*

<i>Independence Even If War with China</i>	<i>Independence If No War</i>		
	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
Agree	25.8	0.98	26.7
Disagree	46.2	27.03	73.3
<i>Total</i>	72	28	100.0

SOURCE: 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

TABLE 2 *Preferences on Unification (%)*

<i>Unification Even If the Two Sides Are Not Compatible</i>	<i>Unification If the Two Sides Are Compatible</i>		
	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
Agree	19	5.3	24.3
Disagree	45.2	30.5	75.7
<i>Total</i>	64.2	35.8	100.0

SOURCE: 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

supporting independence only under favorable conditions (46.2%), and (3) not supporting independence (27.03%).<sup>7</sup>

Second, following the same procedure, we can classify respondents into the following three categories (see Table 2): (1) supporting unification even under unfavorable conditions (19%), (2) supporting unification only under favorable conditions (45.2%), and (3) not supporting unification under any circumstances (30.5%).

An interesting finding we can infer from Tables 1 and 2 is that a significant portion of the respondents could accept either independence or unification conditionally because a majority of respondents (72%) could support independence if it does not lead to war, and a majority of respondents (64.2%) could support unification if the two sides become compatible. A cross-tabulation analysis of preferences on independence or unification along these two dimensions helps us identify the percentage of respondents who could accept either independence

7. To simplify presentation, respondents who failed to indicate a clear preference on either Q1 or Q2 are eliminated from this analysis.

TABLE 3 *Conditional Preferences on Independence and Unification (%)*

<i>Supporting Independence</i>	<i>Supporting Unification</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Unconditionally</i>	<i>Conditionally</i>	<i>Not Support</i>	
Unconditionally	2.7	8.97	15.7	27.4
Conditionally	9.33	25.38	11.33	46.0
Not support	8.5	13.58	4.49	26.6
<i>Total</i>	20.5	47.9	31.5	100.0

SOURCE: 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

and unification conditionally. As can be seen in Table 3, in total, 46.38% (2.7+ 8.97+ 9.33 + 25.38) of the respondents, depending on the condition, could accept either independence or unification as an outcome; about 27% of the respondents would accept independence only, but not unification; and about 22% percent of the respondents would accept unification only, but not independence.

Our empirical findings show that while many people may see the issue of Taiwan independence as a straightforward matter, many others are less decisive because their preferences are conditional on factors such as China's military threat, the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan, Taiwan's willingness to fight, and China's prospects for becoming democratic and prosperous. The existence of a large percentage of respondents who could accept either independence or unification, depending on the circumstances, proves that the unidimensional measures discussed above fail to correctly represent respondents' preferences. Instead, preferences on the independence/unification issue should be measured on both the independence and the unification dimensions.

To check the validity of this new measure, we examine the new measure of the Taiwan independence versus unification issue correlates with respondents' national identity and party identification, consistent with traditional wisdom. In the 2003 Taiwan National Security survey, respondents were asked whether they considered themselves Taiwanese, Chinese, or both. As expected, those respondents who considered themselves Taiwanese tilted toward independence, those who identified themselves as Chinese tilted toward unification, and those who considered themselves both Taiwanese and Chinese were more likely to have conditional preferences (see Table 4).

Respondents' party identification and preferences on the Taiwan independence issue are also highly correlated. As shown in Table 5, respondents who identified themselves with the People First Party (PFP) and the Kuomintang (KMT) leaned more toward unification, and those who identified with the DPP and the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) leaned more toward independence.

TABLE 4 *National Identity and Preferences on Taiwan Independence and Unification (%)*

<i>National Identity</i>	<i>Preferences on Independence and Unification</i>			<i>Row Total</i>
	<i>Independence</i>	<i>Conditional</i>	<i>Unification</i>	
Taiwanese	50.8	42.9	6.4	33.1
Taiwanese/Chinese	14.7	49.2	36.1	57.4
Chinese	9.5	44.2	46.3	9.5
<i>Column Total</i>	26.1	46.6	27.2	100

SOURCE: 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

NOTE: Chi-square (4 d.f.) = 198.509707, significant at \*  $p < .00001$ .

TABLE 5 *Party Identification and Preferences on Taiwan Independence and Unification (%)*

<i>Party Identification</i>	<i>Preferences on Independence and Unification</i>			<i>Row Total</i>
	<i>Independence</i>	<i>Conditional</i>	<i>Unification</i>	
PFP	10.0	48.7	41.3	14.8
KMT	11.6	50.2	38.2	24.8
DPP	53.0	42.2	4.8	22.7
TSU	63.6	31.8	4.5	2.2
Non-partisan	23.2	47.2	29.6	35.4
<i>Column Total</i>	26.0	46.7	27.3	100

SOURCE: 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

NOTE: Chi-square (8 d.f.) = 184.912774, significant at \*  $p < .00001$ .

### Conditional Preferences on the Taiwan Independence Issue

Given that 46% of respondents could accept either independence or unification, it is important to know what factors might cause individuals to move toward or away from these goals.<sup>8</sup> The following four factors are of particular

8. See Brett Benson and Emerson M. S. Niou, "Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, and the Security Balance in the Taiwan Strait," working paper, Duke University, for an earlier attempt to understand how the China threat and the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan could affect voter preferences on the independence/unification issue.

TABLE 6 *Will China Attack If Taiwan Declares Independence? (%)*

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Independence unconditionally	56.9	43.1
Independence conditionally	82.4	17.6
No supporting independence	84.1	15.9

SOURCE: 2003 *Taiwan National Security Survey*, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

NOTE: Chi-square (2 d.f.) = 68.497900, significant at \* $p < .00001$ .

interest: (a) How real is the China threat? (b) Will the U.S. help defend Taiwan? (c) Will the Taiwanese fight if China attacks? and (d) Will China become more reasonable and benign once it is economically developed?

#### *How Real Is the China Threat?*

In the Duke survey, we ask respondents if they think mainland China will or will not attack Taiwan if Taiwan declares independence. We hypothesize that the more a respondent believes the threat is real, the less likely he or she is to support independence. As can be seen in Table 6, among those who support independence unconditionally, 56.9% believe that China will attack Taiwan if Taiwan declares independence, compared with 82.4% and 84.1% of those in the other two categories. That is, the more a respondent believes that the China threat is real, the less likely he or she is to support independence unconditionally, and vice versa.

#### *Will the U.S. Help Defend Taiwan?*

Next, we want to know whether respondents' preferences on independence are affected by their perception of the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan. Our hypothesis is that the more the respondent believes that the U.S. will help defend Taiwan, the more likely he or she is to support independence unconditionally. We ask respondents in our survey whether they think the United States will send troops to help Taiwan if mainland China attacks Taiwan in response to a declaration of independence. As shown in Table 7, those who support independence unconditionally are more likely than those in the other two categories to believe that the U.S. will help defend Taiwan if China attacks: 76.8%, compared with 55.9% and 46.9%.

#### *Will the Taiwanese Fight If China Attacks?*

In addition to the two external factors that might influence the preferences of Taiwanese on independence, the Duke survey also includes a question asking

TABLE 7 *Will the U.S. Defend Taiwan If Taiwan Declares Independence? (%)*

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Independence unconditionally	76.8	23.2
Independence conditionally	55.9	44.1
No supporting independence	46.9	53.1

SOURCE: 2003 *Taiwan National Security Survey*, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

NOTE: Chi-square (2 d.f.) = 44.647367, significant at \* $p < .00001$ .

TABLE 8 *Will Taiwanese Fight If China Attacks? (%)*

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Independence unconditionally	85.4	14.6
Independence conditionally	77.7	22.3
No supporting independence	60.6	39.4

SOURCE: 2003 *Taiwan National Security Survey*, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

NOTE: Chi-square (2 d.f.) = 43.297654, significant at \* $p < .00001$ .

respondents their perceptions of the willingness of Taiwanese to fight. It turns out that 60.6% of those who do not support independence under any condition think that Taiwanese will fight if attacked, while 77.7% and 85.4% of those who support independence unconditionally and conditionally, respectively, believe that Taiwanese will fight (see Table 8).

*Will China Become More Moderate Once  
It Develops Economically?*

The fourth factor we consider is the respondent's perception of whether China will become more reasonable and moderate toward Taiwan as it develops economically. As shown in Table 9, a majority of those who support independence unconditionally do not think so. But for those in the other two categories, a majority believe that China will become more benign as it develops economically.

Thus far, I have used simple correlations between respondents' perceptions of some external conditions and their preferences on independence to argue that perceptions of the four external conditions can affect preferences on independence. A parallel presentation can be made to demonstrate that correlations also exist between respondents' preferences on unification and their percep-

TABLE 9 *Will China Become More Rational and Reasonable Once It Is Developed Economically? (%)*

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Independence unconditionally	46.6	53.4
Independence conditionally	58.9	41.1
No supporting independence	56.6	43.4

SOURCE: 2003 Taiwan National Security Survey, Duke University Program in Asian Security Studies.

NOTE: Chi-square (2 d.f.) = 9.9877, significant at \*  $p < .01$ .

tions of the external conditions. Next, I use multinomial logit to estimate more rigorously the effects of these four factors on respondents' preferences.

The dependent variable for the first model is respondents' preferences on independence. There are three possibilities: to support independence unconditionally, to support independence conditionally, and not to support independence. Independent variables include the four factors discussed above, as well as the respondent's ethnic identity, age, education, and income. Coefficients for the unconditional independence supporters are normalized at zero. All other coefficients from the model are interpreted as the impact of that variable on the respondent's preference on independence relative to that of the unconditional independence supporters.

The multinomial logit regression results of the above model are shown in Table 10. As it shows, the four factors discussed above are indeed very significant in affecting respondents' preferences on independence. Controlling for ethnic identity, age, education, and income, respondents who believe that China will attack Taiwan if Taiwan declares independence, that the U.S. will not help defend Taiwan if Taiwan initiates action by declaring independence, and that China will become more reasonable and benign once developed economically tend not to support independence unconditionally. And given that these variables all have dichotomous outcomes, we can conclude that China's threat of using force is the most critical factor in determining the respondent's preferences on independence. Furthermore, those who believe that Taiwanese will not fight China are more likely to lean toward not supporting independence, regardless of the condition.

For the second model, the dependent variable is respondents' preferences on unification. Again, there are three possibilities: to support unification unconditionally, to support unification conditionally, and not to support unification, regardless of the condition. The independent variables are the same as in the first model. The multinomial logit regression results are shown in Table 11. Among the four factors, after controlling for ethnic identity, age, education, and income,

TABLE 10 *Multinomial Logit Model of Factors Explaining Preferences on Independence*

<i>Covariate</i>	<i>Conditional Supporters</i>	<i>Non-Supporters</i>
Mainlander	.81* (.36)	1.39* (.38)
Hakka	.27 (.34)	.38 (.40)
Age	.13 (.18)	.26 (.21)
Education	.12 (.21)	.39 (.25)
Income	.06 (.04)	.02 (.05)
China threat	1.17* (.23)	1.35* (.30)
U.S. defense	-.57* (.23)	-.91* (.26)
Benign China	.69* (.21)	.57* (.26)
Taiwan's will to fight	-.35 (.29)	-1.05* (.32)
Constant	-1.63* (.82)	-2.36* (.95)
<i>Percentage of cases</i>	48.7	25
<i>No. of cases</i>	589	

\* Indicates  $p < .05$  two-tailed; entries are maximum likelihood coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

TABLE 11 *Multinomial Logit Model of Factors Explaining Preferences on Unification*

<i>Covariate</i>	<i>Conditional Supporters</i>	<i>Non-Supporters</i>
Mainlander	-.89* (.29)	-1.07* (.35)
Hakka	-.14 (.37)	-.28 (.40)
Age	.56* (.23)	.44* (.21)
Education	.80* (.23)	.15 (.25)
Income	-.04 (.04)	-.03 (.05)
China threat	.41 (.28)	-.49 (.29)
U.S. defense	-.01 (.24)	.26 (.27)
Benign China	-.29 (.24)	-1.20* (.26)
Taiwan's will to fight	.25 (.26)	.56 (.30)
Constant	-1.60* (.89)	1.32 (.96)
<i>Percentage of cases</i>	48.8	30.7
<i>No. of cases</i>	561	

\* Indicates  $p < .05$  two-tailed; entries are maximum likelihood coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

only respondents' perception of China becoming more reasonable and moderate once it has developed economically has a positive effect on their preferences regarding unification.

### Conclusion

Stability and change across the Taiwan Strait can be affected by many factors. The emergence of a democratic government in Taiwan has made the Taiwan independence issue one of the most critical factors. Given the importance of this issue, we need an accurate measure to track shifts in Taiwanese public sentiment and to know what factors will affect people's preferences on this issue. To achieve the first objective, I devised a measure to represent the preferences of Taiwanese on the independence issue. An interesting finding revealed by the new measure of preferences is that a large percentage of the respondents in Taiwan agreed both to unite with China if China became modernized and democratic *and* to declare independence if China would not use force against Taiwan. Given that independence and unification are not necessarily mutually exclusive options, this response questions the appropriateness of the traditional one-dimensional representation of the preferences. Instead, I argue that preferences on the independence/unification issue should be measured along two dimensions: one on independence and the other on unification.

The second objective of this paper was to consider some factors that might affect people's preferences on the independence/unification issue. Guided by common sense, I considered the following four factors: (1) China's threat of using force, (2) the willingness of the United States to defend Taiwan, (3) the possibility that China will become more pragmatic and moderate toward Taiwan, and (4) the willingness of Taiwan to fight. The findings from the analysis suggest that all three players in the game, mainland China, Taiwan, and the U.S., can—to various degrees—influence Taiwanese preferences on the Taiwan independence issue.

For Taiwan, strengthening its will to fight is an effective strategy to boost support for independence. For China, the threat of using force against Taiwan can effectively deter many people from moving toward independence. China can do more, though. If China can also convince people in Taiwan that it is becoming more prosperous, open, and democratic, then more people in Taiwan would find unification an acceptable choice. For the U.S., showing some degree of commitment to defend Taiwan could deter China. But showing too strong a commitment might encourage people in Taiwan to move toward independence. Thus, the policy of "strategic ambiguity" may still be the most effective strategy to achieve dual deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>9</sup>

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9. For a game-theoretic analysis of the strategic ambiguity policy, see Brett Benson and Emerson M. S. Niou, "Comprehending Strategic Ambiguity," working paper, Duke University.

The analysis in this article helps us understand how each of the players can affect Taiwanese preferences on the independence issue. But a more challenging question arising from this research concerns the strategic implications of these effects. For example, the U.S. might be reluctant to defend Taiwan because Taiwan failed to demonstrate enough will to defend itself. But once Taiwan strengthens its will to fight, the pro-independence movement might become more powerful, as implied by our finding. To suppress this movement, the U.S. might choose to lower its security commitment to Taiwan, which in turn might embolden China's resolve to "liberate" Taiwan. In other words, each of the three players can take actions to affect the preferences on Taiwan independence. But the full implication of each individual action has to be analyzed in a complicated strategic context.