On December 2, 2016, U.S. President-elect Donald J. Trump spoke to Taiwan’s president Tsai Ing-wen by telephone, becoming “the first president or president-elect who has spoken to a Taiwanese leader since at least 1979.” Trump’s phone call provoked a diplomatic protest from Beijing, which threatened to precipitate a deep rift with China.

A seemingly small act, which should not have raised much attention across the Pacific, brought Taiwan back to the forefront of the China-U.S. relationship. Although China and the U.S. share considerable common interests, issues like Taiwan precipitate periodic tensions between the two. Moreover, despite the ongoing rivalry and growing asymmetry in power and status between Taiwan and China, relative stability and peace has nevertheless been maintained. Why? Such paradoxes require a fresh examination of how interests are articulated and pursued in a trilateral context.

In this project, I address two major issues in the China-Taiwan-U.S. trilateral relationship. First, how and why has the trilateral system exhibited such seemingly contradictory outcomes as flexibility, fragility, and stability in the past four decades? Second, how have domestic factors such as nationalism strengthened or counterbalanced strategic calculations in the trilateral relationship?

Building upon realist and constructivist approaches, I illustrate how strategic considerations and domestic politics produced three distinct phases in the relationship from 1979 to 2012: stabilization, destabilization, and restabilization. In each phase, each actor pursued distinct “core tasks” that at times, were at odds with the objectives of the others. I argue that only when these objectives were better aligned, especially in regard to China and the U.S., would stability ensue.

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