

The Impacts of Small Games on Sino-American Relations

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Abstract: Small incidents between superpowers may inadvertently affect their diplomatic behaviors, like the Butterfly Effect, pushing their international relations in another direction. This is the case with "Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan" and the "U.S.-China Balloon Incident" on the Sino-American relationship. As the most complicated bilateral relationship in the world today, the reaction of the two superpowers will have a significant impact on the entire world landscape. Despite the historical legacy and the different nature of their societies, which have led to differences in a number of areas, the two sides continue to seek opportunities for cooperation in various fields. The evolving Sino-US relations with peace as the main theme should be trusted by the whole world. This paper analyzes these two small events by using the theoretical knowledge of Realism, Constructivism, and International Political Economy in the Science of International Politics to explore the implied meanings behind them and the reasons why the two superpowers responded in this way.

Keywords: Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, U.S.-China balloon incident, Sino-American relations, Realism, Constructivism

1. Introduction

When an event is blown out of proportion by one small factor, it could become catastrophic. Such is the case with the relationship between the United States and China, which began with a small ping-pong ball and then, developed with twists and turns like a bumpy road. In the past two years, Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan and the U.S.-China Balloon Incident, two seemingly trivial matters, have caused considerable impact on Sino-US relations. The overreactions on both sides seem to confirm that there is more behind the small incidents than what we see on the surface. This means that the relationship between the two countries is quite complex, and it is worthwhile for scholars to explore the reasons for the superpowers' overreactions and the hidden meaning behind the minor incidents.

This paper will analyze these two events:

On August 2, 2022, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. From August 2 to August 4, 2022, China conducted a series of deterrent military operations around Taiwan, and on August 5, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that China would impose sanctions on U.S. House Speaker Pelosi. This is the famous "Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan".

On January 28, 2023, a balloon flew over North America from Chinese territory, and the United States sent warplanes to monitor the balloon, which was shot down by the U.S. side seven days later. Based on the calculation and investigation of the balloon's flight path and altitude, the U.S. side

determined that it was a Chinese spy balloon intended to monitor the U.S. military situation. The Chinese side claimed that the balloon was a civilian balloon and that it had drifted into U.S. airspace due to weather conditions, and apologized for the incident. This incident is known as the "U.S.-China Balloon Incident".

Therefore, in this paper, we will use the theories of Realism, Constructivism, and International Political Economy to analyze these two small incidents, explore the implied messages behind them, and explain the reasons for the overreaction of China and the United States as well as the impact on the international political society.

2. Analysis of Reasons

As the typical representatives of socialist and capitalist countries in the international political society, China and the United States are destined to have opposing positions from the moment they enter the stage of history. The different social nature and historical and cultural backgrounds have made the behavioral patterns and values of the two sides very different, and the relationship has become more and more sensitive as neither side can fully understand or even misinterpret the behavior of the other.

2.1. Historical Background

Data shows that the question of Taiwan can be traced back to the *Cairo Declaration* signed in 1943 and the 1945 *Perestroika Proclamation*, during which time China, the United States, and the United Kingdom agreed on the condition that "Taiwan be returned to the Republic of China". However, things began to change in 1949 when the KMT group retreated to Taiwan, and the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet sailed into the Taiwan Strait at the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950; the first members of the U.S. Department of Defense's Military Advisory Group arrived in 1951; and the U.S. signed *The U.S.-Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty* in 1954. The U.S. involvement in the Taiwan issue is getting deeper and deeper, which is what Taiwan has been eagerly waiting for. Access to the U.S. safety net in the Western Pacific not only guaranteed Taiwan's security, but also enhanced Taiwan's international status. The 1979 communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China issued a statement at which time U.S.-China relations were eased. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, which had a huge impact on Sino-U.S. relations. During the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995-1996, the Clinton Administration allowed Taiwan leader LEE Teng-hui to visit the United States, in total violation of the "One China" principle. Since then, it is clear that the views of China and the United States on the Taiwan issue have been very different and have even evolved into a very polarized ideology.

Regarding the Balloon Incident, from a historical point of view, reconnaissance balloons have been used by various countries for more than 200 years since 1794 when they were used by France during the Revolutionary War [1]. From 1944 to 1945, Japanese Fu-Go balloons carried small explosives deep into the American heartland. These bombing balloons caused military devastation and panic in the United States at the time [2]. According to the Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. has been researching plastic balloon reconnaissance since the Genetrix program was initiated in 1946, and in the late 1950s, the U.S. developed high-altitude photographic reconnaissance balloons for strategic reconnaissance of the Soviet Union. In addition, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved a program codenamed WS-119L to launch reconnaissance balloons into China. There is no doubt that the United States is experienced in the use of spy balloons to obtain intelligence on other countries. The Fu-Go balloon incident was gradually forgotten as U.S. reconnaissance and military capabilities and strength in other areas increased. However, the Sino-U.S. balloon incident has awakened fading memories in the U.S. The security issues behind it have led the U.S. to overreact.

2.2. Analysis From Realism

The Security Dilemma, according to the Realism Theory, means that "the measures taken by a country to guarantee its own security will, on the contrary, reduce the sense of safety of other countries, and thus lead to more insecurity of the country itself". From the interaction between the United States and China, the security dilemma exists in almost all events. As the two countries continue to grow, their reaction to each other's increasing power is not only one of caution but also one of fear. Power Transfer Theory tells us that the rise of powerful states in history has inevitably challenged the existing holdout powers. The United States, as an existing established power, is to a certain extent intimidated by the power of China, while China, as a rising power, also makes the United States feel a sense of crisis. Both sides have a certain degree of fear of each other's power, and according to Butterfield's Theory, the core problem of a security dilemma is the sense of mistrust and fear between the states [3], which undoubtedly worsens the crisis of trust between the two countries. Buzan argues that when states seek power and security for themselves, they can easily threaten other states' pursuit of power and security. In this case, both sides perceive each other as hostile and irrational, thus exacerbating the security dilemma.

Thucydides, the father of the school of Political Realism, once offered a powerful insight: "It was the rise of Athens, and the fear it inspired in the Spartans, that made war inevitable." [4] Graham Allison used the Thucydides Trap as a basis for analyzing the relationship between China and the U.S. It refers to the structural pressures that arise when a rising power may pose a significant threat to the dominant power at the time. This is clearly the dilemma that China and the United States are currently facing. China's growing power and international standing have heightened U.S. concerns about its rise and increased the likelihood of conflict between the United States and China. At this point, the overreaction between the two countries caused by Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan and the appearance of a balloon is not incomprehensible.

2.3. Analysis From Constructivism

Constructivism argues that important aspects of international relations are shaped by perceptual factors, most importantly collectively held perceptions, which could ultimately determine the identities and interests of the actors involved. Wendt has said that "For the United States, Britain's possession of 500 nuclear weapons is less of a threat than North Korea's possession of five nuclear weapons because Britain is a friend, but North Korea is not." [5] Over the past 30 years, the U.S.-China relationship has experienced a transition from hostility and conflict to frank dialog and constructive cooperation. But it is clear that short-lived cooperation does not make the two superpowers true allies. Whether it was Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan or the U.S.-China Balloon Incident, the ensuing dialogue between the two sides, the military exercises, and the cancellation of Blinken's visit to China, these official statements have caused the world to panic about U.S.-China relations. Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan added to China's already thorny Taiwan issue, and the Sino-U.S. Balloon Incident evoked America's fear and humiliation of the Japanese hot air balloon attacks of World War II.

Since the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the global financial crisis, China's rising image has gradually emerged, and its changing identity constructs have made the United States feel seriously threatened. Identity can be altered through the interaction between the "changer" and the "self" involved in the process of social learning relationships [6]. According to Constructivism, fear is an expression of social construction [7]. Fear is not only constructed by the individual but also by the individual's interaction with others. The relationship between China and the United States has always been a very complicated bilateral relationship. Even though these two large and complex countries have gradually found common ground on issues such as trade and investment, key historical legacy issues have

remained unresolved over the years, and any little bit of issues related to national interests and identity positions may push the two countries to a more hostile stance.

2.4. Analysis From International Political Economy

From the perspective of International Political Economy, the economic base determines the superstructure, and China's rapid economic growth has broken the old political situation. However, the future of China's economy may be even more uncertain due to the lack of transparency. Rapid growth and integration into the global economic order have brought about socio-economic transformations that have inherently impacted China's traditional social system. Therefore, despite the tremendous economic growth, this uncertainty remains a great threat to the global economic system. The United States, as the world's largest economy, has clearly lost its former absolute dominance. On the contrary, the rapid development of China's economy has broken the old political situation. Since its reform and opening up, it has been following the trend of the times, leapfrogging Japan to become the world's second largest economy in 2010. Although there is still a gap between China and the United States in all aspects of economic and military strength, there is no doubt that China's overall rapid growth with this trend is bound to cause a sense of crisis among other guarded powers in the world.

Returning to the issue of Taiwan, some companies in Taiwan are very worried about the prospects of Sino-US relations. Lacking sufficient confidence in the mainland, Taiwan wants to be able to restrict the mainland technologically to ensure that it has some say when necessary, such as TSMC's refusal to supply high-tech chips to Huawei [8]. This is partly due to Taiwan's own choices and not entirely due to U.S. intervention. However, due to the unstable relationship between the U.S. and China, the Chinese government is more inclined to see this as the U.S. as a technological leader containing China's technological development. As a result, relations between the two countries deteriorated again. In the subsequent balloon incident, the U.S., after experiencing the Russian balloon incident, had a preconceived notion that it was a means of military surveillance by the Chinese government. As a result, the two small incidents triggered a series of follow-ups like Butterfly Effect, and also triggered panic among the public around the world.

3. The Impacts in Worldwide

In fact, for some time now, China and the United States have been engaged in a bottleneck through trade wars and other multifaceted sanctions, rather than a serious head-on conflict. But these two minor incidents have not only affected the two superpowers but also had worldwide impacts.

On the one hand, they have greatly exacerbated the distrust between China and the United States and worsened the relationship between China and the United States. The leaders of China and the United States have demonstrated their respective confidence and condemnation of each other in their speeches in various countries. The visit to China by U.S. Secretary of State Abraham Blinken, originally scheduled for February, was postponed for four months and resumed only on June 18th and June 19th. But it is clear that this "hard-won" trip to China did not receive many positive voices from both sides of the border, either politically or in terms of public opinion. From the moment Blinken stepped off the plane, the Chinese were receiving him in a different way. Unlike Macron's visit to China, which was marked by a red carpet, flowers, and a high-profile state guard of honor, Blinken got nothing (BBC, 2023). During the eight hours of talks between Blinken and President Xi Jinping, the session was otherwise devoid of any other substantive progress, despite the fact that China and the U.S. had agreed to follow up on the consensus set by the two heads of state during their meeting in Bali and return to the agenda set by the meeting.

Undeniably, the purpose of Blinken's visit to China was positive. It was aimed at establishing

"open and authorized" communications and promoting responsible management of the bilateral relationship between the two countries in order to eliminate misunderstandings and avoid miscalculations. In response to the Taiwan issue, Blinken emphasized the importance of "ensuring that competition does not turn into conflict" and that the United States has always respected and recognized China's "One China" principle, and has sought to bridge the deep differences between China and the United States in a number of areas to promote multilateral cooperation. However, the conversation is good, but because the United States is facing domestic elections, China also has some complex historical legacy issues and resistance, which makes many of the promises made in the talks more like a "blank check". Overall, the symbolic significance of the visit and talks is greater than the actual significance.

On the other hand, the frequent friction between the two superpowers over this small matter has led to a strong international perception of public opinion, as well as fear that the deterioration of U.S.-China relations could escalate the political crisis into an armed conflict. This is especially true in the Asia-Pacific region, where security and prosperity are closely linked to the relationship between these two superpowers. Two seemingly insignificant events have dealt a major blow to the stability of both bilateral and multilateral relations. The crackdown on international students and businesses and changes in U.S. policy toward China indicate serious tensions in U.S.-China relations. The negative impact on the world economy, trade, military, and culture is lasting.

4. Conclusion

The "Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan" and the "U.S.-China Balloon Incident" reflect that the relationship between China and the United States is the most complicated bilateral relationship in the world today. There is both competition and cooperation between them. From the perspective of Realism, the Security Dilemma and the Thucydides Trap have made suspicion and mistrust the main theme of the Taiwan issue and the development of Sino-US relations; from the perspective of Constructivism, the good or bad relations are the result of the acquired interaction between the two countries, and the comprehensive interaction of cognition, identity, cooperation, and interests constitutes the current Sino-US relations; from the perspective of International Political Economy, the rise of China and its growing economic power will surely have a great impact on the international status of the United States, as well as a challenge to other established powers, and the new changes in international cooperation and international trade will inevitably lead to changes in the former global political and economic landscape.

The good or bad relations between China and the United States will not only affect the two countries themselves but will also have a significant impact on the entire world pattern. Both China and the United States have very close economic, trade, military, and cultural exchanges with countries around the world. The implied reasons behind small incidents between superpowers are often complex, and an inadvertent small change is likely to trigger a series of Butterfly Effect, which is why China and the U.S. have been adopting the principle of "Strategic Ambiguity" on Taiwan issue as well as on other political issues.

Indeed, in addition to some areas of deep disagreement, the two sides continue to seek opportunities for cooperation in many other areas -- climate and global economic stability, global health, women's rights, environmental sustainability and pollution -- transnational challenges and cooperation that serve the common interests of the peoples of the two countries, as well as the peoples of the world. Therefore, despite localized frictions, the evolving Sino-American relationship, with peace as its main theme, still deserves the world's trust. China and the United States should endeavor to trust each other, strengthen communication and exchanges, and establish a good cooperative relationship; only in this way can a win-win situation be created. This is in line with the expectations of the international community while maintaining world peace and promoting the progress of human

civilization.

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