

## **International Relations Theory and the Cross-Strait Relationship: State of the Field**

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Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies that aim to apply rigorous international relations (IR) theory to the relationship across the Taiwan Strait. In many cases, these studies use IR theory to help shed new light on complicated cross-Strait dynamics. Scholars have applied a diverse range of IR theory to this end, ranging from rationalist signaling and bargaining models (e.g. Chan 2010; Kastner and Rector 2008), to non-rationalist approaches such as prospect theory (e.g. He and Feng 2011) and theorizing on the role of emotion in IR (e.g. Hall 2011). Other studies use the cross-Strait relationship as a test case for broader IR theories; for instance Gartzke and Li (2004) and Kastner (2009) deploy case studies of China-Taiwan relations to test theories on the relationship between international conflict and economic interdependence. And some recent edited volumes (e.g. Blanchard and Hickey 2012; Chu and Kastner 2014) bring together a number of different studies that tie different strands of IR theory to the cross-Strait case.

This paper presents a critical review of recent applications of IR theory to the cross-Strait relationship. The paper considers key recent studies—both rationalist and nonrationalist—that apply IR theory to China-Taiwan relations, and then takes stock by considering the benefits and drawbacks of using IR theory to help make sense of cross-Strait relations. I argue that there are significant costs associated with using IR theory in the context of a specific case like the China-Taiwan relationship, especially one which is in many ways unique in the contemporary international system. Most importantly, use of theory typically focuses the analyst's attention on a single explanatory factor while abstracting away from many other features of this extremely complicated case. Doing so can be useful, as it can highlight important causal mechanisms driving outcomes of interest in cross-Strait relations, mechanisms that might otherwise be obscured in more descriptive accounts. But analysts should be mindful of the limitations inherent in such studies, and should be cautious in the conclusions they draw and the predictions that they make based on IR theory applied to this case.