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Public diplomacy as a contributing factor to solving managing identity-based conflict: Taiwan repositions its identity and security status (2000-2020)

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Chapter 2. East Asian Security and Conflict

2.1 Introduction

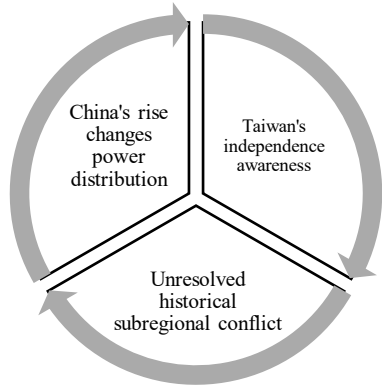
Although the shared sense of East Asian identity has not grown, East Asian countries have still been increasingly aware of the region’s security. The region’s security can be approached in various ways, for example, based on military alliance, economic interaction, and ad hoc diplomacy. Each of these security management styles is grounded in a different theoretical foundation of security approaches. The balance of power forms the basis of military alliances (Duffield 2001); institutionalization and multilateralism drive trade agreements or the formation of free trade blocs (Goldstein and Mansfield 2012); whereas the intersubjectivity of shared norms and values underlies diplomacy (Bessho 1999). These approaches should be synthesized for 21st century East Asian security rather than being dealt with separately (Katzenstein and Sil 2004). I argue that the synthesized theoretical approach is necessary because removing any security approach or favoring one over another may induce further development of rivalries and a variety of conflicts. Hence, it is significant to establish an explanatory framework for 21st century East Asian security because the security environment implies an understanding of conflict formation and its components. Framing the explanation of the conflict provides the path to understanding conflict resolution

I argue that these security approaches have evolved into components of the regional identity that shaped this region’s interpretations of security and perceptions of conflict. Addressing the China–Taiwan conflict as an unresolved historical subregional conflict implies rivalry and competition between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the last century. In 1949, the Chinese Nationalist Party lost the civil war to the CCP and relocated the regime to Taiwan, leading to 38 years of martial law. After martial law was lifted in 1987 and the transformation to democracy began, the Taiwanese have been promoting their identity as Taiwanese rather than Chinese (Benson and Niou 2004). Meanwhile, the CCP assumed power in China and proclaimed itself a peaceful rising power since the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1990s (Johnston 2004). However, the nature of the China–Taiwan conflict should be redefined in the 21st century because of China’s rise and Taiwan’s independence awareness. For example, if China’s assertiveness in building an East Asian regional order involves not recognizing Taiwan as a sovereign state and even claiming to unify

with Taiwan, does Taiwan's continuous formation of its identity, democracy, and sovereignty contribute to enhancing Taiwan's security? This not only questions whether the China–Taiwan conflict should be addressed as an unresolved conflict, but also how to view Taiwan's role in 21st century East Asian Security. The China–Taiwan conflict should no longer be addressed as an unresolved conflict, but only indicates the historical conflict between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the CCP. Moreover, with Taiwan's independence awareness, which represents the developments of identity formation, democratization, and sovereignization in the first two decades of 21st century, to what extent do the historical conflict and the continuous independence awareness define Taiwan's security status in East Asia? Is Taiwan a conflict maker or a peacemaker?

Before further analyzing conflict resolution and the identity-based conflict between China and Taiwan, this chapter establishes a synthesized explanatory framework delineating how the China–Taiwan conflict is contextualized in 21st century East Asian Security. As seen in Figure 2.1 – Synthesized Explanatory Framework of 21st Century East Asian Security – within the East Asian Security web of military alliances, trade agreements, and ad hoc diplomacy, all pertinent to the China–Taiwan conflict, three key factors influence one another: Taiwan's independence awareness, China's rising to changing power distributions, and the context of the unresolved historical subregional conflict.

Figure 2.1 – Synthesized Explanatory Framework of 21st Century East Asian Security

Theoretical Foundation	Security Approach	China–Taiwan conflict
Balance of power	Military alliance	
Institutionalization, multilateral talks	Trade agreement	
Shared norms and values	Ad hoc diplomacy	

Based on this explanatory framework, this chapter is to elaborate on how these security approaches have comprised of the China–Taiwan identity-based conflict in the context of 21st century East Asian Security. Furthermore, in the second part of this chapter, I apply this explanation to three selected cases that occurred in 2000 - 2020: the South China Sea dispute, the ECFA, and the COVID-19 pandemic. While these three cases respectively are referred to the theoretical foundations of balance of power, institutionalization, shared norms, and values, the lens of the China–Taiwan identity-based conflict offers insights into how each factor – China’s rise, Taiwan’s independence, and the unresolved historical subregional conflict – can be contextualized. The following section in this chapter is divided into two parts: (1) China–Taiwan identity-based conflict, and (2) Application to three cases: South China Sea, the ECFA, and COVID-19.

2.2 China–Taiwan Identity-based Conflict

The evolution of the identity-based conflict between China and Taiwan challenges Taiwan’s participation in the region’s stability and security architecture. The unwrapping of the China–Taiwan identity-based conflict should be contextualized in 21st century East Asia and then exemplify the motivation to resort to public diplomacy as a conflict resolution mechanism.

Friedberg (1993) argued that East Asia is susceptible to rivalries for three reasons: change in power distributions, unresolved historical conflicts in the subregion, and growing awareness of independence. The change of power distributions has raised a question about whether China will replace the Soviet Union as the main regional power alongside the US. Moreover, the

Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait remain this region's flashpoints due to the presence of divided regimes. At last, independence awareness has risen along with the development of democracy and social movements, even within the Southeast Asia region. Besides the focus on power redistribution, Sheldon (1994) claimed that East Asian security should transcend territorial concerns and encompass political and ideological dimensions, so a preventive diplomacy approach becomes important to mitigate violent conflicts and foster regional mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution. Roy (2000) suggested that while paradigmatic theories like realism may offer insights into security dynamics in post-Cold War East Asia, they alone are insufficient to explain interstate behavior comprehensively. These three arguments have two common notions: First, 21st century East Asian Security should be viewed in a comprehensive framework that extends beyond conventional security arrangements. Second, the conventional security arrangements alone cannot clarify the complexities of conflict resolution, so refining the 21st century East Asian Security framework allows for exploration of alternative conflict resolution mechanisms. I argue that recognizing the China–Taiwan conflict in the 21st century as an identity-based conflict provides a lens through which to analyze how public diplomacy can serve as a tool for conflict resolution. In the following, I investigate the literature of the past twenty years to elaborate on the components of identity-based conflict in the context of the China–Taiwan conflict by the elements of (1) the unresolved historical subregional conflict, (2) China's rise, (3) Taiwan's independence awareness.

2.2.1 The Unresolved Historical Subregional Conflict

The conflict between China and Taiwan can be addressed as the Chinese 1945 Civil War extension, the Taiwan Strait conflict, or the Cross-strait conflict. These appellations raise a question about the evolution and transformation of this conflict in the 21st century and the fundamental understanding can be traced back to the 1945 Chinese Civil War. This civil war occurred in 1945 between the Chinese Nationalist Party – 中國國民黨 Zhong Guo Kuo Min Tang (KMT), and the Chinese Communist Party – 中國共產黨 Zhong Guo Gong Chan Tang (CCP), both claimed to represent China. 中國 Zhong Guo in Chinese is referred to as China. This 1945 Chinese civil war is to a large extent viewed as concluded in 1949 when the KMT relocated its governing authority to Taiwan (Lary 2015). However, military crises that occurred in 1955, 1958, and 1996 still marked this conflict as a civil war extension for the disputants, the CCP and the KMT. Despite the US recognizing the CCP's sovereignty over China, its military aid to the KMT in Taiwan was perceived as an alliance. The lifting of martial law by the KMT

in Taiwan in 1987 and the subsequent opening of access for Chinese immigrants since 1949 facilitated growing economic and trade relations, known as Cross-strait relations, 兩岸關係 Liang An Guan Xi. In 2000, Taiwan elected a president first ever from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), 民主進步黨 Min Zhu Jin Bu Tang. The DPP president, 陳水扁 Chen Shui Bian, spearheaded the Taiwanese identity movement, 台灣本土化運動 Tai Wan Ben Tu Hua Yun Dong. During his term from 2000 to 2008, the cross-strait economic relations grew more interdependent. Due to growing social and economic interactions, the cross-strait relation is managed by semi-governmental organizations, Straits Exchange Foundation 海峽交流基金會 from Taiwan, and the Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits 海峽兩岸關係協會 from China. Notably, the nomenclature of these two organizations – addressed as “strait” 海峽, cross-strait “兩岸” – avoids explicit references to China, reflecting the historical context of identity-based representation and sovereignty over China. These changes in names and development of interactions reveal that the essence of the conflict between China and Taiwan is the different understanding of Taiwan’s sovereignty. The division of interpretation of Taiwan’s sovereignty and whether Taiwan is a sovereign state has, through time, grown larger (Pan 2012).

Despite the US military alliance arrangements, growing interdependent trade, and diplomacy through semi-governmental organizations, the relationship between China and Taiwan is still considered confrontational and subject to various security approaches. This underscores the argument that these security approaches are intrinsic to the identity-based conflict between China and Taiwan. A military alliance is only a solution to redistribute interests, as well as trade agreements. Ad hoc diplomacy, though aimed at peace, remains contingent upon securing strategic advantages. The next section elaborates on the other component of the China–Taiwan identity-based conflict: China's rise.

2.2.2 China’s Rise

In 1991, the fall of the Soviet Union raised the question of whether China would replace it as the main regional rival of the US. Moreover, since 2003 Chinese President Hu JinTao, 胡錦濤, announced China’s peaceful rising 和平崛起 He Ping Jue Qi, the subsequent question is to what extent has China’s rise impacted security and conflict in 21st century East Asia? In terms of military capabilities, China has outwardly projected a non-confrontational stance, but the military operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait caused concern over the

region's collective security (Karim 2014). The US strived to preserve the power balance in Asia by seeking ways to contain China's rise and China's growth (Silove 2016). China's peaceful rising is arguably a result of its evolving worldviews, which are a complex of Chinese perceptions of the world and China's aim to define its position in the global order (Son and Jenner 2016). In terms of China's growth, China's domestic economic reforms and the increasing trade ties with Asian states were initially anticipated to foster peace in the region, albeit subject to the security dynamics between China and its neighbors (Goldstein and Mansfield 2012). While free trade agreements among China, Japan, and South Korea have promoted economic integration, they have also aimed to contribute to political stability. However, the historical mistrust between China and Japan, along with territorial disputes, revealed that enhancing trade relations may not suffice to ensure peace and stability (Hu and Vanhullebusch 2014). Li (2015) suggested that China, in 2003–2014, employed economic statecraft to influence various sectors in Taiwan, including farmers, fishermen, students, and investors, to foster a common identity: An identity of blood linkages between Chinese and Taiwanese was China's underlying goal to unify China and Taiwan through increased trade, business, tourism, and academic exchanges. While such civil and social interactions offer chances for stabilizing the security environment, the motivation behind these interactions clashes with Taiwan's independence awareness.

After all, China's rise implies whether a rising regional power will challenge the hegemon and hence disrupt the current security establishment (Kapur 2003). Changes in power distribution often induce rivalries, confrontations, and conflicts. China's rise is a variable in the 21st century East Asian Security environment. Although there have not been large-scale wars, these unresolved disputes stemming from changing power dynamics have contributed to conflict formation (Bercovitch and DeRouen Jr. 2011). The discourse of China's rise revealed that the conflict between Taiwan and China is rooted in identity-based tensions. From military capabilities and trade relations to social and civil interactions, China has been tackling the construction and projecting its identity to itself, to Taiwan's audience, and to East Asia. This process intersects with Taiwan's growing awareness of independence. The next section elaborates on the last component of the China–Taiwan identity-based conflict: Taiwan's independence awareness.

2.2.3 Taiwan's Independence Awareness

The Taiwan Strait remains a flashpoint in this region and forms a potential cause for armed conflict between the US and China. Because the US chooses to protect Taiwan's self-determination, enhancing Taiwan's self-defense capabilities and providing periodic intervention has become a US priority (Franck and Melese 2003). Because China aims to unify Taiwan if necessary through invasion or armed force, along with China's military modernization and Taiwan's strategic response, the probability of a military conflict has grown and poses a threat to Taiwan Strait security. The fundamental element in Taiwan Strait security is Taiwan's sovereign status due to the growing awareness of Taiwan's independent sovereignty along with the development of democratization since the lifting of martial law in 1987 (Irwin Crookes 2016). Despite a temporary *détente* between 2008 and 2015 fueled by increased economic ties during the KMT-led administration, the underlying conflict regarding Taiwan's sovereign status remains unresolved (Kastner 2016). The economic ties between China and Taiwan expanded and, to some extent, decreased the probability of conflict among China, Taiwan, and the US (Tanious 2019). On the contrary, some argued that the conflict still existing for China posed a potential economic threat to Taiwan's economic security (Chen 2012). China's efforts to entice Taiwanese people with promises of economic prosperity to achieve unification exacerbated tensions because unification with China undermines Taiwan's sovereignty. While increased economic and social interactions seemingly resolve conflicts, Taiwan's identity as Taiwanese conflicts with China's efforts to reinforce a common Chinese identity. However, some argue that Taiwanese businesspersons have played a significant role in transforming the conflict through unofficial mediation processes (Tavares et al. 2012): Personal interactions rooted in society have served as peaceful channels when economic relations increased the interdependence for both sides. Following these enhanced trade ties since 2008, Saunders and Kastner (2012) suggested that peace between China and Taiwan is essential to reduce the risk of military conflict between the US and China over Taiwan and to alleviate the threat perceptions of other Asian states. Thus, the resolution of the Taiwan–China identity-based conflict depends on the social and civil interactions between Taiwan and China, but the dilemma is Taiwan's identity as Taiwanese in conflict with the Chinese reinforced common identity as Chinese.

To sum up, the Taiwan–China identity-based conflict in 21st century East Asian Security is shaped by three factors affecting one another: unresolved regime representation, China's rise,

and Taiwan's independence awareness. These factors are influenced by various security approaches ranging from military alliances and economic ties to social interactions, each contributing to the formation and evolution of the identity-based. To illustrate how this framework operates in practice, I examine three cases, each representing distinct dimensions of East Asian security management: territorial and military (the South China Sea), economic (the ECFA), and societal-level interactions and ad hoc diplomacy (the COVID-19 pandemic). These cases are chosen not for comprehensiveness but to illustrate how Taiwan's identity-based conflict with China manifests across political, economic, and social domains.

2.3 Application to Three Cases: The South China Sea Dispute, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The 21st century East Asian security architecture has been more encompassing, from political, military, and economic, to diplomatic approaches. Due to the shared sense of security for long-term peace and stability being in demand, it necessitates a comprehensive view of conflictual situations in East Asia to illustrate the identity-based conflict between Taiwan and China. Each of the selected conflictual cases presents challenges to Taiwan's identity-based conflict with China and hampers Taiwan's participation in regional security management. (1) The South China Sea, characterized by territorial disputes and the formation of military alliances, (2) the ECFA, showcasing economic security concerns and the establishment of trade agreements, and (3) the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting societal-level interactions and the utilization of ad hoc diplomacy. Applying the explanatory framework of 21st century East Asian Security, these cases reveal how unresolved regime representation, China's rise, and Taiwan's independence awareness shape Taiwan's identity-based conflict across different security domains.

2.3.1 The South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea has long been an unresolved historical territorial dispute in the region. The disputants involved not only hold different opinions regarding the borders but also maintain a cautious approach towards security issues. Previous attempts to address the South China Sea issue through International Law for the Sea Tribunal resulted in the Philippines adopting a hedging foreign security policy due to concerns over China's rise. China's assertiveness in the region has been salient through its deployment of submarines and research vessels to the area

to perform military activities and to claim evidence resources for its historical rights. In terms of historical rights, the Chinese Nationalist Party, which relocated to Taiwan in 1949 and was later referred to as the KuoMinTang party, continues to assert territorial claims over the South China Sea. This assertion by the KMT regarding the South China Sea reinforces the perspective that the nature of this territorial dispute is an identity-based conflict. The identity-based conflict is whether the KMT represents the Republic of China, which, since relocating the regime to Taiwan in 1949, does not rule over the territory of the People's Republic of China. For Taiwan, since transforming to democracy and growing awareness of Taiwanese identity, even during the DPP administration, there has been a dispute over claiming the sea territory in the South China Sea (Tseng 2015). The following paragraphs hence elaborate on the intricate interplay of two intertwined factors contributing to this identity-based conflict: China's rise and Taiwan's independence awareness.

A study on the South China Sea conflict between two disputants, the Philippines and China has delineated the history of the conflict into three distinct stages (Han et al. 2023): (1) 2001-2010 was characterized more by cooperation than confrontation; (2) 2010-2016 turned to more confrontation than cooperation; (3) 2016-2022 witnessed a moderation of oppositional behavior, albeit with a decline in cooperation. Despite efforts by ASEAN during the 2010s to engage in a multilateral institutionalist movement with China (Ba 2009), the South China Sea conflict escalated to the point that the Philippines took the case to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, thereby testing the international rules-based order in East Asia. The 2016 Arbitration Award revealed the Philippines' hedging of foreign policy, which became entangled in both Sino-ASEAN relations and US-China relations. The power rivalry between the US and China in the South China Sea served as one of the driving factors behind China's maritime military actions in the region. While the Philippines' resorting to the International Tribunal may have been perceived as an alternative approach to security rather than relying only on military alliances, it eventually caused China to disregard the rules-based order and assert its historical rights over the sea territory through discursive power. China's assertive discourse regarding its historical rights symbolizes not only its economic ascendancy but also its increasing military and political influence. China not only claimed its historical rights over the South China Sea since the end of the Cold War, but also over Taiwan, to increase its assertiveness in establishing a regional order. In Sino-ASEAN relations, China has successfully attracted ASEAN by its increasing economic interests (Venkataraman 2006). Although the China-ASEAN Free Trade

Agreement ushered in peaceful development, China's military actions in the South China Sea posed a threat to Southeast Asian states. Karim (2014) argued that China's military modernization and the incompatible approach to the international dispute tribunal would destabilize peace in the South China Sea. China's militarization of the South China Sea is a symbol of China's rise. This rise to power is not only the economic rise in China but also the counterbalance to US security policy in the region (Regilme 2018). This sense of China's military insecurity not only dates from 1949 but is a result of the continuous power formation in East Asia, such as the US security dominance and China's economic rise. However, along with China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, Taiwan's claim is often overlooked in the existing literature.

Taiwan's claim over the South China Sea is intricately linked to the country's democratization process. The dynamics of domestic elections and the competing identities represented by Taiwan's two major political parties contribute to a complex narrative surrounding the South China Sea dispute (Wilson 2017). The KMT represents an identity of reunifying with China, whereas the DPP represents a distinct Taiwanese identity. Despite their different identity representation, they have been involved in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. In addition to the domestic identity challenge, Taiwan's identity was underscored during the 2016 Arbitrary proceedings, where Taiwan was referred to as the "Taiwan Authority of China" rather than as a sovereign state entity. This highlighted Taiwan's identity challenge in the regional dispute. Hsiao (2017) argued that the issue is more political than legal for Taiwan, as its involvement in the South China Sea dispute heightens Taiwan's security risk and impacts cross-strait relations. Tseng (2023) expanded on this perspective, explaining that Taiwan's claim in the South China Sea is tied to its domestic democratization and identity formation, yet it often finds itself being treated as an integral part of China on the international stage. Trif (2023) highlights that the South China Sea case for Taiwan is a conflict between foreign policy discourse and the international rules-based order.

As a result, the conflict between Taiwan and China can be contextualized in the development of the South China Sea dispute, where the underlying nature of the conflict is identity-based. Karim (2014) contends that Taiwan's younger generation, with its pro-independence identity, may have exacerbated the conflict between Taiwan and China; nevertheless, Taiwan's pursuit of democracy and China's emphasis on peaceful development imply the necessity of engaging in people-to-people diplomacy. In essence, the Taiwan-China

identity-based conflict is not only a subregional dispute but also a regional conflictual case for the complex interplay of historical, political, and economic factors that reverberate beyond the subregional level, impacting regional stability and security. Consequently, conventional methods of security arrangement and conflict resolution may prove insufficient in addressing the underlying complexities of this conflict. Thus, I argue that an alternative approach, such as public diplomacy, can be examined for its potential in fostering peace and cooperation in the region. In light of this, I explore this argument in the next case study, ECFA.

2.3.2 The Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement

The ECFA was signed on 26 June 2010 by the Straits Exchange Foundation (for Taiwan) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (for China). The agreement aimed to establish a cooperation mechanism beneficial to economic prosperity and development, aligning with the fundamental principles of the World Trade Organization (WTO). With the breakdown of the Doha multilateral trade negotiations, there has been a proliferation of regional-level or bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), of which the ECFA represents a concerted effort towards advancing common economic interests. The ECFA was believed to bring economic benefits to both Taiwan and China, to reduce political tensions across the Taiwan Strait. However, questions persisted regarding the long-term economic benefits for Taiwan, such as its potential as a gateway to China's market or its ability to facilitate FTAs with other trading partners (Chien-Hale 2011). This posits the Taiwan–China conflict as a key to the region's security. Hsieh (2011) argued that the ECFA has the potential to contribute to regional stability by exemplifying bilateral trade liberalization, but suggested that the cross-strait characteristics may hinder trade relations' normalization. The cross-strait characteristics implied that the ECFA was neither a government-to-government agreement nor one between two WTO members. Hence, the absence of established international norms governing direct negotiations between Taiwan and China poses challenges to the agreement's implementation (Davidson 2011). Although the ECFA facilitates cross-strait economic cooperation, the underlying tensions reflect the identity-based influence of China's rise and Taiwan's independence awareness.

China's rising economic power represents a challenge to the existing regional order in the East Asia region and the US dominance in the Asia Pacific region. The emergence of various regional trade agreements over the past two decades, notably the Comprehensive and

Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), reflects a shifting power balance between established and emerging powers. The US free trade agreements in the Asia Pacific have been a historical development since the Cold War, and hence the US leadership and legacy are prevalent in East Asia (Blanchard and Liang 2014). Since the 2008 Asian Financial Crisis, US leadership in the Asia Pacific has been challenged, revealing China's rising power to influence designing and managing economic mechanisms in this region (Chen 2014). China's pursuit of an East Asian regional order without US intervention can be seen in the example of ASEAN plus three, a trade agreement among ASEAN member states, Japan, South Korea, and China. Within this context, the ECFA between China and Taiwan is positioned as a means to promote security and economic regionalization across the Taiwan Straits. However, China's intention to foster political integration with Taiwan raises security concerns in the ECFA. Lo (2023) points out China's diplomatic strategy of combining economic and political power, referred to as the *guanxi* strategy, emphasizing that it is a relationship between gift-givers and gift-takers. This *guanxi* strategy reveals China's unilateral imposition on defining Taiwan's reciprocity disproportionately benefits business groups, techno-related firms, and political parties, neglecting the interests of civil society. In 2014, Taiwanese people protested the subsequent trade agreements in the ECFA to be signed with China, which was called the Sunflower Movement and it revealed the civil society's demand for security. As security across the Taiwan Strait is not only imperative for both sides but also for the wider East Asia region, both China and Taiwan must engage and convince their respective populations (Ni 2014).

Taiwan's independence awareness has been evolving since transforming into a democracy, but identity formation remains entwined with the pursuit of distinguishing itself from China; therefore, this manifests in both domestic politics and foreign policy. The ECFA and the subsequent agreements have been perceived as threats to Taiwan's security. Chen (2014) argued that the ECFA would subjugate Taiwan to a status akin to China's local government because it fails to recognize Taiwan's statehood; for example, while Taiwan was required to amend relevant provisions in its Intellectual Property laws, China faced no obligations. Beyond the disparities in interests, economic cooperation between China and Taiwan necessitates an alignment of identity. Lai (2022) suggested that identity cannot be established only by economic cooperation and hence the importance for both sides to establish a common identity to reduce hostility. Taiwan's identity, centered on distinguishing itself from China and asserting its

position in the East Asian economy, has become a focal point in the securitization process surrounding the ECFA. Some claim that despite the identity challenges inherent in cross-strait relations, the ECFA provided Taiwan with an opportunity to integrate more fully into East Asia (Matsumoto 2015). To mitigate further security risks stemming from cross-strait relations, Taiwan should pursue a multilateral trade strategy and seek trade agreements with ASEAN to alleviate political tensions (Watanabe and Irish 2014).

Consequently, the Taiwan–China identity-based conflict can be illustrated by the case of the ECFA. As the ECFA aims to promote economic cooperation between Taiwan and China, it illuminates the complexities of this conflict, reflecting divergent interests and identity concerns from domestic to regional levels. It becomes evident that both sides must engage with their respective populations, highlighting the potential of alternative conflict resolution such as public diplomacy in promoting peace and cooperation in the region. The ECFA, contextualized within the 21st century East Asian Security environment, reveals the need for a more encompassing solution to the Taiwan–China identity-based conflict, one that involves civil society and public engagement. I further demonstrate this view in the next case study: the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3.3 The COVID-19 Pandemic

The emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, during the Chinese New Year holiday in 2020 precipitated a cascade of security concerns regarding public health throughout the region. Given the high levels of trade, investment, and tourism, the virus swiftly spread to neighboring countries. In Southeast Asian states, a rising anti-China sentiment posed a significant challenge to China's rising power in this region's security environment. China intended to ease the resentment through its vaccine diplomacy strategy and the proposal of a Health Silk Road, integrating public health issues into its diplomatic endeavors to bolster its global leadership role (Yuan 2023). Meanwhile, in China's diplomatic initiatives, Taiwan was excluded from regional or global participation. Instead, Taiwan faced increasing military provocations from China, such as aircraft intrusions during the COVID-19 crisis. However, Taiwan actively engaged in the global health arena and sought to strengthen relations with neighboring countries. For example, Taiwan's mask diplomacy (Alton 2020) and the social campaign, Taiwan Can Help (Yan 2023) demonstrated its commitment to maintaining the stability of regional security and enhancing its visibility in the international community. An examination of security dynamics during the

COVID-19 crisis reveals the Taiwan–China identity-based conflict as a pivotal regional security concern. Both China’s and Taiwan’s diplomatic activities during the COVID-19 crisis were underpinned by competition for national identity and nationalist movements, further complicating regional security dynamics. The COVID-19 response illustrates how China’s growing influence and Taiwan’s independent identity shape societal-level conflicts and diplomatic challenges.

China’s rise has raised concerns regarding regional security, while the COVID-19 crisis has challenged China’s role in the region’s public health, trade relations, and military activities. The military exercises conducted in the South China Sea, or along the border with India, as well as in the air defense identification zone of Taiwan, heightened the risk of escalating during the COVID-19 crisis due to the surge of anti-China sentiment in the region (Nichiporuk 2021). At the outbreak of COVID-19, ASEAN faced pressure to align with either China or the US regarding the South China Sea dispute. The hedging attitude in ASEAN countries along with the anti-China sentiment lingering in the society undermined China’s leadership in maintaining security and stability. China instead developed a COVID-19 diplomacy with ASEAN emphasizing the importance of people-to-people interactions, economic cooperation, and maritime dispute resolution (Peng 2021). The anti-China sentiment in ASEAN countries influenced China’s foreign policy approaches to managing regional conflicts, evident in the institutionalization of the Health Silk Road as part of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI). For instance, the Philippines witnessed rising anti-China sentiment following the identification of the first COVID-19 case involving a Chinese national, exacerbating tensions amid the South China Sea dispute. China accelerated the institutionalization of the Health Silk Road, advocating for a reciprocal relationship trajectory (Rabena 2021). In managing foreign relations during the COVID-19 crisis, China placed considerable emphasis on emotions. For example, Schneider (2021) highlighted China’s utilization of nationalist sentiments on social media platforms as a form of emotional governance, targeting both domestic and foreign audiences. However, this form of emotional governance demonstrated the identity-based nature of the conflict, as criticisms from Taiwanese media outlets intensified concerns regarding China’s rising nationalist movements. This nationalism movement significantly heightens the risk of an identity-based conflict with Taiwan, thereby posing a substantial threat to regional security.

Taiwan’s critics of China’s online nationalism movement can be construed as a potential

threat to security relations in the region. For Taiwan, the conflict with China has revolved around issues of identity, particularly about independence awareness. During the COVID-19 crisis, Taiwan's identity evolved, leading to the development of stronger state-society relations. Taiwan's successful management of the pandemic crisis can be attributed in large part to its swift implementation of monitoring and quarantine policies, particularly in response to the vast volume of business travelers between Taiwan and China. Through effective policy transparency and civil society cooperation, Taiwan was able to maintain social stability amidst the pandemic. The success reveals the importance of tightened state-society relations. Initiatives such as the campaigns against disinformation and "Taiwan Can Help" exemplified the two-way communication channel between the government and civil society (Yen 2020a). In fighting disinformation, the government set up a central information center to disseminate COVID-19-related policies and news, while civil society engaged with digital skills to pass on the information to the public. The "Taiwan Can Help" campaign, supported by the government and initiated by civil society organizations, facilitated mask diplomacy, donating facial masks to foreign countries and domestic populations, particularly immigrant laborers. Given the significant number of immigrant workers from Southeast Asian states in Taiwan, their health conditions were incorporated into Taiwan's health security policies (Huang 2020). Simon (2021) pointed out that these security measures undertaken by Taiwan as part of its nation-state-building efforts pose a potential risk of escalating conflicts. Taiwan's management of the COVID-19 crisis, despite entailing the risk of national identity competition, highlights the significance of evolving state-society relations as demonstrated through transparent policy implementation and collaborative efforts in combating disinformation.

To sum up, the application of the synthesized explanatory framework to the three case studies elucidated that Taiwan's conflict issue in this region is an identity-based conflict with China. These three cases reveal the potential for resolving Taiwan's identity-based conflict through societal involvement and people-to-people activities. Therefore, I argue that Taiwan does not instigate conflicts in East Asia; instead, its continuous efforts in societal engagement, people-to-people exchange, and public diplomacy, as exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, position Taiwan as a promoter of peace in the 21st century East Asian Security environment.

2.4 Summary

This chapter proposes an explanatory framework for the Taiwan–China identity-based conflict in the security environment of 21st century East Asia. The regional security architecture encompasses military power, economic institutionalization, and ad hoc diplomacy, as reflected in the South China Sea dispute, the ECFA, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of the case studies highlights China’s rise and Taiwan’s independence awareness as key factors shaping the identity-based conflict. Consequently, Taiwan has been strategizing people-to-people diplomacy to address the identity-based conflict and to enhance its security status in East Asia. This positions Taiwan as a promoter of peace and stability in the region, rather than a contributor to conflict. As Taiwan’s identity formation evolves, as seen in the 2024 presidential election, it is crucial to examine how unconventional conflict resolution strategies, including societal-level interactions, can empower Taiwan to shape the narrative surrounding its identity-based conflict. The next chapter establishes a theoretical framework to justify the East Asian way of understanding and interpretation of conflict resolution, considering the viewpoints of both China and Taiwan.