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An uncomfortable triangle: China, Taiwan and the United States An analysis using Game Theory

Abstract

This paper analyses the strategic interaction between China, Taiwan and the United States regarding Taiwan's status, paying particular attention to the possibility of armed conflict and the role played by the United States' policy of strategic ambiguity.

Game theory and its dynamic extension (motion theory) are used to analyse this trilateral relationship. A sequential model is proposed, and the robustness of the results is examined by using alternative parameters for Taiwan and the United States. Various issues relating to asymmetric information are also examined.

The main findings focus on Taiwan's role as a linchpin of global interaction, the long-term significance of China's more assertive stance, and the difficulties that the United States' strategic ambiguity may eventually pose. From the perspective of a potential armed conflict, the combination of 'nationalist' and 'hawkish' tendencies on the part of Taiwan and the United States, respectively, is particularly significant.

In the medium to long term, China will continue to act assertively; Taiwan will come under intense pressure to negotiate its integration with China and will seek to broaden its room for manoeuvre by raising the prospect of an asymmetric conflict in the event of an attack; and the United States will maintain its limited support for Taiwan, whilst upholding a strategic ambiguity that leans in that direction.

Keywords

China, Taiwan, United States, Game theory, Geopolitics.

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1 Introduction

Since 2022, two major conflicts (Ukraine-Russia and the Middle East) have overshadowed the one unfolding between China and the United States[1] regarding Taiwan. The visit to Taiwan in August 2022 by Nancy Pelosi—at that time Speaker of the US House of Representatives—marked a shift in China's stance towards Taiwan[2] and, indirectly, towards the United States (Scobell *et al.*, 2025).

This shift in stance, characterised by increased military and economic pressure from China on Taiwan, necessitates a different approach to analysing the relationship between China and the United States, as a purely diplomatic solution now appears to be off the table and maintaining the current *status quo* has become less plausible.

It cannot be entirely ruled out that the conflict in Ukraine has contributed to this shift in stance, as the United States has been forced to focus its resources on supporting that country, whilst Russia has drawn closer to China, both economically and militarily. The combination of these two developments has strengthened China's strategic capabilities, which may have boosted its confidence in its own capabilities.

Historically, China and the United States have had a contentious relationship regarding the status of Taiwan. On the one hand, China has always regarded Taiwan as an integral and inseparable part of itself, shaping both its foreign policy (under the 'One China' principle) and its domestic policy (under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle). Various reasons underpin China's stance: territorial integrity, the closure of a period its leaders view as one of foreign abuse and interference (the so-called 'Century of Humiliation', 1839–1949), economic and military projection, and, more controversially but plausibly, containing a social and political experiment (Taiwan as a liberal democracy) which could eventually undermine China's political system, centred on the Communist Party and its version of the Marxist-inspired dictatorship of the proletariat.

For its part, the United States has always viewed Taiwan as a means of containing China, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the overall tone of its relationship with that country. This tone, which began on a highly confrontational note in the wake of the Korean War (1950–1953), gradually softened as the United States moved closer to China during the 1970s, seeking a counterweight to the expansion of the Soviet Union and hoping, in the long term, to draw China into the Western sphere through trade (Cliff and Shlapak, 2007; Mearsheimer, 2014; Kuntić, 2015; Scobell *et al.*, 2020; Lin, 2021; Pérez Expósito, 2023; Melián Negrín, 2024; Mazarr *et al.*, 2025).

1 Hereinafter, China will be referred to as the People's Republic of China and Taiwan as the Republic of China, with their origins dating back to 1949.

2 The map shown in Melián Negrín (2024), Figure 7, illustrates this shift in stance very well. Similarly, the number of violations of Taiwan's air defence identification zone by China has risen from an average of 458 in the period 2019–2021 to 2,570 between 2022 and 2025 (CSIS, 2026).

China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 is conventionally regarded as the consolidation of the Chinese capitalist system and the start of its major economic, technological and military expansion. Paradoxically, the success of China's integration into the West has ultimately led to renewed tensions in its relationship with the United States, particularly in the commercial and technological spheres, but also in the financial and geostrategic domains. Naturally, as part of the latter, Taiwan has increasingly become a point of friction between the two superpowers to the extent that various analysts consider an armed conflict between them to be highly likely and even inevitable, with such a conflict likely to arise precisely over the status of Taiwan (Allison, 2015; Castelltort Claramunt, 2021; O'Hanlon, 2022; Cancian *et al.*, 2023; Pérez Expósito, 2023).

In this context, it is particularly important to consider the possibility of direct armed conflict between China and the United States, the consequences of which in terms of human suffering could be enormous. Furthermore, such a conflict scenario would lead to a reduction in economic activity and trade across the three countries. Given the weight of China and the United States, this would have an immediate negative impact on global levels of production, demand and employment. Moreover, given the geographical significance of this region and its importance in global trade, bottlenecks would arise in supply chains, with consequent disruptions to production processes in the rest of the world, as well as general inflationary pressures. The more intense and protracted this conflict is, the greater and more persistent the adverse effects described above will be.

Finally, Taiwan has gradually lost international standing as the United States has drawn closer to China, leading to an increase in the number of countries that recognise only the People's Republic of China. Nevertheless, the United States has always maintained its support, as evidenced by the *Taiwan Relations Act* of 1979 and the *Six Assurances* of 1982. These assurances, together with adherence to the 'One China' principle, have given rise to a stance known as 'strategic ambiguity'. According to this stance, China cannot be certain of US passivity should it invade Taiwan, but neither can Taiwan be certain of US support should it unilaterally declare its independence from China. This approach is geared towards maintaining the *status quo*, whereby peace is preserved, the 'One China' principle is not violated, and Taiwan effectively retains a status very similar to that of a sovereign and independent state (Wolfinger, 1984; Benson, 2000; Chang, 2000; Niou, 2004; Feldman, 2007; Kan and Morrison, 2014; Wang, 2025)

From a methodological perspective, this study employs Game Theory (Bonnano, 2018) and its dynamic extension provided by Movement Theory (Brams, 1994). Since Schelling's (1960) initial contribution, this theory has been systematically applied to the study of international relations (Snidal, 1985; Morrow, 1994; Gates and Humes, 1997), enabling the analysis of strategic interactions between rational actors (such as countries) in situations of interdependence. As a result of this analysis, stable outcomes can be identified through equilibrium concepts, which allow the most plausible states to be characterised based on the interaction of the players. Furthermore, it provides

a framework for understanding how the lack of complete information affects actors' decisions, bringing its application closer to real-world conditions.

Finally, by making explicit the initial assumptions regarding players' preferences and available actions, game theory allows us to examine the robustness of the results in the face of changes to those assumptions, thereby providing a framework for rational discussion in the difficult and controversial field of international relations.

The text is structured as follows. Firstly, it reviews the literature analysing the Taiwan conflict through the lens of game theory. Section 3, which is of a formal nature, presents a sequential model based on two basic two-player games that constitute the first two stages of the model: China–Taiwan and Taiwan–United States, respectively. The model includes a third stage that combines the results of both games, concluding the interaction between the three countries. Section 4, which is analytical in nature, examines certain informational aspects related to strategic ambiguity as well as the potential behaviours of China, Taiwan and the United States. The paper includes three appendices: a brief overview of Game Theory, the detailed results of the interaction between Taiwan and the United States, taking into account all the stances that both countries may adopt, and the extreme case of a game between China and an independent Taiwan.

2 Literature review

Various authors have used Game Theory to analyse the strategic relationship between China and the United States regarding Taiwan; see Franck and Melese (2003), Wu (2003), Chang (2007) and Zietek *et al.* (2025).

Generally speaking, models tend to consider three players (China, Taiwan and the United States), thereby assigning Taiwan a specific role in the interaction between the two superpowers. The sequential approach is clearly dominant and, to a lesser extent, an ordinal (qualitative) characterisation of the players' preferences.

All models take full account of the information available and, when they combine various temperaments[3], they generate a multitude of equilibria, which is an indication of the indeterminacy of the overall system. This indeterminacy reflects the complexity of the relationship between these countries and the multitude of factors that influence it.

A very common feature is the use of multiple temperaments or attitudes to characterise different countries, reflecting their varying internal attitudes towards the game. In particular, all models agree on attributing two temperaments to the United States, designed to capture the principle of strategic ambiguity followed by that country[4]. The following table summarises their main characteristics.

3 In the case of Wu (2003), probabilistic elements are also present, as the study explicitly considers the probability of success of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, both with and without US assistance to the latter.

4 The exception is Franck and Melese (2003), who characterise the United States' stance in terms of factors relating to its military capability.

TABLE I: MODELS BASED ON GAME THEORY

Modelo	Jugadores	Temperamentos	Equilibrio
Franck y Melese (2003)	CH, US	CH: Confiado / Paciente / Impaciente / Desesperado US: (DAM alta/baja) X (Acceso garantizado/disputado)	Nash perfecto en subjuegos
Wu (2003)	CH, US, TW	TW: Independentista / Continuista US: Intervencionista / No intervencionista	Nash perfecto en subjuegos
Chang (2007)	CH, US, TW	US: Claridad estratégica / Ambigüedad estratégica CH: Paciente / Impaciente	Nash perfecto en subjuegos
Zietek et al. (2025)	CH, US		Nash (simultáneo)
Este trabajo (2026)	CH, US, TW	TW: Conciliador / Nacionalista US: Moderado / Belicoso	Nash No Miope (Tª de Movimientos)

Nota: DAM denota la capacidad de la defensa antimisiles de Estados Unidos y "Acceso" indica la facilidad del acceso, principalmente aeronaval, de este país al estrecho de Taiwán.
El símbolo "X" indica que se consideran la cuatro combinaciones posibles de DAM y "Acceso".

From a technical perspective, the main contribution of this work compared to that of Franck and Melese (2003), Wu (2003) and Chang (2007) lies in combining their sequential approach with an in-depth analysis of each stage using Movement Theory. In this way, a dynamic extension is provided that significantly enriches the classical analysis, offering ENMs a long-term perspective that complements very well the short-term perspective provided by Nash equilibrium.

A comparison of the model proposed in this paper with that of Wu (2003) is highly informative. As can be seen in Table I, the two models are very similar, both in terms of the number of players, their sequential structure, and the definition of the temperaments for Taiwan and the United States. However, the greater integration of his model, together with the use of a cardinal and probabilistic framework, makes the analysis particularly complex and hardly operational[5], since those cardinal elements (the utilities derived by the countries in the various states of the model) are, in practice, extremely difficult to calculate.

By contrast, this study has adopted an ordinal approach and avoided the use of probabilistic elements, replacing them with a qualitative calculation based on alternative scenarios, the analysis of which is highly intuitive.

Finally, the sequential approach adopted—which, as will be seen later, includes a possible review of the results from the first stage—provides with a high degree of modularity, simplifying the analysis by allowing each stage to be studied in depth, using Movement Theory.

3 A sequential game theory model

This paper examines this relationship using Game Theory, formulating a model of three players (China, Taiwan and the United States) who interact with one another sequentially, as shown in the following figure:



Figure 1: Model structure

5 See, for example, the diagrams on pages 40 and 46 (Wu, 2023).

In the model, an initial China-Taiwan game is played out. This is followed by a second Taiwan-United States game which 'validates' the first if Taiwan repeats the balancing strategy it adopted in the first game; if not, it leads to a revision of that strategy, with the process repeating itself and yielding a new outcome.

Although in the real world both sets of relations operate in parallel, this sequence seeks to reflect the asymmetry between them, as the relationship between China and Taiwan is considered far more binding and decisive than that between Taiwan and the United States.

Taiwan is the only country involved in both games, acting as an intermediary between China and the United States. In this way, the two the powers interact indirectly, with Taiwan acting as the 'mediating factor' in this interaction.

Both Taiwan and the United States articulate their preferences through two distinct 'temperaments': conciliatory or nationalist for the former, and *dovish* or *hawkish* for the latter.

These attitudes can feed into one another, so that the more nationalistic Taiwan becomes, the more belligerent the United States may become, and vice versa. Thus, the attitudes of the two countries that interact with China—either directly (Taiwan) or indirectly (the United States)—are not necessarily independent of one another.

The use of alternative temperaments is an analytically useful way of qualifying the single-actor hypothesis, reflecting the fact that in both countries there are very different strategic perspectives and assessments regarding the evaluation of the possible outcomes of the games in which they are involved. Furthermore, as already noted, the United States adopts a stance of strategic ambiguity that fits well with a dual temperament.

3.1 First stage: the China–Taiwan game

China has two strategies at its disposal: assertive diplomacy and military intervention. The first involves a combination of diplomatic and economic measures aimed at convincing Taiwan of the benefits of integration with China, alongside demonstrations of military strength and capability, though without resorting to direct confrontation with Taiwan. These demonstrations include, amongst other actions, *de facto* blockades through the conduct of large-scale air and naval exercises around Taiwan. Formally, these are not blockades, but as live fire is used and the island is completely surrounded, they are blockades in practice. They also include smaller-scale but more frequent and unpredictable operations, such as the deployment of fighter jets and bombers east of the median line of the Taiwan Strait, aggressive naval patrols around the Taiwanese islands close to the mainland, etc. See Martin *et al.* (2022) and CSIS (2026) for a quantification and analysis of these threats. Additionally, this strategy of assertive diplomacy also includes measures aimed at integrating the economies of both countries more effectively, with the aim of emphasising the economic and financial benefits of a potential reunification.

By contrast, military intervention, whilst disregarding the diplomatic and economic aspects, involves a series of essentially 'kinetic' actions, the intensity of which can vary considerably:

- Blockade of the island: selective, partial or complete.
- Attack: limited (e.g. on the small islands controlled by Taiwan), comprehensive but limited to military targets, or comprehensive without restrictions.
- Invasion with landing: limited (e.g. occupation of Tainan, the main port) or complete.

For its part, Taiwan has two strategies at its disposal:

- Negotiated integration with China.
- Unilateral independence from China.

Integration can take many forms and offer a wide range of possibilities, ranging from China's complete absorption of Taiwan (e.g. Taiwan would be like Hainan, a Chinese island of similar size) to a status as a Commonwealth of Taiwan, including various degrees of autonomy, a federation or a confederation.

Under any form of integration, two areas would no longer be under Taiwan's control: defence (military affairs in general) and foreign policy (including its economic dimension).

Independence, rather than a separation from China that already exists *de facto*, is a rejection of the integration process. Independence is a unilateral decision by Taiwan with very few nuances, whereas integration is a clearly bilateral and very open-ended process.

The combination of China's and Taiwan's strategies gives rise to four possible scenarios, with both countries stating their preferences. Those of China are structured around two axes, reflecting the official stance of the Chinese Communist Party as expressed at its October 2022 congress[6].

- Primary: integration is preferred to independence
- Secondary: contingent on Taiwan's decision; if it opts for integration, China prefers assertive action, but if it opts for independence, it prefers military action.

Unlike China, Taiwan organises its preferences according to two alternative structures or temperaments. As already indicated, this is a way of qualifying the single-actor hypothesis, reflecting the fact that there are significant differences within Taiwan's population regarding its relationship with China and a potential armed conflict with that country.

6 Xi Jinping (2022): 'Taiwan belongs to China. The resolution of the Taiwan issue is a matter for the Chinese people, and it is for the Chinese people to decide. We will continue to work with the utmost sincerity and make every effort to achieve peaceful reunification, but we will never rule out the use of military force and reserve the right to take all necessary measures'.

3.1.2 Variant 1: Conciliatory China-Taiwan game solution

Firstly, it is seen as a conciliatory stance, characterised by a clear preference for an 'assertive' China over a 'military' one, and subsequently placing greater value on integration than on independence. This approach is particularly associated with the Kuomintang party and the business sector, which have very close commercial and economic ties with China (Herrero Martínez, 2025; Wolfenstein, 2025).

The combination of actions and preferences results in the game solution shown in the table below.

TABLE II: CHINA-TAIWAN CONCILIATORY GAME

Taiwán / China	Independencia	Integración
Acción militar	(2 1) [4 4]	(3 2) [4 4]
Diplomacia asertiva	(1 3) [4 4]	***(4 4)*** [4 4]

Notes: (x, y) = (China's preference, Taiwan's preference) in the original game, 4 = Best; 3 = Next best; 2 = Next worst; 1 = Worst.
[x, y] = [China's preference, Taiwan's preference] in the anticipatory game, described by a payoff matrix whose entries, defined in square brackets, are the non-myopic equilibria (NME) of the original game starting from that outcome.
The Nash equilibria of the original game and the anticipatory game are underlined.
The arrows indicate the transitions between game states leading to a Nash equilibrium. Non-myopic equilibria (NME) are highlighted in grey. The cooperative states of the basic game {(4,4), (4,3), (3,4) and (3,3)} are shown in bold and italics.

A conciliatory Taiwan is characterised by a dominant strategy (Integration), so China will opt to use an assertive strategy. Thus, the Nash equilibrium of the game turns out to be [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration]=(4,4), characterised by being:

- The only cooperative outcome and the best that both players can achieve.
- Coinciding with the game's ENM, which is also unique.
- It also coincides with the Nash equilibrium of the anticipatory game.

The fact that the short-run equilibrium (Nash), the long-run equilibrium (ENM) and the equilibrium in the anticipatory game all coincide indicates the robustness of the solution obtained, a point reinforced by the fact that both players assign the maximum value to it. Although the game is largely determined from a technical perspective, it is worth remembering that the concept of integration is very open-ended and that assertive diplomacy allows for a wide variety of combinations of coercion and compulsion.

Assuming a conciliatory stance towards Taiwan, the model predicts the following:

- Taiwan will integrate into China, relinquishing its own foreign and defence policies.

– Although the process has no precise timetable, it must be consistent with China's use of a non-military strategy. In principle, a date around 2050 seems reasonable, close to the centenary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.
– As the timing and forms of integration remain open, direct military confrontation is ruled out; however, whilst the process is ongoing and as part of China's assertive diplomacy, large-scale military activities may be carried out by China.

3.1.3 Scenario 2: China-Nationalist Taiwan outcome

Taiwan also has an alternative stance, more inclined towards independence and the general maintenance of its sovereignty *vis-à-vis* China. These preferences have been gaining traction, particularly since the election of President Tsai in 2016 and the consolidation of the progressive democratic party.

The nationalist mindset views China's strategy of military action in the same way as the conciliatory one, but reverses the positions regarding China's assertive diplomacy. Consequently, integration ceases to be the dominant strategy and behaviour becomes contingent: if China adheres to a strategy of assertive diplomacy, it prefers independence. Conversely, if China resorts to military action, it prefers integration in order to avoid military confrontation. In this situation, a more radical temperament would prefer independence in this case[7]. The game analysis is shown in the following table:

TABLE III: CHINA-NATIONALIST TAIWAN GAME

Taiwán / China	Independencia	Integración
Acción militar	(2 1) [4 3]	(3 2) [4 3]
Diplomacia asertiva	(1 4) [3 2]	(4 3) [4 3]

Notes: (x, y) = (China's preference, Taiwan's preference) in the original game, 4 = Best; 3 = Next best; 2 = Next worst; 1 = Worst.
[x, y] = [China's preference, Taiwan's preference] in the anticipatory game, described by a payoff matrix whose entries, defined in square brackets, are the non-myopic equilibria (NME) of the original game starting from that outcome.
The Nash equilibria of the original and anticipatory games are underlined.
The arrows indicate the transitions between game states leading to a Nash equilibrium. Non-myopic equilibria (NME) are highlighted in grey. The cooperative states of the basic game {(4,4), (4,3), (3,4) and (3,3)} are shown in bold and italics.

7 This case is analysed in Appendix C.

Taiwan's shift from a conciliatory to a nationalist stance has significant implications for the game's solution:

- There is no Nash equilibrium using deterministic strategies[8]. The game is now strongly cyclical: the players successively alternate their strategies, without reaching a stable point.
- The cycle of integration→assertive diplomacy→independence→integration should be taken as an approximation of actual behaviour that would oscillate around these points, without settling clearly on any specific combination. Furthermore, the transition through the state [Military action, Independence] could be terminal under certain circumstances.
- Although the short-term situation appears unstable, in the long term two Nash equilibria can be identified, both linked to Taiwan's integration strategy. One of them, [Assertive diplomacy, Integration], coincides with that of the previous game.
- The anticipatory game does possess a Nash equilibrium, making the NME associated with [Assertive diplomacy, Integration] more plausible than that of [Military action, Integration].
- A further argument in favour of this NGE is that it is a cooperative state, albeit less unanimously so than when Taiwan adopts a conciliatory stance.
- This NME dominates the other NME in the Pareto sense; therefore, in a rational long-term calculation, it is more likely to prevail.

Taking all of the above into account, Taiwan's integration into China appears to be one of the most plausible options in the long term, as it is a NPM for both of Taiwan's temperaments. It is also the most plausible option in the short term (Nash) if Taiwan adopts a conciliatory stance.

From the point of view of fairness, the state [Assertive Action, Integration] is a cooperative state for both of Taiwan's temperaments, thereby avoiding the perception that one player is 'taking advantage' of the other.

With certain caveats, it can be considered that, from July 2022, the state [Assertive Action, Integration] is the initial state of the game, which reinforces its NME character due to the path dependency it introduces.

Finally, the scenario of a nationalist Taiwan raises certain concerns regarding instability, particularly in the short term, owing mainly to the absence of a deterministic Nash equilibrium and the cyclical nature of the interaction between the two countries.

8 Technically, there is no Nash equilibrium using only pure (deterministic) strategies. Finding such an equilibrium requires the use of random strategies, which, in the context of this paper and given the use of ordinal preferences, is not appropriate.

3.2 Second stage: the Taiwan–United States game

In this second stage, Taiwan—acting as a 'mediating particle' between China and the United States—interacts with the latter. As a result of this interaction, Taiwan may choose the same strategy as in the first stage, bringing the entire game between the three countries to a close. Conversely, if it does not repeat its choice, a third game begins which determines the final interaction between the three nations.

Taiwan will be characterised in the same way as in the previous game, with two strategies available (independence and integration) and its preferences able to align with two alternative temperaments (conciliatory and nationalist).

For its part, the United States has two strategies for supporting Taiwan:

– Limited: arms, intelligence, diplomatic and economic support.

– Extended: additionally, military intervention in the event of Chinese aggression. This intervention would focus on the defence of the island, without considering an attack on China[9].

The United States' relationship with Taiwan, which is shaped by the aforementioned strategic ambiguity, will be characterised on the assumption that the United States itself possesses two temperaments: moderate (dovish) and bellicose (hawkish).

The dovish stance is characterised by a dominant strategy: limited support, and, subject to this, a preference for independence over integration (maximising the return on the investment that support represents).

A bellicose stance alters previous preferences, shifting the balance of power when Taiwan opts for independence. Consequently, the United States favours full alignment with Taiwan when the latter chooses secession.

The two approaches Taiwan adopts in its dealings with China are mirrored in its dealings with the United States. A conciliatory Taiwan maintains a dominant strategy based on integration and, subject to this, prefers full US support to limited support. As in the game with China, Taiwan's nationalist temperament is reactive, with no dominant strategy, and involves a trade-off in the valuation of extended US support compared to the conciliatory temperament.

The combination of the two temperaments of the United States and Taiwan gives rise to four possible games. The following table shows the corresponding Nash equilibria[10].

9 O'Hanlon (2022) and Cancian *et al.* (2023) examine the possible development of this conflict in great detail, primarily through war games.

10 Appendix B presents the detailed results of the four games.

TABLE IV: NASH EQUILIBRIA OF THE TAIWAN-US GAME

		Estados Unidos	
		Moderado	Belicoso
Taiwán	Conciliador	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)
	Nacionalista	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)	[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2) [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (4,4)

In all cases, the outcome [Limited support, Integration] emerges as a Nash equilibrium of the four games, with the same payoff, (2,2). Only when the United States has a bellicose disposition and Taiwan a nationalist one is the outcome [Extended support, Independence] also a Nash equilibrium.

Movement Theory provides a very informative refinement of the previous results. The following table shows the corresponding NMEs, as well as their correspondence with Nash's.

TABLE V: NON-MYOPIC EQUILIBRIA OF THE TAIWAN-UNITED STATES GAME

		Estados Unidos	
		Moderado	Belicoso
Taiwán	Conciliador	**[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)** [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (3,3)	**[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)** [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (4,3)
	Nacionalista	**[Apoyo limitado, Integración] = (2,2)** [Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (3,4)	**[Apoyo extendido, Independencia] = (4,4)**

Clave: en negrita los ENM que también son equilibrios de Nash.

Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos.

If Taiwan's stance is conciliatory, the Nash equilibrium and the NME revolve around integration and limited support from the United States, regardless of the United States' stance.

If Taiwan's stance is nationalist and that of the United States is moderate, this characterisation holds true: the United States' position 'curb's' Taiwan's aspirations for independence.

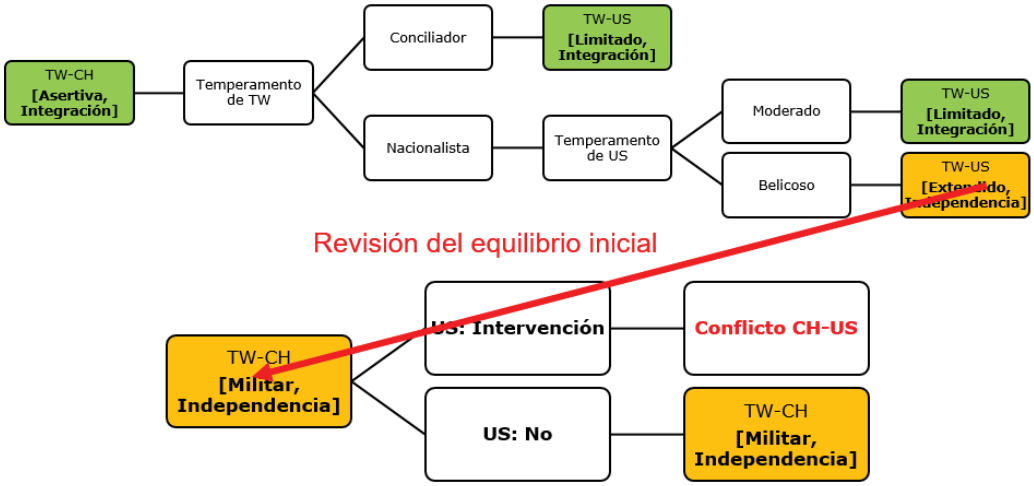
The major shift occurs when a Taiwan with a nationalist temperament is combined with a bellicose United States. In this case, short-term uncertainty arises, as there are two Nash equilibria:

– The most robust: [Limited support, Integration].
– A new one: [Extended support, Independence].

In the long term, the uncertainty is resolved with the emergence of a single NME: [Extended Support, Independence], which is also the cooperative outcome of the game. Consequently, this combination of temperaments, which are likely to reinforce one another, causes Taiwan to pivot towards independence.

3.3 Third stage: validation of the initial China-Taiwan game

Taiwan, as the only player present in both games, must display the same temperament in both games at the end of the sequence. This brings us to the third stage of the game: the validation of the solutions obtained in the two preceding stages. The following figure illustrates this validation process.



Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos.

Figure 2: Complete sequence of the games

The starting point for this sequence is the most plausible outcome[11] of the interaction between Taiwan and China: assertive Chinese diplomacy and a willingness to negotiate Taiwan's integration. Even if Taiwan adopts a conciliatory stance, its interaction with the United States does not alter the above outcome. This outcome is robust with respect to the United States' stance.

If, on the other hand, Taiwan's temperament is nationalist and that of the United States is bellicose, this creates an inconsistency with the previous scenario, as Taiwan now opts for independence and the United States provides extensive support to the country. This inconsistency leads to a revision of the first scenario, with China opting for military intervention. This revision does not occur if the United States has a moderate temperament, even if Taiwan's is nationalist.

The United States is the player making the final move. If it effectively backs Taiwan, the conflict will escalate, with China and the United States entering into direct confrontation. If, on the other hand, the United States renounces its extended support and provides only limited support, the conflict will not escalate, but it will have already begun, unfolding solely between China and Taiwan. At this point, one way or another, the strategic ambiguity would come to an end.

11 By this we mean equilibria that are both Nash equilibria and non-myopic.

4 Analysis

The analysis presented in the previous section is expanded upon below by examining certain relevant information aspects and combining the results of all scenarios for each of the three countries involved separately, presenting their potential evolution. This section concludes with some technical considerations.

4.1 Informative aspects

Both Taiwan and the United States have two distinct approaches, so determining which ones define their preferences is no easy task. The actual approach is difficult to pinpoint, particularly in the case of the United States, which is officially characterised by the concept of strategic ambiguity mentioned earlier.

In particular, the United States can influence the perceptions of the other two players, especially Taiwan, by leading them to believe that its dominant strategy is one of full support when, in reality, its dominant strategy is one of limited support. This distortion of perception could lead to military conflict, as illustrated in the figure below.

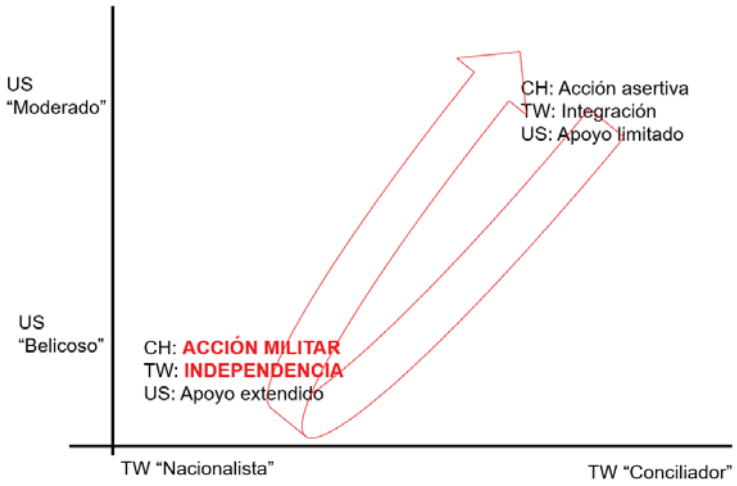


Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos

Figure 3: Actual and simulated alternative equilibria

However, it is unlikely that this scenario will unfold within the context of the flexible containment strategy that China may implement as part of its assertive approach: at some point, the United States will have to move beyond mere rhetoric to an effective demonstration of support (e.g. by supplying Taiwan with long-range offensive weapons). At that point, it would have to reveal its true intentions, as China's assertive strategy would make it impossible to conceal such a move.

It seems more plausible that this shift in perception was intended to gauge the resolve of both Taiwan and, in particular, China. In this way, the course of action would involve a 'journey through Hell', eventually returning to the starting point. This alternative trajectory is shown in Figure 4.



Nota: CH=China, TW=Taiwán, US=Estados Unidos

Figure 4: Real and simulated equilibria, 'Journey through Hell' variant

The 'journey through Hell', represented by the bottom-left corner, is the least favoured option for both China and Taiwan, which would prompt them to abandon it. As noted, if Taiwan were to abandon the path towards independence, the United States could withdraw from the conflict without losing credibility, as it would not be forced to become militarily involved.

4.2 Potential developments in each country

The relationship between China, Taiwan and the United States is a triangular one, but from the players' perspective, it is an uncomfortable one. China would prefer the United States not to play a significant role in its relationship with Taiwan as, in that case, it could impose its preference for reunification, even with a Nationalist government in Taiwan acting as a mediator. This is a fairly robust outcome, though certainly open-ended, as reunification may allow for a considerable degree of autonomy. To what extent this degree of autonomy would be maintained over time is one of the great unknowns, as the temptation for China to renege on its promises is high and Taiwan, once it has ceded control of its armed forces, would be in a very weak position to reverse the process.

The United States would also like to break up the triangle by persuading China to accept Taiwan's independence—ideally by respecting any future referendum leading to Taiwan's formal independence—or, as a second option, by getting China to accept the *de facto* independence that Taiwan currently enjoys.

For its part, Taiwan would also seek to break free from this triangle, on the one hand treating China as a trading partner and eventually easing military tensions, and on the other hand engaging with the United States in the commercial sphere and seeking its protection to counterbalance China.

Taiwan and the United States would prefer to maintain the current *status quo*, which amounts, in practice, to an incomplete triangle. Taiwan because it enjoys effective independence from China in almost every respect and maintains a mutually

beneficial trade relationship with that country. The United States because, in this way, it maintains trade relations with both countries, ensures regional stability and remains Taiwan's ultimate protector, a fact that reinforces its reputation as a guarantor of the security of other countries (Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, etc.). China, whose economic and military capabilities have increased significantly over the last two decades, is not satisfied with this *status quo* and is seeking to assert its power by 'breaking the triangle', thereby distancing the United States from the resolution of the territorial dispute it has with Taiwan.

Finally, in light of these conclusions, how are the three countries involved likely to act?

Firstly, China will maintain its assertive stance, using varying degrees of coercion, with the aim of:

- Narrow Taiwan's range of options, thereby eliminating the possibility of a negotiation process without deadlines or commitments.
- Prevent the United States from supplying Taiwan with heavy weaponry, particularly long-range missiles.
- Force the United States to take a stand, revealing its most likely stance (moderate[12]).

Consequently, without full support from the United States, Taiwan's bargaining power is diminished. In this way, China seeks to reduce the issue to a strictly bilateral matter. Paradoxically, the possibility of a blockade has a stabilising effect, allowing China to calibrate its level of coercion, control escalation and force other players—particularly the United States—to reveal their true preferences.

For its part, Taiwan, whose room for manoeuvre is limited by China's assertive behaviour—which includes flexible, undeclared blockades—is under considerable pressure to negotiate its integration with China. Nevertheless, it will seek to maximise its bargaining power since, as has already been noted, integration can encompass very different degrees of autonomy and may, in turn, be a very gradual process. Some options are:

- Feigning a nationalist stance.
- To seek to secure as much support as possible from the United States.
- Threaten to put up a fierce resistance in the event of an invasion, preparing for an asymmetric confrontation.

However, of the three actions mentioned above, only the third is credible:

- Pretending to be independent as a dominant strategy would lead China to opt for military action, driving Taiwan into its least preferred position.
- Eventually, the United States will have to reveal its most likely strategy (limited support), leaving Taiwan in a very precarious position (e.g. in the midst of a

12 Zietek *et al*. (2025) put it very well: 'unification represents [for China] a strategic imperative, whilst the United States prioritises regional stability and its credibility with its allies. These differing levels of urgency and risk tolerance shape their strategic decisions'.

process of independence, yet lacking any real support from the United States and thereby encouraging China to invade it).
– Stubborn resistance is the only factor over which Taiwan has genuine control, and it is the one that can most effectively enhance its bargaining power.

Finally, the principle of strategic ambiguity pursued by the United States is being put to a severe test. China's assertive actions will eventually force a shift towards more decisive support, with the risk of a direct military confrontation with China (e.g. if China uses force to prevent the shipment of heavy military equipment to Taiwan).

The same applies to a distortion of perception, where a hawkish stance is feigned when the reality is a dovish one. Predictably, the United States will seek to support Taiwan as much as possible, with a view to strengthening its negotiating position and maintaining a beneficial economic relationship in the new situation.

The possibility of a direct confrontation between the United States and China is remote, although it cannot be ruled out entirely. It would require both countries to adopt a belligerent stance, whilst Taiwan maintains a nationalist one. Consequently, the more intense these stances become, the more likely such a confrontation is to occur.

Historically, the US principle of strategic ambiguity has served a stabilising function, deterring the other two countries from pursuing radical courses of action: it deters China from invading Taiwan because it cannot be certain that the United States will not intervene, and it also deters Tai from declaring independence because it has no certainty that the United States would support such a move (Wang, 2025).

China's emergence as a superpower and its use of an assertive diplomatic strategy have caused this principle to come under strain, leaving the United States facing an extremely difficult decision. The considerations examined here suggest that this principle is open to misinterpretation by Taiwan, making a confrontation between Taiwan and China a plausible scenario. In this context, the scenario of a limited war centred on Taiwan in which the United States would be forced to participate, albeit in a limited capacity, cannot be ruled out[13]. This scenario is particularly worrying because the likelihood of it escalating horizontally once it begins (spreading to mainland China) and vertically (with the use of long-range missiles and tactical nuclear weapons) is not negligible (O'Hanlon, 2022; Cancian *et al.*, 2023).

4.3 Some technical considerations

The sequential model considered in this study seeks to balance two important substantive considerations. On the one hand, it aims to maintain the relative autonomy of the two direct interactions; on the other, it seeks to integrate them into

13 What is known as 'passing through Hell': transitional states, dominated in the Pareto sense, which are chosen in order to demonstrate resolve and gain credibility, and, eventually, to achieve more satisfactory outcomes once they have been overcome.

a globally consistent framework. In this way, it has been possible to examine each of them in depth, including the use of Movement Theory and the incorporation of alternative temperaments for Taiwan and the United States. Each of these interactions corresponds to a stage of the game: (1) China–Taiwan and (2) Taiwan–United States.

Overall consistency is ensured by requiring Taiwan to repeat in the second stage the decision it adopted in the first. This consistency is examined in the third stage in a relatively *ad hoc* manner, as it does not arise directly from an equilibrium concept and is not an endogenous element of the model.

Ideally, a more comprehensive solution from a theoretical perspective involves solving the entire sequential game by applying the concept of subgame perfection: first solving the second game (Taiwan–United States) and then applying this solution to the first game (China–Taiwan) via backward induction. However, this formally more comprehensive approach is also more complex, and is therefore reserved for a future extension of this work.

Another interesting technical issue that warrants detailed future consideration is the extent to which the information provided by the war games currently being conducted on a potential armed conflict in Taiwan[14] can be integrated into strategic models such as the one considered in this paper. This integration could help to better specify the players' preferences and, furthermore, to determine the probability of the conflict itself.

Appendix A: Movement Theory

Movement Theory (TM) combines the normal and extensive forms of representing a game. The normal form, usually represented in matrix form, is used for the strategic and simultaneous analysis of a game. The extensive form, on the other hand, usually represented as a graph (decision tree), is used for the sequential and dynamic analysis of a game.

Combining the two forms significantly enriches the analysis, introducing dynamic elements (extensive form) into a static representation (normal form) in a simple and intuitive way. In this way, MT can address path-dependencies, misperceptions, power asymmetries and other advanced features without the need to introduce probabilistic elements. For a detailed exposition of MT, see Brams (1993, 1994). Willson (1998) expanded and refined the basic framework. A discussion of MT can be found in Gilboa (1995) and Stone (2001), and applications to real-world conflicts in Brams (2001), Zagare (2014) and Ericson and Zeager (2015), amongst others.

The basic idea behind MT is that both players make their moves by projecting them into the future, in conjunction with the other player's counter-moves. To make

14 War games typically start from one of the general outcomes of strategic games (e.g. conflict) and provide a highly granular view of it, both geographically and militarily (Cancian *et al.*, 2023; 2025).

their decision, each player considers these moves and uses backward induction to determine whether moving will be beneficial or not.

MT players alternate their moves: they either stick to their current decision (to stay or pass) or change it (to move). They consider not only the immediate consequences of their moves, but also the consequences of counter-moves, counter-counter-moves, and so on.

The basic model of game theory assumes 2×2 ordinal games with complete information regarding the payoff structure and the rules of the game. Therefore, the basic starting point of game theory is a pair of 2×2 matrices (one for each player) that reflect the players' ordinal preferences regarding the four possible outcomes, resulting from the implementation of their two basic actions.

To identify the non-myopic equilibria (NME) of the game, the TM considers six rules. Rules 1–4 define the evolution of the game, and rules 5–6 define the optimality conditions that ensure the final outcome constitutes an equilibrium.

- Rule 1: the game begins with a given outcome, that is, a fixed element of the payoff matrix (ordinals).
- Rule 2: either player may unilaterally change their strategy (i.e. make a move). The player who changes first is called player 1 (P1).
- Rule 3: the other player, Player 2 (P2), responds by unilaterally changing their strategy, thereby bringing the game to a new state.
- Rule 4: alternating responses continue until the player (P1 or P2) whose turn it is decides not to change their strategy. When this happens, the game ends in a final state, which is the outcome of the game.

Note that rules 2 and 3 imply a sequential implementation of the MT and that payments are settled only at the final outcome. Note also that rule 1 is a simple but effective way of introducing path dependencies into game-theoretic analysis.

The following two rules implement rationality (optimisation) in the search for the NMP:

- Rule 5: termination rule: if the players return to the initial state, this becomes the final outcome.
- Rule 6: the rule of reciprocity: Each player considers the consequences of the other player's rational decisions when deciding whether or not to move from the initial state or any subsequent state. Each player uses backward induction to decide whether it is in their interest to move or not. If it is rational for one player to move and the other not to, then the player who moves prevails over the one who remains.

Applying the six rules of MT to all possible opening positions, whilst also taking into account which player goes first, generates the set of NME. Indeterminacy may arise when both players wish to move but differ in their preferred final outcome. In this case, additional information is required to resolve the game (e.g. move order, asymmetric power, etc.).

In order to illustrate the mechanics of the MT, the game between Taiwan and the United States is analysed, assuming a nationalist stance for the former and a bellicose one for the latter, as discussed in the main text and in Appendix B, cases (B.4). It is assumed that the initial state is the Nash equilibrium of this game: [Limited Support, Integration] and that the United States makes the first move.

The game in its expanded form is shown in the following figure:

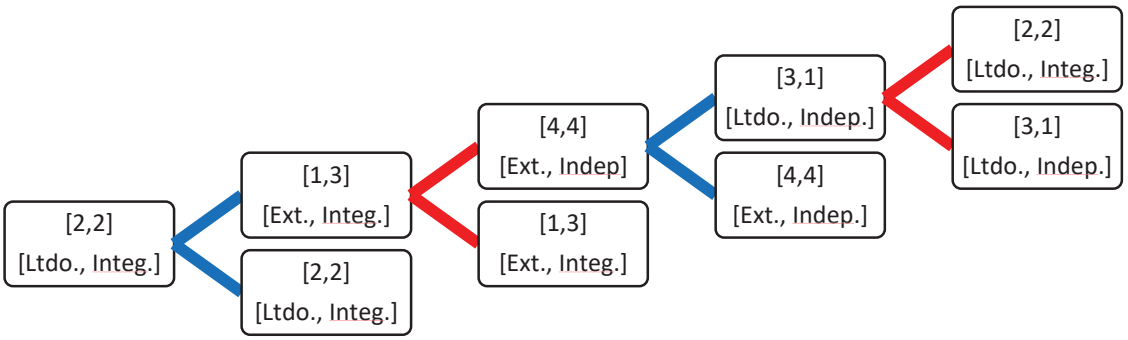


Figure A.1: Nationalist Taiwan–United States game in expanded form

Note: [x,y] represents the ordinal rating of [United States, Taiwan]. In blue (red) are the moves available to the United States (Taiwan). In abbreviated form, 'Ext.' ('Ltd.') indicates 'Extended support' ('Limited support') on the part of the United States and 'Integ.' ('Indep.') indicates 'Integration' ('Independence') on the part of Taiwan.

The United States must decide whether to remain at [Limited Support, Integration] or move to [Extended Support, Integration]. To do this, it examines the entire game tree and begins by looking at what happens at the final node. At that node, Taiwan must decide whether to remain in [Limited Support, Independence] or move to [Limited Support, Integration].

Given its preference structure, it chooses to move. At the previous decision node, the United States must decide whether to remain at [Extended Support, Independence] or move to [Limited Support, Independence], aware that, if it does the latter, Taiwan will choose to move to [Limited Support, Integration] when it is its turn. Given the US's preferences, it prefers to remain in [Extended Support, Independence], blocking the game's progression at that point.

Once again, the third decision node concerns Taiwan. Starting from [Extended Support, Integration], they must decide whether to remain there or move to [Extended Support, Independence], bearing in mind the sequence described in the two previous paragraphs, which leads to the United States blocking the game in the latter state. Given Taiwan's preferences, they choose to move.

Finally, the United States compares the initial state [Limited Support, Integration] with the state resulting from the entire sequence of moves described in the three preceding paragraphs, which leads the game to the state [Extended Support, Independence]. Its assessment of both states leads it to prefer the move. The following figure shows the sequence of the game in terms of the rules of Game Theory:

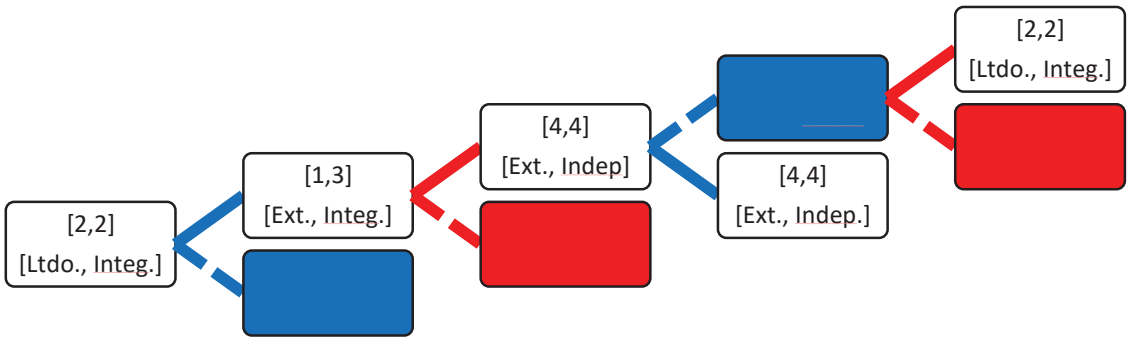


Figure A.2: Nationalist Taiwan–United States game according to MT
Note: [x,y] represents the ordinal rating for [United States, Taiwan]. The moves available to the United States (Taiwan) are shown in blue (red). If a move is shown as a dotted line, it is a rejected move that results in a blocked state (solid colour). In abbreviated form, 'Ext.' ('Ltd.') indicates 'Extended support' ('Limited support') from the United States, and 'Integ.' ('Indep.') indicates 'Integration' ('Independence') on the part of Taiwan.

In this scenario, we can see how the United States enters a period of short-term disadvantage by shifting from limited to extensive support, whilst Taiwan remains committed to its path of integration. However, this decision ultimately proves favourable once Taiwan opts for independence, having the extended support of the United States at its disposal. Upon reaching that point, which is the maximum outcome for both countries, the United States maintains that decision, blocking further development of the game.

The same result is obtained if Taiwan initiates the moves instead of the United States. This convergence allows the state [Extended Support, Independence] to be classified as an NME, in accordance with Rule 6.

The NME in this game does not coincide with the Nash equilibrium [Limited Support, Integration], leading to the conclusion that a combination of a bellicose stance on the part of the United States and a nationalist stance on the part of Taiwan could relatively easily lead to Taiwan's independence, provided that one of them takes a step in that direction: by increasing its support (the United States) or by declaring independence (Taiwan). Although the model formally treats both countries symmetrically, the clearly asymmetrical characteristics of capability and size make it more plausible in practice that the United States would have to be the initiator of this move.

TM requires this analysis to be performed eight times using backward induction: four sequential games, taking as initial states the four cells of the payoff matrix corresponding to the two players who can initiate the sequence. It is therefore advisable to implement this algorithm using a computer programme (Quilis, 2017).

Finally, the MT allows us to develop the concept of an anticipatory game, described by a payoff matrix whose entries are the NMEs of the original game starting from that outcome. The Nash equilibria of that matrix allow us to characterise the 'strength' of the various NMPs. In the case of the game analysed here, the Nash equilibrium of the anticipatory game is [Extended Support, Independence]. Furthermore, it is a cooperative state and Pareto-dominates all other possible outcomes.

Appendix B: Analysis of the scenarios between Taiwan and the United States

Below is an analysis of the four possible scenarios between Taiwan and the United States based on their two possible temperaments: conciliatory/nationalist (Taiwan) and moderate/belligerent (United States)[15].

Starting from the top-left corner and proceeding downwards, the following is presented:

- Normal initial game.
- Cooperative states: those with a payoff of (3,3), (3,4), (4,3) or (4,4).
- Dominant strategies.

Starting from the top right-hand corner and moving downwards, the following are presented:

- Nash equilibria of the initial game.
- Non-myopic equilibria of the initial game, according to the basic algorithm of Game Theory.
- Nash equilibria of the anticipatory game.

B.1 Conciliatory Taiwan and moderate United States



Figure B.1: Conciliatory Taiwan and Moderate United States

B.2 Conciliatory Taiwan and belligerent United States



Figure B.2: Conciliatory Taiwan and belligerent United States

15 All calculations were performed using the MATLAB *Theory of Moves Calculator* library (Quilis, 2017).

B.3 Nationalist Taiwan and a moderate United States



Figure B.3: Nationalist Taiwan and a moderate United States

B.4 Nationalist Taiwan and a belligerent United States



Figure B.4

Appendix C: Analysis of the game between China and an independent Taiwan

A game between China and a Taiwan characterised by a greater inclination towards independence than in the Nationalist case is examined. This scenario is analysed to test the robustness of the results, although it is not considered relevant in the current context. The game analysis is presented in the same way as in Appendix B.

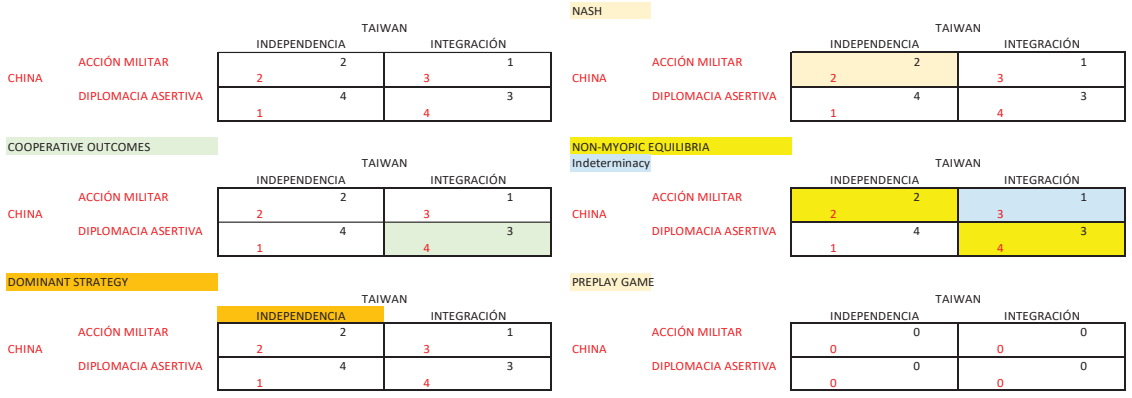


Figure C.1: China and an independent Taiwan

Taiwan's adoption of a dominant strategy (independence) causes China to opt for military action, leading the Nash equilibrium towards conflict. However, from a longer-term perspective, the MT identifies two non-military outcomes: conflict, and the combination of a Chinese strategy of assertive diplomacy with Taiwan's acceptance of integration.

This indeterminacy regarding the two NMEs can be resolved in two non-mutually exclusive ways:

- The state [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration] dominates, in the Pareto sense, the state [Military Action, Independence], and is therefore highly likely to be chosen as the outcome of a negotiation process. It is also worth noting that this is the only cooperative state in the game.
- As China possesses a rational and deterrent threat[16] (military action) that uses conflict as its point of threat, it is plausible that Taiwan would not opt for independence in order to avoid it. By choosing integration, China would opt for assertive diplomacy, leading both players to the NME [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration].

However, although the outcome [Assertive Diplomacy, Integration] remains a plausible outcome, it is now less likely than with the conciliatory and nationalist temperaments, since conflict is highly plausible (as it is a Nash equilibrium) and because this outcome requires a threat of military action that is unattractive to Taiwan.

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16 See Brams (1994), pp. 147–48, for a formalisation of the concept of a rational deterrent threat.

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