



STRAIT TALK
BROWN

Brown University Strait Talk

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Symposium Report

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Strait Talk Facilitators Team:

Tatsushi Arai, Erika Qing Guan, Richard Haddock

Chasen Glatz, Ava Ao Shen

www.straittalk.org

straittalk@brown.edu

2022 Strait Talk Symposium at Brown University: A Summary on the Methods, Processes, and Outcomes

Founded in 2005, Strait Talk is a youth-led non-partisan initiative which brings together young civil society delegates from both sides of the Taiwan Strait as well as from the United States to facilitate weeklong conflict resolution dialogues. Its overarching aim is to promote mutual understanding and peacemaking across the Taiwan Strait.

The Brown University chapter of Strait Talk held its virtual 2022 symposium from May 28th to June 4th. The symposium brought together the total of twelve delegates, four each from Mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States. Strait Talk adapts the method of Interactive Conflict Resolution (ICR), used widely for problem solving and relationship building around the world, to its distinct program needs for experiential learning and youth empowerment. Strait Talk's adaptation of ICR is also unique because it uses ICR to practice a balanced, integrated approach to both conflict resolution and conflict engagement. The latter, unlike the former, views the enduring reality of nonresolution as a basis for planning and action. Conflict engagement also seeks to find a sustainable and constructive way of staying actively engaged in the enduring conflict. To establish a solid basis for conflict resolution and engagement, the delegates analyze the cross-Strait conflict from the perspective of Basic Human Needs (BHNs) theory, which introduces a different way of thinking than the prevailing mode of positional bargaining and strategic analysis. The delegates then draw upon their BHN analysis to explore mutually satisfactory ways of meeting the BHNs of the different sides of the cross-Strait conflict. In addition, they acquire skills and awareness they need to develop individual action plans for cross-Strait conflict resolution and engagement. The remainder of this report will describe some of the techniques and exercises used in the 2022 symposium as well as selected outcomes and lessons.

Metaphor exercise

In the opening session of the weeklong dialogue, each delegate presented a metaphor to describe their image of the cross-Strait conflict. The metaphors invoked various degrees and expressions of rivalry, connectivity, challenges, and opportunities. One delegate described a game of chess between Mainland China and the United States with Taiwan as a pawn. Another delegate portrayed a bridge to emphasize cross-Strait economic interdependence. Yet another one presented an image of streams flowing down the mountain through different paths but eventually converging in the same body of water. In the course of learning about others' metaphors, the delegates experienced the diversity of perspectives. They also deepened their self-awareness of their own ways of thinking.

Walk through history

Each of the three delegations met separately to list eight historical events which they think have most decisively shaped cross-Strait relations. They then compared the three timelines, discussed their similarities and differences, and reflected on their social experiences which have affected their choices of the events. One delegate noted that the Mainland China delegation focused more on security-related events, while the Taiwan and US delegations focused more on events related to value and/or identity. Another delegate was surprised by the significant differences between the Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese delegations because the differences challenged their previously held assumption of similarity.

Sharing personal experiences

The delegates shared their personal experiences of cross-Strait relations and their impact on their lives and identities. Most shared experiences of traveling to and living in places across the Taiwan Strait and noted

how they broadened their perspectives. Some Taiwanese delegates shared uncomfortable memories of interacting with Mainland Chinese. Mainland Chinese delegates shared experiences of tense political conversations with Taiwanese friends. This opportunity for storytelling enabled the delegates to appreciate different yet relatable perspectives, humanize cross-Strait relations, and build empathy across the social divides.

Analyzing the cross-Strait conflict from a Basic Human Needs (BHNs) perspective

Each of the three delegations met separately to identify the most essential BHNs that matter to each society in the context of cross-Strait relations. By presenting and discussing the three sets of BHNs, the delegates came to understand the complex interwoven roots of the cross-Strait conflict. The Taiwanese delegation, for example, identified survival, respect for identity, dignity, desire for recognition, and a sense of autonomy and self-control as their BHNs. The Mainland Chinese delegation characterized their BHNs as pride, dignity, personal welfare, familial bonds, respect for national or ethnic identity, and desire for recognition. The US delegation presented freedom, liberty, and security as their BHNs.

After discussing the three sets of BHNs, they learned how to formulate a dilemma question, a technique of integrative thinking which makes the perceived incompatibility of competing goals as an opportunity for creative problem solving. The delegates used this technique to come up with the following question: *How can we develop cross-Strait relations in which Taiwan can fulfill its distinct identity needs while Mainland China and the United States can pursue their respective needs of dignity?* After formulating the question, the delegates explored how to answer it. The delegates' answers varied greatly – from the establishment of high-level unofficial talks across the Taiwan Strait during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APAC) summits to the application of ICR to substantive cross-Strait policy and civil society discussions. While they did not build consensus on their proposed solutions, they experienced how to apply ICR principles to creative problem solving.

Individual action plans

Using the dilemma question as a guide, the delegates also identified their own short-term and long-term action plans. Many of the plans they developed incorporated an integrated approach to aspirational resolution-oriented activities and more immediate steps for conflict engagement. Some delegates focused their long-term goals on devising new government policies. Others focused on strengthening communication channels through organizing dialogue workshops and making friends across the Strait. In addition, a number of delegates chose to prioritize their own educational goals in terms of acquiring knowledge and/or language skills. As a concrete step toward realizing these individual action plans, the delegates connected with one another as well as with the wider Strait Talk community on social media, through which they can build a network of mutual support. They agreed to convene virtually in three months to discuss what they have implemented from their action plans.

Conclusion

The 2022 Strait Talk Symposium demonstrated the importance of dialogues in the context of rising geopolitical tensions and limited opportunities for in-person interactions. Using ICR as a framework, the delegates developed alternative ways of understanding the complex interwoven roots of the cross-Strait conflict. They also discovered innovative ways of problem solving which depart from the conventional mode of strategic analysis and security-oriented thinking. The opportunity they created to share their personal experiences with one another and hear opposing views enabled them to recognize the human dimensions of the conflict as well as the urgent need to restore empathy in all aspects of cross-Strait relations.