

A large, abstract watercolor splash in shades of teal, grey, and white, resembling waves or a splash of paint, spans across the middle of the page.

**GW Strait Talk**  
Symposium Report  
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## I. Introduction to Strait Talk & the GW Chapter

**Strait Talk** is a non-partisan dialogue workshop that empowers young people from both sides of the Taiwan Strait to collaborate in transforming the Taiwan Strait conflict.<sup>1</sup> It is the world's first initiative that enables direct dialogue on politics and identity between youth from both sides of the Taiwan Strait with the goal of moving toward mutual understanding and peace.

During the period of heightened tension across the Taiwan Strait in 2005, a group of undergraduate students at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island decided to launch a new channel for deep dialogue and collaborative problem-solving — one that is designed for current and future generations of leaders. The name “Strait Talk” (海峽尋新) reflects the hope to speak openly with each other, get to know the other side's real human needs and desires, and find common goals for which we can collectively strive.<sup>2</sup>

Since its founding in 2005, Strait Talk has expanded chapters in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States to host conflict resolution symposiums (dialogue sessions) every year. These chapters are led by student organizers with institutional support from affiliated universities. A transnational steering committee supports, coordinates, and oversees chapter activities, motivated by a guiding theory of change<sup>3</sup> through an innovative model of dialogue and conflict resolution.

Strait Talk emphasizes the role of humanizing relationships in resolving conflicts. Its process is based on the Interactive Conflict Resolution (ICR) method, which has been used since the 1960s to facilitate sustained dialogues and relationship-building between private citizens who come from different sides of deep-rooted social conflicts. The basic goals of Strait Talk's adaptation of ICR are to create personal trust across conflict lines and to empower youth to develop creative and workable ideas to help spur official dialogue.

The George Washington University (GW) chapter of Strait Talk began in 2021<sup>4</sup> as a collaboration between the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, the GW Organization for Asian Studies, the GW Taiwan Education & Research Program, and the Strait Talk steering committee. GW was selected to launch a Strait Talk chapter through the efforts of highly motivated Strait Talk alumni and the recognition that Washington, DC – a crossroads for research, policy, and world affairs – is an ideal location to host a workshop on conflict engagement and youth leadership development.

Amidst growing cross-Strait tensions and the ongoing global pandemic, Strait Talk organizers determined that a new platform of dialogue was urgently needed to bring together young changemakers from all sides and think of ways to engage openly with each other, despite the logistical challenges of gathering in person. Thus, Strait Talk designed and hosted a fully online symposium, with 15 delegates representing Mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States joining from around the world for seven synchronous sessions from August 7 to 18, 2021.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Additional information about Strait Talk is available at [straittalk.org](http://straittalk.org).

<sup>2</sup> In traditional Chinese, the name “海峽尋新” denotes both “new” solutions and a desire to speak from our hearts.

<sup>3</sup> See Strait Talk's theory of change at <http://www.straittalk.org/model>

<sup>4</sup> Additional information about GW Strait Talk is available at [terp.elliott.gwu.edu/strait-talk/](http://terp.elliott.gwu.edu/strait-talk/).

<sup>5</sup> All sessions were held primarily in English, with a handful of instances of words or phrases in Mandarin.

## II. Interactive Conflict Resolution and Conflict Engagement in Strait Talk

Since 2005, Strait Talk has used ICR to focus on three priorities: capacity building, relationship building, and consensus building. The online format gave the committee an opportunity to reassess the most suitable model for achieving Strait Talk's mission of empowering young people from both sides of the Taiwan Strait to collaborate and stay engaged in transforming cross-Strait relations, particularly given the current geopolitical circumstances. As a result, the committee decided to make another significant milestone adaptation to Strait Talk by shifting focus of the symposium from conflict resolution to conflict engagement,<sup>6</sup> which entail two significantly different approaches to dialogue.

**First**, the shift meant that rather than aiming to build a consensus document (a long-standing feature of previous Strait Talk symposia that consists of an aspirational vision for resolving the cross-Strait conflict), the primary goal of the 2021 Strait Talk symposium was to strengthen the capacity of **the participants to stay actively engaged in the enduring state of non-resolution.**<sup>7</sup> Key principles of conflict engagement included finding ways to live with uncertainty and contradiction present in enduring conflict while finding ways to address the core issues directly. **Second**, the new focus of the symposium activities was to explore opportunities and identify conditions that would enable the participants to stay engaged in the conflict realistically and sustainably.

This shift from conflict resolution to conflict engagement necessitated a different set of working assumptions on which the facilitators could design symposium activities. The assumptions that provided the methodological backbone of the symposium included:

- a) The need to analyze the root causes of the conflict and identify a general perspective on transformative changes necessary to overcome the root causes in the long run.
- b) The need to foresee a sustained state of non-resolution, in which the root causes of the conflict will remain unresolved.
- c) The need for the participants to continuously readjust their engagements with the evolving nature of the conflict.
- d) The need to acknowledge that Strait Talk's adaptation of ICR for conflict engagement will need to take a decades-long perspective of intervention and that a constructive and sustained process of engagement does not abandon the possibility of peaceful conflict resolution or transformation in the future.

From these basic assumptions, the facilitators planned activities in the symposium to enable participants to take the following actions, as identified by Bernard Mayer (2009):

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<sup>6</sup> Integrating concepts from Bernard Mayer's (2009) *Staying with conflict: A strategic approach to ongoing disputes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>7</sup> Conflict engagement, however, does not imply conflict avoidance; it accepts the sustained reality of non-resolution as such and continuously develops an adaptive, practical way of addressing the sources of an **enduring conflict**.

- a) Stay focused on what is *essential* in the conflict, resisting temptation to avoid the difficult yet fundamental issues, such as structures, identities, and values;
- b) Find an appropriate level, depth, and breadth of intervention, which should be neither too ambitious nor too shallow in scope;
- c) Build and maintain lines of communication across social divides, recognizing that refusal and breakdown of communication do not negate the fundamental need for communication;
- d) Use small and/or interim agreements strategically – that is, be purposeful and skillful in using each of the tactical, procedural, and/or technical agreements of limited scope and strength as a *step* toward a broader long-term vision of transformation;
- e) Identify and mobilize resources, energy, emotional support, and arrangements for personal safety that enable the participants to stay engaged; and
- f) Help the participants find a way to encapsulate their conflict experience, that is, to support and empower them to find a right, sustainable balance between conflict engagement activities and other aspects of life.

### **III. GW Strait Talk 2021 Symposium Highlights**

#### *Metaphors for Cross-Strait Relations and Definitions of Conflict*

Prior to the beginning of the symposium, delegates were invited to reflect on a metaphor that describes cross-Strait relations they would like to see realized. The purpose of this exercise was to prime delegates to think about the cross-Strait conflict creatively and in personal, relatable, experiential terms. The metaphors presented included:

- Cross-Strait relations as a sibling relationship or rivalry;
- Cross-Strait relations as calligraphy, with a recognition of shared history but with nuanced differences in style, meaning, and interpretation;
- Cross-Strait relations as a Chinese wind instrument that requires multiple pieces to be aligned together in a certain way to produce harmony;
- Cross-Strait relations as water in that it can be flexible, fluid, firm, and transparent;
- Cross-Strait relations as a family photograph with multiple generations of history present, each member with a unique and personal perspective; and
- Cross-Strait relations as a multi-colored knit sweater in which each interlinked strand can be made up of several different colors.

## *Conflict Analysis*

GW Strait Talk focused on addressing the following three questions to analyze conflict:

1. What is conflict?
2. What is *enduring* conflict?
3. What can we do about enduring conflict?

Strait Talk expands on peace and conflict studies pioneer Johan Galtung's definition of conflict as an incompatibility of goals pursued by two or more parties<sup>8</sup> by conceptualizing conflict as "a dynamic and interdependent relationship between two or more parties pursuing their respective goals but being unable to achieve them because one's goal-seeking behavior stands in the way of the others."<sup>9</sup> In particular, Strait Talk emphasized the nature of the Taiwan Strait conflict as **enduring**, given that it is long lasting, has deep roots, is embedded in structure, involves values and identity issues, and entails fundamental issues of power. In order to address enduring conflict, Strait Talk promoted **conflict engagement** - a sustained process of staying constructively engaged in enduring conflict in contexts in which resolution is unlikely to be attained in the foreseeable future.<sup>10</sup>

Using the conflict analysis framework described above, delegates met with their respective delegations to identify their respective community's core needs regarding cross-Strait relations and distinguish them from interests, which are pursued to meet the fundamental needs. The delegations generated the following ideas:

- The **Mainland China** delegation identified **national integrity** as a core need with respect to cross-Strait relations, although the term was interpreted to comprise many political, cultural, and economic components. Mobility and the ability to connect with people, a sense of recognition of commonalities in identities, and trust were explored as interests.
- The **Taiwan** delegation identified **dignity in the international community** as a core need along with other needs, such as self-determination and peace. The delegation explored concepts such as economic independence, security, and prosperity as interests.
- The **United States** delegation identified **liberty** – the freedom to pursue self-determined economic, political, and security options – as a core need with respect to cross-Strait

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<sup>8</sup> Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1969), pp. 167-191, [http://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD%202015%20readings/IPD%202015\\_7/Galtung\\_Violence,%20Peace,%20and%20Peace%20Research.pdf](http://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD%202015%20readings/IPD%202015_7/Galtung_Violence,%20Peace,%20and%20Peace%20Research.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Tatsushi Arai, "Toward a Buddhist Theory of Conflict Transformation: From Simple Actor-Oriented Conflict to Complex Structural Conflict," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 24 : No. 2 , Article 5. DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2017.1450 Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol24/iss2/5>

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Meyer, *Staying With Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2009).

relations. Safeguarding democratic ideals, ensuring that the political future of Taiwan is determined by the Taiwanese themselves, and opening multifaceted options for economics, trade, and people exchanges were explored as interests.

### *Conflict Engagement Themes & Groups*

Before creating groups to offer recommendations for conflict engagement, delegates first participated in a brief envisioning exercise to generate ideas of activities or options that could address the following dilemma question referencing the core needs identified by each delegation: *How can Taiwan's need for national dignity be met, while at the same time Mainland China's need of integrity be met, while at the same time the United States' need to secure liberty be met?*

Delegates also had an opportunity to hear from Strait Talk alumni who shared their own experiences of sustained engagement with the Taiwan Strait conflict since their participation in the symposium, as well as breakout room discussions on barriers and enabling conditions to effective conflict engagement in each society.

Delegates brainstormed functional themes around which they would form cross-national groups and develop more detailed plans on how to conduct conflict engagement in cross-Strait affairs. After delegates formed groups and shared interests, some of the groups were reformed or dissolved based on delegate consensus. The final groups that emerged were:

- **Development of Cross-Strait Exchanges:** addressing cross-Strait engagement and dialogue from multiple levels (e.g., civil society, individual, and academic institutions); and
- **Cross-Strait Reconciliation:** addressing the meanings of reconciliation and how to create and restore relationships across the Strait.

Within these two groups, delegates were encouraged to develop group-specific dilemma questions and individual action plans for their personal active, sustained engagement with the cross-Strait conflict. The final dilemma questions and conflict engagement strategies generated by the two groups are as follows:

- Development of cross-Strait Exchanges:
  - **Dilemma Question:** How can exchanges be fruitful but also do not depend on reaching consensus?
  - Suggested steps or strategies:
    1. Continuing fora with Strait Talk alum in the future.
    2. Encourage individuals to be involved in conflict engagement through accessible “indirect” topics of mutual interest such as environmental issues.
- Cross-Strait Reconciliation:
  - **Dilemma Question 1:** Is reconciliation necessary? What does reconciliation mean or look like for cross-Strait relations?
  - **Dilemma Question 2:** How do we overcome the difficulties and problems in achieving cross-Strait reconciliation?
  - Suggested steps or strategies:

1. Organize dialogues within an individual's institution or community, such as in schools or workplaces.
2. Change the narrative or offer a different perspective in fields with otherwise dominant, stagnant, or unchallenged views on cross-Strait issues.
3. Create education opportunities in a variety of fields, including in peace and conflict studies, to foster development of new connections and better understandings about the communities involved in the cross-Strait conflict.

#### **IV. Takeaways from GW Strait Talk 2021**

1. **Cross-Strait Dialogue is Needed Now More than Ever:** Delegates recognized that humanizing dialogue and diversifying cross-strait exchange is more important than ever, especially given current restrictions due to geopolitical tensions and the pandemic.
2. **It Is Imperative to Avoid Armed Conflict:** There was general consensus among all delegates regarding the importance of preventing armed conflict across the Strait, and the urgency to create interactive mechanisms between all sides to encourage deescalation.
3. **We Need New Mechanisms to Reach Out to the Other Side:** Delegates recognized the need to tackle the structural barriers within and across societies that prevent meaningful engagement with the Taiwan Strait conflict, including monolithic media narratives and the dearth of opportunities for people-to-people exchange.
4. **Each Side is Diverse, No Side is Monolithic:** Delegates gained a renewed appreciation for the diverse multitude of views from and within each side of the cross-Strait conflict. There was a widespread recognition that no one side is monolithic, and that each society is composed of dense layers of actors and networks, from individuals to professional and business communities, with their own respective dynamic needs and goals regarding cross-Strait ties.
5. **Developing Personal Relationships Are Essential in Humanizing Conflict:** Perhaps most impactfully, delegates found that building personal relationships with each other and sharing personal stories about cross-Strait experiences were incredibly valuable in the dialogue process. Through these organic moments of open and personal conversation within and between groups, delegates were able to empathize, relate, and connect with each other in meaningful and novel ways.
6. **Online Platforms Can Be Useful for Enabling Dialogue:** Although in-person dialogue is irreplaceable, hosting dialogue activities virtually presents new possibilities to expand conflict resolution and conflict engagement outreach, training, and development. Virtual tools such as WebEx breakout rooms and Google Jamboards offered useful means of convening and recording small group conversations. Strait Talk organizers found that delegates are just as willing to be part of the conflict engagement process and share personal, transformative experiences virtually as in person.