



A contingency approach to the Sino–U.S. conflict resolution

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Abstract

Taking the dispute between the United States and China over the collision of a U.S. Navy plane with a Chinese jet in April 2001, the research confirmed at certain the Contingency Theory variables that affect the U.S. government's stance in resolving the conflict. It supported the postulates of the theory: Symmetry through a dialogue may not be inherently ethical; in a morally intractable conflict, accommodation may be impossible.

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1. Introduction

With the rapid growth of international news media and globalization, disputes and conflicts between countries are more than ever subject to the shaping influence of increasingly diverse publics. Taking the dispute between the United States and China over a midair collision in April 2001, this research aims to identify the factors that affect the dispute resolution of the U.S. government. The dispute was sparked by the incidental collision of a U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet sent to intercept it over the South China Sea. The U.S. spy plane made an emergency landing on the Chinese island of Hainan after the collision, while the Chinese fighter jet crashed into the sea, with its pilot missing.

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The collision evolved into a tense standoff between the two countries. China demanded apology, while the United States urged returning of its plane and crewmembers. Both sides found in the beginning no room to make any shift toward a more accommodative stance. However, the conflict was resolved and the relations between the two powers resumed. Throughout the dispute, both sides employed a welter of public relations techniques to advance their own rhetoric. Public opinions on both sides were enflamed as the countries competed on the world stage for credence and support. The dispute provides an ideal case for understanding conflict resolution under the dynamics of international public diplomacy as played out in major media outlets.

1.1. Model selection and Contingency Theory

Public relations and technology have changed the worldwide nature of communication (Hiebert, 1992). With continued advances in the communication technology, national governments find greater need to influence world publics (Grunig, 1992; Mole, 1990; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). Conflicts between nations are increasingly mediated with public relations and have been scrutinized by the world media (Serajnik-Sraka, 1999). Grunig (1993) proposed to apply his Two-Way Symmetrical Model to research international affairs. He argued that the model is inherently ethical because it opens the question of right and wrong to dialogue, collaboration and comprise.

The Contingency Theory proposed by Cameron suggests that accommodation is not necessarily ethical. It proposes that accommodation of morally repugnant publics may be unethical and that accommodation is logically impossible when an organization faces two publics locked in an intractable moral conflict (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). The theory proposed a continuum of accommodation and a matrix of factors that affect the organization's stance (Cameron, 1999). Following is the accommodation continuum of conflict management of the Contingency Theory.

Pure ----- Pure
Accommodation Advocacy

For this research, the Contingency Theory table of the clusters of variables is slightly adapted. The organization is the U.S. government. Public relations is adapted into diplomacy. Public relations practitioners are diplomats. Legal department includes the Congress and the international law.

The Contingency Theory table of the clusters of variables

- Internal variables
 1. Organization (Government)'s characteristics
 - A. Open or closed culture
 - B. Dispersed widely geographically or centralized
 - C. Level of technology the organization uses to produce its product or service
 - D. Homogeneity or heterogeneity of officials involved
 - E. Age of the organization/value placed on tradition
 - F. Speed of growth in the knowledge level the organization uses
 - G. Economic stability of the organization
 - H. Existence or non-existence of issues management officials or program
 - I. Organization's past experiences with the public
 - J. Distribution of decision making power

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