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Island China

A Twentieth Century Fund Study

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England
1978

deprived us of all motives either for territorial aggrandizement or the acquisition of political power in that distant region."[3]

Before the end of the century, however, both the status of Taiwan and the US government's view of its role in the western Pacific had changed radically. Japan acquired Taiwan in 1895 as a result of the Sino-Japanese war, thus joining the ranks of the imperialist powers competing to extract concessions from China. Soon thereafter, clashing American and Japanese interests in the Hawaiian islands provided the first test of strength between these expanding Pacific powers, resulting in the annexation of Hawaii by the United States in 1898. The acquisition of the Philippines, almost by inadvertence as the result of a war with Spain over Cuba, soon installed the United States as a colonial power next door to Japan's colony, Taiwan. Many years later, culminating the history of sharpening disputes between the United States and Japan over the Japanese expansionist policies in East Asia, Taiwan became the base from which the Japanese military launched their attack on the Philippines and their advance into other parts of Southeast Asia.

Determined to strip Japan of the power to make war, the United States joined Britain and China at the Cairo Conference in 1943 to declare that Taiwan would be taken from Japan and restored to China. Prior to the conference no thought appears to have been given by senior American officials to the possibility of annexing Taiwan or of offering its inhabitants the choice of independence. The intention to return Taiwan to China was confirmed in the Potsdam Proclamation of July 26, 1945, which was later concurred in by the Soviet Union and France and accepted by Japan. In October 1945, officials of the ROC formally accepted the surrender of the Japanese forces in Taiwan and took the island over from Japan, declaring it to be once more incorporated into the territory of China.

In turning Taiwan over to the ROC, the United States acted on the assumption that its postwar policy in East Asia would be founded upon close cooperation with a strong, united China. Japan, stripped of its colonies, was to remain disarmed and weak. But within four years, US policy was in disarray. The Chinese Communists had gained control of mainland China and were soon to enter into an alliance with the Soviet Union directed against both Japan and the United States.

The conquest of the China mainland by the Chinese Communists and Mao's declaration of July 1949 that his government would take the Soviet side in the global power struggle aroused concern in Washington

3. Sophia Su-fei Yen, *Taiwan in China's Foreign Relations* (Hampden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1965), pp. 77–78. See also Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 276, 284–291.

as to the strategic consequences for the United States should Taiwan come under Peking's control. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) foresaw serious damage to the strategic position of the United States in that event, but they were unwilling to recommend US military intervention to keep Taiwan out of Communist hands because of the potentially more urgent needs elsewhere for limited US forces. There was general agreement within the US government that it would be highly desirable for Taiwan to remain under a friendly, non-Communist regime. Various proposals to achieve this end, short of military intervention, were considered, including an appeal to the United Nations, US support of the Taiwan independence movement, and provision of large-scale economic and military aid to the Nationalist government, which had withdrawn to Taiwan in December 1949. The continuation of a modest economic aid program was approved, but massive economic aid was rejected as likely to be ineffective. President Harry S. Truman also decided against reinstituting a military aid program in Taiwan, despite recommendations to that end by the JCS and demands by prominent Republican members of Congress.[4]

In January 1950, Truman announced that "the United States has no desire to obtain special rights or privileges or to establish military bases in Formosa at this time. Nor does it have any intention of utilizing its armed forces to interfere in the present situation. The United States Government will not pursue a course which will lead to involvement in the civil conflict in China. Similarly, the United States Government will not provide military aid or advice to Formosa."[5]

The Department of State two weeks earlier had issued a confidential policy memorandum to information officers abroad informing them that the fall of Taiwan was widely anticipated and giving instructions intended to minimize the damage to US interests that would result.[6] Thus, at the highest level, the United States had decided in early 1950 that US interests in Taiwan were not important enough to warrant intervention to prevent its conquest by the Chinese Communists. Chiang Kai-shek and his remaining forces would have to fend for themselves.

Reversal of Policy During Korean War

The surprise attack by North Korean forces against South Korea in June 1950 and the decision to intervene with American forces caused

4. See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949*, vol. IX, *The Far East: China* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1974).
5. *Department of State Bulletin*, Jan. 16, 1950, p. 79.
6. Hungdah Chiu, ed., *China and the Question of Taiwan* (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 217–220.

an urgent reassessment of US interests in Taiwan and a reversal of the hands-off policy. This blatant use of force by a Soviet proxy, coming soon after the formation of the Sino-Soviet alliance, raised serious questions about possible future Soviet and Chinese Communist actions in this region or elsewhere. Under the circumstances, particularly in light of the views already prevalent in the government concerning the strategic importance of Taiwan, it seemed only prudent to keep the island for the time being out of Chinese hands. Moreover, it would be difficult to justify continued rejection of Republican pressures for US assistance in the defense of Taiwan while seeking public support for the decision to intervene militarily in Korea. Consequently, Truman declared:

> The occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area. Accordingly, I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action, I am calling upon the Chinese Government on Formosa to cease all air and sea operations against the mainland. The Seventh Fleet will see that this is done. The determination of the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations.[7]

Thus, the attack in Korea and the American reaction to it brought about a fundamental reassessment of US policy toward China and Taiwan, causing that policy to veer sharply from the direction it had taken prior to June 1950. The attack set in motion a series of developments that linked Taiwan more and more firmly to the United States in a connection that would become the main issue between Washington and Peking in the years to come.

The Korean war was instrumental in radically changing US relations with Taiwan, not only because it impelled Truman to adopt emergency measures to protect Taiwan from attack, but also because by the end of the war the United States and the PRC had come to regard each other as implacable enemies. From the US viewpoint, the Chinese had intervened in Korea in order to back an unprovoked Soviet-supported North Korean aggression against South Korea. From the Chinese viewpoint, they had intervened to counter an imminent threat to their industrial heartland by a government that had just resumed its support of the defeated Chiang Kai-shek forces in Taiwan. The need of both nations to mobilize public support for their forces

7. *Department of State Bulletin*, July 3, 1950, p. 5.

engaged in combat in Korea caused each to depict the other in the darkest colors. The United States came to perceive the PRC as an aggressive power prepared to use military force to extend Sino-Soviet hegemony over East Asia. The PRC saw the United States as a continuing military threat that had even hinted at its possible use of nuclear weapons against China to end the war in Korea.[8] Angrily rebutting Truman's assertion that the status of Taiwan was undetermined, Peking accused Washington of seeking to gain control over Taiwan and sever it from the motherland.[9]

Once China, strongly backed by the Soviet Union, began to be viewed as a serious menace to US interest in the western Pacific, Taiwan took on a new importance. It came to be regarded as a vital link in the US defense line, whose loss to Communist forces would imperil the US position in Japan and the Philippines. As early as the summer of 1950, General Douglas MacArthur, after a visit to President Chiang Kai-shek, stressed the importance of defending Taiwan, that "unsinkable aircraft carrier."[10] In an address to the Congress following his dismissal MacArthur expressed the extreme view that the loss of Taiwan "might well force our western frontiers back to the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington."[11] The concept was gaining support that, by strengthening the government of the ROC on Taiwan, the United States could pose a continual threat to the PRC, tie down large numbers of forces opposite Taiwan, provide an alternative focus of loyalty for overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and perhaps ultimately help the government on Taiwan to recover the mainland from a weakened and beleaguered Communist regime.

Not all Americans agreed that the PRC was an aggressive power that had to be contained by military force, but the opposition was a minority, inhibited in public debate by the emotional atmosphere created by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's trumpeted accusations against alleged Communists in the US government. Moreover, Peking's abusive propaganda attacks on the United States could not be ignored. The PRC's aid to the Vietminh and its attacks on the Nationalist-held offshort islands soon after the cease-fire in Korea also strengthened the view that the PRC would further the spread of communism through violence wherever it did not encounter superior force.

While the conflict in Korea was hardening the attitudes of the two

8. Foster Rhea Dulles, *American Foreign Policy Toward Communist China, 1949–1969* (New York: Crowell, 1972), pp. 136–137.
9. See Chiu, *China and the Question of Taiwan*, p. 232–236.
10. Dulles, *American Foreign Policy Toward Communist China*, pp. 99–100.
11. Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), p. 292.

that this would lead to conflict, although he added that he would not rule out a peaceful settlement if the United States did not intervene.[1] Even if the United States should decline to intervene with its own forces against a PRC attack, however, the ROC is not defenseless.

Aside from the important political constraints on the use of force against Taiwan by the PRC, significant military constraints are also implicit in the balance of forces between the contending governments. Although some allege that Taiwan would soon be overwhelmed militarily if US protection were withdrawn, others assert that the PRC lacks the military capability to cross the strait and defeat Taiwan's defenders. These purely military considerations, while not necessarily decisive, must be taken into account by American, PRC, and ROC leaders in their overall evaluations of the costs and benefits of various possible courses of action.

Suspension of Military Conflict

When the Korean war broke out, preparations for invading Taiwan had been under way in the PRC since early 1950 under Su Yu, deputy commander of the Third Field Army. The invasion of Taiwan had been designated the principal task for the year. Assault forces variously estimated at 150,000 to 300,000 men, many of them trained in amphibious operations, had been assembled on the Fukien coast. New airfields had been built, some 400 aircraft rounded up, a fleet of invasion barges constructed, and 5000 to 6000 junks and sampans mobilized.[2] The People's Liberation Army (PLA) had already had some experience in amphibious operations, including the crossing of the Yangtze River in April 1949 and the invasion of Hainan Island in April 1950. A large invasion force supplied with thousands of junks had also been assembled opposite the Choushan Islands, some 75 miles southeast of Shanghai in May 1950, where upon the ROC withdrew its defensive force of 125,000 men to Taiwan, and the islands were taken without a battle.

The Hainan Island landings bore some resemblance to the amphibious operation that the PLA expected to carry out against Taiwan, but on a much smaller scale and without the formidable obstacles that an invasion of Taiwan presented. Hainan, at its closest point, was only

1. *The New York Times,* Sept. 7, 1977.
2. John Gittings, *The Role of the Chinese Army* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 41–42; Hollington K. Tong, *Chiang Kai-shek* (Taipei: China Publishing, 1953), pp. 500, 505.

15 miles from the mainland, not 90 miles. A large Communist guerrilla force had controlled the interior of the island for many years and was available to harass the defending forces from the rear. Moreover, Hainan was not, like Taiwan, the last redoubt of Chiang Kai-shek, which he could be expected to defend tenaciously. Consequently, although the invading troops, inexperienced in amphibious operations, suffered heavy casualties in landing on Hainan from some 400 motorized junks, resistance soon crumbled, and the bulk of the 40,000 defending forces were withdrawn to Taiwan.[3] A better precedent than Hainan Island for the kind of resistance that the PLA was likely to encounter in Taiwan was the attempted invasion of Quemoy in October 1949, when the invading force was thrown back with losses of 7000 captured and 2000 killed.[4]

In 1950, Taiwan's defenses were far stronger than those of Hainan Island. Of the 800,000 troops withdrawn to Taiwan from the mainland, perhaps 300,000 were first-line combat troops, including a nucleus of men trained and equipped by the United States. An armored force under Chiang Kai-shek's younger son, Major General Chiang Wei-kuo, had between 750 and 1000 tanks, as well as armored cars and other motorized equipment. Some 300 to 600 fighter aircraft and transports had escaped to Taiwan, as well as about 70 sizable naval ships, including 7 destroyer escorts, minesweepers, and LSTs. The only larger ship in the ROC navy, the cruiser *Chungking* (formerly the British *Aurora*), had defected to the PRC but had been disabled by ROC bombing. The ROC forces on Taiwan were less effective, however, than these numbers suggest. They were crippled by severe shortages of arms and ammunition. The air force was so short of aviation gasoline and spare parts that only a small portion of the force could operate at one time. Moreover, the PLA doubtless counted on low morale and agents planted in strategic positions to diminish the combat effectiveness of the Nationalist armed forces.[5]

While the PLA was gathering its forces for an assault on Taiwan, the ROC sought to make effective the closure of mainland ports to for-

3. William W. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 323; Tong, *Chiang Kai-shek*, pp. 484–485.
4. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command,* p. 244. A. Doak Barnett, writing from Taipei in November 1949, reported the attacking force as 17,000, of whom 8000 were captured and 9000 killed or drowned. Barnett, *China on the Eve of Communist Takeover* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 310. A still higher figure of 15,000 to 19,000 killed or wounded appears in Angus M. Fraser, "The Military Posture and Strategic Policy in the Republic of China," *Asian Affairs,* no. 5 (May/June 1974): 313.
5. Barnett, *China on the Eve of Communist Takeover,* pp. 310–311; Tong, *Chiang Kai-shek,* pp. 478–80, 483, 492–493; Fred W. Riggs, *Formosa under Nationalist Rule* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972; 1st ed. 1952), pp. 20–24.

eign ships that had been announced in June 1949 and also carried on nuisance bombings of Nanking and Shanghai. The ROC navy claimed to have prevented some forty vessels from entering Shanghai during the first six months of port closure operations, but the blockade was far from effective, and efforts to enforce it were discontinued after the withdrawal of Nationalist forces from the Choushan Islands, except for the ports of Amoy and Foochow, which could be blocked from Quemoy and Matsu. More effective in readying Taiwan for the expected attack were the reorganization of the armed forces by Ch'en Ch'eng and the rooting out of Communist agents, including Lieutenant General Wu Shih, the deputy chief of the general staff, and his wife.[6]

If the PLA had invaded Taiwan in 1950 with its primitive amphibious equipment, the success of the first waves in securing and consolidating beachheads would have depended heavily on the weather and the relative morale of attackers and defenders. Neither side had enough usable aircraft to make much difference, and the PRC lacked the heavy naval guns needed for a landing against determined opposition. Although the PRC had no guerrilla forces in the interior to support an expeditionary force landing on the coast, it probably could have airdropped a small number of parachutists to spread fear and confusion. If the PLA had persisted, the defenders would have exhausted their ammunition, and if there was no offer of replenishment and defeatism infected their ranks, as it did on the mainland, the PLA would have eventually prevailed, although losses on both sides would probably have been heavy.

President Truman's decision to interpose an American armed force between Taiwan and the mainland changed the ground rules for conducting the unfinished civil war. An invasion of Taiwan from the mainland was no longer practicable. The PRC therefore halted its preparations for a large-scale invasion and began strengthening its coastal defenses, particularly after its assault on the US forces in Korea increased the possibility that the United States might support ROC military operations against the mainland.

After the Korean war ended, however, the PRC did not remain exclusively on the defensive. It built numerous additional airfields in the coastal area usable either defensively or offensively. In September 1954, PRC forces heavily bombarded Quemoy. The ROC retaliated by bombing artillery positions on the mainland. In November, PRC aircraft bombed the Ta Chen Islands and other small islands off the coast of Chekiang and Fukien provinces. In January 1955, they again bombed

6. Tong, *Chiang Kai-shek*, pp. 483, 492–493.

the Ta Chens, this time with one hundred aircraft; a week later, they followed up with a well-executed amphibious assault against Ichiang Shan, a small island seven miles north of the principal group, and overwhelmed its one thousand defenders. Although the force defending Ichiang Shan was small and equipped only with small arms and mortars, the PRC, with its new Soviet equipment and Korean war experience, demonstrated a capacity for coordinated sea and air attack that it had not possessed in 1950. The ROC withdrew its remaining forces from the Ta Chens with the help of the US Seventh Fleet because the islands were too far from Taiwan to be given air support; however, it did retaliate by bombing shipping in several mainland ports.

From that time, the only large-scale military clash between the adversaries was the PRC attempt in 1958 to isolate Quemoy and Matsu with artillery fire. Since 1958, the ROC has conducted a number of raids against the mainland, the largest of company size, but most much smaller, and the last in 1969. Specially equipped reconnaissance aircraft from Taiwan have occasionally flown over the mainland to gather intelligence; ROC planes have regularly patrolled the Taiwan Strait, spaced a short distance inland by PRC fighter aircraft scrambled from nearby airfields; ROC ships have landed supplies regularly on Quemoy, Matsu, and the smaller Nationalist-held offshore islands and have rotated their garrisons without PRC interference; and ROC planes, flying low to avoid PRC radar, have frequently taken dignitaries to Quemoy on the even-numbered days, when there is no shelling, to gaze through powerful binoculars at PLA soldiers on PRC-held islands 2000 yards away. In recent years, the chief reminder of the suspended civil war has been the propaganda shells that whistle in over Quemoy on odd-numbered days scattering leaflets. Indeed, the quiet life led by the opposing forces suggests the existence of a tacit agreement between them.

The Taiwan Strait has been dominated for the most part by the ROC air force and navy, although ROC naval ships have been sunk by the PRC navy when they ventured too close to the mainland. The PRC air force and navy have stayed near the coast. Tacit understandings, growing out of years of experience, have defined with some precision the lines beyond which neither side will interfere with the other's transit of sea and sky. For many years, the US Seventh Fleet maintained a Taiwan Strait patrol, which served to remind Peking of the US commitment to defend Taiwan, but the patrol was discontinued in 1970. If, in normalizing relations with Peking, the United States should end the security treaty and the PRC should exert military pressure on Taiwan, the first move is likely to be a challenge to the domination of the Taiwan Strait by the ROC navy and air force.