

The roots of the Taiwan conflict

Part Two: The US hand in China's civil war

Part 1 of this series, in the AAS of 2 November, documented the origins of China's Kuomintang Party and the rise of its leader, Chiang Kai-shek, the future leader of Taiwan. For decades, Taiwan has been exploited by Anglo-American powers to agitate against the People's Republic of China. In Part 2, we trace the USA's post-World War II support of the Kuomintang and US involvement in China's civil war.

By Melissa Harrison

During World War II, the Chinese Civil War (1927-49) was interrupted while the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party and its chief rival, the Communist Party of China (CPC), both battled the invading Japanese forces, although military clashes between the parties continued during this period.

When the Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945, both the CPC and KMT rushed to re-occupy former enemy territory which was vacated by the defeated Japanese. During the war, the CPC had provided valuable intelligence to the USA, rescued downed American pilots, and committed its own forces in the fight against Japan. Yet soon after WWII ended, the USA, under the Presidency of Franklin Roosevelt's British-influenced successor Harry Truman, began to aid the KMT in its renewed civil war against the Chinese Communists.

In an Operations Directive of 20 August 1945, US General Albert Wedemeyer, who had replaced KMT critic General Joseph Stilwell as commander of the American forces in China, instructed his military leaders to make every effort to "avoid participation in any fratricidal conflict in China". However, this command conflicted with the number one objective outlined in the same directive, which was to assist the Nationalist Government (KMT) in occupying key areas of China. Although the US War Department had instructed the Marines to avoid direct military involvement in China's internal conflict, US support of the KMT increased the likelihood that Marines would be involved in CPC-KMT clashes.

In September 1945, 50,000 combat-ready US Marines, with air and sea support, began assisting the KMT to re-occupy strategic regions and key infrastructure in China in order to deny them to the Communists, under the code name Operation Beleaguer. In one example of this operation, Marines were transported to Peking (Beijing) soon after their arrival in China, just in time to prevent the surrounding CPC forces from seizing the city. American planes airlifted whole KMT armies into strategic regions. The CPC's advance on Shanghai was thwarted when US transport planes airlifted KMT troops into the city. General Wedemeyer insisted that these actions were undertaken to ensure law and order, and to facilitate China's post-war reconstruction. He rejected the notion that this constituted interference in China's internal affairs.

This sentiment was echoed in Washington. The US State Department claimed that US forces (a total of around 113,000 at their post-war peak) were in China to help disarm and repatriate the Japanese. However, by the end of 1945 only 14 per cent of Japanese forces had been repatriated. Although the necessary transport capacity was available, it was secretly decided by US Army and Naval commanders at a 15-17 January 1946 Conference on Repatriation in Tokyo, that the USA's first priority would be the transportation of KMT troops, aiding their fight against the CPC.

Chiang's armies included Japanese units and former Japanese puppet troops (pro-Japanese Chinese forces which had been trained and armed by Japan during the war). In November 1945, General Wedemeyer informed his chief of staff that repatriating the Japanese was impossible because the KMT was utilising them to protect infrastructure and



KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek and US General Albert Wedemeyer. Photo: National WWII Museum

communication lines. Moreover, Wedemeyer asserted that if the Japanese were disarmed in Communist-controlled areas, then the CPC would take over these regions and seize Japanese arms and equipment.

Rather than disarming Japanese troops, US soldiers were guarding railways and mines with them. The 26 December 1945 *New York Times* reported that Marines were "puzzled" by their guard duty in China. One Marine lieutenant said, "you can't tell a man he's here to disarm the Japanese when he's guarding the same railway with Japanese". Similarly, in November 1945 US Sergeant Sam C. McKay wrote to US Representative Tom Connally (Texas), informing him that: "We were told when enroute to Tsingtao [or Qingdao, Shandong province] that we were to assist in the disarming of Japanese troops in this area. Before we arrived the Chinese had the situation well in hand, and have since gone so far as to rearm some Japanese units for added protection against the Chinese Communist forces. Recently we have been told that the reason for our prolonged visit is to hold the area in lieu of the arrival of General Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces. In other words we are here to protect General Chiang's interests against possible Communist uprisings. Everything we do here points directly or indirectly toward keeping the Chinese Communists subdued".

In his memoirs, US President Harry S Truman (in office 1945-53) described this strategy as "using the Japanese to hold off the Communists". According to Truman, it "was perfectly clear to us that if we told the Japanese to lay down their arms immediately and march to the seaboard, the entire country would be taken over by the Communists. We therefore had to take the unusual step of using the enemy as a garrison until we could airlift Chinese National [KMT] troops to South China and send Marines to guard the seaports."

Before his untimely death in April 1945, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt had planned to foster a cooperative peace with America's wartime ally, the Soviet Union, after the war. In contrast, Roosevelt's successor upon his death, then-Vice President Harry Truman, and Truman's advisors, were convinced that the greatest threat in northeast Asia was presumed Soviet expansionism. Roosevelt's former Vice President Henry Wallace, who had been ousted by Truman as a



US Marines in China after WWII as part of Operation Beleaguer. Photo: LIFE

result of a British intelligence regime-change operation, believed that Truman and the US Departments of War and Navy intended to abandon ties with Moscow, which Wallace believed were “the cornerstone of the peace of the future”, ultimately leading to war. Later in June 1947, Wallace stated that Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins, the US Secretary of Commerce under Roosevelt, “were always able to cooperate with [Soviet leader Joseph] Stalin to excellent advantage. After Roosevelt’s death Hopkins saw Stalin once more and came away convinced that Stalin wanted peace with the United States”.

The two most powerful Americans in China, General Wedemeyer and US Ambassador Maj. Gen. Patrick Hurley, were both staunch anti-communists who believed that China’s internal conflict was part of a worldwide Communist conspiracy. They believed that Russia planned to bring China under its sway, thereby linking the Communist power base in Europe to East Asia. Hurley was convinced that the conflict in Asia was an existential battle between “Imperialism and Democracy” and “Free Enterprise and Monopoly”. US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes and Navy Secretary James Forrestal believed it was necessary to keep the Marines in China to support the KMT against the Communists. *The US Crusade in China*, a 1979 book authored by Michael Schaller, Professor of History at the University of Arizona, documents the events of a 20 November 1945 meeting of the Secretaries of State, War and Navy. At this meeting, Forrestal warned that if the US withdrew from China as a result of Russian pressure (Russia had declared their intentions to withdraw from China’s northern province of Manchuria in October), this “would be seen as cowardly and a strategic retreat. The resulting anarchy in China ... might lead to a Russian takeover and the formation of a Sino-Soviet axis which could dominate the entire world”.

USA attempts negotiation

In November 1945, General Wedemeyer informed the US War Department that the pace of China’s civil war had escalated rapidly, blaming most of the increasing chaos in China on the KMT’s incompetent and corrupt officials. Wedemeyer asked the War Department to explain to the President and State Department that he now believed it was impossible for the US to unify China under the KMT or repatriate the Japanese forces, “without ... becoming involved in fratricidal warfare”. According to Wedemeyer, the USA had to decide whether to evacuate American forces entirely, or to intervene directly and massively in China. After the withdrawal of all foreign forces, the Chinese could, “through processes of evolution or revolution” decide “by whom and how they will be governed”.

American policymakers decided to return to a policy which was initiated under Roosevelt and in force before the surrender of Japan, in supporting the creation of a coalition government in China under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek’s leadership. *The US Crusade in China* notes that “the fact remained that this reversal of policy only followed an abortive

attempt to use limited military means to subdue the Communists. That having failed, Washington belatedly and reluctantly sponsored an alternative solution”.

In a 15 December 1945 speech, President Truman stated that the US strongly advocated that the KMT’s one-party government be broadened to include other political parties, granting these elements a fair representation in a coalition government. This was intended to be an interim arrangement until a representative democracy was established in China. The same month, US General George C. Marshall, the Army’s Chief of Staff under Roosevelt and Truman, was appointed to negotiate a cease-fire agreement between the CPC and KMT, in an endeavor known as the Marshall Mission. Marshall was charged with mediating the transition of the KMT’s one-party regime into a coalition government.

In January 1946 the CPC and KMT agreed to a truce while the government was reorganised. The Communists were initially positive towards Marshall’s appointment and initiated cooperation with his efforts. The CPC was willing to politically compromise as long as the arrangements preserved the Communists’ military and political base. The CPC wanted a real coalition government, but it soon became apparent that Chiang Kai-shek had no intention of relinquishing any real power. There were months of bitter gridlock over issues such as the proportion of representation in the new government which would be granted to the CPC and other minor parties. There was dispute over constitutional issues; for example, the KMT wanted to concentrate power into the hands of would-be President Chiang, while the CPC and other minor parties wanted a parliamentary system which limited the powers of the elected president. Initially, both parties had reached an agreement on the integration of CPC troops into the KMT’s armies, however Chiang reneged on the number of troops he was willing to demobilise. At Chiang’s insistence, the CPC agreed to evacuate its military from certain regions, however this was on the condition that the KMT refrain from re-occupying these areas, and that local governments and reserve militia remained until the overall political settlement was completed. Chiang rejected these demands, insisting that the KMT had the right to move in and assert military and civil control over all areas the CPC had evacuated. Because Chiang insisted that agreements on other issues were conditional upon the reorganisation and integration of the armies, the gridlock on this subject meant that negotiation on other matters was shelved. The 28 July 1946 *New York Times* observed that it was clear that Chiang was “unwilling to make a peace that would leave his old and bitter enemies in a position to menace on equal or near-equal political and military terms the power of the Kuomintang regime”. The *NYT* acknowledged that Chiang’s peace conditions were “indicative of [his] determination, either through negotiations or force, to put the Communists in a weak if not helpless position”. When the CPC “refused to accept negotiated subordination”, Chiang “again resorted to force”. Military clashes between the CPC and KMT resumed in earnest in March 1946; meanwhile, Marshall persisted in his efforts to negotiate between the two parties.

USA aids the KMT in China’s civil war

While the USA was ostensibly mediating between the CPC and KMT in an effort to prevent civil war in China, the US was also providing substantial financial and military aid to one of the warring parties. The total value of US Lend-Lease aid extended to the KMT in 1945-49, after WWII had ended, was estimated at \$2 billion in cash and \$1 billion worth of military equipment. Although General Marshall’s negotiating efforts commenced in December 1945, it was not until 29 July



US peace negotiator General George Marshall (left) with KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek (right) and his wife. Photo: Priscilla Roberts

1946 that the USA announced an embargo on the export of arms and munitions to China, which was officially in force until 26 May 1947. Despite the embargo, the KMT received large quantities of goods from the USA, through post-war surplus property transactions.¹ By July 1947 the US had authorised the sale of around \$824 million worth of surplus goods to the KMT, which included combat materials, ships, airfields, trucks, construction equipment, food and medical supplies. The surplus goods were sold to the KMT for less than a quarter of procurement costs. In the months before the arms embargo was lifted, US Marines turned over large quantities of small arms and ammunition to the KMT. By September 1947, approximately 6,500 tonnes of ammunition had been given to the KMT at no charge. The 2 September 1946 *New York Times* reported that CPC General Chou En-Lai (Zhou Enlai) declared that it was “inconceivable that American peace envoys can mediate in China while the United States Government and the United States Army, Navy and Air Force give full assistance to the Kuomintang to wage war”. *NYT* paraphrased Chou’s demands that the US suspend assistance to the KMT and “maintain a strictly impartial attitude in the Chinese civil strife or else publicly proclaim the termination of American mediation efforts and openly aid the Kuomintang Government fight against the Communists”.

Although the US officially wanted to refrain from direct military involvement in China’s civil war, the distinction between direct and indirect aid was blurred. For example, the 30 September 1946 *NYT* reported that, although the USA had ceased transporting KMT troops in ships or planes bearing US insignia by September 1946, by this time the USA had trained the KMT to transport their own troops in ships and planes provided by American Lend-Lease aid. Although it was claimed that the USA was not helping the KMT determine strategy, US assistance in reorganising the KMT’s Defence Ministry helped to make its offensive more efficient. The US Military Advisory Group in China planned a five-year training project, whereby Americans would train Chinese instructors to extend American military methods throughout the KMT’s armed forces. Thirty-nine divisions of the KMT’s army were trained and armed by the USA. In the first half of 1946, Marines helped transfer hundreds of thousands of tonnes of military supplies in aid of the KMT.

The 19 and 20 August 1946 *NYT* contained reports from its China correspondent, who had interviewed US Marines while on a three-day trip along 160 miles of the Peiping-Mukden railway, between Tientsin (Tianjin) to Chingwangtao (Qinhuangdao, Hebei province). The Marines interviewed said that they did not understand why they were in China, and

none wished to see the Marines remain in the country. Almost all expressed disillusionment with the KMT and disgust with the internal Chinese political situation. Interestingly, even though US forces were subject to military clashes with the CPC while guarding infrastructure against the Communists, most Marines “privately sympathised with the Communists in the present crisis”. They believed that Communist participation in the government would prevent civil war and help economic recovery. Few Marines believed that their presence in China had a stabilising effect on the political situation, as was broadly claimed; however, all believed that their presence was aiding the KMT against the Communists. Virtually all Marines believed that their continued presence in China was connected to Russia. This belief was reinforced in an editorial comment on the *NYT*’s reporting by the 24 August 1946 *Army and Navy Bulletin*. The *Bulletin* stated that the Marines were in China because of “the predatory policy of Soviet Russia”. If the Marines were withdrawn, this would “be nothing more than the signal for Russia to extend its ‘iron curtain’ influence over the vast areas of the Chinese mainland”.

Throughout late 1945 and all of 1946, *New York Times* articles documented numerous allegations from the CPC, which accused American troops of actively collaborating with the KMT in attacking Communist forces. In November 1945, it was alleged that US planes machine-gunned the Communist-occupied town of Antze (Hopeh). In December, it was reported that the CPC claimed that American planes were constantly making reconnaissance missions over Communist-controlled areas. It was also alleged that American-made KMT planes frequently attacked and bombed CPC positions. In April 1946 Communist newspapers reported that American planes had attacked Communist troops in the northeastern province of Jilin, and that CPC soldiers had discovered the body of an American airman in a downed aircraft. General Wedemeyer, noted for his anti-communist views, ordered investigations into these and other allegations and declared them to be untrue. Notably, in a December 1945 incident reported by the *New York Times*, US forces had fired twenty-four 60mm mortar shells into a village, potentially wiping it out. The attack was in retaliation for the killing and wounding of two Marines by Chinese gunmen, who had fled into the village. The Marines demanded the village surrender the gunmen; when they had failed to do so after half an hour, the village was fired upon. In another incident, a train bearing a US general was fired upon; the general requested that American planes attack the village whence the firing had come.

US aid to China opposed

In April 1946 CPC General Chou asserted that US financial aid to the KMT was facilitating a one-party dictatorship. He argued that the KMT should not receive any aid until it had been reorganised into a representative coalition government, as was agreed in January of that year. In July 1946 the CPC’s Central Committee in Yanan issued an official statement which accused the US of imperialist tendencies and of “fostering civil war in China”, through its ongoing Lend-Lease aid to the KMT. CPC leaders demanded that Chiang issue an immediate cease-fire and proposed that all surplus war equipment should be sealed up. They urged the KMT to establish a multi-party coalition government, which would oversee the demobilisation of troops and the integration of the KMT and CPC militaries.

Despite the CPC’s demands, the KMT reinstated conscription in June 1946. The 28 June *New York Times* reported that “excellently informed” American sources said there was “solid evidence” that factions of the KMT were “bent on

1. US Department of State, *United States Relations With China, With Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949 (China White Paper)*, 5 August 1949

civil war” and “opposed to peace with the Communists under any condition”, “under the inspiration of German Nazi advisors”. (In the years following WWII, large numbers of Nazis were at large in China, and many enjoyed a longstanding intimacy with high-profile KMT officials.)

During 1946 there were increasing demands in America for the withdrawal of US troops from China, and for the cessation of US aid to the KMT until it formed a coalition government. American opposition to US policy in China included pro-withdrawal rallies and media commentary from academic and political figures.

In July 1946 Soong Ching-ling, the widow of Chinese revolutionary leader and founder of the KMT, Sun Yat-sen, broke a two-year political silence to make an appeal to the American people, in a letter addressed to US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, members of the Congressional Foreign Relations committees, and US publishers and labour leaders. Soong asked the USA to withdraw its forces from China and refrain from issuing any further loans to the KMT until the Chinese government was reorganised and truly representative. Soong believed that “reactionaries” on both the American and KMT sides were inflaming civil war, in the hope that conflict in China would incite war between the US and Russia, thereby finally crushing the Chinese Communists. Soong wrote, “The American people, who have been our allies and have long been our friends, must be told that this is the road to disaster. ... They must be told that the presence of the United States armed forces on Chinese soil is not strengthening peace and order among the Chinese people. ... They must be told that if America makes it plain she will not supply munitions or military equipment there will be no spreading Chinese war”.

Soong’s letter complemented a statement released at the same time by 56 prominent individuals in China, which asserted that US aid to the KMT would be used to enlarge the civil war. According to the statement, “lend-lease loans, surplus property, Marines and military mission will lead China into a prolonged state of civil war, for the Chinese people will fight relentlessly for a termination of fascism in their country. We therefore ask you to prohibit your Government from destroying our chances for peace and democracy and for maintaining useful diplomatic, economic and cultural relations with you”.

The sentiments in Soong’s statement were echoed by her close friend, retired US Marine Corps officer, Brigadier General Evans F. Carlson. Carlson was a former intelligence officer in China who had returned to the country in 1937 to gather intelligence for the White House at the request of US President Franklin Roosevelt, travelling as a military observer with the CPC’s Eighth Route Army. When Carlson returned to America in 1939, he authored several books about his positive experiences with the Chinese Communists. During WWII, Carlson led two special Marine units which utilised the tactics of the CPC’s guerrilla forces, to remarkable success. At a September 1946 conference of the National Committee to Win the Peace, of which Carlson was co-chair, Carlson referred to his extensive experience in China, stating: “I feel very strongly that the only democratic force—the only organisation aiming to benefit the broad mass of people here—is that being fostered by the Chinese Communists. People in this country don’t like that word, ‘Communist’, but I’ve learned it’s wise to go beyond words and find out about action”. Carlson contended that US policy in China was strengthening fascism in that country.

In China, there were escalating demands for the withdrawal of US forces, which accompanied a rise of anti-Americanism. There were attacks upon US servicemen and large protests against the US presence in China. In a January 1947 protest

in Shanghai, 1,000 students marched while carrying signs stating: “China is not an American colony” and “Get out or we’ll throw you out”. At a protest involving 2,000 students the same month, leaflets were distributed which declared that US aid to the KMT had “indirectly contributed to the killing of millions of Chinese”. Other leaflets described the “innumerable outrages” committed by US troops in China. There were many serious charges of assault, reckless driving causing death, rape, theft and murder committed against Chinese people by US servicemen.

By mid-1946 American diplomatic sources privately admitted to the *New York Times* that America’s effort to negotiate peace in China had failed. In January 1947, the US officially abandoned its mediation attempt in China. General Marshall returned to the US and was promptly appointed Secretary of State. The 19,000 Marines remaining in China were gradually withdrawn over the next several months, leaving a small contingent guarding Americans who were training Chinese navy personnel in June 1947.

Shortly after the US ended its mediation efforts in China, US President Harry Truman made a pivotal 12 March 1947 speech which marked a reorientation of American foreign policy, known as the Truman Doctrine. Truman’s speech established that the USA would provide military, economic and political assistance to democratic nations “who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”. Truman asked the US Congress to approve economic and military aid to the government of Greece, with the aim of supporting them against Communist forces in the Greek civil war. Unsurprisingly, KMT leaders warmly approved of Truman’s speech, hoping both that the USA would back the KMT in its war against the Communists, and that the concept of a coalition government with the CPC would be abandoned. Several months later, the USA lifted its embargo on the export of arms and munitions to China. As reported in the 12 June 1947 *New York Times*, former US Vice President Henry Wallace warned that the Truman Doctrine would lead to war. Wallace predicted that the next extension of the Truman Doctrine would be aimed at China.

Next—The Kuomintang retreat to Taiwan

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Research for this article draws extensively from reporting in the *New York Times* between November 1945 and July 1947, which can be accessed via the NYT’s archives at www.nytimes.com



New York Times headlines during the post-WWII Chinese civil war. Photo: Screenshots