Taiwan Part Six: US-China 'normalisation' and provocations

By Melissa Harrison

For decades the island of Taiwan, situated about 160km off the southeastern coast of China, has been used by Anglo-American powers to agitate against the Chinese government. Parts 1-5 of this AAS series documented the rise of Chiang Kai-shek, head of the Kuomintang Party, and his ultimate defeat by the Communist Party of China; the influence of the pro-Chiang "China Lobby" in America; and the collaboration of US-KMT intelligence agencies.

Post-World War II, the USA supported China's ruling Kuomintang Party (KMT) in the KMT's fight against its chief rival, the Communist Party of China (CPC), thereby interfering in China's civil war (1927-49). Despite significant US support, the KMT was defeated by the CPC, which established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949. The KMT's armies, secret police and political establishment fled to the nearby island of Taiwan.

For two decades following the KMT's defeat, American policymaking was conditioned by US hostility toward China. In the early 1950s, the USA enacted a trade embargo against the PRC, refused to allow the exchange of journalists, and restricted American travel to China. During this time, Washington successfully campaigned against the PRC's admission to the United Nations, which allowed the vanquished KMT regime on Taiwan to remain the UN representative for all of China. In America, anti-CPC sentiment was aggressively promoted by the KMT's vast propaganda networks and the powerful "China Lobby", which successfully purged any dissenting voices from American academia, foreign service and the US State Department. The USA also attempted to destabilise the PRC government: in the 1950s and 1960s, the KMT and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) collaborated to conduct raids, sabotage, psychological warfare, intelligence collection and aerial spying operations against China, directed from Taiwan. Under the USA's clandestine warfare program, Operation Paper, the CIA utilised remnant KMT armies in neighbouring Burma (Myanmar) to attempt military invasions of southern China.

Soon after the PRC's establishment in 1949, the CPC ejected American reporters from the country and CPC Chairman Mao Zedong launched an anti-American propaganda campaign, denouncing the USA for imperialist tendencies. However, CPC leaders had initially been positive towards America. For example, in his youth Mao expressed admiration for American statesmen George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and envisioned close collaboration between China and the USA.[1] As a CPC leader during World War II, Mao informed American diplomat John Service that he believed the United States and China had "strong ties of sympathy, understanding, and mutual interest". Mao considered the USA to be the most suitable country to assist China in its national economic development.[2] However, the USA's military and economic support of the KMT in its civil war against the CPC eroded the Chinese Communists' positive regard of America.

1. He Di, "The Most Respected Enemy: Mao Zedong's Perception of the United States", *The China Quarterly*, Mar. 1994.
2. Report by the Second Secretary of Embassy in China (Service), Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, The Far East, China, Volume VII, Document 195, US State Department, 13 Mar. 1945.

Military buildup and nuclear threats

Zhou Enlai with the chairman of the 24 April 1955 Bandung conference. Photo: Wikipedia

In the early 1950s, the USA established military alliances with China's regional neighbours, forming defence treaties with Japan (1951), the Philippines (1951), Thailand (1951), and South Korea (1953). In 1951, the United States, Australia and New Zealand formed the ANZUS security agreement. In 1954, the USA and Taiwan co-signed a Mutual Defence Treaty, which guaranteed support to Taiwan in the event of an attack by the PRC. By 1957 there were 10,000 Americans on Taiwan, who were mostly CIA and military personnel and their families; by 1967, this figure had doubled.

In 1954, America led the formation of the anti-communist Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) military alliance, which included Thailand and the Phillipines, and extended military protection to "observer" countries South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. SEATO members also included Australia, New Zealand and former regional colonial powers Britain and France. The USA used SEATO as the legal framework to justify its involvement in the Vietnam conflict, by including Vietnam, China's neighbour, as a territory under SEATO's protection. US-China tensions escalated during the Vietnam War (1955-75); between 1965 and 1968, China deployed around 50,000 troops into North Vietnam on the side of the Viet Cong, and US and Chinese forces engaged in direct conflict.

In 1954, KMT and CPC forces clashed over China's offshore islands. In response to the KMT's build-up of military installations and deployment of large numbers of troops there, the PRC began bombing the islands in September 1954. When the CPC-KMT conflict escalated in early 1955, Washington was prepared to use nuclear weapons to defend Taiwan. The crisis de-escalated after Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai proposed in a 24 April 1955 speech at the international Asian-African Conference (Bandung Conference) in Indonesia that China and the USA "should sit down and enter into negotiations to settle the question of relaxing and eliminating the tension in the Taiwan area". During the resulting US-China ambassadorial-level talks which began in Geneva in August 1955, the Chinese side suggested the formation of a joint US-China renunciation of force agreement, which would commit the two countries to settle disputes by peaceful means, in which the matter of Taiwan was included. However, China's proposed compromise was rejected by the Eisenhower Administration, which wished to avoid angering Chiang Kai-shek and the powerful pro-Chiang Congressional bloc. It was also believed that any such agreement would encourage other nations to switch diplomatic recognition from the Chiang's "Republic of China" (ROC) to the PRC, which the USA firmly opposed.

In 1958 US military and State Department leaders

responded to the PRC's resumed bombing of the KMT-controlled offshore islands by preparing to launch nuclear attacks against the Chinese mainland, although the attacks were ultimately vetoed by Eisenhower.[3] At this time, Taiwan hosted US nuclear cruise missiles which were capable of reaching the Chinese mainland. In 1958, the KMT initiated research on its own nuclear weapons program.

Status of Taiwan

Taiwan was the primary issue around which US-China hostilities revolved. In the early 1950s, Taiwan's status as Chinese territory began to be doubted by the USA and United Kingdom, although historically Taiwan had generally been recognised as a part of China. In 1895 China had been forced to cede Taiwan to Japan following a major defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). During WWII, the 1943 Cairo Declaration, signed by Chiang Kai-shek, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill, promised the eventual restoration of "stolen" Taiwan to China. The July 1945 Potsdam Declaration, in which the USA, UK and Soviet Union set negotiated terms for the end of the war, affirmed that the terms of the Cairo Declaration would be carried out. When WWII ended in August 1945, the Allied powers required that Japan surrender its forces stationed on Taiwan to China's then-leader, Chiang Kai-shek. In the years following WWII, US ambassadors and foreign service officials, various State Department guidance papers, statements by US President Harry S Truman, and official reports of US aid distribution under the 1948 *China Aid Act*, treated Taiwan as part of China.

When the CPC defeated the KMT in October 1949 and Chiang's forces retreated to Taiwan, Washington expected that the island would soon fall to the CPC. In a 5 January 1950 speech, Truman affirmed that the United States regarded Taiwan as Chinese territory. Truman claimed that the USA had no "predatory designs" on Taiwan, and no desire to establish military bases on Taiwan "at this time". Truman announced that US armed forces would not interfere in China's civil conflict or "provide military aid or advice to Chinese forces on [Taiwan]".

However, six months later, upon the outbreak of the Korean War, Truman reversed his position. In a 27 June 1950 speech, Truman declared that the attack on South Korea from northern communist forces demonstrated that communism was an expansionist military threat. Truman announced that in these circumstances, "the occupation of [Taiwan] 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", and thus, he had ordered the US Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to protect the island. Truman also called on Chiang's forces to cease attacks against the Chinese mainland, and stated that the 7th Fleet would ensure that this was done. The Chinese civil conflict was now considered an international affair. Although Truman claimed that these actions were in response to the Korean War, they were essentially anticipated some years earlier—in December 1948, the US National Security Council concluded that it was in the USA's strategic interest to deny Taiwan to the Chinese Communists, a judgement with which the State Department concurred.[4]

Although in January 1950 Truman had affirmed that Taiwan was part of China's territory, when the Korean War broke out, he raised doubts about Taiwan's status. In Truman's June 1950 speech, he raised the prospect of the "determination of the future status of [Taiwan]", which he said "must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations." Notably, any UN decision on the matter would likely have been influenced by the KMT, which, as China's representative to the UN National Security Council, had veto power over decisions. By the time that the formal post-war San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed between Japan and UN member nations in 1951, there were diverging views over Taiwan's legal status. The 1951 Treaty did not resolve the matter, because although Japan formally rescinded its sovereignty over Taiwan, Japan did not specify to whom sovereignty was ceded. Both the USA and the UK maintained that Taiwan's status remained undetermined. It was evident that any solution to the issue was dependent upon the USA's approval, as Taiwan's self-appointed protector. Neither the PRC nor the KMT were signatories to the 1951 Peace Treaty. Both parties rejected the view that Taiwan's status was undetermined, insisting that there was only "One China", and that Taiwan was part of it. The parties only differed over who was the legitimate government of China—both the CPC and the exiled KMT claimed to be the rightful government. The Chinese Communists' view was that Taiwan was part of China, which the KMT retained only through US intervention in China's civil conflict.

For the next several decades, the USA refused to recognise the legitimacy of the PRC government. Because Washington continued to recognise Chiang Kai-shek's ROC, US military activities on Taiwan could be justified as conducted at the invitation of China's legitimate government, rather than interference in another country's internal affairs.

Improved US-China relations a geopolitical manoeuvre

After 1965, opinion leaders in American media, academia and the political arena began to question the prevailing convention of total hostility toward China and communism in Asia. During this time, many of Chiang Kai-shek's American supporters, relics of the once-formidable "China Lobby", were older and uninterested in Chiang's cause. In a series of hearings on the Vietnam War conducted by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee between 1966-71, American Asia experts testified that the United States had egregiously misconstrued China's foreign policy since WWII, and argued against the US government's portrayal of the PRC as a ruthless and imperialist communist power. During this period, understanding Communist China became a critical issue, as the PRC exploded its first nuclear device (1964), developed a hydrogen bomb (1967) and launched its first satellite into orbit (1970).

Ultimately, the decision to improve US-China relations was a geopolitical manoeuvre. A major catalyst was the Sino-Soviet split, a rupture in PRC-Soviet Union relations which began in 1956 and peaked in military clashes in 1969. US President Richard Nixon (in office 1969-74) and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger aimed to exploit the Sino-Soviet split, hoping to play the two sides against each other to US advantage and to inveigle concessions from the PRC, which was now bereft of its major economic and military ally.

Shortly after Nixon assumed office in January 1969, the PRC indicated a wish to improve the US-China relationship, suggesting that the two nations should pursue peaceful coexistence. This was followed by a mutual thawing in relations.

3. Charlie Savage, "Risk of Nuclear War Over Taiwan in 1958 Said to Be Greater Than Publicly Known", *New York Times*, 22 May 2012.
4. Memorandum by the Acting Secretary of State to President Truman, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, The Far East: China, Volume IX, Document 293, US State Department, 14 Jan. 1949.

Shanghai Communiqué

In November 1970 Nixon commissioned a review of US China policy by the Interdepartmental Group for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, which found that the USA's policy of recognising the ROC over the PRC was "being regarded more and more as being unrealistic and out of date". The Group projected that within the next few years, most US allies would have recognised the PRC, and the ROC would be expelled from the UN. Notably, the Group acknowledged that the USA was "largely responsible for the very existence of the [ROC]".

In a televised 15 July 1971 announcement, Nixon stunned America and the world by announcing that Kissinger had just returned from a secret week-long visit to China. At the invitation of Premier Zhou, Kissinger met with PRC leaders to discuss the normalisation of US-China relations.

During the discussions, Zhou stated that although the PRC's legal rights in the UN should be reinstated, China regarded the future of Taiwan as "the most crucial issue" between the USA and China. Zhou observed that prior to 1950, Washington had viewed China's civil war as an internal Chinese affair, and by this time, Taiwan had "already been restored to the motherland, and China was that motherland". However, upon the outbreak of the Korean War, the USA "surrounded" Taiwan and declared that Taiwan's status was "still unsettled".

Zhou enumerated specific requirements for US-China "friendship" and the normalisation of relations:

- It must be recognised that the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legitimate government representing the Chinese people.
- It must be recognised that Taiwan belongs to China; that it is an inalienable part of China which was returned to China after World War II.
- That … the USA does not support a two Chinas or a one China, one Taiwan policy and does not support the so-called Taiwan Independence Movement.
- [That] the spokesman of the Department of State no longer [states] that the status of Taiwan is undetermined.

Zhou also insisted that the USA must withdraw all of its forces from Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait "within a limited period", referring to the Taiwan-US Mutual Defence Treaty as "illegal".

Several months after Nixon's announcement of the Kissinger visit, UN member nations voted to expel Taiwan and grant sole recognition to the PRC. In February 1972, Nixon accepted an invitation to visit China, which was celebrated with much pomp and hype in America. At the end of Nixon's week-long visit, Chinese and American leaders issued the joint Shanghai Communiqué (formally titled the Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China), which defined the new terms of the US-China relationship.

Although the overall tone of the Communiqué was friendly, and both sides stated that progress toward normalisation of relations was "in the interest of all countries", the two countries still had major differences. Each country issued a separate declaration concerning Taiwan. The Chinese side asserted that the "liberation" of Taiwan was strictly an internal affair, "in which no other country [had] a right to interfere". The American side reaffirmed "its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves", stating that the US military presence on Taiwan would be progressively reduced as "tensions in the area diminish[ed]".

The USA planned to remove its military forces and installations from Taiwan by 1977, including nuclear weapons, which had been deployed on the island since 1958.

Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong meeting in 1972. Photo: Wikipedia

Although US authorities considered the loss of Taiwan as a weapons storage facility to be inconvenient, one month after his July 1971 visit to China to discuss normalisation, Kissinger observed that with nuclear-capable bombers and submarines alone, "the US will be able to pre-empt [China] for perhaps the next 10 to 15 years".[5]

USA refuses to publicly affirm the 'One China principle'

During the private negotiations which preceded the release of the Shanghai Communiqué, the Nixon Administration assured the PRC that America "would not foster any 'two Chinas' situation", and that US government spokesmen would no longer make any statements to the effect that Taiwan's status was "undetermined" (although US government officials continued to imply this). In his private February 1972 meetings with Chinese officials, Nixon informed Zhou that he "completely endors[ed]" the principle that "There is one China, and Taiwan is a part of China", and promised that the United States would not support any Taiwan independence movement.[6]

However, in public it was a different matter. In the Shanghai Communiqué, the USA merely "*acknowledge[d]* that all China on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of that China", (emphasis added) and affirmed that the US government "[did] not challenge that position".

During the preceding discussions with Zhou, Nixon maintained that the Shanghai Communiqué's final language regarding Taiwan must be carefully chosen, because various American opposition groups could "gang up and say … that the American President went to Peking and sold Taiwan down the river", and thus "torpedo our initiative [to improve US-China relations]". Nixon said that upon his return to the US, he did not want to be forced, either by the press or Congressional leaders, to "make a strong basically pro-Taiwan statement because of what has been said here". Nixon stated that this would make it very difficult to deliver on the USA's normalisation commitments.

However, the US government's non-committal language in the Shanghai Communiqué also served the USA's determination to maintain the US-Taiwan Mutual Defence Treaty. As the State Department's Deputy Legal Adviser argued in a 7 January 1974 memorandum to Kissinger, if Washington publicly recognised the "principle of One China", this

5. Robert S. Norris, William M. Arkin and William Burr, "Where they were", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Nov./Dec. 1999.
6. Memorandum of Conversation 22 February 1972, Nixon's Trip to China, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 106, The National Security Archive, (nsarchive2.gwu.edu).

could be "fatal" to the legal foundation for maintaining the defence treaty, unless the matter was very carefully handled. Kissinger was advised that if the United States publicly withdrew recognition of Taiwan's statehood, this would result in unavoidable termination of the defence treaty, which would render any US threat or use of force to defend Taiwan against the PRC unlawful.

1979 establishment of US-China diplomatic relations

After the USA and China established unofficial embassies in their respective countries in 1973, progress on normalisation slowed under the Ford (1974-77) and the early Carter (1977-81) administrations. Differences over Taiwan remained the key obstacle to furthering US-China relations.

In 1975, the KMT's leader on Taiwan, 87-year-old Chiang Kai-shek, died, and was succeeded by his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, several years later. PRC leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai died in 1976. Mao's death and the ousting of the group known as the Gang of Four, which was led by Mao's wife, ended China's brutal Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76). From 1978, China's new political leadership launched programs to modernise China's economy, industry, agriculture, science and defence; sent large numbers of Chinese students abroad to undertake scientific and technical training; allowed foreign scholars to visit China; and welcomed foreign businesses and investment. Concurrently, there was a liberalisation of Chinese domestic civil society.

China's rapid modernisation influenced the USA's move to establish full diplomatic relations with the PRC, however the decision was also a geopolitical one. Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor to US President Jimmy Carter, was a driving force behind finalising normalisation. Brzezinski, an adherent of "balance of power" geopolitics, spoke of "playing the China card"—using closer US-China ties to contain the Soviet Union.

During preceding discussions, the USA continued to press China to renounce the use of force in reuniting Taiwan with the mainland. The Chinese side rejected this as tantamount to relinquishing sovereignty over China's own internal affairs.

The USA insisted that it would continue to sell arms to Taiwan for "defensive purposes" after normalisation. Chinese officials emphatically objected to this. PRC Foreign Minister Huang Hua stated: "We think if Chiang Ching-kuo of Taiwan did not get US equipment and weapons there might have been a quicker and better settlement of [the Taiwan issue]".

In December 1978, a US-China Joint Communiqué was issued, which announced that as of 1 January 1979, the two nations would establish bilateral diplomatic relations. The United States affirmed that it recognised the PRC as the sole legal government of China, would terminate the US-Taiwan Mutual Defence Treaty, and would end diplomatic relations with the ROC. The Carter Administration intended to seek changes to US legislation to allow the maintenance of unofficial cultural, commercial and other relations with Taiwan.

Both countries issued separate statements in the 1978 Joint Communiqué. The Chinese side stridently objected to continued US arms sales to Taiwan, arguing that this was against the principles of normalisation, was "detrimental to the peaceful liberation of Taiwan, and "would exercise an unfavourable influence on the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific". The US continued to maintain that America had an interest in the "peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue"; China insisted that the matter of reunification was entirely China's internal affair.

At the same time, Taiwan issued a statement which attacked the United States for breaking its commitments to Taiwan, stating that the USA's diplomatic recognition of the PRC was "tantamount to denying the hundreds of millions of enslaved peoples on the Chinese mainland of their hope for an early restoration of freedom" and was "a great setback to human freedom and democratic institutions". At this time Taiwan was still under martial law, which was imposed on Taiwanese citizens for a total of 38 years (from 1949 to 1987).

US President Jimmy Carter reading the statement that established US-China relations in a 1979 televised address to the nation. Photo: Screenshot

In a 1 January 1979 message, the PRC leadership extended an offer of reconciliation to Taiwan, which expressed kinship and hope in the Taiwanese people, and proposed to open up postal services, trade and travel between Taiwan and China. PRC leaders pledged to "take present realities into account" in accomplishing reunification, and promised to "respect the status quo on Taiwan and the opinions of people in all walks of life there and adopt reasonable policies and measures in settling the question of reunification so as not to cause the people of Taiwan any losses".

However, Chiang Ching-kuo refused China's overtures of peace. In April 1979 his government established the policy of "three noes"—no compromise, no contact, and no negotiations with the PRC. Instead, he authorised a propaganda campaign directed against the Chinese mainland and a new covert warfare program, in which the KMT allied with organised crime and extreme right-wing groups to harass and intimidate individuals in Taiwan and overseas who were suspected of being allied with the PRC's cause.

On 28 January 1979 the Carter Administration introduced a bill to authorise the USA's unofficial relations with Taiwan, which would be conducted through the American Institute in Taiwan and a corresponding organisation created by Taiwan. However, the Congress, which included supporters of Taiwan, felt slighted by the Carter Administration's lack of formal consultation prior to announcing the termination of the US-Taiwan Mutual Defence Treaty. Subsequently, Congressional intervention transformed the 1979 *Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA) into an effective guarantee of Taiwan's security, authorising the sale of arms of a "defensive character" to Taiwan, and essentially reconstituting the original US-Taiwan defence treaty. China formally protested that the language of the TRA contravened the normalisation agreement and violated the principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. In the following decades, the PRC repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the TRA; for example, in a 19 July 2004 statement the Chinese government affirmed that it regards the US law as "openly violating China's sovereignty".

Next—Taiwan and 'Project Democracy'

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