

China Overreach: Taiwan's Democracy in Peril

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Introduction

Taiwan is a small subtropical island off the southern coast of mainland China. It has mountainous and coastal areas and a population of 23 million. The capital of the country is Taipei: a thriving metropolis with a population of about 2.6 million people. While Taiwan has been inhabited by people for thousands of years, it was not settled by Han Chinese people until the 1600s. It has become progressively more important on the world stage since that time.

Its worldwide importance is largely due to the question of to what extent it should be governed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). This issue has existed since 1949 and is growing more contentious by the day. The issue gained global attention in August when U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan (Haenle). In reaction to the visit, the PRC started large-scale military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, including sending ballistic missiles over Taiwan (Haenle). The magnitude of these military exercises raised concerns about the possibility of a 4th Taiwan Strait Crisis (Blanchette et. al.). Additionally, the recent August Official White Paper published by the PRC had a distinctly more aggressive attitude towards Taiwan than previous white papers (Xinhua). The PRC's recent actions in the Taiwan Strait and this white paper indicate the growing tension between the PRC and Taiwan. This tension implicates the whole world economically and politically because if the conflict escalates it will harm the global economy and countries will be drawn into the conflict due to previous agreements with either side (Wu). The purpose of this essay is to cover the recent history of

Taiwan and China, detail the political situation in Taiwan, and explain the current state of Chinese-Taiwan relations to demonstrate why the world must not let China interfere with Taiwan's autonomy.

Early History of Taiwan

Before any Han Chinese, Japanese, or European people set foot on the island of Taiwan, it was populated by indigenous plains tribes (Mack). There were nine main tribes: Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Tsou, and Yami (Of Taiwan). Taiwan also has copious natural resources including sulfur and gold (ThoughtCo). It was these resources that began to draw explorers during the 1600s. The Europeans were replaced by mainland Chinese people in the 1660s when the Manchus overthrew the Ming Dynasty on the Chinese mainland and established the Qing dynasty (Mack). Ming loyalists, now rebels after the dynasty change, fled to Taiwan, and drove out the Dutch, thereby establishing Han Chinese control of the island (Mack). The Ming loyalist reign, however, did not last. In the 1680s, the Qing dynasty launched a military offensive to take over Taiwan (Mack). The initial assault only captured part of the island, and it took a year before the Qing dynasty solidified its control over the entire island and designated it the 22nd province of China (Mack).

The Qing Dynasty, and later the Republic of China, maintained control of the island until the Sino-Japanese War (Mack). The main cause of the war was the conflict over each country's influence over Korea (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The war lasted one year from 1894-1895 and ended with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki (CSIS). The treaty forced China to recognize Korean independence and cede Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and Liaodong Province in Manchuria to Japan (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The ceding of

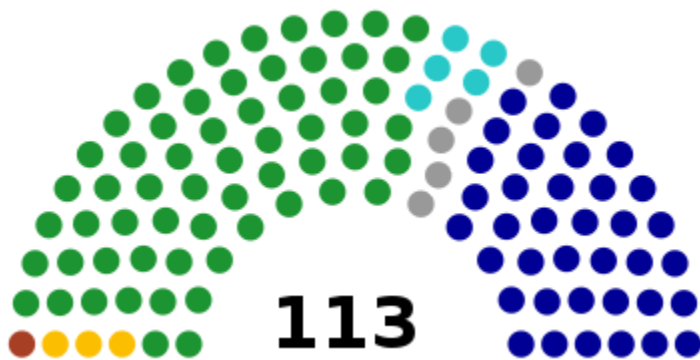
Taiwan to Japan was significant because Japan had wanted to acquire the island for a significant period of time before the war (Mack). Japan, however, underestimated the independent nature of the people living on the island. It was not simply “acquired,” by the Japanese. In fact, in 1895 after the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the mainland Chinese government declared Taiwan a republic, and the governor of the Taiwan province was made president (Grajdanzev). The new Republic of Taiwan refused to recognize the cession of the island to the Japanese and militarily defended the island (Grajdanzev). Thus, the Japanese had to invade the island and conquer its residents (Grajdanzev). Even after Japan established control of the island, rebellion and unrest continued throughout the entire reign (Grajdanzev). Japanese control of Taiwan radically changed the island’s export shares. Before the occupation, the share of Great Britain in Taiwan’s imports was 7.3 percent, the American share was 5.3 percent, the Chinese share was 37.4 percent, and the Japanese share was 61 percent (Grajdanzev). During the occupation, however, Great Britain’s import share was 0 percent, the American share was 0.4 percent, the Chinese share was 0.5 percent, and the Japanese share was 89.4 percent (Grajdanzev). This radical change in imports and trade made Taiwan a true colony of Japan, a fact that many native Taiwanese resented.

Taiwan was not freed from Japanese rule until after World War II. On December 1, 1943, China, the United States, and Great Britain signed the Cairo Declaration which stated that “all the territories Japan has seized from China, such as Manchuria, Taiwan, and the Penghu Islands, shall be restored to China” (CSIS). At the time the treaty was signed, the Republic of China (ROC) i.e., the Nationalist Party led the government. This is important because Taiwan was ceded to the Nationalist Party government, not the Chinese Communist Party government (CSIS). Thus, the ROC government began governing Taiwan in 1945 as China when the

Japanese surrendered to end World War II (Taiwan.gov). Japan's surrender also ended temporary peace between the Nationalists and Communists because they lacked a common enemy (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The United States tried to intervene and mediate the conflict, but violence inevitably broke out (Encyclopedia Britannica). During the four years of combat after World War II, more than two million Chinese soldiers died or were wounded in combat, and about five million Chinese soldiers died from combat, starvation, and disease (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The conflict ended in 1949 when Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party, declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China in Beijing (CSIS). During this year, the leader of the Nationalist Party (KMT), Chiang Kai-Shek was forced to leave for Taiwan along with 2 million KMT troops and supporters (CSIS). Once in Taiwan, he proclaimed Taipei the temporary capital of the Republic of China (CSIS).

Current State of Taiwan and China

Despite this tension with China, Taiwan has emerged as a successful democracy and a major exporter of technological products. It is similar to the American system of democracy because it



is also a majoritarian system, and most members of the legislature are elected from single-member districts on a first-past-the-post basis (Bush). The members of the legislature that are not elected in this method, are selected on a party basis (Bush).

They hold frequent elections, and they are competitive, free, and fair (Bush). There are two major parties: the Kuomintang (KMT) which is the Nationalist Party, and the Democratic

Progressive Party (DPP) (Bush). These parties are supported by camps of small parties and other groups (Bush). Each party is identified by the colors of their flags, much like the American Republican Party is identified as red and the American Democratic Party is identified as blue. The KMT is represented by blue, and the DPP is represented by green (Bush).

This chart displays the continuum of Taiwanese political parties with the DPP on the left side and the KMT on the right side.

The issue that is most polarizing for the Taiwanese political parties is how to deal with the threat that China poses. The KMT (blue) has a more charitable view of the mainland Chinese government and believes in its ability to manage the risk that the PRC poses (Bush). The DPP (green), on the other hand, takes a much more negative view of the mainland Chinese government (Bush). The DPP also does not believe that the KMT is even promoting Taiwan's interests. For example, the DPP highlights the fact that the KMT's full name is "Nationalist Party of China," to prove that the KMT is a pro-China party (Glauert).

With respect to the general population of Taiwan, the proportions of people that want full independence rather than the "One China Two Systems" model have changed over time. This change is most explicitly demonstrated by the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections where Chen Shui-bian, the first non-KMT candidate, won the election (CSIS). Chen represents the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which before 1999, campaigned on a platform that directly called for Taiwanese independence (CSIS). This election represented a tangible shift in public opinion about Taiwan's relationship with China. Many Taiwanese people that want full

independence for Taiwan argue that Taiwan was never part of the People's Republic of China government that was established under Chairman Mao Zedong in 1949, and therefore the PRC has no claim to the island (Brown). The PRC disagrees, along with most of the world except for the 13 countries that recognize Taiwan as a sovereign nation (Brown). The PRC is not afraid to express this disagreement militarily. In October 2021, Taiwan experienced 56 incursions into its airspace by PRC aircraft in a single day (Brown). This number of incursions was unprecedented and represented an all-time low in Chinese-Taiwan relations according to the Taiwanese defense minister (Brown).

Contentious Narratives

The larger issue, though, is the China question: the “irresolvable conflict,” of which governing party of China governs Taiwan and mainland China (Resar). This issue was addressed in the 1992 Consensus: an agreement between Taiwan and the PRC concerning relations across the Taiwan Strait. Before the consensus, there had been absolutely no contact between the ROC and the PRC (Resar). The most important part of the consensus is the agreement that both governments are operating within a singular country i.e., there is only one China, and Taiwan is a part of China (Resar). It does not address who rules that one country, but it established a powerful status quo that allowed for significantly more normalized relations between the two governments. Currently, the KMT views the agreement more favorably, but the DPP does not agree with any version of “One China,” and therefore does not accept the consensus (Resar).

Recently, the PRC changed its tone regarding its stance on Taiwan. Originally, in its 1993 white paper, the PRC government stated that they will “will respect the status quo on Taiwan and the views of people of all walks of life there and adopt reasonable policies and measures” (The

People's Republic of China). However, the 2022 August white paper stated that “the government of the PRC should enjoy and exercise China's full sovereignty, which includes its sovereignty over Taiwan” (Xinhua). This is a departure from its previous language about upholding the status quo from the 1992 Consensus. Instead of refraining from declaring which government should rule “One China,” the 2022 white paper aggressively states that Taiwan should be governed by the PRC. Many in Taiwan are strongly opposed to the white paper and the “one China, two systems,” approach for which it advocates (Taiwan Today). Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council issued a statement saying, “The Republic of China (Taiwan) is a sovereign country that has never been under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party,” and that “Beijing needs to recognize that Taiwan is fully committed to defending its free and democratic constitutional system while resisting annexation or encroachment upon its sovereignty” (Taiwan Today). Although these are in reaction to the Beijing white paper, these statements are also a departure from the status quo language of the 1992 Consensus. The leader of the ruling party in Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP, went a step further in stating that Taiwan had “never accepted the 1992 Consensus” (Office of the President Republic of China). Additionally, she stated that the “vast majority of Taiwanese also resolutely oppose ‘one country, two systems,’ and this opposition is a Taiwan consensus” (Office of the President Republic of China). It is difficult for the PRC and Taiwan to reach any sort of solution when both sides are so adamantly opposed to one another.

China, Taiwan, and the United States

Before the end of World War II, the United States was minimally involved in the issue of Taiwan’s relationship with China. However, the war in China posed a threat to maintaining a peaceful Asian continent for the United States to trade with. Additionally, after the Chinese

Communist Party took over, the United States had a vested interest in maintaining involvement in the region to prevent the spread of communism. During the Korean War, the United States sent the Seventh Fleet to monitor the Taiwan Strait and prevent conflict between the island and the mainland (CSIS). This decision renewed cooperation between the United States and the Nationalist government that ruled Taiwan (CSIS). This cooperation was codified by the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty by the United States and Taiwan in 1954 (Huang). This treaty obligated the United States to defend Taiwan if it was attacked by the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Tiezzi). This treaty was written before the United States established relations with the PRC, thereby lending legitimacy to the ROC government in Taiwan.

However, this legitimacy was soon challenged when the PRC gained enough votes in the UN General Assembly to remove Taiwan as China's representative at the UN and then change it to the PRC (CSIS). The legitimacy of the Republic of China in Taiwan was further undermined when President Nixon traveled to mainland China in 1972 to reestablish contact with the PRC (CSIS). During this meeting, President Nixon signed the US-Sino Joint Communiqué, which would later be called the Shanghai Communiqué (Huang). This document formally established American and Chinese views on the Taiwan issue (Huang). Essentially, it allowed the United States to acknowledge the Chinese view of the situation i.e., that there should be "One China," without issuing an opinion on who should rule the "One China" (Richard Nixon Foundation). The exact language of the communiqué is, "the United States acknowledges that all Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is, but one China and that Taiwan is part of that China. In addition, the United States asserts its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves" (CSIS). This document laid the foundation for the

normalization of relations between the two countries, without making a concrete decision on such a divisive issue.

The United States formally established diplomatic relations with the PRC when President Deng Xiaoping visited Washington DC in January 1979 (CSIS). During this meeting, he and President Carter signed another communique called the January 1, 1979 Communique (CSIS). This document established formal relations between the two nations, outlined their separate perspectives in Taiwan, and set constraints for American involvement in Taiwan (Huang). The Communique required that the United States repeal the defense treaty between the United States and Taiwan, remove United States forces from Taiwan, and withdraw their formal diplomatic recognition of Taiwan (U.S.-PRC Joint Communique 1979). While the executive branch could not do anything about this aspect of the agreement, the United States Congress began outlining the unofficial relationship between the United States and Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979 (Huang). This act reestablished the United States' commitment to defending Taiwan's security (Huang). Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's visit to attend the commencement ceremonies at Cornell University (his alma mater), further exacerbated the tensions between China, the United States, and Taiwan (Lange). China argued that the United States should not have given President Lee a visa and claimed that his graduation speech was inflammatory (CSIS). To express their displeasure with the event, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) did ballistic missile tests and war games in the Taiwan Strait (Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training).

Conclusion

Mainland China is a massive country with a globalized economy and a rapidly growing military force. Taiwan is also an economic powerhouse with exports that are key for the functioning of technological devices around the world. For example, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) controls over half of the world's semiconductor market (BBC). TSMC factories are "foundries," meaning that they create devices like integrated circuits that are crucial to the functioning of many electronic devices (BBC). TSMC markets to both consumer and military customers and its market share was worth almost 100 billion dollars in 2021 (BBC). Part of why the PRC is so insistent about its sovereignty over Taiwan is because of this economic capacity. The PRC is not singularly motivated by principle when it comes to the Taiwan issue. They are motivated by the fact that if they control the Taiwan economy, they will control this semiconductor market and provide a huge boost to the Chinese economy.

Thus, the PRC has demonstrated its lack of commitment to democracy, human rights, and the general well-being of its people. As I have explained in this essay, the PRC has made continuous political and military overreaches into Taiwan that violate the 1992 Consensus and its previous pledges to uphold the status quo. Its recent takeover of Hong Kong proved the inefficacy of the "One China, Two Systems," arrangement. If the PRC is allowed to take over Taiwan, especially militarily, the same fate awaits the Taiwanese people. The global community must mobilize to defuse the current tension and support Taiwan in its hopes for peace and autonomy in the future.

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