

Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, and the US: A Symposium

Editor's introduction: Taiwan-PRC relations and their ramifications for the US, as well as Asia's stability, are critical regional and world topics. In what follows, academics and journalists, all of whom share substantial knowledge regarding the Taiwan issue, provide different perspectives on various aspects regarding this critical issue.

Why Are We Still Talking about Taiwan?

By Shelley Rigger



SHELLEY RIGGER is the Brown Professor and Chair of Political Science and Chinese at Davidson College. She is the author of three books on Taiwan, including *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse* (New York: Rowman Littlefield, 2011).

With twenty-three million people and 14,000 square miles of territory, Taiwan ranks between Madagascar and Mozambique in population and Belgium and Bhutan in land area. A small country by either measure, Taiwan plays a big role in world politics and economics nonetheless.

The US does not recognize it as a sovereign state, yet Taiwan's presence in the US and its importance to US foreign policy are enormous. It is the America's twelfth-largest trading partner and a top importer of American agricultural products. Belgium has an embassy and three consulates in the US; similarly sized Taiwan has an embassy equivalent (the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Representative Office) and eleven offices performing consular functions. Their American counterparts employ more than 550 people in Taiwan. This handful of facts underscores two key aspects of the US-Taiwan relationship: Its importance is disproportionate to Taiwan's size, and it is unusual. Given the extensive ties between the two countries, why *doesn't* the US recognize Taiwan as a state? Why don't the two sides exchange *real* embassies and consulates?

The answers to these questions lie in Taiwan's history—a legacy of tragedy and triumph that has given it a unique position in international

Until the early 1990s, Taiwan's government insisted it would someday "retake" the mainland.

affairs and a convoluted relationship with its most important international friend. Taiwan's situation raises conflicts among America's foreign policy interests and principles—conflicts that have been managed, if not resolved, through creative, if sometimes awkward, diplomatic innovations. The result is a relationship that balances close economic, political, and military

ties between the US and Taiwan with the People's Republic of China's demand that Washington keep Taiwan at arm's length.

Taiwan's experience invites us to reflect on what makes a nation. Its society was built through waves of migration, settlement, and conquest. Over time, the peoples those waves carried to its shores melded together into a society comprised of discernible layers cemented, like sedimentary rock, into a single whole. The earliest inhabitants—Taiwan's aboriginal peoples—arrived from nearby islands thousands of years ago. In the seventeenth century, migrants from the overcrowded Chinese province of Fujian joined them. The first states to assert sovereignty on the island were the Netherlands and Spain, which built forts to defend their claims. In 1662, a Taiwan-based pirate king expelled the last of the European occupiers and claimed the island for the defunct Ming dynasty. Twenty years later, the Qing Empire defeated the Ming loyalists, and Taiwan joined the empire as a weakly controlled frontier zone. In 1895, the Qing Empire handed Taiwan over to Japan, which added its own layer of cultural and economic influences. For fifty years, Taiwanese lived as Japanese subjects until, at the end of World War II, the island was handed to China's reigning Nationalist government. In 1949, just four years later, Communist forces overthrew the Nationalists; their leaders fled to Taiwan. From there, they prepared for a return to mainland China that has never materialized.

Aboriginal, European, Fujian-Chinese, Japanese, Nationalist-Chinese—each element contributes to Taiwan's contemporary identity. They are held together by their concern for their shared homeland and by democratic institutions that give each Taiwanese an equal political stake.

There are many countries like Taiwan in the modern world: diverse peoples forged into nations by history, cemented in their collective identities by the experience of democratic citizenship. But Taiwan is also different—and thus puts the issues in sharper relief—because its claim to nationhood faces active opposition from Beijing. Because Taiwan was part of the Qing Empire and was given to Nationalist China at the end of World War II, the People's Republic of China claims the island on the grounds that it is the legal successor to those states. It insists that Taiwan and the PRC must be "reunified," and it requires all other nations that hope to have diplomatic relations with Beijing to renounce formal ties with Taiwan. According to Taiwan's postwar government, the Nationalist state continued to exist on Taiwan. Until the early 1990s, Taiwan's government insisted it would someday "retake" the mainland. For the past twenty years or so, Taiwan's government has accepted the existence of the PRC (the two now have a robust economic relationship), but it rejects the idea that Taiwan should be folded into the PRC.

Some Taiwanese would like the island to be unified with the mainland under a democratic government; others prefer that Taiwan give up on the idea of unification altogether. But a large majority wants to keep things the way they are, with Taiwan under one government, the mainland under an-

other, and the question of their future relationship left to future generations.

This state of affairs pits American values against American interests. During the Cold War, the US viewed Taiwan as a crucial ally in the fight against Communism. When American policymakers became aware of the deep rift between Beijing and Moscow in the 1960s, they decided to reach out to China as a way of isolating the Soviet Union. In 1979, the US de-recognized Taiwan in order to secure diplomatic relations with the PRC. While the original rationale for closer US-China ties was strategic, China's value to the US has not diminished with the end of the Cold War; instead, the two countries have become deeply economically interdependent. That reality makes American policymakers loath to antagonize Beijing and gives the US strong pressure to minimize its interactions with Taiwan.

Acceding to Beijing's demands regarding Taiwan would ease tensions between the US and the PRC, but American officials are reluctant to do so for reasons of interest and principle.

Strategically, the US benefits from a web of security relationships. Since World War II, alliances around the world have nurtured a relatively peaceful and prosperous international environment and supported US leadership. But, as China's power increases, America's Asian friends and allies are becoming uneasy. They wonder whether Washington is willing and able to protect them against a strong China. Reducing American support for Taiwan—including arms sales—would be read in other capitals (including Tokyo, Seoul, Manila, and Hanoi) as evidence of America's declining resolve and capability.

These strategic concerns probably could be managed, but difficult issues of principle remain. Taiwan is a long-standing American friend; it has

done nothing to cause Washington to abandon the relationship. On the contrary, Taiwan has remade itself into the kind of nation American leaders encourage.

The Taiwan that was close to the US during the Cold War was a single-party authoritarian state with a managed economy, but in the 1980s and '90s, Taiwan transformed itself both politically and economically to become a liberal democracy and free trader. Those changes proved that democratization is possible, including in culturally Chinese societies, without sacrificing prosperity, growth, or social order. For the US to turn its back on Taiwan now would be to repudiate decades of policy and rhetoric committing Washington to promoting democracy.

Substantively, the Taiwan issue is important because it is a primary source of tension between the world's leading powers. It also is an excellent pedagogical vehicle for exploring the tension between interests and values in US foreign policy. ■

SUGGESTED READING

Bernkopf Tucker, Nancy. *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Bush, Richard. *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006.

Huang, Jing, and Xiaoting Li. *Inseparable Separation: The Making of China's Taiwan Policy*. Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2010.

Rigger, Shelley. *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011.

A Unique Trilateral Relationship *The US, the PRC, and Taiwan since 1949*

By Zhiqun Zhu



ZHIQUN ZHU is John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Chair in East Asian Politics and Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania. His research and teaching interests include US-East Asian relations, East Asian political economy, and Chinese politics and foreign policy. He is the editor of *New Dynamics in East Asian Politics: Security, Political Economy, and Society* (New York: Continuum International, 2012), *The People's Republic of China Today: Internal and External Challenges* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2010), and *Global Studies:*

China (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009 and 2011). His single authored books include *Understanding East Asia's Economic "Miracles"* (Ann Arbor, MI) *China's New Diplomacy: Rationale, Strategies and Significance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), and *US-China Relations in the 21st Century: Power Transition and Peace* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

The US was an ally of China—the Republic of China (ROC)—during World War II. After WWII, the Kuomintang (KMT) that ruled the ROC and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) engaged in a bloody civil war. With the Communist victory imminent, the KMT government retreated to Taiwan. In October 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established on the mainland.

During and after WWII, the US became disenchanted with the corrupt and inefficient KMT. As the Communist forces swept across the Chinese mainland, it appeared to be just a matter of time before Taiwan would be absorbed, and the US was prepared to abandon Taiwan. The US rediscovered Taiwan's strategic value when the Korean War broke out in June 1950. Soon afterward, the US Seventh Fleet was dispatched to the Taiwan Strait, essentially blocking any PRC attempt to take over Taiwan by force. The US and the ROC also signed a mutual defense treaty in 1954.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the US and the ROC maintained diplomatic ties, although secret talks between the US and the PRC were held intermittently. In a 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article, presidential candidate Richard Nixon argued that "We simply cannot afford to leave China outside the family of nations." In July 1971, Dr. Henry Kissinger, the president's national security advisor, secretly visited Beijing and met with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. The visit paved the way for Nixon's groundbreaking travel to China the following February and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué based on the One China Policy. In July 1971, the PRC replaced the ROC to become the sole representative of China at the United Nations.

On January 1, 1979, the US and the PRC signed the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations. Meanwhile, the US de-recognized the ROC. The third communiqué, also known as the August 17 Communiqué, was issued between Washington and Beijing in 1982, in which both sides reaffirmed the statements about Taiwan in previous