

Taiwan Shouldn't Be Used as a Geopolitical Pawn - A historical perspective

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During the Cold War, US officials saw Taiwan as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” and supported Chiang Kai-Shek’s dictatorship. Modern-day Taiwan has developed a democratic culture that shouldn’t be subordinated to confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

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In September 18, President Joe Biden was [asked](#) on *60 Minutes* about the US commitment to defend Taiwan against a potential Chinese attack. His answer to the question “Would US forces defend the island?” was a blunt “yes.”

Since 1979, the official US policy has been to state that any change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait by non-peaceful means would be of “[grave concern](#)” to the United States. Yet the *60 Minutes* interview was the [fourth time](#) since coming to office that Biden has publicly stated the United States would defend Taiwan. His recent comments appear to have upped the ante, outlining a clearer commitment than US presidents have made in past decades.

Biden’s comments ignited a firestorm of both [criticism](#) and [support](#). Some pointed to the recklessness of revising a long-standing US policy in a way that could draw Washington into a dangerous conflict. Others argued that such a commitment would provide [necessary deterrence](#) to an aggressive Beijing.

What is the relationship of the United States to an island of twenty-three million people for which it is potentially risking a military confrontation with China? And how did US-Taiwan relations develop to this point?

Taiwan in the Global Periphery

For most of its history, Taiwan was home to Indigenous Taiwanese, part of the larger Austronesian peoples spanning the Indian Ocean and South Pacific. Beginning in the seventeenth century, with encouragement from the Dutch East India company that had [colonized a corner of Taiwan](#), migrants from China began to settle the Taiwanese lowlands.

The Qing military conquered Taiwan in 1683 and administered the western lowlands. This was part of a drive by the Manchu-led Qing Empire to expand its influence and eliminate political rivals at its frontiers, resulting in the conquests of present-day Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet. Qing rule was not all-encompassing: Indigenous Taiwanese predominated in the rugged mountainous highlands, often [resisting Qing](#) and later [Japanese rule](#).

Japan took control of Taiwan in 1895 as a prize of the First Sino-Japanese War, then turned it into a 'model colony' to showcase Japanese imperialism.

Partly because of its perceived lack of importance to the Qing Empire and its unwelcoming, subtropical climate, the Kangxi Emperor referred to Taiwan as “[a ball of mud](#).” Over time, however, the island’s natural resources and production of agricultural commodities — rice, camphor, and sugar — gave rise to a new perception.

Japan took control of Taiwan in 1895 as a prize of the First Sino-Japanese War, then turned it into a “[model colony](#)” to showcase Japanese imperialism, both to the metropole and to the rest of the world. In practice, however, Taiwanese were subjects of an imperial project that [drafted them](#) into a global war while denying movements for self-rule and [political and economic rights](#) enjoyed by their colonizers.

Apart from a [minor naval incident in 1867](#), the island existed outside of the US sphere of concern until 1949. As part of the negotiations between the Allied powers in the 1943 Cairo Conference, Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Republic of China (ROC) and the ruling Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT), secured a commitment from the United States to have control over Taiwan, then still a Japanese colony, transferred to the ROC government at the end of the war. In 1945, Chiang’s Nationalist forces marched into Taiwan, to be greeted with optimism by Taiwanese who believed the Nationalists were liberators.

But the KMT government met the Taiwanese people with violence and authoritarianism instead. US diplomat George Kerr described in his book [Formosa Betrayed](#) the slaughter that he witnessed in Taipei during the months after the so-called February 28 Incident in 1947. Nationalist soldiers violently put down island-wide protests that erupted when a policeman struck a woman selling black-market cigarettes.

The Kuomintang implemented martial law, which went on to last for almost forty years, curtailing political freedoms and stifling dissent. Despite Kerr’s horror at the humanitarian violations that he saw, such events in Taiwan attracted no interest in Washington.

Cold War Taiwan

The revolution of 1949 ended decades of civil war between the Chinese Communists and Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists. It brought Taiwan into the framework of the global Cold War that was taking shape. When the Communists defeated Chiang’s military forces across the Chinese mainland, he sought to retreat somewhere he could regroup and counterattack.

The KMT leader considered a number of options but settled on Taiwan because of its [favorable geography](#), separated from China by approximately a hundred miles of the Taiwan Strait. Communist leader Mao Zedong initially supported the idea of [Taiwanese self-determination](#), including possible independence. However, Chiang's withdrawal turned the island into a target for the newly established People's Republic of China. Those hundred miles of water would protect Chiang and the KMT for decades.

Chiang ordered the majority of his Nationalist administration to move across the strait with him: around a [million](#) officials, soldiers, refugees, and their families. Once established on Taiwan, the KMT officially maintained that the Republic of China was the only legitimate government for all of China. The stay in Taiwan was only supposed to be a temporary one until the promised counterattack against Mao's forces could begin.

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The Nationalist government in effect colonized Taiwan. A secret military police, the [Garrison Command](#), enforced martial law. Anyone suspected of dissent could be deemed a traitor, resulting in [detainment, trial, imprisonment, and execution of prisoners](#), all of which took place in secret.

Chiang's administration implemented programs of Sinicization, teaching Taiwanese subjects that they were in fact Chinese. This entailed [mandatory education](#) in Mandarin Chinese, the ROC's national language, and punishment for speaking other tongues, such as Taiwanese Hokkien (Minnan), Hakka, or Indigenous Taiwanese languages. This pedagogy was designed to discipline Taiwanese subjects into obedience to the Nationalist party-state so that they would become model citizens of the ROC's imagined community.

Even though geography protected Chiang, the ROC on Taiwan was still a [fragile state](#) in 1949. Chiang desperately sought US support. US observers at the time were skeptical of Chiang's abilities as a leader. Their negative views owed something to his intransigent personality and to previous conflicts with American representatives like "Vinegar Joe" [Stilwell](#).

Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier

The Korean War was a turning point for Taiwan. For US policymakers, the advance of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) into the Korean peninsula in 1950 raised the alarming prospect of a "domino effect" leading to the spread of communism throughout Asia. They responded with a [containment policy](#) to check communist advances.

Taiwan became integrated into US plans as part of an Asian anti-communist alliance. General Douglas MacArthur famously described the island as the "[unsinkable aircraft carrier](#)" that the United States could not allow to fall into communist hands. Taiwan's geography thus once again benefitted Chiang.

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McCarthyism reinforced the support for his administration on Capitol Hill, as fearmongering senators accused State Department officials of “losing” China to the communists. In 1955, the United States and the ROC signed the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty that resulted in a decades-long Cold War alliance.

As part of that alliance, Taiwan received American aid and investment. US aid added up to a total of approximately \$3 billion from 1949 until 1965, with \$1.5 billion for military assistance and another \$1.5 billion for economic development. During the postwar period, Taiwan began its economic transformation from a largely rural, agrarian economy into an industrial power.

One could find US symbols and signs throughout Taiwanese society, whether emblazoned on foodstuffs or street names, such as Roosevelt Rd. running through Taipei. US economic development agencies encouraged Taiwanese planners to introduce American-exported agricultural foods, like wheat bulgur, to Taiwanese diets. This was an attempt to shore up deficient calorie intakes among the island’s population while simultaneously finding an outlet for American surplus wheat. By 1965, Washington deemed Taiwan to be a successful “graduate” of US aid programs.



This image of “Sino-American Cooperation” was often displayed on foodstuffs given to Taiwan during the period of US aid until 1965.

International Isolation

However, it was becoming increasingly difficult by the early 1970s for the KMT/ROC administration to maintain its self-image as China's sole legitimate government. At the United Nations, a majority of member-states voted in 1971 to replace the ROC with the People's Republic of China as the [government representing China](#), with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. A number of countries began to sever diplomatic relations with the ROC and recognize the People's Republic of China instead.

In 1972, Taiwan's most ardent ally, the United States, made a move that fundamentally altered the US-Taiwan relationship. Henry Kissinger had secretly visited Beijing the previous year, meeting with Chinese premier Zhou Enlai and laying the groundwork for President Richard Nixon to meet Mao Zedong. This opened a period of rapprochement between the United States and China.

The 1972 Nixon visit stemmed from a US desire to isolate the Soviet Union by building stronger ties with China, which had sought its own international path after the Sino-Soviet split of the previous decade. The cost to the ROC was devastating. The 1972 Shanghai Communiqué that followed Nixon's visit, jointly issued by the United States and China, stated that Washington acknowledged (but did not recognize) Beijing's position that there was only "one China."

The United States formally switched its diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 1979 and ended the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty.

In effect, this set a precedent for Taiwan's future exclusion from the international community on Beijing's terms, even though the United States did not explicitly adopt Beijing's line as its own. Kissinger and Nixon had decided that bargaining over Taiwan was a price worth paying for Beijing's friendship.

Chiang, at heart a nationalist, always maintained that the ROC was the rightful government for all of China and that Taiwan was a part of it. But he died in 1975. In the decades that followed, the ROC was gradually forced out of international organizations.

The United States formally switched its diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 1979 and ended the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty. Recognizing that this had weakened Taiwan's status, the US Congress passed the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) in 1979. The act laid out a stern but ambiguous [declaration of US interest](#) in the preservation of peace across the Taiwan Strait while also guaranteeing arms sales to Taiwan.

Democratization and Taiwanese Identity

Beginning in the 1970s, and aided by the [Taiwanese diaspora](#) in the United States, Taiwanese activists made slow progress in pressuring the KMT to loosen its authoritarian grip. The [Kaohsiung Incident](#) of 1979, triggered by a government crackdown upon peaceful demonstrations in the city of Kaohsiung, brought the democracy movement into the public spotlight. In the aftermath, the

Tangwai (“outside the Kuomintang”) movement called for democratization during the 1980s.

In 1987, bowing to political pressure, the KMT lifted martial law. A cascade of political reforms followed over the course of the late 1980s and early 1990s, including an end to press censorship and genuinely free legislative elections. This process culminated in Taiwan’s first free presidential elections in 1996.

An opposition party formed out of the Tangwai movement, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Taiwan’s current president, Tsai Ing-wen, is the DPP’s chair. The end of martial law thus finally allowed the Taiwanese people to determine how they would be governed.

Democratization in Taiwan proved to be a fortuitous turn of events for its relationship with the United States. For decades, the United States had referred to Taiwan as “Free China,” even though the country was not “free” in a democratic sense. Its political transformation allowed Washington to depict Taiwan as one of the success stories of US postwar assistance, while glossing over its decades-long support for the authoritarian KMT government.

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The transition to democracy also ushered in change for Taiwanese political and social identities. Grappling with decades of abuses under authoritarian rule, Taiwanese sought to dismantle the colonial institutions established by the KMT government. Transitional justice [brought to light](#) the record of human rights violations, such as the February 28 Incident of 1947.

A Taiwan-centric identity grew to become a [majority position](#) within Taiwanese society. Younger Taiwanese who have been educated since democratization took place particularly associate the idea of being Chinese with the period of colonial rule imposed by an authoritarian government.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Taiwan often finds itself caught between the conflicts of larger powers. The US-Taiwan relationship since 1949 has often been an inversion of Washington’s relationship with China. During the 2000s and 2010s, when the United States was investing heavily in China and seeking access to the Chinese market, relations with Taiwan waned out of deference to Beijing. To complicate things further, Taiwan’s economy is [deeply intertwined](#) with that of China, after decades of [Taiwanese investment](#) that relies upon Chinese low-wage labor.

Today, with tensions between the United States and China at a high point, Taiwan has returned to center stage. An [increasingly nationalistic](#) Chinese leadership has ramped up a policy of coercion with [gray zone warfare](#) and [military force](#). During the recent Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping reiterated a long-standing position on the importance of Taiwan to the PRC and sternly warned “external forces” against interference.

Chinese officials often argue that [US interests](#) are using Taiwan as a [pawn](#). Figures in the US foreign

policy field reinforce Beijing's narrative when they view Taiwan only as a counterweight to China, a one-dimensional [semiconductor factory](#), or as the [battlefield](#) for a war with China. Some in the Pentagon have fanned the flames by arguing that Beijing will invade Taiwan by 2027 (or perhaps even sooner) — an assessment that is based on the PLA's [military capabilities](#) rather than intelligence about its plans.

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The vast majority of Taiwanese simply want to [exist peacefully](#) and be a part of the [international community](#) like any other society. Yet the big powers have historically treated Taiwan more as an object than as a nation determining its own future.

Since few countries are willing to [cross Beijing](#), Taiwan believes that it has few options beyond turning to the United States as it did in the past. Taiwanese politicians from both [major parties](#) largely welcomed [Nancy Pelosi's visit](#) in August, as did many Taiwanese residents who showed up to [greet Pelosi](#) in person, although the trip sparked a threatening response from Beijing that consisted of economic sanctions and missile tests conducted [recklessly close](#) to inhabited areas of Taiwan.

Pelosi's visit was purely symbolic and potentially inflammatory. Yet Taiwan has mostly been denied state visits, a basic routine for most countries in the world, over the last half century, and Taiwanese celebrated her arrival as a brief example of a US politician treating Taiwan as if it were a state. Biden's comments are also likely to receive a positive reaction in Taiwan, where people see the United States as the only power willing to stand up to a belligerent Beijing.

Beijing's escalation of military threats to a peaceful Taiwan needs to be addressed by the entire international community, but it is irresponsible to assume that war is inevitable. US policymakers should recognize that the desire of democratic Taiwan for self-determination must take priority over their own hawkishness, while Beijing ought to step back from an irredentism that needlessly focuses on Taiwan to fulfill a nationalist ideology.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 11.18.2022:
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