

# Taiwan Issue in Sino - US Relations: A Geopolitical View

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## Abstract

*From the late nineteenth century, the geopolitical and geostrategic theory have been researched and applied in planning the national development strategy and policy by many countries, especially the major powers all over the world. The United States (US) and China are typical cases. In the view of geopolitics, Taiwan is an important territory in East Asia that created important changes in the US foreign policy to China. Taiwan issue can be regarded as the core and sensitive issue of the Sino - US relations. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the expression of Taiwan's geostrategic position in these relations. The expressions are analyzed in the interrelationship among the following aspects: Taiwan's geostrategic position and Taiwan issue in the Chinese and the US and Chinese thinking, and the impacts of Taiwan issue on Sino - US relations.*

Keywords: Geopolitics, Taiwan, Sino - US relations

## 1. Taiwan's Geostrategic Position and Taiwan Issue in Chinese Thinking

Taiwan is an island in East Asia. The East China Sea lies to the north, the Philippine Sea to the east, the Luzon Strait directly to the south and the South China Sea to the southwest. Taiwan has an area of 36,179 square kilometers, measuring approximately 240 miles long and 98 miles wide with a shape often compared to a tobacco leaf. Taiwan's most noticeable geographic feature is mountainous and hilly. As a result, only about one third of the total land area is arable. Fortunately, river deposits on the western side of the island have filled the shallow waters and extended the land nine to eighteen miles westward from the foothills. Crossed by the Tropic of Cancer, Taiwan has climate ranging from tropical in the south to subtropical in the north, and is governed by the East Asia Monsoon. The island is often subject to earthquakes and typhoons.

From a geopolitical view, Taiwan which the Westerners called Formosa is a link in the chain of islands stretching from Kamchatka to the Malay Peninsula and sheltering the coastal line of the Asian continent. Situated between 21 and 25 degrees north latitude and 119 and 124 degrees east longitude, the island lies in a middle point in the chain which includes Japan and the Philippines. The most northeasterly point of Taiwan is about 350 miles west by south of Okinawa, and its southernmost tip is 225 miles north of Luzon.

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This position helps Taiwan to play a role in the changing geopolitics of East Asia. Besides, Taiwan is parallel to the mainland of China (at a distance of some 100 miles) and separated with Chinese coast by a strait of 90 to 120 miles in breadth. Taiwan had been considered a delicate position in the strategic triangle between the US, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Through most of antiquity, nearly all imperial China considered Taiwan to be beyond the pale of Chinese civilization. Their interest in Taiwan paled in comparison with other territories in China. In the eyes of contemporary Chinese, Taiwan was the home of savages and large communities of settlers who had illegally migrated there such as pirates and political and military enemies of the mainland government. The Chinese central government not only made no territorial claim to Taiwan but also had no interest in colonizing Taiwan. Time went on and the island has become the factor attracting some European powers since the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, since the end of China's long civil war (when Chang Kai - Shek and his followers fled to Taiwan after their defeat by the Chinese Communist), the Chinese has paid more attention to this territory. The Kuomintang (KMT) governed in Taiwan and called itself the Republic of China (ROC). They didn't recognize the PRC founded in Beijing by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1949. On the other hand, the PRC didn't recognize the ROC. They claimed that the ROC ceased to exist in 1949 and that Taiwan was a province of "one China". At present, both sides agree that there is only one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. However, they don't agree on the term for national unification. Therefore, a status quo was created.

To the PRC, regarding the case of Taiwan, territorial integrity is China's core national interest and the loss of Taiwan would mean political shame, economic weakness, and military threat. In the context of recent maritime expansion, China's push into the regional seas has created Taiwan's newfound geopolitical significance in East Asia. Taiwan is an important factor to China's sea-lanes both eastward to the Pacific and down through to South China Sea because of its physical position. Taiwan is astride regional sea lines and "China is semi-concealed by the first island chain<sup>1</sup>. If it wants to prosper, it has to advance into the Pacific, in which China's future lies. Taiwan, facing the Pacific in the east, is the only unobstructed exit for China to move into the ocean. If this gateway is open for China, then it becomes much easier for China to manoeuvre in the West Pacific" (Jiang Minfang & Duan Zhaoxian, 1995, pp.212 - 213). The Chinese government believes that the Taiwan issue is Chinese internal affair and it cannot brook interference by any foreign forces. China's 2000 White Paper entitled *The One-China Principle and Taiwan Issue* wrote that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of China...", "the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China..." (China's 2000 White Paper) and "if Taiwan is invaded and occupied by foreign countries, or if the Taiwan authorities refuse, sine die, the peaceful settlement of cross-Straits reunification through negotiations, then the Chinese government will only be forced to adopt all drastic measures possible, including the use of force, to safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and fulfill the great cause of reunification. The Chinese government and people absolutely have the determination and ability to safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will never tolerate, condone or remain indifferent to the realization of any scheme to divide China" (China's 2000 White Paper). This means PRC will have to fight at any cost to recover the territory of Taiwan because this is its supreme national interest.

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<sup>1</sup> The first island chain runs from the Kurile through Japan, the Ryukyu, Taiwan, and the Philippines to the Indonesian archipelago

## 2. Taiwan's Geostrategic Position and Taiwan Issue in the American Thinking

Despite having particular interest in Taiwan's strategic position, American policy was not concern about Taiwan as a serious factor until the early twentieth century. With the Cairo Declaration (December 1, 1943), Taiwan was returned to China. For the next few years, Taiwan was briefly united with the Chinese mainland (under KMT regime). However, because of the Chinese Civil War, Taiwan (under KMT administration) became once more politically and militarily separate from the rest of China from 1949. At that time, there were debates related to Taiwan's strategic significance. Those debates continued until the early 1950s when the State and Defense Departments worked out a compromised view to show that Formosa had a strategic importance for the United States and the State Department should do its best by diplomatic and economic means to keep Formosa from falling into hostile hands (Senate, 1951, p.902). After that, the thinking about Taiwan's strategic importance has changed incessantly depending on the US strategic interests on a global scale and the Asia - Pacific region. With "Pivot to Asia" policy, they focus on long-term strategic interests - protecting the regional allies and maintaining their maritime preponderance. In this context, Taiwan is considered a part of the US military sphere of influence. The US views itself as a status quo power and wants to preserve the current security order in the Asia - Pacific region. Moreover, if Taiwan is in the hand of China, China would be able to take advantage of Taiwan's wealth, advanced technology (including US - transferred military technology) and pose a direct challenge to Japan security. Losing Taiwan means Japan will lose a close political friend and the energy lifelines. Furthermore, the ability of China's improving navy to serve Japan's maritime lifelines and to prosecute effective sea denial against the US Navy (potentially even local sea control within the semi-enclosed East China and South China Seas) would be greatly improved if the Chinese army controlled Taiwan (Chris Rahman, 2001, p.82) and "the future of Taiwan has become linked to Japanese security, therefore, and the future health of the Washington - Tokyo alliance, ..." (Chris Rahman, 2001, p.82). So, unless the security of Japan ceases to be a vital national interest of the US, the maintenance of the geopolitical status quo in Taiwan is a balance-of-power and shipping interest for the US (Chris Rahman, 2001, p.82). Those factors showed that the US regarded Taiwan as a strategic factor in the geographical backbone of their security structure in this area.

Hitherto Taiwan has still been governed by the ROC and its geopolitical position vis-à-vis China's irredentists (PRC) presents a complex issue. Most of relations related to Taiwan's territory is sensitive, especially Sino - US relation in which Taiwan issue is considered one of Sino - US geopolitical rivalry.

## 3. Impacts of Taiwan Issue on Sino - US Relations

Each super-power always adopts a grand strategy in international relations. China and the US are not the exceptions. However, according to Goldstein, the grand strategy of China is difficult to identify. Only when a broader time frame is applied can the goal and logic of the Chinese grand strategy be comprehended (Goldstein, Avery, 2005, p.19). Meanwhile, many researchers show that it would be easier to identify the American grand strategy because it stemmed from an identity-based role conception albeit practically the instrumental use of the relationship. And, the US adopted a style of grand strategy conception based on the judgment of the relative power of the US (Chih-yu Shih and Chiung-chiu, 2015).

When the PRC was established in the mainland (October 1, 1949), the US initially adhered to a policy of military non intervention with regards to Taiwan. In late 1949 and early 1950, American officials were even prepared to let PRC forces cross the Taiwan Strait. It appeared that the US might have been able to reach some sort of accommodation with the new Chinese government. But a number of factors hindered the development of cordial US - PRC relations (Dennis Van Vranken Hickey, 1997).

The continued support of the US for KMT, albeit reduced, aroused deep PRC suspicions. The Beijing leadership was also infuriated by Washington's reluctance to extend recognition to the new regime and its insistence that the Communists "have foresworn their Chinese heritage and have publicly announced their subservience to a foreign power, Russia" (US Department of State, 1945).

At the same time, Washington was outraged by PRC actions. On July 1, 1949, Mao denounced the "imperialism" of the US and proclaimed that China would "lean to the side of the Soviet Union". In November 1949, several diplomats were jailed for spying in China. In early 1950, the PRC seized US property in Beijing and announced that it had successfully negotiated an alliance with the chief US rival - the Soviet Union. These developments contributed to the strain in the US - PRC relationship.

After the outbreak of the Korean War (June 1950), the US started to support the ROC in Taipei again, setting the stage for several decades of tense and limited US relations with PRC in mainland China.

The US policy to China in the 1950s contributed to the tension in the Taiwan Strait. In the Korean War (1950 - 1953), in order to prevent the communist aggression, the US sent its Seventh Fleet into Taiwan Strait. John Kuan observed: "The Korean War transformed American policy from abandonment of the ROC to the defense of Taiwan" (John C. Kuan, 1980, p.10). Indeed, the US's action showed a major shift in the American foreign policy toward the conflicts in the area which was related to their concerns about the falling of Taiwan into the Chinese Communist hand. To Western powers, Taiwan was vital point in the first island chain in East Asia. If PRC could control Taiwan, they could conquer Japan and the Philippines from this island. President Truman declared "the determination of the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the US" (James F. Schnabel, 1992).

With the American military presence in the Taiwan Straits, the relations between PRC and ROC were especially tense. The first Taiwan Strait Crisis was an example.

From the spring of the 1950, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of PRC concentrated thousands of junks in the port cities along the Taiwan Strait. The US reacted by authorizing the movement of B-29 bombers to Guam in July 1950.

During August 1954, Chiang-kai Shek authorized the movement of troops to the islands of Quemoy<sup>2</sup>, Matsu<sup>3</sup> and Dachen in Taiwan Strait. Zhou Enlai, Premier of the PRC responded with a declaration on August 11 that Taiwan must be liberated and dispatched the PLA to begin shelling the offshore islands (Jinmen Island, Dachen Island,...) three weeks later.

<sup>2</sup> Two miles from the mainland Chinese city of Xiamen

<sup>3</sup> Ten miles from the city of Fuzhou

The US responded actively by signing the Mutual Defense Treaty<sup>4</sup> with the ROC (December 2, 1954). The Eisenhower Administration also threatened a nuclear attack on China in the spring of 1955. These events had brought the US and China to the brink of confrontation. In April 1955, China agreed to negotiate, claiming a limited victory following the Nationalists' withdrawal from Dachen Island. The US supported this resolve by providing the ships, training and protecting for the ROC forces during the evacuation operations. Also, following the first Taiwan crisis during 1954 and 1955 and in line with the new US - ROC mutual-security pact, the US increased its funding and training efforts, particularly in the use of high-tech equipment to help the ROC carried out its blockade of the mainland, as well as keeping it prepared to fight off a PRC invasion. All of these factors were to play an important role during the second Taiwan Strait crisis in 1958.

After the first crisis, PRC attempted to halt the blockade and diversify its international trade away from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). According to the US Embassy, one of the PRC's top priorities in 1958 was to increase its trade with Britain. To fulfill this target, PRC tried to neutralize Jinmen Island - the ROC's main blockade base. This put extreme pressure on the Taiwan Strait and resulted in the second crisis.

On August 23, 1958, PLA began to bombard Jinmen Island. The ROC requested full US military support immediately. According to the US - ROC defense treaty, although the US could not get directly involved but they could assist in other ways. By mid-September, the US Navy had positioned five carriers and their escort ships near Taiwan. In addition, the ROC Air Force was provided with advanced Sidewinder air-to-air missiles. The US Navy also helped protect the shipping lanes supplying Jinmen. A direct Sino - US conflict seemed unavoidable when some attacks broke out. During late September, the PRC sent a message that if the ROC withdrew from the islands they would not be attacked. But the PRC refused to accept the US demands that a cease - fire precede Sino - US talks to resolve the crisis. For its part, the US was also concerned that fighting in the Taiwan Strait might escalate into war. Therefore, they tried to persuade the ROC to withdraw from the offshore islands. However, the ROC refused this proposal and the US attempts to resolve PRC - ROC differences peacefully failed. On October 6, 1958, the PRC halted shelling on Jinmen and ended the ROC blockade.

After the second crisis, tensions in the Taiwan Strait remained high. By the early of 1960s there was a significant PLA buildup across Jinmen Island. The third Crisis began when the PRC moved additional troops to the Taiwan Strait region during the spring of 1962. By the US diplomatic response, there was no military conflict. The US succeeded in de-escalating rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait. However, they tried to ensure that Taiwan could adequately defend itself by providing more powerful missiles.

So, as part of the global Cold War to contain the spread of Communism, Taiwan was considered the US important nuclear base in the Western Pacific which almost led to the direct US-PRC intense belligerence. But in early 1960, many events occurred which led to a warming in Sino - US relations.

First, with a series of internal upheavals - including the disastrous Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, the Tibetan Uprising in 1959, and the Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976), the PRC gradually became more preoccupied with internal problems.

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<sup>4</sup> The treaty did not commit the United States to defending the off-shore islands, it promised support if the ROC engaged in a broader conflict with the PRC.

Second, Sino-Soviet alliance began to deteriorate in the late 1950s. The PRC's attempt to halt the blockade and diversify its international trade led to increasing Sino - Soviet tensions over the PRC's Great Leap Forward. The 1969 Sino - Soviet dispute provided an opportunity to improve Sino - US relations.

At National Security Council meeting (August 14, 1969), US president Richard M. Nixon's announced that the US "could not allow China to be smashed". Henry Kissinger also explained it had been a major event in American foreign policy when a President declared that we had a strategic interest in the survival of a major Communist country, long an enemy, and with which we had no contract. In other words, this event signaled a momentous transformation in US policy toward China. We can explain this change by looking at the US Global strategic concerns. The PRC had come to be viewed "as a desirable counterweight to the Soviet Union which was rapidly gaining strategic nuclear parity with the US" (Steven L. Levine, 1978, p.247).

For its part, the PRC aimed at diversifying its international trade and pursuing a policy of détente with the US. The US diplomatic arrangements in the third Taiwan Strait crisis were a good signal for the PRC to improve Sino - US relations. More importantly, Sino-Soviet tensions in the 1960s made the alliance split off and was even about to go to war when both sides began to fight along their lengthy borders.

After some potent diplomatic messages, in 1971 Henry Kissinger made a secret trip to Beijing in order to prepare for Nixon's visit to meet with Mao Zedong. In 1972, Mao Zedong invited Richard Nixon to Beijing to begin opening Sino - US diplomatic relations. At the historic meeting, they signed the Shanghai Communiqué, the first of the three communiqués issued in 1972, 1979, and 1982. The period of 1972 - 1978 was a time of progress in improving Sino - US relations. However, there were many dilemmatic factors which prevented the normalization of their ties. Among them, Taiwan issue was the main problem. This problem was expressed in the Shanghai Communiqué: "The two sides reviewed the long-standing serious disputes between China and the United States. The Chinese side reaffirmed its position: the Taiwan question is the crucial question obstructing the normalization of relations between China and the United States; ..." (Shanghai Communiqué, 1972)

From mid-1978, a new momentum was developing toward normalization of Sino - US relations. China's modernization programs and the "China card" in the US's foreign policy pushed this process. Arrangements were made between American and Chinese governments for the exchange of scientists, scholars and athletes. Then on December 15, 1978, the US announced the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the PRC, to become effective January 1, 1979.

From 1979 to 1989, China and the US focused on fighting against Russia. Their cooperation helped to limit tensions in the Taiwan Strait. However, in spite of ending formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the US would still maintain culture, commercial, and other unofficial relations with Taiwan and continue to sell "selective defensive weaponry" to Taiwan. The continued US support for Taiwan's defense has lingered as the most contentious issue in Sino - US relations. Especially, after the collapse of the USSR, the PRC'S geostrategic importance to the US had greatly reduced. Formerly, the PRC had been the essential pressure point on the USSR, but with the USSR's collapse, the international geopolitical situation changed and created a strategic shift in the US foreign policy. In the new context, Taiwan appeared to be a "game card" in the US hands in order to deal with the China's rise.

The growing of Taiwan's democratic movement since 1987 and its comparative advantage in political freedom provided a marked improvement in its international position and put additional pressure on the PRC government. In fact, Taiwan's growing democratization put it in the ranks of developed countries/territories in political as well as economic terms. The US government also showed their support to Taiwan's democratization and backed Taiwan militarily. On September 2, 1992, President Bush announced that he would approve the sale of up to 150 F - 16 fighters<sup>5</sup> and other weapons to Taiwan, including Hawkeye E-2T early-warning aircraft, MK-46 torpedoes, M60A3 tanks, Knox-class destroyers, Stinger missiles, and a derivative of the Patriot missile air defense system. These arms represented a significant boost to Taiwan's defensive capabilities (Dennis Van Vranken Hickey, 1997, p.71). In May 1995, the Clinton administration announced that Lee Teng-hui Taiwan's President would be permitted to pay a private visit to the US to attend an alumni reunion at Cornell University<sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile, the PRC government was not only concerned about Taiwan's democratization process but also believed that it was more likely to declare independence. Therefore, PRC put the pressure on Taiwanese presidential election so that the pro-independence candidates would not win. The PRC carried out military exercises, tested and fired missiles in the vicinity of the island in 1995 and 1996. These military activities implied that the PRC would use deadly force to prevent a formal Taiwanese declaration of independence. The PRC's activities put intense pressure on Taipei and prompted the US intervention. The US aircraft carrier - the USS Nitmiz (CVN 68) - had transited the Taiwan Strait on December 19, 1995. This event was described as "a carefully controlled and minimally provocative use of military power that allowed the US to reemphasize the 'ambiguous' policy of previous US presidents designed to maintain a balance in US relations with both sides of the Strait" (Rick M. Gallagher, 1997, pp.2-3). To response, the PRC government warned that the US should not intervene in a cross - strait crisis. Sino - US relations remained high throughout this entire period. At last, the US, Taiwan and China too were engaged in their own round of reassurances through diplomatic activities to end crisis.

After this event, there were some tensions that seriously damaged Sino-US relations. It followed a combination of the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Kosovo in May 1999 and Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui's remark in an interview on 9 July 1999. The PRC government especially show its concern when President Lee Teng-hui stated that China and Taiwan had a special state-to-state relationship. They interpreted Lee's remarks as tantamount to a declaration of statehood and independence. Before Taiwan's Presidential elections held on 18 March 2000, China's State Council warned again in China's 2000 White Paper entitled *The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue* that it would use force in the following circumstances:

- if there was a grave turn of events leading to the separation of Taiwan from China in any name
- if Taiwan was invaded and occupied by foreign countries, and
- if Taiwan refused sine die (indefinitely) to negotiate on reunification

<sup>5</sup> Aircraft unavailable at any price during the Cold War.

<sup>6</sup> No president of the ROC had been allowed to visit the US since 1979.

Those events clearly reflected the PRC's view in supporting Taiwan's independence and were evaluated as the test for both China and the US in implementing foreign policies related to Taiwan issue.

Since 2001, Sino - US relations gradually improved. The new US administration was interested in seeking negotiations with China in order to create "deliverables" and other agreements. Chinese leaders also recognize that if Sino - US relations were to avoid further deterioration, it was up to China to take steps to improve ties. They thus adjusted their approach and were more solicitous and less acrimonious in interaction with the US. However, the two countries continued to have fundamentally contradictory interests over many problems, and the US support for Taiwan was still a challenge in their relations.

Conclusion, Taiwan issue has been the most difficult issue in the Sino - US relations since 1950s. This issue not only prevented the Sino - US normalization process during the period of 1972 - 1978 but also created many tensions for both sides. The fourth Taiwan Strait Crises presented the great challenge to Sino - US relations for many decades.

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