



Research Report

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Issue of: The first Taiwan Strait Crisis



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Introduction

Some of you might now about the interesting position Taiwan holds on the international stage of today. It is only recognized as a state by 17 nations and does not hold a seat on the UN. The Peoples Republic of China PRC (mainland China) sees Taiwan as a province of China and wants to annex it under the motto of 'one China'. The government of the Republic of China (ROC) with its governmental seat in Taipei also endorses the 'one China' principle and sees itself as the true government of the entirety of China. Like almost everything in politics, this peculiar situation has its roots in the past. We will therefore go back to the year 1954 and examine the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, one of the key disputes that explain the current relationship between Taiwan and China.

As can be seen in the image here, Taiwan is an island state that is separated from mainland China by the Taiwan Strait.

In essence, the Taiwan strait crisis consisted of a short, armed conflict between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) The conflict revolved around several islands close to mainland China which were held by the ROC before the crisis began. In the end, the ROC had to abandon some of the other groups and held on to others with the help of the USA.



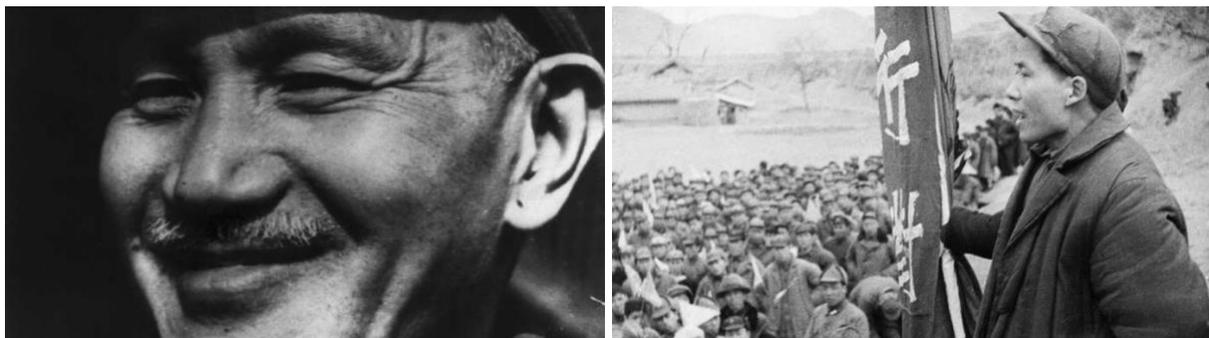
General Overview

The issue of the first Taiwan Strait Crisis was a result of the Chinese Civil War which lasted from roughly 1927 to 1949. This civil war was a conflict for power between the communists under Mao Zedong and the nationalists (also known as the Kuomintang) led by Chiang Kai-Shek. The division in the country led to periods of hostilities between the two groups over the years. The most critical stages of the civil war occurred however after the end of the second Sino-Japanese war which lasted from 1937 and 1945. The second Sino-Japanese war was an important part of the Second World War in Asia. During the period of the Sino-Japanese War, China was divided between the areas occupied by Japan, Nationalist China still under the control of the government and communist china. The latter two groups however were held together in the struggle against the Japanese invaders.



Division China 1941

After the Second World War ended and the Japanese left China, the Nationalist and Communist groups resumed their conflict over control of China.



Left: Chiang Kai-Shek, right: Mao Zedong

After several years of intense fighting, the conflict reached an end in 1949. The Communists had been gaining ground steadily and the Nationalists wanted to discuss peace terms with the help of mediation of other nations. A peace agreement was never reached, however, due to the continuous hostilities and the



unacceptability of the terms. On April 24th, 1949 the Nationalist capital of Nanking fell which marked the beginning of the end for the Nationalists.

On October first of that year, Mao officially declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) which consists of much of China as we know it today. The seat of the Nationalist government was moved a couple of times that year as the communists took important nationalist cities on the mainland. Its final relocation was on December 8th to Taipei on the Island of Formosa. This island is known to us as Taiwan. A couple of days later Nationalist leader Chiang also moved to Formosa.

The ROC now only controlled Taiwan and several island groups between Taiwan and China. Interesting is that at this point in time, the ROC still held the seat of China in the United Nations, including its position in the Security Council. It has held onto this seat until 1971.

After the Korean War which lasted from 1950 to 1953, the situation of Taiwan again attracted international scrutiny. Seeing as the American military still protected Taiwan after the Korean War, the PRC shelled several islands between the two states. In addition, the PRC launched an attack on the Dachen Islands. US President Eisenhower did not want to escalate the conflict and convinced Chiang to give up the islands.

The situation escalated further when the PRC also started shelling the islands Quemoy and Matsu. Chiang did not want to give up the islands because they were crucial for his dreams of one day retaking mainland China. In addition, the fall of those islands would mean a severe blow to the morale of the ROC troops. However, the US troops could not protect the islands without severely increasing the scale of their military activity in the area. In early March 1955, the USA even publicly threatened with nuclear attacks against the PRC. These threats did not have much effect on the PRC however.



ROC soldiers stacking shells on the island of Quemoy

The situation de-escalated during the Conference of Bandung. Premier Zhou Enlai of the PRC offered to negotiate peace terms with Taiwan during the closing of this conference. His statement was followed by the negotiation of peace terms in Geneva which ended the first Taiwan strait crisis. Unfortunately, this relative peace



was not for long seeing as the second Taiwan strait crisis commenced in 1958 and we have recently seen the third Taiwan strait crisis in 1995.

Major Parties Involved

Peoples Republic of China (PRC)

The People's Republic of China has been in effective control of mainland China since 1949. Its founder and leader of the communist troops during the civil war was Mao Zedong. The People's Republic of China only took over the seat of China in the UN in 1971, supplanting the ROC. During the Taiwan Strait crisis the PRC was therefore not a member of the UN.

Republic of China (ROC)

After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, the Republic of China was a sovereign state on mainland China until 1949. As we discussed earlier in this research report, the governmental seat of the ROC was relocated to the island of Taiwan (Formosa). The ROC was a founding member of both the League of Nations and later the United Nations. Throughout the first Taiwan strait crisis, the membership of China in the UN, including its seat on the Security Council, is filled by the ROC. The leader of the nationalists, striving for the return to power of the government of the ROC, was Chiang kai-Shek. During his lifetime, he was elected as president of the ROC on Taiwan for 5 consecutive terms.

USA

The USA is also a key player in the First Taiwan Strait crisis. The USA became important in this conflict after the outbreak of the Korean war. Before this war, President Truman was reluctant to get pulled into another conflict. He therefore refused to recognize the PRC but also made it clear he was not going to come to the aid of the ROC. In 1950, Kim Il Sung, leader of communist Korea made an attempt to re-unify North and South Korea, this division being a remnant of the second world war. This plan did not succeed due to the intervention of UN and American troops under the command of General McArthur. The Korean war ended unsatisfactorily for both parties after Chinese soldiers pushed back the Americans in order to preserve the original division line between North and South Korea. For the Americans, this latest conflict with another communist nation was very influential on the public opinion about the situation of the ROC. Many people were scared that Taiwan, having a strategic position on the map, was going to fall to the communists as well. After the Korean War, Truman therefore pledged to support the government of the ROC on Taiwan. In 1955 the US Congress passed the Formosa Resolution which gave the US government under President Eisenhower, the authority to protect Taiwan from the communist threat. After the conference of Bandung, the PRC and Geneva discussed peace terms at the conference of Geneva.



General MacArthur and President Truman

USSR

The Soviet Union was also largely influential in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. Being the first nation to adopt communism as its official doctrine, it sought to get other nations to do the same. When the PRC declared its establishment in 1949, the Soviet Nation was therefore also the first nation to recognize the new government. Furthermore, Stalin endorsed the decision of Kim Il Sung to annex South Korea which started the Korean War. After the death of Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev leads the communist party from 1953 until 1964. This change of leadership could be what convinced the Soviet Union to pressure the PRC to stand down in the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1955. On the other hand, this new stance of the USSR in the crisis could also be due to the fear of nuclear escalation of the conflict. Of course, the USSR is also a very important party to this crisis due to its role in the cold war as a whole.

Timeline of Key Events

1912: Fall of the Qing Dynasty and establishment of the Republic of China on mainland China

1917: Start communist revolution Russia
December 30, 1922 Establishment USSR

1937 – 1945: Second Sino – Japanese War (Large part of WWII in Asia)

1927 – 1949: Chinese Civil War (intermittent periods of aggression within this time frame)

1st October 1949: Establishment People's Republic of China

8th December 1949: The seat of the ROC moves to Taipei

1950 – 1953: Korean War

1954-1955: First Taiwan Strait Crisis

- **1954:** PRC shells Quemoy and Matsu
- **1955:** US Congress passes 'Formosa Resolution'
- **1955:** Conference of Bandung
- **1955:** Conference of Geneva



Previous attempts to resolve the issue

One could say that the abandonment by the ROC of the Dachen Islands was a previous attempt to resolve the issue. The ROC could not hope to hold the islands without the help of the USA. Therefore, Chiang surrendered the islands in the hope the conflict would then be over. Secondly, the USA had expressed the wish for Taiwan to join the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, an organization brought to life in 1954 in order to preserve peace in the region. However, due to the rise of the crisis, this never happened. Questions can also be raised about the effectiveness of this solution since it might have triggered Mao to instigate the crisis in the first place.

Possible Solutions

Possible solutions for this issue are extremely difficult because of the complicated historical past of the PRC and the ROC. First of all, it is important that more attempts should be made to bring these parties closer together. This can be done either through mediation by other states or the interference of the UN. In addition, the threat of escalation into a nuclear war must be dealt with. A lot of the allies of the United States, including the United Kingdom, were very much against the threats of possible nuclear strikes. However, treaties on the use of nuclear weapons have always been difficult terrain in the UN. Another interesting thing to note in regard to this issue, is that Mao wanted to overthrow the ROC government in order to obtain the seat of China in international organizations like the UN. One way to solve this issue would then be to recognize the PRC and let it supplant the ROC in international organizations.

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