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Taiwan: Yesterday and Today

This year, 2023, could be the year that Communist China finally launches its long-anticipated war on Taiwan. For decades the mainland behemoth has blustered and threatened, occasionally resorting to military shows of force. The Chinese Communist Party has berated Western governments, and the United States in particular, for their continued support of Taiwan's free and independent government. It has long since persuaded all but a tiny minority of its captive citizenship that the key to restoring China's lost dignity and putting to rest more than a century of foreign humiliation is annexing the Republic of China on Taiwan.



Sino-Japanese War: During the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895, Japan confounded the experts by achieving a swift and decisive victory over numerically superior Chinese forces. In the ensuing peace treaty, the Chinese government ceded the island of Taiwan to Japan.

At the same time, free and prosperous little Taiwan has begun building up and modernizing its military as quickly as possible. No one doubts Chinese dictator Xi Jinping's plan to launch a war of annexation as soon as possible; in recent months his massive military has carried out almost continuous threatening military exercises in the waters and skies around Taiwan. With President Biden openly promising to come to Taiwan's defense on more than one occasion, and the United States redeploying significant forces to the western Pacific, the question no longer seems to be whether, but when, a world war will break out in the Pacific Ocean, a conflict that at minimum will involve the world's three largest economies (the United States, China, and Japan), and could well spiral into all-out unrestricted warfare all across the Pacific Rim and beyond. Sane minds all agree that such a conflict would be ruinous, but, in view of Xi's obvious intentions, it seems increasingly unlikely that such an outcome can be avoided.

In stark contrast with Communist China — where culture, religious expression, and speech are strictly curtailed by the totalitarian regime — Taiwan is brimming over with cultural and religious expression, including many Western faiths. The many Buddhist temples in Taiwan are always abuzz with activity, and Taiwanese and foreign Christians mingle freely. There are no limits on free speech or the internet, and the Taiwanese are as immersed in foreign entertainment and media as the citizens of any other free country. Taiwan very literally presents an entirely different version of China — a vibrant, free society full of talented people — that completely negates the Chinese Communist Party's core claim that only it can rule the Chinese people effectively and elevate them above their traditional poverty and ignorance. The great divide between the two Chinas laying claim to sovereignty over the whole can only be fully appreciated in the context of five centuries of contentious history.

A Look Back

Taiwan originally had closer cultural ties with the Philippines and with Polynesia than with the Chinese mainland. The lush subtropical island's aboriginal inhabitants spoke languages akin to those of the Pacific islanders. The first foreign powers to take an interest in the island were not the nearby mainland



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Chinese, but two distant colonial powers, the Dutch and the Spanish, both of whom established trading colonies on the island in the early 17th century. The trading prosperity created by these settlements began attracting immigrants from the Chinese mainland, mostly merchants from the region of Fujian on the nearby southeastern Chinese mainland.

That same period coincided with the collapse of the Ming Dynasty — the last authentically Chinese dynasty — and the subsequent conquest of China by the Manchu people, aggressive relatives of the Mongols who imposed their own culture and court language on China via a series of bloody conquests and subsequent massacres of resisting Chinese. One of those who resisted the Manchu conquest, Koxinga, was forced to flee the mainland for Taiwan, where he drove out the Dutch and established Taiwan as a bastion of Ming loyalists. In response, the Manchus — who came to be known as the Qing — eventually invaded Taiwan in the late 17th century, defeated the Ming loyalist government there, and annexed the island as part of the new Qing Dynasty's empire.



Prelude to world war: During the Second Sino-Japanese War, which gave way to the Pacific theater of World War II, Japanese troops advance on Beijing in 1937. The following year would feature the calamitous Battle of Shanghai, which some historians regard as the real beginning of World War II. (AP Images)

The Qing Dynasty's rule was most definitely a subjugation of China by a foreign power; the Manchus used their own language in government, and forced all Chinese males to wear pigtails in conformity with Manchu culture. Millions of Chinese men who refused to wear the pigtail as an act of defiance were slaughtered in the early years of Qing rule. Yet the narrative of the modern Chinese Communist Party portrays the Qing Dynasty as Chinese, and lays claim to all territory seized under Qing Dynasty rule. Disputes between the Qing Dynasty and foreign powers, such as the infamous Opium Wars, are uniformly described as "foreign humiliation," even though they were directed against a foreign occupying power, the Manchus, and not the Chinese people per se.

Where Taiwan is concerned, the question is muddied still further by what took place in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. The war arose over competing claims between China and Japan regarding the status of Korea, which China treated as a vassal state. Japan during the Meiji period had decided to selectively adopt Western ways and to end its many centuries of self-imposed isolation. As a result, the Japanese economy boomed, and the country modernized rapidly. The Japanese believed that one way to



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lessen Chinese control over Korea would be to export the Japanese model of modernization and openness to Korea (once known as the “Hermit Kingdom” for its extreme isolationism). This posture was viewed with deep suspicion by the xenophobic and extremely conservative Qing Dynasty, who saw the encroaching modern world as a threat to its absolute control over the Chinese citizenry. After a series of clashes and crises between the conservative pro-China factions and more liberal pro-Japan factions within Korea, which resulted in several Chinese and Korean massacres of Japanese soldiers and civilians, the two countries declared war in August of 1894. The Japanese declaration was modeled on Western influence, laying out Japanese grievances in an appeal to the “Law of Nations”:

Korea is an independent state. She was first introduced into the family of nations by the advice and guidance of Japan. It has, however, been China’s habit to designate Korea as her dependency, and both openly and secretly to interfere with her domestic affairs. At the time of the recent insurrection in Korea, China dispatched troops thither, alleging that her purpose was to afford a succor to her dependent state.

The Qing government’s haughty response showed a complete disregard for the norms of international communication, repeatedly referring to the Japanese by the pejorative *wojen* (“dwarf”):

Korea has been our tributary for the past two hundred odd years. She has given us tribute all this time, which is a matter known to the world. For the past dozen years or so Korea has been troubled by repeated insurrections.... In the fourth moon (May) of this year another rebellion was begun in Korea, and the King repeatedly asked again for aid from us to put down the rebellion. We then [sent] troops to Korea; and they having barely reached Yashan the rebels immediately scattered. But the *Wojen*, without any cause whatever, suddenly sent their troops to Korea, and entered Seoul, the capital of Korea, reinforcing them constantly until they have exceeded ten thousand men.... It was found a difficult matter to reason with the *Wojen*.... Japan has shown herself bellicose without regard to appearances, and has been increasing her forces there. Her conduct alarmed the people of Korea as well as our merchants there, and so we sent more troops over to protect them.... As Japan has violated the treaties and not observed international laws, and is now running rampant with her false and treacherous actions commencing hostilities herself, and laying herself open to condemnation by the various powers at large, we therefore desire to make it known to the world that we have always followed the paths of philanthropy and perfect justice throughout the whole complications, while the *Wojen*, on the other hand, have broken all the laws of nations and treaties which it passes our patience to bear with.

The general consensus abroad was that the huge Qing military would make short work of the Japanese — who also had the disadvantage of having to conduct military operations across the sea, whereas China shared a large land border with Korea. In what was perhaps the first but certainly not the last time that the world underestimated Japan, the Japanese proceeded to defeat the Chinese handily, first at Pyongyang and then at a decisive naval engagement at the mouth of the Yalu River. This was followed by a rapid Japanese invasion of Manchuria and northeastern China, and a string of impressive victories by the Japanese. Meanwhile, a portion of the Japanese navy sailed south and captured the Pescadores Islands, a small archipelago in the Strait of Formosa halfway between Taiwan and the



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mainland. With Japanese land forces closing in on Beijing and the Japanese navy in complete control of the northeast Chinese coast, the Qing Dynasty had little choice but to sue for peace. In April 1895, China and Japan signed a peace treaty in which China recognized the total independence of Korea and also ceded both Taiwan and the nearby Pescadores Islands to Japan. The Qing government burned with the humiliation of this latest foreign affront to its incontestable sovereignty, but, its impotence laid bare, could do nothing about it.

The war so discredited the Qing Dynasty that, scarcely a generation later, it fell in the 1911 Qinhai Revolution, and the Republic of China was proclaimed by Sun Yat-sen and his associates. Taiwan, however, remained in Japanese hands, despite an effort by agents from the Mainland to foment an uprising against the Japanese.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Japanese continued to press their advantage against unstable China, successfully invading and occupying Manchuria and then moving southwest into traditional Han Chinese territory, until an exchange of fire between Japanese forces and Chinese forces at Marco Polo Bridge near Beijing led to all-out war between China and Japan for the second time in 50 years. Beijing and the huge nearby port of Tianjin both fell speedily to the Japanese, and Shanghai followed after a colossal four-month battle that is often considered the true start of World War II.

What followed was the bloodiest campaign in the greatest war in human history, in which tens of millions of Chinese perished. The tide of war finally changed when the United States entered the arena and began conducting operations against the Japanese in early 1942.

The Rise of Chinese Communism

With the defeat of Japan in August 1945, the island of Taiwan was ceded to the Republic of China. Not all of the island's inhabitants were happy with being ruled by the Kuomintang (or KMT), as the government of the Republic of China was called. In 1947 a violent uprising against the KMT led to a violent crackdown. In all, the so-called February 28 Incident cost up to 28,000 lives, and the state of martial law that was subsequently declared lasted for 35 years.

Unfortunately for the hard-pressed peoples of both Mainland China and Taiwan, the creation of the Republic of China in 1911 was followed only a few years later by the appearance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921. The party was created following the May Fourth movement in 1919, in which university students in Beijing staged angry demonstrations protesting the outcome of World War I, in which territories in Shandong in northeastern China that had been seized by Japan from Germany were assigned permanently to Japan instead of to China. The movement coalesced into anti-imperialist, anti-Western, Chinese nationalist sentiment to which the communists were able to appeal.

By 1923, the Communist Party controlled many areas of China, thanks to backing from the new Soviet Union and a somewhat sympathetic reception on the part of Sun Yat-sen and his wife. But when Sun Yat-sen died in 1925, his successor, Chiang Kai-shek, who understood and detested communism, waged war against them, beginning in Shanghai, which was completely under the control of communist militias.

Over the next two decades, China's war-within-a-war raged, with Chiang's forces contending both with Mao's Red Army and with the Japanese occupiers. The West, led by the United States, appeared to support Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists through the end of World War II. But with the end of the



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war, the United States, in a rank betrayal of one of its staunchest wartime allies, began encouraging Chiang to make peace with the communists and to allow them once again full participation in the Kuomintang. In addition, the United States destroyed stockpiles of weapons in places such as India that had been slated to be sent to China, and even imposed an arms embargo in 1946 on China. In the meantime, the Soviet Union, which did not declare war on Japan until after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, was allowed to seize Manchuria. The Soviets gave this strategic territory over to Mao's communists for use as a base of operations against the Chinese government, and began shipping vast amounts of armaments — including lend-lease supplies from the United States and captured Japanese equipment — to his Chinese surrogates.

The Great Divide

As a consequence of betrayal by the United States of its strongest ally in Asia, in combination with Soviet support of the Chinese Communists, it wasn't long before the Nationalist government was driven from power, abandoning its capital of Chongqing in central China and relocating to the island of Taiwan. There, Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang set up what was intended to be a short-lived government-in-exile for the Republic of China. The Kuomintang famously announced its intention to “counterattack in two years, sweep out the enemy in three years, and succeed in five years.”

General rule: Military leader and president of the Republic of China Chiang Kai-shek was forced to abandon mainland China to Mao Zedong's communist forces and set up a government in exile on Taiwan, which remains free and independent to this day. In the 1990s, Taiwan transitioned from military rule to a republic with popularly elected leaders. (AP Images)



But it was not to be. On the mainland, Mao and his communist “agrarian reformers” proclaimed the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, and began mopping up resistance in remote holdouts. That same month, the Communists attempted for the first time to seize a group of islands just off the coast of the mainland, known as Quemoy or Kinmen. These islands, along with the Matsu group further up the coast and the Penghu or Pescadores Islands in the middle of the Taiwan Strait, in addition to Taiwan itself, were still controlled by the Nationalists. Surprisingly, the communist forces were defeated, and Mao was forced to concentrate his efforts on other coastal areas such as Zhoushan and Hainan islands, both of which were conquered the following year.



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By the early 1950s, the new reality in China was a mainland and several major offshore islands under communist control, with Taiwan itself, the Penghu archipelago, Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan Strait, Orchid Island off southeast Taiwan, and several tiny islands and reefs in the South China Sea including strategic Pratas Island southeast of Hong Kong, remaining under the control of the Republic of China.

The geographical importance of the many islands surrounding the Chinese mainland cannot be overstated. Taiwan is a crucial member of the so-called First Island Chain that also includes Japan and the Philippines. This continuous archipelago stretching from Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula all the way to Borneo reaches from frigid eastern Siberia all the way to the equator — and completely hems in China's coast. Although Communist China claims virtually all of the South China Sea, including Taiwan, as well as the East China Sea and various smaller islands controlled by Japan, its lack of actual control over a single island in this strategic chain has limited its ability to project power out into the Pacific. Its capture of tropical Hainan Island off China's south coast has proven pivotal to establishing de facto control over much of the South China Sea over the last 20 years, which has included seizing a number of islands and reefs claimed by other countries, and in several cases converting them into large military bases for harassing foreign ships and planes across the entire region. In 2001, for example, Chinese planes intercepted an American surveillance aircraft flying in international airspace over the South China Sea and forced it to land on Hainan. This major international incident, all but forgotten today for having taken place only a few months before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, marked the beginning of modern China's largely successful seizure and militarization of the entire South China Sea. The only remaining obstacle to the regional hegemon is Taiwan, which, against all expectations and despite heavy odds, remains defiantly independent of Communist China.

Steadfast Resistance

Taiwan's path has not been an easy one. In 1954 and again in 1958, Communist China renewed its attacks on Quemoy, and the two sides fought protracted, bitter battles. The so-called First Taiwan Strait Crisis lasted from September 1954 until March 1955, and led to the fall of one island to the Communists and the loss of more than 700 Taiwanese defenders. The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis lasted from August to October 1958, and featured not only more artillery attacks on Quemoy, but also Taiwanese bombardment of the nearby mainland Chinese port city of Amoy (now Xiamen), as well as material and logistical support from the United States, a consequence of a mutual defense treaty signed between the two nations four years earlier.

After the crises of the '50s, the dispute between Taiwan and Mainland China settled into a bitter war of words. And as China sank into the horrors of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the Republic of China on Taiwan embarked on a path of progress, modernization, and — despite the continued state of martial law — liberalization, a place where commerce flourished and freedom of religion and speech were largely respected. For these reasons, Taiwan's position among the community of nations remained largely intact, with most Western countries declining to extend diplomatic recognition to Mao's abhorrent regime, and preferring to maintain ties with the Republic of China.

All of that changed in 1971, when the United Nations, under the influence of its many communist and communist-sympathizing members, recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legal representative of all China, in the infamous UN Resolution 2758. In response, Taiwan, stating that it would not stand with thieves, became the only country to withdraw from the United Nations, an



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organization that has shunned and marginalized the island nation ever since. Eight years later, in another stunning betrayal, the United States broke formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan and exchanged embassies with the People's Republic of China, which was still recovering from the decade-long horror of the Cultural Revolution. In breaking official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the United States also renounced its defense pact with Taiwan, leaving the island open to attack from the ever-vindictive government in Beijing.

However, Congress insisted on the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 to define the legal relationship with the island republic thereafter. The act established the bizarre tangle of legal and diplomatic doublespeak that characterizes Taiwan's status *vis-à-vis* the United States to the present day. The United States will have no embassy or ambassador in Taiwan — but it does have the American Institute in Taiwan, which provides all normal consular services, is indexed under the URL [usembassy.gov](#), and is an embassy in everything but name. Taiwan no longer enjoys the protection of a defense treaty — but the act provides for making sure that Taiwan always has sufficient weapons to defend itself, and also directs the United States itself to “maintain the capacity ... to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”

The treaty did not impose any actual obligation on the United States to defend Taiwan against China; hence the term “strategic ambiguity,” which for decades has defined the United States' role in any potential conflict over Taiwan. The idea then was that such ambiguity would deter Chinese aggression while allowing the United States to have it both ways, enjoying the economic benefits of investment in both countries. The United States proclaimed its “One China Policy,” which differed slightly from the “One China Principle” of Communist China in being merely a recognition that China believes both Taiwan and the Mainland to be part of one country, and that the United States would do nothing to disrupt the policy as long as relations between the two remained peaceful.

The first major test of this policy came in 1995, when Taiwan's pro-independence president Lee Teng-hui visited Cornell University to deliver a commencement speech. Lee had previously been barred entry to the United States, whose spineless political leadership feared offending the Chinese Communist Party. Under pressure from a Republican-controlled Congress, the Clinton administration finally allowed the visit, and the PRC responded by firing many salvos of missiles in Taiwan's direction. The crisis simmered well into the following year, as the communists tried to intimidate the Taiwanese into not voting in that year's elections. But the United States sent a carrier task force into the region in a show of force, and the PRC finally backed down.

Taiwan Today

In the meantime, Taiwan has transitioned into a fully free, modern republic, abandoning martial law in the late 1980s and instituting free elections in the 1990s, a state of affairs maintained ever since.

In 2012, an aggressive and very anti-American new Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, ascended to the leadership of the Chinese state. Initially welcomed as another Chinese “reformer” by gullible Western politicians, investors, and policymakers, Xi soon revealed his true persona via a series of dictatorial measures designed both to drive out detested foreign influence in China and to prepare the People's Liberation Army for a military takeover of Taiwan and a war with the United States. During the Covid crisis, Xi's malign intentions became much clearer, as his aggressive “wolf warrior” diplomats and



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spokespersons blamed Covid on the West and openly threatened war on anyone who stood up to China regarding either Taiwan or its increasingly blatant territorial claims over almost the entire South China Sea. More ominously still, Xi has used Covid as an excuse to put China increasingly on a war footing, with periodic directives ordering populations in Chinese eastern coastal provinces to stockpile food and other supplies.



Nightlife: Taipei's Raohe St. Night Market, one of numerous commercial and tourist hotspots in Taiwan's free and prosperous capital. (fazon1/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

Meanwhile, China's military for the past couple of years has maintained a continuous aggressive posture against Taiwan, sending almost daily flights of fighters and bombers into Taiwan's "air identification zone" and conducting frequent military exercises off Taiwan's coasts. The most egregious of these was the more than week-long onslaught of missiles and warplanes unleashed in response to then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan. So vicious was the communist reaction that Speaker Pelosi and her accompanying delegation took pains to fly to Taipei under cover of darkness, following a circuitous route over Borneo and the eastern Philippines rather than risk flying in international airspace over the South China Sea.

With new House Speaker Kevin McCarthy reportedly planning a trip to Taiwan later this year, the current crisis is not likely to abate anytime soon.

The lessons to be learned from Taiwan's history are legion. For one thing, the United States has gained nothing and stands to lose a great deal by short-sightedly turning its back on Taiwan repeatedly over the past 75 years, while giving official credence to the damnable lie that Communist China has a legal claim over Taiwan. It does not and never has controlled Taiwan. To recap: Taiwan was not conquered by China but by the Manchu invaders, and was relinquished by treaty to Japan. It was then ceded to the Republic of China after World War II, also by treaty, and became the sole remaining bastion for that government when Mao's bandit army took over the mainland, thanks to the U.S. government's betrayal of Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Chinese, and subjected it to decades of horrific despotism. China's claim of sovereignty over Taiwan is largely bound up with a cultural obsession with saving face, coupled with a desire to crush once and for all a hated foe that has been showing the world for decades that, in fact, the Chinese are capable of sustaining a free government.

It would be yet another tragic betrayal if the United States were to abandon Taiwan to communist



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conquest.



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