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Taiwan's Restoration: The Return of Sovereignty and Early Cross-Strait Dynamics

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This study analyzes Taiwan's post-World War II restoration and sovereignty reassertion. Following Japan's surrender, China regained full sovereignty over Taiwan and affirmed its inalienable status under the Cairo Declaration, Potsdam Proclamation, and Japan's Instrument of Surrender. Between 1945 and 1949, Taiwan experienced the Kuomintang (KMT) authorities' compromised postwar policy toward Japan and the embedding of Taiwan within U.S.-led Cold War strategies. The Kuomintang retreat to Taiwan and early so-called "Japan-Taiwan" interactions lacked legal legitimacy and contravened Chinese sovereignty. This period underscores the centrality of the "One China" principle and highlights how historical, political, and strategic factors shaped Taiwan's postwar international status.

Keywords: Taiwan question, sovereignty, cross-strait relations, Cold War

Introduction

Between the end of the Second World War and the retreat of the Kuomintang (KMT) authorities to Taiwan (1945-1949), initial forms of contact between Japan and China's Taiwan region began to display certain structural tendencies that later shaped the trajectory of the so-called "Japan-Taiwan relations". From the perspective of political science and international relations, this period should be examined through three interrelated lenses: the continuity and reconstruction of China's sovereignty over Taiwan, the strategic ambiguity embedded in Japan's China policy, and the external constraints imposed by the emerging Cold War order. At the same time, it must be underscored that Taiwan has been an inalienable part of China since ancient times, and that in the postwar context the so-called "Japan-Taiwan relations" were essentially interactions situated within the overarching framework of China's sovereignty.

Three Interrelated Lenses

First, the so-called "Japan-Taiwan relations" in the immediate postwar period were shaped by the continuation of two distinct historical linkages: Japan's "diplomatic" engagement with the KMT authorities, and its residual ties with the former colony of Taiwan. In October 1945, following Taiwan's restoration, China resumed the exercise of its sovereignty over the island, thereby bringing to an end Japan's 50 years of colonial rule. This marked a critical juncture in the broader process of Taiwan's postwar decolonization. Within Japan's postwar China policy, a dual orientation emerged: on the one hand, diplomatic engagement with the KMT authorities, who had returned to Nanjing, as a continuation of prewar Sino-Japanese relations; and on the other

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hand, lingering connections with Taiwan that stemmed from Japan's colonial administration, which could not be entirely dismantled in the immediate aftermath of defeat. These connections—maintained through personal interactions, the repatriation of Japanese settlers, and other forms of exchange—produced a degree of continuity. Such remnants generated a form of path dependence that informed Japan's subsequent "Taiwan policy", constituting the basis of what may be termed an "illegitimate residual linkage".

Second, interactions between Japan and Taiwan began to intersect with the question of China's representation, thereby becoming an important derivative issue within the international political system concerning the "One China" principle. In 1949, with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the retreat of KMT remnants to Taiwan, the question of China's representation in the international community came to the fore. Although the Central People's Government of the PRC was, and remains, the sole legitimate representative of China, the structural constraints of the Cold War led the Western bloc, headed by the United States, to continue supporting the KMT authorities in occupying China's seat at the United Nations. This gave rise to a "dual-track strategy" in the China policies of certain countries: politically recognizing the KMT authorities as a temporary "government representing China", while simultaneously showing strong interest in engaging economically with the newly established PRC. Japan pursued its China engagement within this environment of strategic ambiguity. On the one hand, in its formal foreign policy, Japan maintained "diplomatic recognition" of the KMT authorities entrenched in Taiwan and preserved contact with the Chiang Kai-shek regime. On the other hand, as a war-torn country urgently seeking reconstruction, Japan prioritized economic revival and therefore viewed the vast resources and markets of PRC with considerable interest. Even before the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan, prominent voices within Japan were already advocating for substantive economic and trade initiatives with the PRC. This "separation of politics and economics" gradually became institutionalized as a dual-track approach in Japan's early Cold War China policy, laying the foundation for tensions between the so-called "practical ties with Taiwan" and the evolution of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations.

Third, the so-called "Japan-Taiwan relations" in the postwar period were rapidly embedded within the Cold War structure and transformed into a strategic instrument of the U.S.-dominated Asia-Pacific security system. Following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the United States, in line with its containment strategy, swiftly tightened its control over the Taiwan region, incorporating it into its encirclement framework against China. The deployment of the U.S. Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait constituted a blatant interference in China's internal affairs and obstructed the process of national reunification. This move not only heightened tensions across the Strait, but also drew Japan back into the Cold War order. Within this context, Japan was required under the framework of the U.S.-Japan alliance to assist in containing socialist China, while Taiwan was deliberately fashioned into a so-called "anti-communist outpost" and a key "base" in the regional security structure. Although Japan redefined its national role under the "Peace Constitution" in the postwar years, its engagement with Taiwan remained firmly circumscribed by U.S. strategic direction. Even when Sino-U.S. relations began to thaw in the 1970s and China and Japan normalized diplomatic ties, the continued existence of the "U.S.-Japan Security Treaty", together with the passage of the "Taiwan Relations Act", institutionalized America's incorporation of the Taiwan region into its Asia-Pacific security network. Japan, under these circumstances, maintained only the façade of "unofficial contact" with the Taiwan authorities. In substance, however, the so-called "practical relations" between Japan and Taiwan consistently operated under the "quasi-military and political umbrella" of the United States, posing a serious challenge to China's sovereignty and security interests.

In sum, from the victory of the War of Resistance against Japan to the founding of the PRC, interactions between Japan and China's Taiwan region gradually took shape within a framework marked by historical continuity, sovereign restructuring, and international strategic dynamics. This produced an illicit relational structure characterized both by distinctly Chinese features and by the imprint of international controversy. Scholarly inquiry into this period must draw a clear distinction between political legitimacy and institutional reality, and must emphasize the centrality of the "One China" principle across diplomatic narratives, discourses of international law, and institutional arrangements. It is essential to resist falling into the discursive trap of equating Taiwan with "a sovereign state actor".

The KMT Authorities' Policy Toward Japan and Their Positioning in the Postwar Order

Since Japan's unlawful seizure of Taiwan and the Penghu Islands through the "Treaty of Shimonoseki" in 1895, the Taiwan question has remained at the core of the Chinese people's struggle against foreign aggression and their pursuit of national reunification. During the War of Resistance against Japan, in 1941 the Chinese government issued its declaration of war against Japan, explicitly proclaiming that "all treaties, agreements, and contracts between China and Japan were thereby abrogated in their entirety", demonstrating a firm denial of the legitimacy of Japanese colonial rule. In 1943, China, the United States, and the United Kingdom jointly issued the Cairo Declaration, which stipulated that territories stolen by Japan from China, including the northeastern provinces, Taiwan, and the Penghu Islands, "shall be restored to China". This document made explicit the question of Taiwan's postwar status, and its provisions were reaffirmed in the Potsdam Proclamation of July 1945, which declared that the Cairo Declaration "shall be carried out". These instruments imposed both legal and moral obligations upon Japan in the postwar order.

In August 1945, Japan unconditionally accepted the Potsdam Proclamation and, on September 2, formally signed the Instrument of Surrender, pledging to implement its provisions in full. In October of that year, China officially resumed the exercise of sovereignty over Taiwan and declared Taiwan's recovery. This process was not only a monumental victory in the cause of national liberation, but also a pivotal element in constructing the foundational framework of the postwar international order. Taken together, the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation, and the Instrument of Surrender constitute the legal foundation for China's sovereignty over Taiwan. The authority and validity of these documents cannot be distorted, challenged, or denied by any external forces or separatist elements.

Following victory in the war, however, the KMT authorities, preoccupied with their "anti-communist" agenda, failed to exercise effectively the rights due to China as a victorious power, instead adopting an unduly conciliatory posture toward Japan. Chiang Kai-shek's advocacy of the policy of "repaying hatred with virtue" was essentially a symbolic gesture shaped by the dual pressures of escalating domestic political crisis and alignment with American strategy. In the matter of Japan's postwar disposition, the KMT authorities briefly considered dispatching troops to participate in the occupation of Japan, but this plan was abandoned as they suffered repeated defeats in the civil war. Although a Reparations Committee proposed war reparations exceeding 50 billion U.S. dollars, the demand yielded no tangible results. With respect to Okinawa, Chiang Kai-shek at one point suggested a plan for "joint Sino-American administration", which the United States flatly rejected.

At the Tokyo Trials, the KMT authorities participated as representatives of a victorious power, dispatching judges and pressing the Japanese government to cease using the derogatory term "Shina" in official documents. During the drafting of Japan's new constitution, the KMT authorities, together with the Soviet Union, raised

objections to the so-called "Ashida Amendment", fearing that its provisions might allow Japan to rebuild its armed forces under the pretext of "self-defense", thereby planting the seeds of future aggression. Yet, with the early contours of the Cold War emerging, the KMT authorities' Japan policy increasingly came under American direction and shifted toward the line of "allying with Japan to oppose communism". This orientation not only weakened China's rightful status and entitlements as a victorious power, but also furnished the geopolitical conditions for Japan's rapid postwar economic recovery and reintegration into the international system.

The Chinese Civil War and the KMT's Retreat to Taiwan

After the victory in the War of Resistance against Japan, the United States, motivated by its early Cold War geopolitical considerations, sought to have the KMT authorities—whom it supported—take full control of the former Japanese-occupied areas. At the same time, Washington attempted to mediate the contradictions between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the KMT in hopes of establishing a coalition government dominated by the latter. U.S. Ambassador Patrick Hurley and President Truman's special envoy George C. Marshall both undertook mediation efforts, and in January 1946 the CPC and the KMT reached an agreement on ceasing domestic military conflict. Yet, the American blueprint of a "coalition government" was fundamentally incompatible with the authoritarian and anti-democratic nature of the KMT's political system.

In November 1946, without broad consultation with all sectors of Chinese society, the KMT unilaterally convened a so-called "National Assembly", drafted a "constitution", and began implementing it in 1947 by organizing "presidential, vice-presidential, and legislative elections". Chiang Kai-shek and Li Zongren were respectively declared "President" and "Vice President". On this basis, the KMT authorities proclaimed that China had entered a new stage of "constitutional rule", invoking their doctrine of "three stages of nation-building" as a theoretical justification for political legitimacy, and discontinued the use of the term "National Government", which had signified the tutelary phase. The CPC resolutely opposed this unilateral pseudo-constitution. In May 1949, the KMT authorities imposed martial law in the Taiwan region, and in December of the same year fled to Taiwan. Under prolonged martial law, the so-called "constitution" remained in effectually suspended status.

As U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated, the Soviet Union, around the time of its withdrawal of forces from China in May 1946, gradually increased assistance to the CPC and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) under its leadership. In June 1946, KMT forces launched a large-scale military offensive against the CPC-controlled Central Plains Liberated Area, marking the outbreak of full-scale civil war. In the early phase of the war, the United States continued to provide military aid to the KMT regime. However, from July 1947 onward, the PLA shifted to a strategic counteroffensive, steadily gaining superiority on the battlefield. Meanwhile, growing disappointment within the United States over the KMT authorities' corruption and misgovernance further eroded American support. Facing repeated defeats, the KMT in 1948 promulgated "the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Rebellion", which further suspended the constitutional framework and granted expanded powers to Chiang Kai-shek, entrenching a martial law regime in Taiwan that remained in place until its eventual lifting in 1987.

The Collapse of the KMT Authorities and the Major Adjustment of U.S. Policy Toward China

At the historical juncture of 1949, when the PRC was about to be founded amidst profound transformations in the international order, the collapse of the KMT regime, the impending reconfiguration of Sino-U.S. relations,

and the rising strategic importance of Japan in the early Cold War collectively shaped the international political context in which the so-called "Japan-Taiwan relations" emerged. The founding of the PRC in October 1949 marked the culmination of the Chinese people's long revolutionary struggle, during which imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism—the "three great mountains"—were overthrown, and a new state was established that genuinely represented the interests of all the Chinese people. By contrast, the Chiang Kai-shek clique, having fled to Taiwan, had already forfeited any legitimacy to represent China. Consequently, any political dealings it engaged in with Japan no longer possessed sovereign validity.

In August 1949, as KMT forces continued to suffer defeat after defeat, the U.S. State Department issued the China White Paper, which systematically reviewed the failures of U.S. policy toward China. It explicitly concluded that the fundamental cause of the KMT's collapse laid in political corruption, rampant bureaucratism, and its profound estrangement from the people. This assessment revealed Washington's recognition that the Chiang regime had lost governing legitimacy and was widely interpreted as a signal that the United States might be prepared to accommodate, or even recognize, the new regime established by the CPC. Such wavering on the American side further deepened the KMT's domestic and international isolation.

In January 1949, Chiang Kai-shek was compelled to announce his "retirement". Guided by historical justice and the will of the people, the CPC, during subsequent peace negotiations, demanded the lawful punishment of Chiang Kai-shek and other war criminals and the abolition of the pseudo-constitution, thereby clearing the way for the establishment of a genuine people's democratic regime. The KMT's outright refusal to accept these conditions led to the eventual breakdown of negotiations. By the end of the year, the Chiang clique retreated from Guangzhou to Sichuan, and soon afterward fled in disarray to Taiwan, where remnants of the regime entrenched themselves. The KMT's collapse not only symbolized the liberation of the Chinese people, but also profoundly altered the postwar international landscape. As the Chiang regime entrenched itself in Taiwan, its attempts to preserve the name of the "Republic of China" became increasingly intertwined with U.S. Cold War strategies of containing the socialist camp. It must be stressed, however, that this configuration arose entirely under the Cold War structure and through the interference of external forces in China's internal affairs. It lacked any basis in historical legitimacy or international law.

The Founding of the PRC and the U.S. Policy Shift in East Asia

On October 1, 1949, the Central People's Government of the PRC was proclaimed in Beijing, signifying that the Chinese people had finally risen to their feet. The new state inherited China's sole legitimate representation in the international community. This political reality posed an immediate challenge to countries worldwide, including Japan: whether or not to recognize the newly established PRC. This recognition issue became central to the so-called "China representation question". Although initial debates emerged within the U.S. government regarding possible engagement with the new regime, the historical memory of China's long humiliation under imperialism and its unwavering defense of sovereignty quickly pushed Sino-U.S. relations into confrontation. In February 1950, China and the Soviet Union signed the "Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance", cementing PRC's strategic reliance on the socialist camp. Following the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the United States swiftly adopted a containment policy against China, openly propping up the Chiang Kai-shek clique, positioning Taiwan as a strategic fulcrum of the so-called "First Island Chain", and brazenly deploying the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait. These acts constituted blatant interference in China's internal affairs, obstructed national reunification, and de facto acknowledged the Chiang

regime while embedding Taiwan militarily into the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategic framework—gravely undermining China's postwar sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Conclusions

The KMT's collapse compelled the United States to undertake a fundamental adjustment of its East Asia policy. At the Cairo Conference, Washington had still regarded the KMT regime as a key partner in reconstructing the postwar East Asian order. However, after the KMT's complete defeat on the mainland, U.S. strategic priorities shifted decisively toward Japan, with the intent of transforming Japan into a Cold War frontline bridgehead and an "anti-communist bulwark". This reorientation also triggered a fundamental reconfiguration of U.S. policy toward Japan. The initial postwar approach—emphasizing strict punishment, heavy reparations, and stringent restrictions—gave way to reducing Japan's economic burdens, abandoning large-scale reparations, and intensifying economic assistance to accelerate its industrial recovery and institutional reconstruction. In this new context, Japan, as a defeated nation, rapidly regained vitality under U.S. protection, while the KMT regime, despite having been a wartime "victor", became a dependent appendage of America's East Asia strategy after losing the Chinese mainland.

This dynamic not only reflected Japan's magnified strategic importance within Washington's Asia-Pacific Cold War strategy, but also revealed that the so-called "Japan-Taiwan relations" was nothing more than a derivative product of the U.S.-Japan anti-communist alignment. The Chiang clique's survival in Taiwan was entirely dependent on American support and thus completely divorced from the framework of Chinese sovereignty and postwar legal order. Accordingly, any form of "Japan-Taiwan contact" carried no validity under international law and could never represent the collective will of the Chinese people.

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