

# The Ties That Bind – Taiwan, Japan & the South China Sea Issue

By Mike King

## Formosa & the Japanese Legacy

In 1938, three years before Imperial Japan formally entered World War II, government records showed a total of 309,000 Japanese citizens domiciled on the island of Formosa. By October 1945 when control over the island had been ceded to the government of Nationalist China under the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, those pre-war settlers were repatriated (unhappily in many cases) to Japan. While some Taiwanese were elated at their departure, many were not, for the Japanese administration had built excellent infrastructure across the island, established an efficient railway system, provided good, honest government, placed agriculture on a modern footing and developed other successful industries including the production of sugar cane.

In the years which followed, the Japanese occupiers were sorely missed by those Taiwanese people who spoke Japanese amongst themselves, furnished their homes in Japanese style and admired and respected their former rulers for the good work they had done in their country. One such person of that era was the brilliant Taiwanese-born, first democratically elected president of the Republic of China (ROC), Lee Tung-Hui. President Lee openly admired Japan, had been educated at Kyoto University in Japan before the outbreak of World War II and would proudly tell people “I was a Japanese until I was twenty-six.”

In a country which was greatly influenced by the Japanese, many Taiwanese inhabitants of that time resented the arrival of the ragged Chinese Nationalist Party/Kuomintang (KMT) forces who proved themselves indisciplined, corrupt and overbearing. Distrusted by the KMT government in general for being too Japanese in their outlook and for their inability to speak Mandarin, the majority of Taiwanese spoke Hoklo (Taiwanese) and other local dialects. Thus, the Taiwanese rapidly became suspect citizens in their own country. Resentment against the KMT government erupted in the now infamous 2/28 Incident of 1947 when many deaths were recorded in what was a popular uprising against the KMT government in power across Taiwan. Even in the late 1980s, that generation of people who continued to speak Japanese at home resented the KMT government and wished for the old Japanese administration to return and take over the running of Taiwan again.

While Taiwan had been placed under the ROC's governance in 1945, the Allies did not award sovereignty to Chiang Kai-Shek's government until the matter was finally resolved at the San Francisco Peace Conference of 1952 at which the ROC government was not

represented. Prior to that all-important date, Japan had never formally relinquished its sovereignty over the island. This only happened when the ROC became the official, recognised government of Formosa. The KMT for their part never understood the Taiwanese affection for the Japanese and their refusal to hate them, notwithstanding the issues of colonial occupation and the war.

## The Korean War & Taiwan

Taiwan first sprang to worldwide attention and importance in 1950 when North Korean forces invaded South Korea and sought to place the entire nation under Communist rule. Once Communist China entered the Korean War on North Korea's side, Taiwan assumed an enormous position of importance to the United States and its allies as a defensive bulwark against the takeover of the South China Sea area by hostile forces which could threaten the entire Indo-Pacific region through the so-called First Island Chain. The Americans lost no time in arming Taiwan against possible Communist invasion and establishing a strong garrison of their own on the island which acted as a powerful deterrent to China's hostile moves in the region. To US Gen. Douglas McArthur, Taiwan was “an unsinkable aircraft carrier”.

The American presence did much to help the island build its postwar fortunes and develop a modern farming industry following a successful land redistribution programme. In addition, the extra money in circulation set off a construction boom which led to the building of badly needed new housing for its expanded population and infrastructure that would drive Taiwan to new heights as an exporter of quality goods to the world. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was immensely successful in postwar Taiwan up to the 1960s. The Chiang Kai-Shek government was always warmly disposed to the Americans who achieved much good in their time in Taiwan and are still held in high regard to this day, most notably for their willingness to arm the country's forces against Chinese attack and help defend the island as part of the legal provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act.

While Taiwan has always been in danger of invasion by Communist China under the pretext of reuniting Taiwan to the mainland, the island is now at its most dangerous stage since the US recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) government in 1979. The reason for this is the rise to power of the driven ideologue President Xi Jinping. His openly stated plans call for a greater and more assertive nation that will dominate the entire Indo-Pacific region, and eventually the world. His constant reference to the so-called One Hundred Years of

Humiliation is driving a new and dangerous nationalistic agenda across China that excites its younger population who know nothing of war and conflict. If not correctly managed, Xi's playing of this nationalist card could easily ignite a confrontation between China and its perceived enemies in the South China Sea region over control of the international sea lanes.

### Present Dangers

Despite the fact that China's claim to the whole South China Sea has been dismissed by the International Court of Justice in The Hague as invalid and enjoys no support amongst the various free nations of Asia, China continues to bully and intimidate smaller and more poorly defended countries in its path. A new pattern of Chinese behaviour known as "lawforce" has come into being of late whereby the use and misuse of existing law is brought into play to further China's political and strategic demands in the region. The buildup of missile platforms, gun emplacements, radar sites and airstrips on reclaimed land unlawfully claimed by China in the South China Sea area bodes ill for the future and clearly serves as a potential launching pad for any planned invasion of Taiwan.

Taiwan, despite its lack of foreign diplomatic recognition, stands resolute in its determination to defend to the end its hard won democracy which took 40 years of solid effort to achieve. Recognition or not, Taiwan has many friends in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan being the oldest and most important of them. This is for many reasons which can be summarised as a mixture of trade and strategic concerns as well as the strong ties of friendship between the two nations known in Japanese as *kizuna* – the heartfelt bond between peoples. In spite of China's efforts to weaken Taiwan and convince its people into accepting Communist rule, the Taiwanese strongly reject this idea of "uniting" with a country the majority of them have no relationship with, and do not wish to be part of.

Many Taiwanese have told me over the course of the past 40 years that they feel closer to Japanese people and identify with them rather than people from mainland China – with whom they have no existing ties or bonds. Japanese visitors to Taiwan are often pleasantly surprised by the positive feelings of Taiwanese people towards them, which is not usually the case in China. An example of this affection would be the gift of 20 billion yen raised by the people of Taiwan for earthquake relief in Japan in 2011, an astonishing sum of money for a country of only 23 million people. Japan later did its part by buying up the entire Taiwanese pineapple crop which had been ordered and

then refused by China in a fit of pique. Most recently, it was Japan which came to Taiwan's rescue in its hour of greatest need by gifting over 1.25 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to protect the island's population at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Notwithstanding the lack of diplomatic relations between Taiwan and Japan, the dangerous situation prevailing in the South China Sea area did not prevent former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from speaking out strongly on the issue of Chinese aggression towards the island state on Dec. 1, 2021. He warned that any Chinese attack on Taiwan would be disastrous – for China – and would result in economic suicide for the world's second-largest economy. To Abe, a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency and therefore an emergency for the US-Japan alliance. These blunt remarks were then followed by those of current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who stated that the Taiwan Strait could be the next diplomatic problem for Japan.

Since ancient times, wars have invariably been fought between nations over land and economics. Taiwan is no exception. Apart from the ideological reasons promoted by Xi, China would want possession of an island nation that has the world's 25th largest economy. It is the world leader in microchip production, any interruption to which would have a seriously damaging effect on the world at large. Japan's investments in Taiwan alone amount to \$22.5 billion and Taiwan has just received official government permission to build a microchip manufacturing facility in Japan valued at \$7 billion. The Taiwan prize is enormous and cannot willingly be surrendered to a giant, hostile nation which constantly violates international treaties while demanding total capitulation to its unlawful demands.

The nation of Taiwan is seen as a core interest of both Japan and the US. If these two allies were to lose this strategic outpost, they would also lose access to the Pacific Ocean area while Tokyo would be losing its key lifeline of the South China Sea along which trillions of dollars of international cargo flow towards the East China Sea. To this day, Japan receives 80% of its energy shipments via this important waterway. Strategically, Japan lies 700 miles north of Taiwan while the Senkaku Islands and the Sakishima Islands are a mere 220 miles from Taipei. Yonaguni Island lies just 62 miles away from Taiwan. Geographically speaking, the dangers could not be more obvious. In addition, the island of Okinawa which lies only 1 hour and 18 minutes flying time from Taiwan hosts the largest US air base in Asia. The loss of Taiwan to a hostile power places Okinawa in immediate danger and, by extension, US and Japanese interests across the Pacific region.

## Defending the Prize

The Roman dictum of “If you wish for peace, prepare for war” comes to mind in this regard. Japan has not been idle in meeting the Chinese threat to its own landmass and island territories. Japanese defence spending has been increasing steadily over recent years to combat the persistent threat from two mighty neighbouring states, Russia and China, and it is set to increase again, entirely because of China’s threatening behaviour in the South China Sea and beyond. Japan’s membership of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alliance with the US, India and Australia will stand it in good stead in the Indo-Pacific region and provide a very substantial deterrent to the activities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) naval forces seeking to expand their areas of influence. Japan is known for the excellence of its self-defence forces and will not be an easy nut for China to crack despite China’s boasts of military invincibility. While Japan’s forces may be fewer in number than China’s, they have higher quality, well-trained personnel who can be relied on to give a good account of themselves in any military showdown with China, not least in the air. Japan’s planned purchase of American F-35 fighter jets will place the Japanese air force in a very strong position, well able to take on China’s PLA air force in any confrontation.

In recent months, strong words of support for Taiwan have come from various sources in Japan. Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso stated that in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan “We need to think that Okinawa could be next.” In July 2021, Japan reportedly vowed to stand with the US in defending Taiwan, making it plain where Japanese interests lay. Remarks such as these fly in the face of a deliberate policy by Japan and South Korea over the course of more than 40 years not to upset the balance between their countries and that of their giant neighbour, Communist China, and the agreed one-China policy which has caused other countries to shrink from any overt form of support for Taiwan. With Japan, the previous long-term security threat of North Korea, missiles and all, has now been replaced by China with its massive armed forces and a navy which constantly intrudes into Japanese waters.

In this respect, the Miyako Strait running between the strategically vital Prefecture of Okinawa and Miyakojima Island becomes critical to the extent that Yasuhide Nakayama, the Japanese deputy minister of defence, openly stated that “We have to show deterrence to China.” He added that it was necessary to wake up to Communist China’s pressure on Taiwan and protect the island “as a democratic country”.

The news that US forces have been training and exercising with

Taiwanese troops in recent years comes as no surprise to those informed persons watching the ever-unfolding situation in the Pacific region. While this may be infuriating to China, it is a serious reality and one which China would do well to heed. Political statements of intent to assist Taiwan by Japan and the US are being matched with actions which show China how serious Taiwan’s friends are when it comes to the issue of an invasion.

While it may be Xi’s intention to simply wear Taiwan down through the use of Gray Zone tactics to obtain the island’s surrender without a shot being fired, the possibility of an outright sea and airborne invasion cannot be ignored. Since its inception in 1949, the PRC has a history of launching treacherous attacks against its neighbours, notably Tibet (1950), India (1962), Paracel Islands of South Vietnam (1974) and Communist Vietnam (1979), which should not be forgotten.

When dealing with a mendacious government headed by a man who sees himself as the strongman figure leading China towards a glorious future, the free world must be willing to take a stand and meet force with force if the need arises. The fact that the only law China recognises is the law of force should not be lost on anyone in South East Asia. This is why Taiwan and Japan as the two countries in most serious danger of attack from China have been busily preparing for military action in the region. It is a situation driven by hard reality.

For years, China has relied on its sheer size and economic clout to try and intimidate Taiwan into surrender, confident in the belief that Taiwanese people were not serious about defending themselves against an attack from China. This belief may now be a thing of the past given a recent nationwide poll of Taiwan’s population which showed that 72.5% declared themselves willing to fight China in any armed assault on their island.

Coupled with the Chinese government’s lack of legitimacy and its repression of its own people at home, there can be no attraction in living under the “One China, Two Systems” formula which has proved such a crashing failure in Hong Kong. People there have seen their freedoms stripped away and have resisted China’s moves to the best of their limited ability. No amount of disinformation and propagandising will persuade the people of Taiwan to give up their democratic system of government in return for something far less attractive and worthy of their support.

While Taiwan is no military threat to China in any way at all, it is a potent political threat in every sense of the word, for without a free Taiwan, there can never be a free China. Since China does not understand democracy and does not want democracy, it is clear that

the ruling Communist elite will do their utmost to cling onto power at any price. While open rebellion with citizens out in the streets protesting is not yet a way of life in China, that possibility exists and the unelected government which came to power by force of arms in 1949 can only maintain its power by force of arms – the one and only philosophy it understands.

Given Taiwan's geographical position and its population's willingness to defend their own territory, any invasion of the island will prove problematic for China in terms of amphibious movements across the Taiwan Strait which can easily be spotted by satellite and aerial surveillance. Assembling an assault landing craft fleet of the size needed to accomplish such a task will be problematic for China and impossible to disguise. A surprise Chinese rocket attack will simply be met by one from Taiwan, which has the capability to inflict considerable damage to key cities along the Chinese coast. An aerial attack will be met by Taiwan's highly trained air force flying upgraded US F-16 fighter jets that will prove a ready match for China's mixed fleet of aircraft, some of which are of questionable quality.

China's overwhelming belief in its own power and the philosophy that the big guy always wins in a military scenario may yet prove erroneous when considering the 1979 surprise attack on Vietnam that resulted in the PLA forces being repulsed with considerable casualties. No matter what invasion plan the Communist Chinese forces adopt, they will have to contend with the knowledge that US and Japanese naval and air forces will have covered every single scenario years before the fact and are ready for any military eventuality which arises in the region.

As Taiwan's oldest and most valued friend after the US, Japan will almost certainly have to engage in its defence, if only out of self-interest, but it will be self-interest born out of historic ties, friendship between peoples, enormous investments on both sides, the production of microchips and the strategic issue of the South China Sea. In addition to Japan and the US, there is also the issue of democratic, worldwide support for Taiwan outside Asia. Will the nations of the free world, ever anxious to placate China in return for business opportunities, be willing to make sacrifices for a small but hugely important island (Taiwan) on which so much depends?

When details of the 2021 AUKUS agreement were first announced, it immediately became apparent that Britain had placed itself at the forefront of the Indo-Pacific region defence alliance along with its traditional allies, Australia and the US. A new partnership involving the building of nuclear-powered submarines for the use of the Royal Australian Navy presented China with a major setback in that

another defensive agreement with serious muscle had been created and would place a further check on its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region for some time to come.

From the time of Prime Minister David Cameron and his successor Theresa May, the UK government has taken a generally deferential line towards China and bowed to its wishes in return for planned investments in the British economy. This unequal relationship changed dramatically when the US government made plain its objections to the involvement of Huawei in the UK's proposed 5G project and the planned arrangement ended there. It was very much to the relief of British parliamentarians opposed to Chinese involvement in 5G and other projects in the UK when this happened.

In respect of Taiwan and the South China Sea issue, it is to be hoped that the current Freedom of Navigation exercises involving the Royal Navy and its allies will continue as a visible deterrent to China's aggressive behaviour in the region. As things stand, nothing must be allowed to interrupt the free flow of maritime cargo and energy supplies through this hugely important area on which so many other countries in the region depend. From once being seen as a purely local issue between China and its democratic island neighbour of Taiwan to be resolved at some distant point in the future, the South China Sea is now an issue of world importance which needs to be carefully managed so that a nation (China) which does not respect international treaties or agreements is made to see that its conduct outside the normal rules of behaviour will be resisted by the free world at large. **JS**

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