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The Cold War's Odd Couple: The Unintended Partnership between the Republic of China and the UK, 1950-58

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Author:

Steve Tsang

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Chi-kwan Mark

Historians of the Asian Cold War have often focused on the interactions between the United States and Communist China, treating the United Kingdom (UK) and the Republic of China (ROC) as secondary players eager to manipulate and restrain their respective friends and foes. In *The Cold War's Odd Couple*, Steve Tsang has re-examined the history of the Sino-American Cold War by highlighting the crucial roles played by the UK and the ROC in the 1950s. By making use of the Chiang Kai-shek papers at the Academia Historica and selected documents in the archives of the ROC Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Defence, together with a wide range of British and American archival sources, Tsang has provided a comprehensive study of UK-ROC relations in the wider context of Sino-American confrontation.

The main thesis of *The Cold War's Odd Couple* is that a 'de facto strategic partnership' between the UK and the ROC emerged in the course of the second Taiwan Strait crisis in 1958 as a result of 'their shared hostility to communist expansionism' (p. 196). Tsang suggests three important reasons why Britain and Taiwan ended up as 'unwitting partners', despite the continuation of their basic differences, not least over the future of the Nationalist-controlled offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu. The first was the failure of Britain's constructive engagement approach towards the Chinese communists notwithstanding its recognition of the People's Republic in 1950. By 1958, Beijing's repeated refusals to reciprocate London's enticements had 'made the idea of supporting the ROC unobjectionable to the UK' (p. xviii). Second, the successful reforms introduced by the Kuomintang in the 1950s had 'fundamentally changed the political, economic, social and military situation in the ROC' (p. xvi), changes which were closely watched by British consular officials on the spot. Through their 'unbiased and perceptive' reports which gradually 'eroded the long-held negative impression that the British had harboured of Chiang's regime', these officials 'made an important contribution towards improving relations' between London and Taipei (p. 189). The last reason, Tsang

argues, was the impact of the Suez crisis on the Anglo-American 'special relationship'. The crisis, which shattered the British illusion of their independent great power status, turned cooperation with the USA into a vital factor in their foreign policy, and the UK into an 'unwitting partner' of the ROC during the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis.

In examining the making of the 'unintended UK-ROC partnership', Tsang has also addressed the various dimensions of Anglo-Chinese relations, the existing literature of which, he criticises, has failed to explain 'why British policy was so unsuccessful' (p. xvii). The problem for the British, according to Tsang, was their failure to understand the real nature of the Chinese Communist regime. In according diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1950, the pragmatic British were influenced by three major factors: protecting British economic interests in China, acting in line with international law, and driving a wedge into the Sino-Soviet alliance through positive engagement with China. Concerning the last factor, while British officials were realistic in their assessment that the Chinese communists were 'strictly orthodox', they at the same time held the (mistaken) belief that the Chinese were 'too nationalist to be subservient to the Soviets' (pp. 21-2). To Mao Zedong, the communist revolution was not only about the defeat of the Kuomintang, but also about the elimination of Western imperialist influence and the restoration of China's 'rightful' place in the world. In view of the hostile international environment in the postwar period, Mao regarded leaning to the Soviet side as both a short-term tactical move to facilitate China's reconstruction and a long-term commitment to international communism. (The chairman saw no conflict between his Chinese and communist identities, Tsang adds.) Given the centrality of Sino-Soviet relations to Mao's thinking and policy, China thus 'did not respond to British efforts to engage it positively' (p. 23), and the British wedge strategy against the Sino-Soviet alliance was doomed to failure.

One of the most revealing aspects of Tsang's book is the light that it sheds on the perspective and policy of the ROC. Chapter 2 shows how the ROC responded to London's recognition of Beijing on the basis of realism, and sought to build an informal partnership with Britain, not least by permitting the British to maintain a consulate in Tamsui. It gives a detailed account of the unofficial Nationalist representation in London, liaison officers in Hong Kong, and the special emissaries sent to Britain in the 1950s. At the beginning, through this informal presence and contact the Chinese Nationalists hoped to reverse the British policy of recognising Beijing. But once it became clear that London's recognition policy was not going to change, from the later half of the decade on, the ROC focused on inducing the British not to act against its interests - over the future of Taiwan, and the ROC's membership in the United Nations. Nevertheless, in the early 1950s, the British were not enthusiastic about the idea of a partnership with the ROC: the unofficial Nationalist representation in Britain was of a low level, and the special emissaries from Taipei more often received a cool reception. In short, the bilateral relations between the ROC and the UK remained limited and unimportant.

In examining the British side of the story, Tsang argues that the UK worked harder than any other power to find a solution to the Taiwan question. Its main concern was 'not to unify or divide China', but 'to defuse the time bomb across the Taiwan Strait' (p. 93). At first, Britain's Taiwan policy was short-term and reactive. Before the outbreak of the Korean War, the Labour government expected to see Taiwan fall into communist hands. Once the war started and was still raging, however, it was not willing to see Beijing capture Taiwan by force. Nevertheless, a more sympathetic British attitude towards Taiwan did not develop until Winston Churchill returned to power in early 1952. With his emphasis on the Anglo-American 'special relationship', Churchill did not support an abandonment of Taiwan, although he was at the same time eager to stop Chiang from provoking a new world war.

It was the two Taiwan Strait crises that had the greatest impact on the changing relations between the UK and the ROC. In chapter 5, Tsang aims to 'significantly modify the generally accepted explanation of Mao Zedong's objectives and calculations in starting the first Taiwan Strait crisis' (p. 111). Whilst the existing works hold that Mao initiated the crisis in order to disrupt the conclusion of the US-ROC defence treaty, Tsang has suggested the chairman's other main objective, which was to weaken Taiwan's ability to harass the China coast from the offshore islands. Besides, Tsang challenges the established view that Beijing only intended to take Tachen during the crisis, by arguing that Mao indeed expected the ROC to abandon Matsu

(after the occupation of Tachen), and kept an open mind on the seizure of Quemoy. But limited resources prevented Mao from taking all the islands at the same time.

Throughout the crisis, the main concern of the UK was to restore peace and stability to the region. Thus, Britain worked closely with America and New Zealand to seek a peaceful solution through Operation Oracle, a resolution which was aimed to neutralise the offshore islands by the United Nations. But the problem was that, as Tsang shows in detail, Operation Oracle pitted Britain and Taiwan as well as Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower against each other. Chiang was convinced that Operation Oracle was 'a British plot to create a two China situation' (p. 136), a conspiracy which would remove his chance to return to the mainland and destroy the *raison d'être* for the existence of the ROC in Taiwan. Churchill, for his part, had serious disagreement with Eisenhower over the protection of Quemoy and Matsu, if not over the defence of Taiwan. (The poor relationship between Anthony Eden and John Foster Dulles made matters worse.) The biggest winner of the first Taiwan Strait crisis, as Tsang implies, seemed to be Mao, who was 'able to influence decisively the scale of the crisis' (p. 139), and who had gained an insight into the limits of the Anglo-American alliance regarding the offshore islands. His growing confidence contributed to the shelling of Quemoy the second time in 1958.

The second Taiwan Strait crisis culminated in the development of an 'unintended partnership' between the UK and ROC, argues Tsang. During the crisis, the new British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, was eager to put the newly restored Anglo-American relationship above other considerations. Like the Americans, Macmillan recognised that the defence of Quemoy and Matsu had become an integral part of Taiwan's security. Instead of criticising and arguing with Eisenhower as his predecessor did in 1954⁷⁵, Macmillan stood by the United States and 'supported the ROC in denying Quemoy to the PRC' (p. 145). But there was another vital factor which explained why the UK turned into an 'unwitting partner' with the ROC in 1958. According to Tsang, the ROC had 'played an active and indeed key part' in the development of the crisis, 'despite its outward dependence on the USA for security' (p. 145). The ROC forces in Quemoy were capable of resisting the communist military offensive, with the United States providing merely logistical, material and moral support. This reduced the necessity of American intervention and thus 'the actual risk of this crisis escalating into a general war' (p. 197). In this regard, Tsang adds that, notwithstanding his rhetoric of retaking the mainland, Chiang 'came to realize in the 1950s that this was not a practical policy' (p. 191). By the end of that decade, Chiang recognised that 'the best he could hope for was to maintain the status quo'; what influenced him was 'more of a peace than a war mentality' (p. 191⁷²). Through the perceptive reporting of the consulate in Tamsui, the British government got an insight into Chiang's intention in the crisis, which was not to 'provoke a third world war'. These reports 'removed the UK's underlying worry about the ROC disrupting the peace and security of East Asia' and thus 'made it a lot less objectionable for British policy makers to form their unintended partnership with the ROC in 1958' (p. 189).

The UK-ROC partnership was a paradoxical one, however. The economic links between the two countries were insignificant throughout the 1950s. On the other hand, bilateral conflicts over the Nationalist closure of the Chinese ports and their violation of Hong Kong's neutrality were what characterised their day-to-day relationship. Nevertheless, as Tsang concludes in the final chapter, these bilateral disputes were 'distinctly secondary' (p. 188) to their 'de facto strategic partnership' against communist expansionism that was born out of the Sino-American cold war.

In the postwar bipolar international system, all anti-communist countries were partners of sorts: all of them shared the ideology of resisting communist expansion. Whether two (or more) anti-communist countries would become truly working partners depended on many factors. In his book, Tsang does not elaborate on what constituted a 'partnership', and what kind of 'support' Britain rendered to Taiwan in 1958⁷ and beyond. He does, however, stress that the formation of an 'unintended partnership' between Britain and the ROC during the second Taiwan Strait crisis involved, or even implied, 'no change in British policy or attitude towards the ROC' (p. 198). But if nothing seemed to have changed in and after 1958, one may wonder whether it is meaningful to speak of Britain and Taiwan as 'de facto partners'. Perhaps, a possible answer to this question can be discerned by reexamining the three factors which Tsang suggests had made their 'unintended partnership' a reality. First, the impact of the Suez crisis on British foreign policy. It is true that

Macmillan supported, or more precisely did not oppose, the ROC in the second Taiwan Strait crisis. But his 'silence' had more to do with the Anglo-American 'special relationship' than with the making of a 'strategic partnership' with the ROC, however unintended it might be. In fact, the main differences between London and Taipei were not over the denial of Taiwan to communist rule, but over the defence of the offshore islands and Chiang's plans to liberate the mainland. Although in 1958 Britain shared the American view that the defence of Quemoy and Matsu had become an integral part of the protection of Taiwan, it still worried that the offshore islands would become a cause of war with China. Thus, while Macmillan decided not to criticise and put pressure on Eisenhower, British officials (Selwyn Lloyd and the Foreign Office particularly), concerned about the possible American use of nuclear weapons against China, did try to encourage the administration to seek a diplomatic solution. Even the Americans were eager to prevent the offshore islands from becoming a flashpoint time and again. Thus, after the danger of war receded, Eisenhower ? as in the first crisis ? sought to encourage Chiang to diminish the importance of Quemoy by reducing the number of the ROC troops there, if not withdrawing from the island outright. Alarmed by the perceived American efforts to create a de facto 'two-China' condition, Mao appealed to the Nationalists to relax the tension among the Chinese people themselves. The second Taiwan Strait crisis thus ended in a matter of two months, as compared with the eight-month long crisis in 1954?5. (1)

It is debatable that the British government found the idea of a 'de facto partnership' with Taiwan unobjectionable as a result of the favourable reports by the consulate in Tamsui, which according to Tsang highlighted Chiang's orientation towards 'peace' and the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. There is little evidence to suggest that Macmillan and other decision makers in London were influenced by the reports (however perceptive) written by these low-ranking consular officials. It is also arguable that Chiang had settled for the status quo across the Taiwan Strait as early as 1958. While it is true that there was a gap between his anti-communist rhetoric and his actual policy of liberation, it was probably due to the objective constraints Chiang had to face (China's military strength and lack of American support), rather than a deliberate policy choice on his part. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Chiang strongly opposed the idea of a 'two Chinas' seating arrangement at the United Nations explored by successive US administrations, for this would undermine his claim to the mainland. (The Chinese Nationalists preferred to walk out of the United Nations ? as they did in 1971 ? if the People's Republic was admitted.) As Tsang puts it, 'The fact that he [Chiang] realized he had no realistic chance of retaking the mainland did not mean he had given up the hope or emotional commitment to do so. Until his death Chiang wanted to recover the mainland ...' (p. 192). A brief look at the third Taiwan Strait crisis of 1962 (though beyond the coverage of Tsang's book) may shed more light on Chiang's thinking about liberation. Unlike the first two crises, the 1962 crisis was to a large extent initiated by Chiang. Convinced that the Great Leap Forward disaster in China and the influx of refugees to Hong Kong were the impending signs of the collapse of the communist regime, Chiang intensified his preparations for liberation and encouraged the Americans to support Taiwan's paramilitary operations against China. This triggered a massive military buildup on China's part and consequently a war scare in the Strait. This time, Macmillan was not as 'silent' on his opposition to Chiang as he had been in 1958, and even Washington saw the need to restrain Taipei. (2) In short, if Britain became a de facto ally of Taiwan in 1958, four years later their 'unintended partnership' had all but disintegrated.

Tsang has done an admirable job in explaining the failure of Britain's China policy. But a related question to ask ? and explain ? is: why did the British not abandon the policy of constructive engagement with China despite its apparent failure since 1950? In essence, Macmillan's demonstration of solidarity with Eisenhower over Taiwan in 1958 did not lessen Britain's eagerness to engage with the People's Republic, however unsuccessful it turned out to be. For all the diplomatic snubs, abuse of British consular officials, and hostile propaganda by the Chinese communists, never had London come to the conclusion that the UK should break off (semi-)diplomatic and economic relations with China, a break which would have the added advantage of strengthening relations with Washington ? and perhaps with Taipei. On the other hand, since 1961 Britain voted for the admission of China into the United Nations, even though it also supported the American-sponsored 'important question' resolution which required a two-thirds majority to change the Chinese seat. Trade between the UK and China began to increase after the abolition of the China differential in 1957, although the British had little illusion of reviving their prewar informal economic empire on the mainland. In

1950, Britain's policy of recognising Beijing was informed by three main considerations: maintaining British economic interests in China, driving a wedge into the Sino-Soviet alliance and safeguarding the colony of Hong Kong. A decade later, the first two of these considerations no longer played a crucial role in Britain's China policy, and Hong Kong became the only constant, though by no means the most decisive, factor. Although Mao had long decided to leave the British colony alone, the pragmatic Britons still felt that Hong Kong's delicate coexistence with its communist neighbour necessitated a constructive approach towards China on a day-to-day basis. On top of this was Britain's determination to avoid war in Asia in order to focus on Europe. To decision makers in London, the best way to achieve this was to restrain China through positive engagement, not to ally with Taiwan in the Sino-American cold war.

That said, *The Cold War's Odd Couple* has filled a significant void in the existing literature on East Asian international history. Its provocative thesis will be a subject of debate among historians for years to come.

Notes

1. The existing works on the second Taiwan Strait crisis show a greater degree of British concerns and worries about the danger of war than that portrayed by Tsang. See, for example, Qiang Zhai, *The Dragon, the Lion, and the Eagle: Chinese-British-American Relations, 1949-1958* (Kent, Ohio, 1994), pp. 178-207. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. By making use of Taiwanese and American archival sources, Jay Taylor has detailed Chiang's liberation plans and covert operations against China in the late 1950s and early 1960s. See *The Generalissimo's Son: Chiang Ching-kuo and the Revolutions in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), pp. 253-4, 261-68. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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