

MA War, Diplomacy, and Society Example Thesis Proposal

Draft or Tentative Title:

'Otherwise, it's War': Nixon and Taiwan (1969-1974)

Proposed Historical Question or Thesis:

This proposed study will analyze three major components of Nixon-era strategy towards Taiwan. Firstly, it affirms that his administration sought to maintain its 1954 Defense Pact with Taiwan, pursuant to the stated goals of the Nixon Doctrine. Secondly, it examines the development of 'constructive ambiguity' on the question of American recognition of the ROC. As Henry Kissinger defines it, this approach would allow "a Sino-US modus vivendi on the Taiwan situation which will permit our relations with Peking to develop while we at the same time retain our diplomatic ties and mutual defense treaty with the ROC." Lastly, this study aims to trace the American shift towards a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Discussion of Relevant Historiography:

The foreign policy of President Richard Nixon has typically been discussed as being a time of re-evaluation for American grand strategy during the Cold War. Nowhere was this more apparent than in his administration's outreach to the once-hostile People's Republic of China (PRC). Throughout the process, the United States had to control for a number of outside variables that could jeopardize this outreach, including the reaction of the Soviet Union, the posture of the US military in East Asia, and most relevant to this study, the American defense pact with Taiwan (ROC). At the time, the United States continued to recognize Chiang Kai Shek's regime on the island as the legitimate 'China,' and had maintained a defense pact with the ROC since 1954. When

Nixon came into office in 1969, he envisioned an opening to Beijing which would lead to a US-PRC partnership which could counter the Soviet threat in Asia and help extract the United States from the Vietnam War. However, as PRC diplomats repeatedly informed the Administration, that US derecognition of the ROC and annulment of the 1954 MDA were prerequisites to such a breakthrough. This thesis will examine the strategy which the Nixon Administration employed during the period of 1969-1974 as the United States sought to retain its commitments to the ROC while negotiating diplomatic normalization with the PRC.

Nearly all historical discussions about the Nixon Administration's policy towards Taiwan have been framed within the context of the 1972 'opening' to the PRC. Stemming from this focus on the dynamics between Washington and Beijing, Taipei has been largely sidelined in discussions of Nixon-era policy. Rather than viewing the Administration's China strategy as an Asian diplomatic 'triangle,' many historians have chosen to examine the US-PRC relationship in terms of polarity. For example, Chris Tudda's *A Cold War Turning Point* and Eric Ladley's *Nixon's China Trip* are characteristic of this approach, wherein the role of Taiwan as a factor in US-PRC relations is examined only in brief. On the converse, historians which have more thoroughly examined US-ROC relations have been critical of the Nixon Administration's somewhat cavalier approach to relations with Taiwan. This camp of scholars has almost universally adopted the term 'sellout' to describe what they believe was an American abandonment of the ROC in the interests of opening the PRC. In both camps of this historiographical discussion, Taiwan is treated as an obstacle to be overcome by negotiations between the United States and PRC.

Proposed Methodology:

This proposed study will analyze three major components of Nixon-era strategy towards Taiwan. Firstly, it affirms that his administration sought to maintain its 1954

Defense Pact with Taiwan, pursuant to the stated goals of the Nixon Doctrine. Secondly, it examines the development of 'constructive ambiguity' on the question of American recognition of the ROC. As Henry Kissinger defines it, this approach would allow "a Sino-US modus vivendi on the Taiwan situation which will permit our relations with Peking to develop while we at the same time retain our diplomatic ties and mutual defense treaty with the ROC." Lastly, this study aims to trace the American shift towards a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Strait Crisis. While staunchly opposed to a PRC attack on Taiwan, the United States acted to encourage a diplomatic settlement between Beijing and Taipei. This was a dramatic shift from the earlier position held by the United States, which was committed to the indefinite separation of the ROC from the PRC.

This thesis will be a work of diplomatic history, focusing on the formulation and implementation of the American policy towards Taiwan between 1969 and 1974. The primary point of view to be presented therein is that of the Nixon Administration, with the perspectives of the Mao and Chiang regimes acting as forces which helped to shape US policy. Secondly, this study will incorporate elements of political science, anthropology, and peace studies, so as to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the United States and Taiwan. Regarding primary sources, this thesis will draw from the Nixon Library Archives, the Digital National Security Archive, the digitized historical documents of the US State Department's Office of the Historian, the CIA Virtual Reading Room, and the digitized Central Foreign Policy Files of the National Archives. As a whole, it will view the Nixon-era policy towards Taiwan as a process- one in which the United States transformed its relationship with the ROC, moved towards a partnership with the PRC, and modified the American conception of containment in East Asia.

Proposed contribution the thesis will have on the field of study:

Arguably, the modern relationship between the United States and Taiwan was forged during the Nixon years. In order to understand current American interests and strategy surrounding this contemporary geopolitical flashpoint, it is necessary to examine the period in which they were most drastically altered. This thesis argues that from 1969-1974, the Nixon Administration aimed to recalibrate its defense commitment to Taiwan. In doing so, the United States sought to preserve its treaty commitments to the ROC, satisfy the PRC, and compel both sides to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Strait Crisis.

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