

World War II's unfinished business

Written by Jerome Keating
Tuesday, 23 June 2020 04:35

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, a brutal war that left more than 75 million dead around the globe. Hostilities ended when the Germans surrendered in May 1945 and the Japanese surrendered in August of the same year.

Unfortunately, 75 years later, that war has left a lot of unfinished business, particularly regarding Taiwan.

On the European front, the Potsdam Conference (from July 17 to Aug. 2, 1945) marked the official conclusion of the conflict, as the three major powers involved, Britain, the Soviet Union and the US, decided how to administer Germany.

All this was surprisingly wrapped up a mere three months after hostilities ended, but the ensuing Cold War between the East and the West would carry with it years of troubles.

A NATION'S FATE

On the Pacific front, it was a different story.

While hostilities ended in August, it took six years to finally sign the San Francisco Peace Treaty (SFPT) on Sept. 8, 1951, and another year until that treaty went into effect on April 28, 1952.

The US as the principle victor in the war was the nation that would determine the fate of Taiwan.

The time gap between 1945 and the treaty, along with other events and treaty ambiguities, expose the multiple issues involved; they continue to haunt the people of Taiwan today.

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For starters, the treaty never mentioned who would receive Taiwan. Japan surrendered its former colony, but it never said to whom.

While the US was the occupying force in Japan, it in 1954 asked the Republic of China (ROC) to represent it on Taiwan.

At the same time, the Chinese Civil War restarted in late 1945; the ROC eventually lost and in 1949 was driven from China by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The ROC in effect was left in exile on Taiwan.

Next came the Korean War, which began in June 1950, with North Korea attacking the South and with the PRC helping North Korea.

That war would carry on until July 27, 1953. During that time, the US sealed off the Taiwan Strait.

'UNDECIDED'

There was more: On Sept. 8, 1951, the US and Japan initiated the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. This treaty, signed into law on April 15, 1952, went into effect the same day as the SFPT.

Regarding Taiwan, the official US position was, is and continues to be that it is "undecided." Three generations and 75 years after the end of World War II, the US remains "undecided," even though Taiwan has become a de facto, independent, mid-sized democracy.

What then falls under this "undecided" umbrella? That the SFPT never specified a recipient is

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not the only problem. Why were Taiwanese never given the right to self-determination as the newly formed UN gave so many colonials?

John Foster Dulles, who advised then-US president Harry Truman after World War II and served as secretary of state under former US president Dwight Eisenhower, continued to maintain that the Taiwan problem was unfinished business from the war with Japan. It was not part and parcel of the Chinese Civil War.

IN A NAME

Then came the US Formosa Resolution.

Few today are even aware of the resolution, which was enacted on Jan. 29, 1955, well after the 1952 SFPT. It gave Eisenhower the right to defend Taiwan, then called Formosa, and the Pescadores, with force if he deemed that the PRC or other communists had attacked them.

Note the nomenclature: This resolution is called the Formosa Resolution and not the ROC Resolution or such.

The resolution, unlike the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that led to the Vietnam War, has never been rescinded.

On Oct. 25, 1971, in Resolution 2758, the UN expelled the “representatives of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石),” but it said nothing about Taiwan or the Taiwanese who had been put under martial law by that same exiled Chiang and his followers.

This issue of nomenclature arose again when the US in 1979 moved its embassy from Taipei to Beijing.

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It created the Taiwan Relations Act, established the American Institute in Taiwan and so on.

On March 26, it enacted the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act. In short, the US is now using the name Taiwan instead of Formosa. Again, it did not use the name ROC.

It must also be pointed out that while the US adheres to a “one China” policy, it has never accepted the “one China” principle promoted by the PRC.

The key difference between “policy” and “principle” is that while the US might acknowledge in policy that Beijing in its dreams believes that Taiwan is a part of China, this does not mean that the US in principle accepts that belief or dream.

MUDDY WATERS

Throughout the years, the obvious question remains: Why were Taiwanese never given the right of self-determination under UN principles after World War II, and why are they still not given that right?

To muddy the waters, there is more.

On April 1, 1945, before the end of hostilities, then-Japanese emperor Hirohito decolonized territorial Taiwan to officially make it part of Japan. This then raised the unsolved question of the status of those living in Taiwan at the time, ie, did they then officially become “citizens” of Japan instead of colonials?

Some would say that the Treaty of Taipei between Japan and the ROC helped here. Although signed on the day that the SFPT went into effect, it did not go into effect until months later.

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It allowed the people on Taiwan to not be stateless. However, if they were already citizens of Japan, they would not be stateless.

Should Taiwanese not have been given the opportunity to return to Japan? Or should they instead have been given the right to self-determination under UN principles?

This along with the complexities of the post-World War II era appears to be one more item, which fell through the cracks of history.

Regarding the Formosa Resolution, it still gives the US president the right, as one member of US Congress put it at the time, to “start shooting” in defense of Formosa if they so decide.

ISSUES PERSIST

The US is not finished in adding to these complications.

As late as 2012, the US said that it considers the Diaoyutai Islands (釣台), known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan, as falling under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the US and Japan, and that the US is obligated to defend them if they ever came under attack.

These islands are also claimed by the PRC and the ROC, but is Taiwan the ROC? Or is it time to finally rectify the name and world status of Taiwan?

The Taiwan problem remains a Gordian knot that Taiwan, the US and the UN still struggle to resolve.

One obvious step is for democratic Taiwan to develop a new constitution with nomenclature that

is more in line with reality.

The US could learn from the Soviet Union, which was instrumental in obtaining Mongolia's independence from China.

One of the key reasons for it to do so was that as leader of the then-Soviet Union, Russia did not want too much of its border to be shared with China. It wanted a buffer between Russia and China.

Except for a minuscule 37km stretch between Kazakhstan and Mongolia, the only shared border that Russia has with China is in the far northeastern part of China.

There was wisdom and foresight in the Soviet reasoning for "freeing" Mongolia from future PRC rule.

A NEW EMPIRE

As the world watches, the PRC continues to act like the former hegemonic Empire of Japan when it created the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (大東亞共榮圈).

The PRC has gobbled up Tibet because Tibet allows it great hegemonic leverage throughout Southeast Asia.

Tibet controls water sources into Pakistan, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and others. The PRC is making no bones about damming up all those rivers for its energy supply.

Fortunately, the realities brought on the world by the COVID-19 pandemic and the PRC's broken promises regarding Hong Kong have become a wake-up call.

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They help clarify the danger and unreliability of the PRC. They also give new light to see into all the complexities of the past.

Hopefully, the many nuances of the Taiwan issue are not too deep or complex for the current US administrations or the world.

These same nuances pose a challenge to the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文).

Three generations and 75 years after the end of World War II is enough time. The current age demands that all nations work together for the good of the human race and the planet.

The difference between Taiwan and the PRC in their handling of COVID-19 demonstrates who the good neighbor is.

The time is right and auspicious for the US and other nations to settle World War II's unfinished business and finally rectify the past by recognizing the inalienable right of Taiwanese to self-determination.

Jerome Keating is a writer based in Taipei.

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