British Government policy and Taiwan 1945-1972

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Preliminaries

The present paper is a contraction of a more extensive study which I hope to publish, covering the post World War II relations between the UK and Taiwan, from the reopening of the Taipei Consulate in 1946 until 1972, when it was finally closed as part of the agreement which sent a British Ambassador to Beijing. Since the delay of the ‘thirty-year rule’ for the opening of the 1972 Foreign Office papers in the National Archives has now elapsed, this seems an opportune time critically to review the quite complex political and diplomatic history that was developed around Taiwan in the quarter-century following the end of the Pacific War. ¹

The history of British policy towards Taiwan is one that was played out between four main foci of interest: the London Foreign Office, the Washington State Department, the United Nations, and the British Commonwealth. Each of these had important input into the diplomatic traffic, particularly at times of crisis. Canada, though nominally a member of the ‘Old Commonwealth’ played an admirably independent role. Among other European nations, Italy occasionally took initiatives; France was throughout somewhat aloof, in the earlier years no doubt preoccupied with its own problems in Vietnam. ²

An outline history of the ‘Hong Mao Cheng’

Though lesser known than the earlier Spanish and Dutch factories in Formosa, there was a brief British outpost there during the 1660s and 70s operating under the East India Company in Batavia. After their summary removal by the Qing, it would be a further 200 years before any official presence returned, with Consuls appointed first in Tainan (1860) and later Taipei (1877). Tainan was closed in 1911 and the remaining Consulate in Tamsui continued reporting to the British Embassy in Tokyo, as it had done since the arrival of the Japanese in 1895. Discontinued for obvious reasons during the Pacific War 1941-45, diplomatic relations were restored with the reopening of the Tamsui Consulate in autumn 1946, situated in the historically celebrated ‘Hong Mao Cheng’ building. The Acting Consul in charge was G.M. Tingle, and he reported now to the Foreign Office through the British Ambassador in Nanking, Sir Ralph Skrine-Stevenson.
For the first few months business mainly concerned recovery of British property and establishing links with the new KMT government. Before long, however, a very efficient system of informants seems to have been set up and reports were sent back concerning the political situation, the economy and military matters. Experts from the Foreign Office and the ‘Admiralty’ (in fact more likely the Secret Service) would arrive from time to time to assist in this process. As the civil war in China progressed quiet diplomacy began to be mixed with protests, particularly around the question of the treatment of British shipping. Once the Communists had begun to control the mainland seaboard, the Nationalist navy attempted a sporadic blockade of foreign trade and in the course of this many British ships were boarded at sea, officers were occasionally beaten up, and ships diverted to Kaoshiung, where their cargo could be expropriated. With mounting pressure in Parliament to react to this, the Consulate had a delicate situation on its hands for several years.

A particularly detailed report was prepared by Tingle and forwarded to Nanking on the 12\textsuperscript{th} of February 1947, that is on the very eve of the ‘228’ events. By the time it had been edited for forwarding to the Foreign Office, the violence had already begun, and supplementary dispatches followed at regular intervals throughout March 1947. The Tingle report makes abundantly clear the state of the island in the post-liberation period, the corruption of the KMT, the degree of exploitation my Mainland interests, and the resulting disaffection of the great majority of the native population. He appears in no doubt that: ‘the Administration know quite well that, if popular elections were held, they would be unable to maintain themselves in office’. Elsewhere in the same report:

‘Their enthusiasm for China at the conclusion of the Pacific War was strong and sincere. It did not long survive the arrival of the mainlanders, and their acquisitiveness, corruption and apparent inefficiency, as revealed in the declining standard of living, has deeply disappointed the Formosans … the early Chinese, with incredible obtuseness, referred to the Formosans as ‘slaves’, and took what they wanted, whether property that could be termed ‘enemy’, or a free meal in a restaurant.’

The ‘228’ days

As the ‘228’ events gathered momentum, Tingle and his staff alongside their colleagues at the American Consulate, were in a ideal position to observe and record the behaviour of the military and secret police, and the courage of the Taiwanese in the face of overwhelming brutality. Dispatches were sent to the Foreign Office almost daily during March 1947 and together make up an extremely valuable archive. There are carefully assembled eye-witness reports of Government terrorism, some of them from Commonwealth citizens and United Nations personnel. Both Tingle and Ambassador Skrine-Stevenson in Nanking are deeply critical of the Chiang and the KMT and let their views be known forcibly in the summary sent to the Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin.

The ‘228’ period and the ‘great evacuation’ of the KMT in 1949-50 were the Tamsui Consulate’s finest hour. For a brief period the insignificant outpost of the Hong Mao Cheng and its very junior diplomatic staff became almost a centre of world diplomatic attention. The arrival of Tingle’s reports and the later investigations by
Lieutenant Colonel Millar, Assistant Military Attaché in Shanghai, and Commander Berman, sent by the Admiralty, caused a flurry of comments at the Far Eastern Desk in the Foreign Office. Although there are a number of quite supportive minutes, backing up Tingle’s sympathetic attitude to the Taiwanese, the general tone of the Foreign Office reaction is dismissive and at times sharply critical. A key figure in handling the Taiwan reports in the early period was R.H.Scott, Minister of State and Under Secretary for Far Eastern affairs in the late 40s and early 50s. Scott, writer of prolific minutes, who appears never to have missed an opportunity to steer Foreign Office thinking in a direction favourable to the KMT. Scott’s commanding position in the FO enabled him to dismiss Tingle’s evidence as flawed, subjective and unduly biased in favour of the Taiwanese. For a while he claimed that more mainlanders than Taiwanese had been killed in the ‘228’ events, and repeatedly insisted, against all evidence from Tamsui, that the whole thing was a highly organized conspiracy and in no way spontaneous. The special Admiralty report by Commander Berman was similarly slapped down as, ‘unworthy of an experienced intelligence officer’. Yet the Ambassador’s comment from Nanking had ended with the words:

The conclusion to which I am forced is that the best solution to the problem of Formosa, as it stands today, would be for the island to be removed from mainland China administration … it is certain that a plebiscite held before the Peace Treaty with Japan would show an overwhelming vote to get rid on mainland Chinese control.

Reading the files for this period, it is clear that, in the post-war Foreign Office, ignorance was seldom a deterrent to making ex cathedra statements on Taiwan. When the Manchester Guardian reported sympathetically on the Taiwanese sufferings, Scott penned the confused remark that ‘(the great majority of the six million inhabitants of Formosa are Chinese) ‘Only because the Chinese call then Chinese! The great majority are aboriginals over whom the Chinese administration even in Ming times had little or no control’. A rather choice example to be found a year or two later is the opinion of one J.Lloyd who confidently writes to the effect that plebiscites are all very well, but are useless in countries such as ‘The Sudan and Formosa where there is such a high level of illiteracy’.

Nevertheless, it needs to be recalled, as it scarcely ever is in ‘228’ histories, that the governments concerned had a great deal else on their minds in Feb-March 1947. In London the Prime Minister Clement Attlee had announced only on Feb. 19th that India would be given its independence __ a decision that infuriated Winston Churchill and the solid Empire Loyalists of the Conservative party. Moreover, on the tragic day itself, February 28th, Chiang Kai-shek in Nanking was embroiled in what would prove to be the very last meeting with Communist representatives in an attempt to defuse the civil war. When they rejected his terms he haughtily sent them packing and refused further negotiations, thus in effect sealing the fate of the Nationalist Republic. Shortly afterwards he announced to the world that, given adequate support, he would need at most six months to rid China of the communist threat. This was the man whose judgement was to hold the Western nations to ransom over the coming years.
The Taiwan Independence Movement and the British Government

Even before the ‘228’ crisis in 1947 various exile groups were active in sending manifestos and appeals to the British government, the State Department and the United Nations. Two of the most vociferous were the self-styled Formosan Democratic Independence Party and the Formosan Emancipation League both associated with Thomas Liao (Liao Wen-yi __ __ __ ). Liao had attempted to work out of Hong Kong, but moved his organization to Tokyo when threatened with deportation if he did not cease his anti-KMT activities. Though studiously ignored, these pleas, drafted in excellent English, were duly filed, with minutes to the effect that no account should replies be sent or any contact established with the writers. For all that their content was backed up by official reports from Tamsui, the Foreign Office continually sought to represent this material as arising from ‘the lost causes of exiles with little relationship to the Taiwanese people’, while Liao was ‘a political adventurer trying to build on shaky foundations’.

Nevertheless, even at the early post-‘228’ stage a shift in Foreign Office attitude can be detected. Whereas in the immediate post-war period responses to questions on Taiwan’s political status were invariably referred to the Cairo Agreement for its retrocession to China, later these began to be replaced by the prevarication that no final decisions on this question could be taken until the Peace Treaty with Japan had been concluded. Nevertheless, once the PRC had been recognized in 1950, looking the other way in the face of the Taiwan opposition, became almost overnight a matter of ‘not displeasing Peking’ rather than ‘supporting the KMT for better or worse’. Yet in whichever case the result was the same dismissive minutes and stone-walling whenever questions came up in Parliament.

The great evacuation

The KMT evacuation to Taiwan was watched and reported in great detail by the Tamsui Consulate. Diplomatic traffic almost equalled the intensity reached during the ‘228’ period; indeed Tingle and his staff had long predicted the coming debacle, on the evidence of increasingly frantic visits by politicians and military chiefs, well before the mass evacuation occurred in 1949-50. The Labour government in London were no friends of the KMT and neither they nor the Service Chiefs gave Taiwan much chance of holding out against what was expected to be an imminent invasion.

On the 8th June 1949 Prime Minister Attlee had written a personal minute to the Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin as follows:

I have no confidence in the existing Kuomintang government to make good in Formosa. I should need very strong arguments to allow arms to go to Formosa if there is an effective Chinese government on the mainland even if it is communist. It would, I think, have severe repercussions on the position of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong would remain a primary concern in Foreign Office minds over the next decades, fluctuating in prominence as political and military crises succeeded each other and the expiry date for the treaty, still comfortable in the distance, could only get closer. In November 1949 the Defence Committee of the Cabinet received a Top Secret
paper drawn up by the Chiefs of Staff entitled *Security of Hong Kong - Effects of possible future developments in Formosa.* This played down the immediate danger of invasion in both Taiwan and Hong Kong, but assumed that an eventual take-over of the former was only a matter of time. What concerned the military advisors most was the possibility of vast quantities of arms and naval equipment falling into the hands of the Communists when the time came as much as had happened on the Mainland probably accompanied by the defection of military units on a grand scale. A similarly pessimistic assessment appears in the Tamsui communiqués for the period. In one it is remarked that ‘if the last stand on Taiwan is as determined as that which was proclaimed for Hainan, we had better get ready for the Communists’ arrival.’

Against this background the outbreak of the Korean war on the 25th of June 1950 took everyone by surprise and threw all Far Eastern policy into disarray. It was a godsend for the CKS and the nationalists who, particularly after the active entry of the Chinese in November 1951, saw it as their best hope of both exerting pressure on the Western Powers for a more favourable treatment, and perhaps being ‘unleashed’ for attacks on the Mainland. Visits to the island by Gen. MacArthur and right-wing Senators boosted this vision. The immediate response of the State Department to the outbreak in Korea was President Truman’s declaration of the 3rd July 1950 on the defence of Formosa. The operative text reads:

‘... I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action I am calling upon the Chinese government on Formosa to cease all air and sea operations against the mainland. The Seventh Fleet will see that this is done. The determination of the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations.

With the general rise in tension at the outbreak of the Korean War, Foreign Office worries about implications for Hong Kong returned. The papers show that there was a certain dilemma here. If the Chinese were resoundingly defeated in Korea, they might well attack Hong Kong out of pique; on the other hand, if they succeeded in inflicting a military or diplomatic defeat on America, this might well embolden them to do the same.

**Meanwhile back at the Hong Mao Cheng**

As soon as the British Government recognized the PRC *de facto* in 1950, the status of the Consulate in Tamsui changed overnight. It was now in the highly anomalous position of being a Consular outpost of HMG in a country with which diplomatic relations no longer existed. This was not quite unique a later example occurred in Guatemala in very different circumstances nor was it unique in Taipei, for other countries such as Malaysia operated under the same conditions. Nevertheless the absence of any established protocol led to the possibility of embarrassing and sometimes near-farcical situations. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Nationalists went out of their way to pretend that it was business as usual with the Tamsui staff still ‘official’ representatives of HMG. The fact that the Consulate was not given marching orders following the PRC suggests that KMT regime saw advantage in keeping it there, I spite of the obvious face-loss entailed.
The situation was mirrored in London, where the newly-established ‘Free Chinese Centre’ and its Director, Charles Wang, whose staff were carrying out a different charade of pretending to be diplomatically accredited when they were nothing of the kind. Whether or not their presence was allowed as a quid pro quo for Tamsui, they were certainly perceived as a problem. The Foreign Office was tolerant of ordinary business contacts, but didn’t hesitate to step in when some Ministers, Julian Amery and Geoffrey Rippon among others, were found to be socializing at Wang’s invitation.

One way of handling this situation was for the Tamsui consulate to pretend to be dealing with only ‘Provincial Authorities’ and thus avoiding any implied recognition of the Central Government. This worked for some years with only minor embarrassments until in 1967 the Taipei authorities changed the regulations for the number-plates on vehicles, including those of the ‘pseudo-diplomatic corps’, and this required applications to the Interior Ministry. A near panic seems to have ensued with lengthy opinions being sought in Whitehall from the Legal Department, the Protocol Department and anyone else on the desk at the time. Fortunately, a more down to Earth opinion put an end to it, pointing out in effect ‘come on, you’ve conceded the point long ago when you applied for your duty-free privileges’ so go ahead and apply for the number-plates’. Rather more awkward were the occasions when permission to attend important, genuine diplomatic gatherings had to be denied __ one such case being the visit by the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies and his delegation, who still recognized the ROC. This was fudged by a note of explanation to Canberra and a directive that Consular wives could attend the reception while husbands were instructed to be ‘diplomatically absent’.

The offshore islands crises

The three ‘offshore island’ crises would condition Anglo-American policy in the region for the next decade and beyond, and still be a major topic in John Kennedy’s election campaign in 1960. Against a background of fluctuating military tension, the struggle for the former two strategically insignificant pieces of land, Quemoy and Matsu, under the very noses of the Communists __ and of course their artillery __ would destabilize Far Eastern politics for years to come, at times dominating the search for peace in Korea and the British government’s constant worries about Hong Kong. The present format prevents me from giving more than an outline, but I shall summarize the key moves that were made on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the situation seemed stabilized by President Truman’s July 1950 directive, the first round of the offshore islands crisis blew up in 1951, when it became clear that the Nationalists were likely to hold on to at least Quemoy and Matsu by the skin of their teeth and make them into a symbolic rallying-point. The Truman declaration had not specifically mentioned the offshore islands, no doubt deliberately, but under the tension of the Korean war, the assumption grew that they would be included in any defensive action.

The danger of this situation was not lost on the British Cabinet. They were fully aware that the State Department strategy (under Secretary of State Dean Acheson) was to lock the Formosa problem into that of the Korean hostilities and, if possible thereby
obtain UN sanction for any offensive the US forces might carry out against China. A Prime Minister’s memorandum of the 19th of July 1950 put the dilemma facing the Labour government in the following terms.

‘...it would be unwise to assume that no clash leading to hostilities between China and USA can occur ...If this does happen we may be faced with a decision whether to dissociate ourselves firmly and publicly from this quarrel, or whether to risk becoming involved with China ourselves. ...In their present mood, the Americans would react most strongly to a refusal by us to join them in what they would regard as part of the same struggle as Korea. On the other hand hostilities between ourselves and China would have the gravest effect upon our position in the Far East, especially in Hong Kong, and would endanger our relations with India. They would probably also endanger the unity of the Parliamentary Labour Party over Far Eastern policy.’

The sense of alarm at this stage was not restricted to the Cabinet. The Service Chiefs were alerted and already discussing contingency plans for pulling out of an American attack on China, when a constitutionally remarkable event suddenly brought the matter to a head. The King, no less, (George VI), informed the Prime Minister saying in effect: ‘I will not allow my navy to be used as part of an American attack on China’. (They were, after all, ‘H.M.S.’) A flurry of telegrams advised British and Commonwealth Commanders that they should not take part in any such actions, and would not be under American orders in the event of hostilities. Copies of these were hurriedly sent to the King, who appears to have calmed down. In the event the Americans stayed their hand and attention shifted to the peace negotiations in Korea.

If the British government had wanted to take a more positive stand, they would have had a powerful ally in Lester Pearson, the extremely able Canadian Foreign Minister, On August 15th 1951 Pearson wrote a pointed appeal to Acheson at the State Department condemning:

‘The strident efforts of the Luce-Hearst-McCormick axis to bring about an open, armed conflict between the United States and Communist China. In that conflict a great many of the United Nations would do their best to stand aloof....’

At the same time there was clearly no love lost between the 1940s Labour Party and the KMT and this shows on both sides. When the Conservatives won the 1951 election and Winston Churchill returned as Prime Minister, there was general rejoicing in KMT circles __ somewhat ironically, as the September 1951 report from Tamsui notes, in view of the fact that Churchill had long been condemned as the ‘arch-imperialist’.

It was in 1951 that the Foreign Office Far Eastern Desk suffered a particularly embarrassing setback. One of the most experienced hands, notable for many of the sharpest minutes on Taiwan, proved to be a Russian spy and defected to Moscow. This was Guy Burgess, a flamboyant character, whose previous service in Washington had raised eyebrows, but led to no particular disquiet. More embarrassing still was that, Burgess had recently been selected be the Foreign Office Minister Christopher Mayhew to coordinate a new programme of anti-Communist propaganda.

The second islands crisis
The second off-shore islands crisis blew up in 1954, shortly after the signing of the Korean armistice. Eisenhower was now President and Churchill still Prime Minister in London, though in failing health. General MacArthur was safely out of the way, following his dismissal by Truman three years earlier, but the pro-KMT faction in Washington led by Senator Knowland, along with the ‘Luce press’ were still calling for firm action. Eisenhower’s new Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, an abrasive diplomat of the old school, was not unsympathetic to these, as future events would show.

As the crisis built up, it happened that a delegation of Labour Party leaders was in China, somewhat to the embarrassment of the sitting Government. It was even suggested in some quarters that the show of strength by the Chinese might have been partly for their benefit. Clement Attlee, who had now stepped down as leader and Hugh Gaitskell his successor both made statements to the effect that a couple of offshore islands were not worth a third world war; Attlee went on to Australia and New Zealand, where he repeated similar remarks to the press.

It was fortunate that Winston Churchill, as Eisenhower’s old WWII ally could approach him directly without having to deal with Dulles. He and Anthony Eden, his Foreign Secretary, took a tough-talking line in marked contrast to the craven attitude of their successors Macmillan and Selwyn Lloyd three years later. Churchill sent a nonsense letter to Eisenhower in February 1955 stating in true Churchillian manner that ‘(CKS) deserves the protection of your shield but not your sword.’

This good sense was not echoed in the United States Congress, which in its Formosa Resolution of January 1955, stretched the limits of policy by authorizing the President to allow US forces to defend ‘such positions and territories that are now in friendly hands as he might find necessary to assure the defence of Taiwan and Peng-hu’.

The third islands crisis

It was clear by the mid-fifties that the offshore islands were becoming a pressure point which the Peking government could turn on and off at will, activating it either to divert attention from events elsewhere, or in the hope of creating divisions between the Western allies.

The build-up to the autumn 1958 crisis began with intensified shelling of Quemoy, some have suggested out of misplaced glee at the success of the Soviet ‘Sputnik’. This temporarily cut supply-lines but was countered by a provocative US decision to provide a Seventh Fleet escort up to the three-mile limit. By September 1958 the signs were ominous. In February 1959 Dulles admitted to the UK Minister of Defence that Eisenhower thought CKS’s stubbornness over the islands was ridiculous, but insisted on his own view that: ‘surrender would destroy the whole of the free world from Japan to New Zealand’. He now began to talk of using nuclear weapons if necessary defend the islands, though probably ‘only some small air-bursts’. Needless to say, this attitude once again delighted the KMT in Taipei, reviving thoughts once again of their being ‘unleashed’ on the Mainland. Dulles concluded a message to British Prim Minister Macmillan: ‘The President and I hope very much that you will, as you suggest, be able to steer your public opinion so that if the worst should happen we could be together. Anything different would be a
great catastrophe for both of us’. (‘Steering public opinion’ was not going to be such an easy matter in 1959 __ CND had just been formed and was getting a lot of publicity.)

It seems astonishing that no one present in Cabinet seems to have picked up the incredible chain of non-sequiturs in Dulles’s justification. The idea, elaborated by Harold Macmillan, that the loss of Quemoy would be such a psychological shock to the KMT that their regime would collapse, followed by others all the way down to Australia was surely as preposterous then as it seems now. The KMT had just survived the ‘psychological shock’ of losing the whole of China, could it not survive the loss of a militarily useless island? The crucial Cabinet meeting wound up with a completely lame resolution taking note ‘that the PM would consider the advisability of sending a private and personal message to the PM of Australia about the situation’. At a later Cabinet meeting a vague proposal to liase with the Russians and promote a UN initiative was resolved, but the idea of writing to CKS to persuade him of the case for withdrawal on military-strategic grounds (echoing Churchill’s advice four years earlier) was rejected. Macmillan urged the Cabinet to stay on the right side of the Americans at all costs, given the probable need for their support over Hong Kong and in the Middle East and it was agreed that:

‘…the robust attitude which the United States Government were adopting offered us the best hope of avoiding the damage which our prestige in the Far East would suffer if we were compelled to evacuate Hong Kong’ …. 

. (This, of course, only two years after the Suez fiasco, where American support was distinctly noticeable for its absence!)

Thus ‘third world war diplomacy’ continued in the somewhat laid-back manner of the Macmillan era, with largely ineffective missives between ‘Dear Harold’, ‘Dear Foster’, ‘Dear Selwyn’ and occasionally ‘Dear Bob (Menzies)’, when Australia got out of line __ as it frequently did. These were in distinct contrast to the very sharp dispatches from the real diplomats in the front line __ Roger Makins, Harold Caccia and Pearson Dixon in Washington and the UN __ and the straight from the shoulder approach of Churchill four years earlier. For Churchill the policy was plain wrong; for Macmillan it simply ran the risk that public opinion in this country would not stand for it.

By the time the crisis reappeared in Cabinet, events had overtaken it __ and fortunately in a peaceful direction. In mid-October the Chinese unilaterally ordered a cease-fire. Caccia reported from Washington that Dulles was elated and regarded it as ‘a great diplomatic victory’. He was no longer in any mood to talk of concessions or demilitarisation of the islands. In his Press Conference on the 15th October he boasted that he had no plans whatever to urge CKS to reduce forces on Quemoy. Quotes: ‘We are not in favour of turning over the 45,000 civilians on Quemoy even if the Nationalists agreed’ Curiously the Peking cease-fire order said that the suspension is ‘to enable our compatriots on Quemoy, both military and civilian, to get sufficient supplies, including food and military equipment, to strengthen their entrenchment’ The cease-fire did not last long __ on the 25th October the bombardment of Quemoy resumed on alternate days, much to the puzzlement of the Foreign Office.

While all this was going on, and in characteristic fashion, Lord Louis Mountbatten showed up in Washington to talk with Eisenhower and Dulles.
Extraordinary efforts were made to keep these conversations secret, since Mountbatten was clearly, to use the contemporary word, ‘outside the loop’. As reported by the Ambassador (Caccia) the main subject of conversation was a scheme by Mountbatten to placate CKS by the offer of landing-craft which it could be arranged to be unseaworthy and could never be used. This is the last we hear of such a scam.

Unknown to most people at the time, Dulles was by now terminally ill. He duly died in May 1959 and, perhaps to the relief of many in the Western democracies, was replaced by the mild and largely ineffective Christian Herter. Thus ensued a relatively tension-free two years leading up to the victory of John Kennedy in the 1960 elections. Quemoy and Matsu figured prominently in the election campaign rhetoric, though without serious effect in the Taiwan elections. Kennedy we enter the State Department era of Dean Rusk, an equally wily, though somewhat less abrasive operator than Dulles. On June 24th 1962 Rusk arrived in London for a secret meeting that took place at 1 Carlton Gardens. Present were PM Macmillan, Lord Home FS, Ambassador Caccia, and a State Department retinue. Rusk was there, it seems, to turn up the pressure over reports that China was massing six to eight divisions in Fukien. (The British had already been warned from the Washington Embassy two days earlier that the ‘Fukien build-up’ story was probably a calculated leak to smoke-out reaction in London and Taipei.) For once Harold Macmillan’s laid-back approach to diplomacy probably suited the occasion. According to a note of the meeting, he began by questioning Rusk on US long-term policy towards China saying that: ‘At present the Americans did not admit that China existed. This was pure fantasy; it was made worse by letting CKS occupy the Chinese seat in the United Nations.’ Rusk was clearly needled by this and later replied that: ‘it was not comfortable for the United States when the United Kingdom traded with China and the United states provided the gendarmes to keep the Chinese in their place’. On this occasion at least, Rusk’s patent attempt to bully the UK government seems to have failed.

‘Higher diplomacy’

I want to backtrack now to consider now some of the events in what might be called the ‘higher diplomacy’ of the Taiwan situation, by which I mean constitutional matters arising, and considered, long-term steps towards solutions, as distinct from responses under pressure to find a ‘fix’ for emerging crises. Problems arose under several headings, all interrelated, largely coextensive: 1) The precise status of Taiwan in international law 2) The Japanese Peace Treaty 3) The right to seats in the UN General Assembly and Security Council. 4) Diplomatic relations.

The question of Taiwan status would haunt British-Taiwan relations for over 60 years, having repercussions on many levels, legal, political and commercial. In the immediate post-war years it was assumed that the question was cut and dried: the Cairo Conference of 1945, attended by Churchill, Roosevelt and Chiang Kai-Shek had laid down that Formosa should be returned to the Central Government of China following victory, and this was the condition under which the KMT forces took over the island in September 1945. Before long, however, this fait accompli began to be questioned and on two grounds: the existence of a vocal Taiwanese faction demanding independence
from China, and the increasing uncertainty as to whether the Communists’ victory in 1949 called into question the legitimacy of their title to Taiwan.

In terms of British government policy this was to cause a gradual shifting of stance and a considerable degree of legal sophistry in the coming years. Questions in Parliament from both political parties exposed a degree of confusion that existed in the Foreign Office, not only as to the precise legal situation, but also as to how much should be admitted in public on the question. The Foreign Office papers, including the briefings on which replies to Parliamentary Questions were invariably based, show that the general line was to say as little as possible and always, whenever practicable, refer back to previous statements on the subject, rather give the impression of any change in the Government attitude. In fact the Cabinet in discussion of Formosa on the 4th July 1950 formally ‘hoped that spokesmen would avoid being drawn into statements on these questions’ and agreed that ‘Ministers should for the present endeavour to avoid making any statement on the subject of Formosa’. As the previous Cabinet discussion makes clear, this was largely for fear that divisions between Britain and the US would come into the open.

Nevertheless, pressure on the Government to state a clear opinion continued, and with Parliamentary Questions being posted from both sides of the House, the Labour Government felt bound to make some kind of statement. Thus, on the 11th May 1951, the Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison, no doubt reluctantly, addressed Parliament on the subject:

‘Until China shows by her actions that she is not obstructing the fulfilment of the Cairo Declaration in respect of Korea and accepts the basic principle of that declaration, it will be difficult to reach a satisfactory solution of this problem. His Majesty’s government is of the opinion that the objectives of the Declaration can be achieved only in the context of a genuine and satisfactory Far Eastern settlement, the first step towards which must be a settlement in Korea...

The question of Formosa will, however, come up in the content of the Japanese Peace Treaty. Our aim here is to secure an early Peace Treaty without allowing the difficult issue of Formosa to delay its negotiation and without attempting in the Treaty to find a final solution to an issue which must be given careful consideration later in the general context of the Far Eastern situation’

This would appear to result from some clever footwork on the part of the Foreign Office. At one stroke, they managed to query the finality of the Cairo Declaration; connect Taiwan to the forthcoming Japanese Peace Treaty; imply that its implementation of the Cairo Declaration had been invalidated by Chinese bad faith over Korea; and given a strong hint that the Peace Treaty might not solve the problem after all.

With every year that passed the question of a Japanese Peace Treaty became more urgent, even as the problems of setting one up grew more complex. With the two Chinas now at loggerheads, the question of who should be signatories and have a voice in its drafting was itself a major stumbling block. The solution, after considerable discussion between Washington and London was simple: No China, neither Peking nor Taipei, would be represented at all. When the treaty was signed on April 28th 1952 Japan formally renounced all right, title and claim to Formosa and the Pescadores, but, to the fury of the Nationalist régime in Taipei, already incensed by their exclusion from the drafting process, the treaty provided that Japan was free to negotiate bilaterally with
whichever China it might choose. As widely predicted, the treaty did nothing to settle the present sovereignty of Taiwan and, probably against Washington’s wishes, was silent about the offshore islands. The Japanese Peace Treaty had served its purpose as a delaying tactic in facing up to the Formosa question; now unfortunately this would become awkwardly embroiled in the settlement in Korea.

The Commonwealth and the United Nations

I have grouped these together because many initiatives over the years would link them in various ways. As I mentioned at the beginning, the Commonwealth was an important factor in Formosa politics, both as a way of projecting British self-interest, while to some degree providing a check against domination by Washington. The Commonwealth countries were conspicuous in the UN and might be used, sometimes at the prompting of the State Department, to promote joint initiatives, at others as a possible conduit to Peking, in the absence of direct US-China diplomatic relations. They were also a factor in holding together the ‘vote’ on the perennial question of who had the right to the China seat in the General Assembly and Security Council. Moreover, both the ‘Old’ Commonwealth countries ___ particularly Canada, Australia and New Zealand ___ and the ‘New’ Commonwealth ___ India, Pakistan, Malaysia ___ had ideas of their own that reflected the geopolitical reality of being closest to the scene and, if the Dulles scenario were believable, most liable at any moment to fall one after another into the Communist embrace. Canada seems always to have been accepted as a force in its own right, and deserved to be, for, as we have seen, its 1950s Foreign Minister, Lester Pearson, was one of the few people able to stand up to John Foster Dulles in the State Department.

Throughout the successive crisis periods the Commonwealth Office took great care to keep the various Governments informed, though always remaining noticeably less open with the ‘New Commonwealth’ than with the ‘Old’. India presented a certain dilemma. When Nehru was in power, at least until the India-China hostilities of 1962, he was regarded as a useful asset, with valuable connections with Peking, but at the same time there were considerable reservations about his volatile and left-leaning Foreign Minister Krishna Menon, who it was felt could not be trusted with sensitive schemes.

The records show that the Commonwealth could at times be an irritant as much as a resource in Foreign Office policy. One of the principal awkward customers was the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies. Menzies kept coming up with ‘humble suggestions’, such as that of face to face meting between Dulles and Chou Enlai, and a revival of the idea of an International Commission on the Offshore Islands problem. He also had a habit of calling in a group of newspaper editors to float his latest thoughts, a style hardly calculated to play well with the Foreign Office. At the height of the 1958 crisis, he had to be fobbed off with the standard ploy: ‘Dear Bob, thank you so much for the benefit of your thoughts. However, this is a most complex matter and it’s really a question of timing…’

Another awkward customer was Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia, who spoke out forcefully on the question of recognition of China in the UN. In June 1960 he met
Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and set out his views on paper after first, rather tactlessly, having talks with Gen. De Gaulle in Paris. He agrees with the General that it was unfortunate that the American Secretary of State had openly declared that America would never recognize Communist China, and feels that this can only provoke China into aggression, with a repetition of what happened in Korea. As he put it more forcefully:

‘China is the only country who would risk war because she has millions of morons who are prepared to throw away their lives at the bidding of their leaders. In my mind, the danger is very real and an honest attempt should be made to meet it. Recognition of China is inevitable …

Tunku Abdul Rahman had little respect for Foreign Office niceties. On one occasion he happily disclosed the content of secret Foreign Office discussions to a press conference he called as he left Heathrow airport. He was not the only leader of the ‘New Commonwealth’ to be distrusted by the Foreign Office, who made no attempt to disguise their preference for the ‘Old Commonwealth’ countries over the ‘New Commonwealth’ in Southern Asia. Attempts to use the latter for manoeuvres in the UN did not always meet with cooperation and were sometimes rudely rejected. When sounding out interest in Pakistan’s membership of a possible International Commission on Taiwan, the Foreign Office received the dusty answer, ‘You weren’t ready to help us over Hyderabad, why should we help you out over Formosa?’ Kashmir was another thorny problem which could be linked to the price of cooperation. The ‘Old Commonwealth’ was altogether more amenable.

One would imagine, given its founding principles, that the United Nations General Assembly would have been the ideal place to air the problem of Taiwan. The US and British governments indeed manoeuvred at various times to get either a General Assembly resolution or better, the setting up of a Special Commission on Taiwan. None of these initiatives came to anything, though they generated a great deal of diplomatic traffic across the Atlantic and within the Commonwealth. There was always the dilemma of whether to go to the General Assembly of the Security Council. The General Assembly was an arena where large numbers of third-world votes could be manipulated towards the Eastern Block; in the Security Council there was always the problem of the veto, either by the Soviet Union or, until 1972, Taiwan itself. An early scheme to create a Special Commission caused a rare example of friction between the UK and the US. The UK position was that the ‘great powers’ should stay out of it, letting India take a leading role, while the US wanted to throw its weight into the proceedings. Predictably the UK gave in the State Department, but nothing came of the Commission proposal in the event. Later, at the time of the Second Islands Crisis in 1954, New Zealand was cultivated to sponsor a General Assembly resolution, but after much scheming and diplomatic traffic, this was trumped by Dulles’s signing of a bilateral security pact behind the backs of his allies, just as the initiative was supposed to go ahead.

Meanwhile back in Tamsui
Though they were kept thoroughly informed and occasionally consulted, the diplomats in Tamsui could only watch the international scene as though from a great distance. Annual reports were dutifully compiled, along with speculations on how long Chiang Kai-Shek would last and whether the pro KMT vote would hold up in the annual General Assembly vote on China’s Security Council seat. The annual review for 1966 from Tamsui the Consul R. Bereton wrote:

‘The Nationalists can look back with some satisfaction on the year 1966…their régime continued smoothly its oligarchic existence under CKS, but the latter now appears to be taking steps to ensure that his son CCK can assume effective power on his death. (the Nationalists) appear confident that they will be continue to retain China’s seat in the UN…’

Although this was the period of the bai si kongbu, there is little mention of the brutality of the regime beyond occasional statistics of the number of executions the authorities admitted to. The numbers of landings of defecting PRC pilots are reported, though the almost equal number of pilots defecting the other way is never mentioned. Perhaps the Consular staff had learned their lesson from Tingle’s experience in the post-war period — expressions of concern for the Taiwanese people were likely to become ‘subjective’ and even ‘un-professional’ by the time they reached Whitehall. One notices that year by year the Tamsui reports, as excellently drafted as ever, were going down less well in London. (Minute: ‘Do we really have to thank for this __ it’s still a bit long’) Yet it is hardly surprising if attention was focussed on Beijing, where, after all, they were burning down the consulate building. Any tendency to satisfaction with the status quo in Taipei would have been premature, however, for in respects there was writing on the wall, concerning both the UN question and the future of the Hong Mao Cheng.

In December 1968 a letter arrived at the FO from an A.F.Maddox of the Colonial Secretariat, Hong Kong, headed Representation in Taiwan. This made out a detailed case for the immediate closure of the Tamsui consulate in the interests of better relations with Beijing. In Maddox’ opinion, the Tamsui Consulate had become a liability, frequently complained of by the Peking authorities, and of negligible importance in terms of trade and cultural connections. It was an embarrassment to Hong Kong and its closure could easily be justified as an economy measure, without any politically adverse repercussions.

The Tamsui Consul R.J.Bray responded with a plea for the usefulness of their work, claiming that the Foreign Minister in Taipei was firmly in favour of continuation and that America and Japan were sympathetic. The topic was passed around the Foreign Office and a flurry of minutes resulted, arguing not so much the case for preservation as offering guesses at the probable beneficial impact on Peking relations. The Research Department was asked to trawl the records to find instances of Communist spokesmen raising the question in interviews, but the results were indecisive — the point had only been raised on rare occasions over the years, in some cases only to visiting businessmen. There were suspicions that the Beijing Consulate might be behind the move, though the Chargé d’Affaires at the time, Percy Craddock, was on record as saying that he thought the gesture would have little impact.

There are some oddities in this period. Parliamentary questions suddenly started being submitted from Conservative back-benchers demanding to know why the
Government still kept a Consulate in Taipei. It was a ruse __ what they were really getting at was why the government had fully broken of all representation with the rebel Ian Smith regime in Rhodesia. If the Foreign Office could sometimes be tricky with Parliament, the reverse was also true.

Underlying the various crises and démarches of the 1960s a further shift of emphasis can be detected. The greatest taboo __ that against displaying any interest in the Free Taiwan opposition groups __ may at first have been an instinctive move to stay on the right side of the KMT, the government ‘we could do business with’, but once recognition had passed to the PRC, it now became a matter of avoiding any action or form of words that could displease Beijing. While there was no longer much need to please Chiang Kai-shek, the Foreign Office had before them the painful example of Canada, where the mere utterance of the words ‘Two Chinas’ by the External Affairs Secretary Paul Martin in 1966, had led to uproar and the last minute cancellation of a State Visit by the Vice President C.K.Yen. Against this background the will of the people of Taiwan was the last thing to be put into the equation; the Taiwan Consulate had long since ceased to be useful in its normal intelligence functions and was looking more than ever like a mere pawn in the Asiatic cold war.

Was there a pro KMT, or perhaps one should rather say anti-Taiwanese, bias in the Foreign Office? As judged by the minutes during the crisis periods there is certainly an institutional tendency to give the side with the upper hand the benefit of the doubt, and find excuses for political oppression. When in 1951 the missionary Leslie Singleton wrote asking for an interview at the FO to explain the views of the Taiwan people, it was minuted that:

‘Mr Singleton has been in Formosa for thirty years as a Presbyterian Missionary, and is quite possibly well informed about the Formosan problems. However it is clear from the second paragraph of his letter that what he had in mind when he made his offer is not a fairly impartial survey of Formosan problems, but a presentation of the case for some kind of Formosan independence. In these circumstances it would be inopportune and possibly embarrassing to see Mr. Singleton and I attach a draft letter declining his offer.’

(This opinion was, however, overruled and Singleton was given his interview, on more considered advice. There is no record of any impression he may have made.)

It is instructive to contrast this with the behaviour of R.H.Scott at about the same time, who on his own initiative circulated reports of his clandestine meeting with CKS’s special representative Dr. Han Li-wu, an ‘old friend and London University graduate’, afterwards circulating, with only the mildest scepticism, a mass of blatant KMT propaganda. (Millions of guerrilla fighters only waiting for the signal to rise up … etc.) While Scott can reasonably be said to have been the KMT’s man in Whitehall, it is perhaps unfair to find him typical of the Foreign Office, and there are also admirable examples of more junior figures both in London and Tamsui, who attempted to keep the record straight about KMT excesses and the politics of the Chiang family.

The Peng Ming-min affair
My previous remarks connect with one particular affair that I should like to explore before concluding. I refer to one of the most newsworthy events of 1970, the escape and appearance in Europe of Peng Ming-min, a sworn enemy of CKS and notable independence advocate, who was serving an eight-year sentence commuted to house arrest. The papers on this case have only recently been released and give further insight into Foreign Office attitudes in this period.

In May 1970 Peng somewhat mysteriously arrived in Stockholm. Headlines around the world such as ‘Escape of Chiang’s enemy’ provided the worst press that the KMT had received for many years. Shortly afterwards he precipitated a minor crisis by asking the British Embassy for a visa in order to come to London and speak at Chatham House. On news of this the Foreign Office did everything it could to block the application, writing to the Home Office that:

Prof. Peng is explicitly coming to lecture on the Taiwan independence movements and cannot be expected to refrain from advocating a solution of the “two Chinas” problem that would deeply offend the Chinese Government. He has accepted invitations from the University of London and the RIIA, and proposes to join in discussions with writers and journalists concerned with Chinese affairs. …’You will appreciate that Prof. Peng Ming-min’s proposed visit to England is potentially a severe irritant to our most delicate relationship with China….’

But in a move that may bring a smile to those of us who have suffered at the hands of the Home Office, the official responsible, one Kay Coates, replied that Peng entirely satisfied the conditions for entry and that, given the tradition of free expression of non-violent political views, he should be admitted.

Peng got his visa and duly appeared at Chatham House. *The Guardian* for the 26th June 1970 commented:

‘Peng, a former United Nations delegate and now the exiled liberal champion of the 11 million native Formosans is Chiang Kai-shek’s main critic. In London he did not talk officially with the Foreign Office, and somebody was making sure that he did not meet officials privately. Invitations to such places as Chatham House were not taken up when it was known that he would be there…’

He returned later in the summer to address the Amnesty International Conference before moving to an academic post in the States.

The Peng Min-Ming affair, with repercussions in London, Washington and Beijing, had one important result; for the first time in many years, the Foreign Office opened an extensive file on *Taiwanese opposition to the KMT in Taiwan*, and began research this with input from Tamsui, and Washington. Although this mainly contained newspaper cuttings, and may have been concerned more with damage-limitation than understanding, it represented a step in the direction of awareness that a quarter-century of oppression had not extinguished the independence movement and its striving for a voice. A measure of its newly raised profile was the articles that appeared in the People’s Daily at the time furiously condemning the movement and particularly the Sato government in Japan for allowing the exiles to operate there.

The demise of the Hong Mao Cheng
By 1972 events surrounding the Hong Mao Cheng were moving rapidly towards a final act. Though the staff in Tamsui seemed confident and had even begun to negotiate a move of the Consulate to central Taipei, they must have known which way the diplomatic wind was blowing. At one point there was even a minor conspiracy to stop the Consul’s monthly visit to Hong Kong in case officials there should be forced to reveal was being planned behind his back.

Nixon and Kissinger had been to Peking in July 1971; Canada had finally recognized the PRC in October 1970; and there were signs of equivocation on the next UN admission vote. There had been much discussion of the so-called Canadian and Italian options. Canada was promoting the idea, almost certainly unworkable, of giving the PRC a General Assembly seat while Taiwan retained its permanent membership of the Security Council. Italy favoured yet another attempt to create a UN Commission.

On the 25th October 1971, ‘the sword of Damocles that had been hanging over Taiwan finally fell’__ as the Far Eastern Economic Review put it at the time. The General Assembly voted 59 to 55 with 15 abstentions for the admission of the PRC, a US amendment to require a two-thirds majority having first been defeated. It would be another seven years before President Carter at last recognized Peking and allowed the Taiwan Defence Treaty to lapse, but the way towards this was now clear.

On March 13th 1972 the Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas Home rose in the House of Commons to make the following announcement:

‘When early last year we decided to resume discussions with the Chinese Government, we told them that if an agreement on the exchange of Ambassadors were reached we would be prepared to withdraw our Consulate from Taiwan. This we shall now do’

The House was evidently pleased and Dennis Healey warmly congratulated the government from the Labour benches. It fell to the Conservative backbencher Sir Gilbert Longden to ask the only awkward question ( one that, to the credit of Parliament, had been asked many times before in PQs) :

‘Can the Government assure us that it will take into account the wishes of the people of Taiwan other than the Chinese Nationalists there?’

To which Home replied:

‘I do not have any indication of the wishes of the people of Taiwan’

Given the considerable bulk of Foreign Office material relating quite explicitly to the wishes of the Taiwanese people, one may pause to consider whether this statement by the Foreign Secretary, showed a simple want of competence, or whether it was, not for the first time, a wilful deception of Parliament.

18 pages 9241 words

1 Given the present format this can only be a brief precis with highlights. It will not be possible to include full quotations or references for the files used, or to present a proper critical analysis at
this opportunity. However I shall be happy to supply a fuller version with ‘chapter and verse’ and file-referenced quotations to researchers with a more specialized interest.

2 For the less familiar with British political history I recall that the governments and Prime Ministers in power during the years 1945-1972 were: Labour, 1945-49 (Attlee); 1951-64 Conservative (Churchill, Eden, Macmillan, Home); 1964-70 Labour (Wilson); 1970-74 Conservative (Heath).

3 It seems worth mentioning that one remarkable question was never to be a part of British Taiwan diplomatic relations. This was the subject of war crimes committed by Taiwanese involved in the ill-treatment and murder of British prisoners of war, particularly the several hundred condemned to forced labour in the mines near Khaosiung. Though incriminating records were kept and can be consulted, it seems that the Taiwanese war-criminals, some of whom may still be alive, were never pursued, in part, as the files record, because, unlike their Japanese officers, they succeeded in hiding their names from the surviving prisoners.

4 Though it would be interesting to give more on the ‘228’ reports here, space limitations forbid, and in any case I have described them in detail for the 50th anniversary conference in Taipei in 1997. All files quoted can be seen in the National Archives at Kew, along with much other background material for this lecture. A few reprints of my 1997 lecture are available for Chinese readers if interested, and an English vision appears in the book: An Introduction to 2-28 Tragedy in Taiwan: For World Citizens, (Ed.) Tsung-Yi Lin, Taipei, 1998.