

# 2019

## H-Diplo

 [@HDiplo](https://twitter.com/HDiplo)

Article Review  
No. 853  
30 April 2019

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse  
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

**Brian Hilton. “‘Taiwan Expendable?’ Reconsidered.”** *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 25:3 (2018): 296-322. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02503004>.

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR853>

Review by **Jeffrey Crean**, Bush School of Public Service and International Affairs, Texas A&M University

---

In December 1978, when the United States ambassador in Taipei informed Chiang Ching-kuo that the U.S. had agreed to establish full diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and thus sever diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC), the Taiwanese leader reportedly wept.<sup>1</sup> It was an all-too-fitting end to an agonizing decade of estrangement between American presidents and the leaders of what their ardent U.S. supporters once termed ‘Free China.’ With a now-less hostile mainland beckoning, the island outpost of Taiwan appeared to have outlived its usefulness.

This was the argument made by Nancy Bernkopf Tucker in her 2005 article “Taiwan Expendable: Nixon and Kissinger Go to China.” Bernkopf Tucker claimed that neither President Richard Nixon “nor [National Security Advisor Henry] Kissinger actively worried about the survival of the government under Chiang Kai-shek” and in fact “rarely reflected on Taiwan at all.”<sup>2</sup> Thirteen years and numerous additional extant documents later, Brian Hilton presents a strong rebuttal in his article “‘Taiwan Expendable’ Reconsidered.” Hilton counters that “the Nixon administration actually gave much consideration to the island’s future and was reluctant to abandon the ROC despite the improving Sino-American relationship.”<sup>3</sup> Hilton makes a strong and convincing case, offering a valuable contribution to scholarship on an oft-overlooked aspect of this much-studied Cold War-era diplomatic revolution. His article provides a useful corrective to Bernkopf

---

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China: An Investigative History* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 271.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, “Taiwan Expendable: Nixon and Kissinger Go to China,” *Journal of American History* 92:1 (June 2005), 110.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Paul Hilton, “‘Taiwan Expendable?’ Reconsidered,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 25:3 (2018), 298.

Tucker's, yet fails to fully confront an important aspect of her argument due to an overly narrow perspective of the events under consideration. Nonetheless, this is a worthy piece that succeeds on its own terms.

In part, Tucker's intention was to demystify Nixon's best-known foreign policy triumph, which has transcended the historical discipline to become the subject of everything from an acclaimed opera to a joke on the television show "30 Rock."<sup>4</sup> She argued that Nixon, in his eagerness for rapprochement with the Chinese communists, "surrendered more than was necessary" when it came to Taiwan's future security. For Bernkopf Tucker's Nixon, Taiwan "must not stand in the way of his anticipated foreign policy triumph."<sup>5</sup> As evidence, she cites U.S. promises to swiftly remove military personnel from the island, a half-hearted and confused attempt to keep Taiwan in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, and Nixon's all-around shabby and at times deceitful treatment of Chiang, his government, and his diplomatic representatives. Taiwan mattered more to Mao than it did to Nixon, and the Chinese were able to capitalize on this asymmetry.

To make these arguments, Bernkopf Tucker relied on a large number of published primary sources, supplemented with the first batch of Nixon administration archival documents on the topic. With the benefit of much additional documentation, Hilton ably counters much of what Bernkopf Tucker put forth. First, he provides numerous quotes from Nixon expressing strong attachment to the Taiwanese regime and his admiration for its achievements. In addition, using the transcripts of Henry Kissinger's 1971 meetings in Beijing with Zhou Enlai, Hilton demonstrates that Nixon's National Security Adviser stoutly resisted the Chinese Premier's maximalist demands for the severing of U.S. ties with the island. When it came to the withdrawal of military personnel, Hilton argues that it was of a piece with the Nixon Doctrine's emphasis on allied self-defense and U.S. retrenchment, was in no way done precipitously, and was not the result of PRC demands. With regards to the UN, Hilton agrees with Chris Tudda that the administration did everything it could to keep the ROC in the General Assembly, but was hampered by Taiwanese tactical stubbornness.<sup>6</sup>

Central to Hilton's arguments is a framing of Nixon's Taiwan policy as reflective of the so-called Nixon Doctrine for establishing a post-Vietnam regional order in Asia. Hilton identifies four components to Nixon's grand strategy, which can be grouped into two pairs of concepts, each a connection of means to ends. The first pair was the goal of gradual change, achieved through negotiations. The second was greater reliance on the efforts of allies, with this weening from U.S. dependency achieved gradually so as to preserve both regional stability and American credibility. Applied to the Chinese situation, the first pair of principles dictated a slow rapprochement with the PRC through personal high-level diplomatic encounters, and the second a gradual and further outsourcing of Taiwanese security to indigenous defense forces. The courting of an adversary would not entail the abandonment of an ally.

Hilton acknowledges that U.S.-ROC relations during the Nixon years were often rocky, but situates this in the context of an always fraught relationship. Even when cooperation was closest during the Eisenhower

---

<sup>4</sup> John Adams's "Nixon in China," premiering in 1987. Liz Lemon defending Nixon in a moment of sentimental weakness: "He did so much for China!"

<sup>5</sup> Bernkopf Tucker, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Tudda. *A Cold War Turning Point: Nixon and China, 1969-1972* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

administration, the U.S. President viewed Chiang as an obstreperous burden who made needless trouble for his great power patron and protector. Yet Nixon was still devoted to the regime's continued existence, and had great faith in the abilities of Chiang's son and heir apparent.

Bernkopf Tucker concludes by claiming that the U.S. commitment to Taiwan's de facto existence continued in spite of Nixon, due to a popular domestic groundswell reflected by subsequent congressional actions. For Hilton, these domestic political considerations are irrelevant. Nixon supported Taiwan, not out of negative fears of domestic political costs, but positive evaluations of Taiwan's regional usefulness, particularly as an example of successful capitalist economic development in East Asia which could be usefully contrasted with the mainland's status as an economic basket case. The authors' differing takes on Taiwan entail a revealing contrast in explanations for subsequent complications in the emerging U.S.-PRC relationship. The authors are in agreement that these occurred, and that they did so largely because of Chinese misperceptions of U.S. views on Taiwan. For Bernkopf Tucker, Nixon's abandonment of Taiwan deluded the Chinese Communist leadership into thinking the rest of the American political establishment shared his apathy. The discovery that this was not the case caught them off-guard, and made them feel somewhat deceived. For Hilton, the Chinese came to believe that Nixon had put one over on them, his stubborn defense of Taiwan's interests leading them to question "what the new relationship with Washington had bought for them."<sup>7</sup>

Any piece on this topic must address U.S. behavior surrounding the UN votes of October 1971 which replaced the ROC with the PRC in both the Security Council and the General Assembly. Actions in New York that month were colored by those in Beijing. After visiting China that July, Kissinger returned on the very eve of the UN vote. The optics of this visit were, at the very least, problematic. Whether the Nixon administration intended so, it was impossible not to read Kissinger's presence in the Chinese capital as a signal to U.S. allies that if the administration were forced to choose between outreach to the mainland or protection of Taiwan, it would select the former, if it in fact had not already done so. To quote a press release from The Committee of One Million Against the Admission of Communist China to the United States—the leaders of what remained of the so-called China Lobby—"just at the time when Secretary of State William Rogers and Ambassador [to the UN] George Bush were announcing an all-out effort to prevent the expulsion of the Republic of China, the White House ostentatiously sent Kissinger to Peking. Other nations got the signal, and voted accordingly."<sup>8</sup>

While Bernkopf Tucker makes much of the timing of Kissinger's second visit, Hilton ignores its awkwardness, or the signals it sent, instead focusing on how the U.S. pursued its quixotic attempts at 'dual representation' in the face of PRC objections. Though he does not say so explicitly, Hilton implies that by October 1971 the ROC's expulsion from the UN was a foregone conclusion, the U.S. had already done all it could to prevent such a result, and therefore the visit had no effect on the votes and in no way reflected a betrayal by Nixon of Taiwan.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hilton, 321.

<sup>8</sup> Press Release, Committee of One Million, 27 October 1971, 2, Folder Committee of One Million General/non-printed material, 1968-1971, Box 177, Walter Judd Papers, Hoover Institute Archives.

## H-Diplo Article Review

Bernkopf Tucker devotes considerable space to an outlining of the history of U.S.-PRC relations during the two decades of non-recognition, including a step-by-step narrative of how Nixon began the process of ending the period Warren Cohen termed “The Great Aberration.”<sup>9</sup> Hilton, on the other hand, focuses in far greater depth than Bernkopf Tucker on Nixon’s approach to grand strategy and diplomatic tactics. This in part explains why their arguments diverge. Another explanation is their divergent perspective on the events they both describe in-depth. It is in its perspective that the main weakness in Hilton’s work emerges. Betrayal is not defined by the betrayer, but by the betrayed.

Even if Nixon did not consider Taiwan to be expendable, he may still have failed to convey that vital piece of information to the Taiwanese. Hilton does not discuss the opinions of Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ching-kuo, or other ROC leaders concerning Nixon’s actions. By contrast, Bernkopf Tucker presents abundant evidence that these actors firmly believed Nixon had betrayed and abandoned them. At the very least, Hilton should have addressed Taiwanese sentiment, if only to point out that it was misplaced and based upon a misunderstanding of the situation. A few paragraphs on this matter would have made the article even better. Nonetheless, this noticeable oversight in no way detracts from the strength and validity of Hilton’s central arguments. He presents a worthy rebuttal to an important work by a legendary historian, thus enhancing his own scholarly stature.

**Jeffrey Crean** holds a doctorate in History from Texas A&M University. He is currently a Lecturer in International Affairs at the Bush School of Public Service and International Affairs and Texas A&M University, and a Lecturer in History and Government at Blinn College. He has published articles in *Diplomacy & Statecraft* and *War & Society*. Currently, he is adapting his dissertation, “With Fear and Favor: A Rising China and the Path to Normalization, 1954-1971,” into a book manuscript.

© 2019 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](#)

---

<sup>9</sup> Warren Cohen, *America’s Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Columbia University Press), 2015.