

# **From Cold War shadows to democratic diplomacy: Navigating Taiwan-Australia relations**

In the realm of international diplomacy, intricate dynamics often emerge, shaped by a confluence of historical imperatives, cultural intricacies, and geopolitical pressures. Australia's nuanced engagement with Taiwan post-Cold War is an exemplar of these complexities. While Australia's formal diplomatic pivot towards the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1972 represents a seminal juncture, it remains imperative to also acknowledge its continuing rapport with Taiwan.

The narrative of Australia-Taiwan relations has been somewhat eclipsed by burgeoning Sino-Australian ties. However, historical archives reveal a robust and multifaceted interaction between Australia and Taiwan, predicated on political alignment, grassroots interaction, and a shared commitment to democracy. This paper elucidates the often-underrepresented facets of Australia's diplomatic overtures towards Taiwan, advocating for a perspective that transcends the traditional paradigms encapsulated within 'One China' narratives. It emphasises the interconnected nature of diasporic communities and diplomatic strategies, highlighting Australia's strategic positioning between Taiwan and China in the broader context of global geopolitics.

## **Cold War initiatives**

On October 1, 1949, Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), marking the conclusion of the intense civil war with the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT). Following this, the KMT, led by Chiang Kai-shek, retreated to Taiwan, maintaining its governance as Nationalist China. Australia undertook four significant initiatives in diplomacy with Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s: the visit of a parliamentary delegation to Nationalist China in 1956, recognition of an ROC (Republic of China, or Taiwan) ambassador to Australia in 1959, Australia's establishment of an embassy in Taipei in 1966 and the visit of Prime Minister Harold Holt to Taiwan in 1967.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, the decision to establish diplomatic ties with Taiwan was influenced by a prevailing fear of Communist China spreading its

influence into Southeast Asia. The United States played a significant role in pushing Australia towards this decision. Yet Australia found itself at the crossroads of a complex debate on the strategic importance of Nationalist China on an independent Taiwan and on recognition of Communist China.

One of the advocates for Nationalist China in the Australian Parliament, W. S. Kent Hughes (a federal minister in the 1950s for the Liberal party), frequently raised questions about Australia's stance and advocated for recognising Chiang Kai-shek's leadership in Taiwan. Documents archived among Hughes' papers reflect his eagerness for clarification from Canberra regarding the undefined relationship between Nationalist China and Australia, a connection that surpassed the conventional categorisation of 'Friends and Neighbours' (as Hughes put it) without, at that time, quite reaching the point of full diplomatic relations.

Hughes believed that aligning strategically with Nationalist China would serve Australia's interests in Southeast Asia by securing support from the wider Chinese diaspora and addressing strategic security considerations in the region. However, the debate within Australia's corridors of power was far from straightforward. Limited access to direct intelligence about Nationalist China, coupled with concerns about Chiang Kai-shek's global political standing and difficult relations between the Chinese Nationalist government and Formosans (which refers to Taiwanese who lived on the island before 1945 and their descendants) created a complex tapestry that kept the relationship with Nationalist China undecided for some years. Formal recognition of an Ambassador for the Republic of China on Taiwan required improved intelligence and further direct information for Australia. Satisfaction of government concerns resulted in official acceptance of Ambassador Chen Chih-mai in 1959.

Chen Chih-mai's diplomacy in Canberra was well-received. From his personal papers, now available in Taipei, it is clear that Chen believed that the Australian diplomatic delegation visiting Nationalist China and Nationalist China officials visiting Taiwan held great political significance. Chen's personal records demonstrate the growing importance of people-to-people diplomacy during the Cold War. He documented an increasing number of Australian visitors, including many who toured Taiwan around the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. Before Australia switched recognition from ROC Taiwan to the PRC in 1972, Australia was the fifth largest source of international tourists visiting Taiwan, showcasing increasing curiosity and engagement during that era.

Chen's diplomatic contributions cannot be overlooked. At a private banquet with the then Prime Minister of Australia, Harold Holt, the establishment of the Australian Embassy in Taipei was accepted. The following year, Holt visited Nationalist China. These initiatives were founded on the personal ties that Ambassador Chen built up during his term in Australia, transforming interpersonal friendships into significant diplomatic achievements.

However, Nationalist China's diplomacy during the Cold War did not dictate Australia's Taiwan policy, which navigated a range of contradictions over China involving the positions of the US and the UK, as well as other countries with close ties to Australia, before reaching a satisfactory accommodation with mainland China. While in Opposition, the then leader of the Labor Party Gough Whitlam visited China in July 1971 three months ahead of the United Nations expelling the Nationalist China representative from the chamber, in favour of recognising the PRC as sole legitimate representative of China to the United Nations. This marked a critical juncture leading to the severance of formal diplomatic ties between Australia and ROC Taiwan after the Whitlam government was elected in late 1972.

## **The Cold War legacy and telling Australia's 'Taiwan story'**

The termination of diplomatic ties in 1972 marked a turning point, not just in political relations, but in the larger tapestry of people-to-people connections of those times. The cessation of official diplomatic channels did not deter sustained efforts by individuals and organisations to bridge the gap. The Sino-Australian Cultural and Economic Association in Taipei and the Australia-Free China Association in Sydney emerged as custodians of these enduring ties.

Key figures such as Douglas Darby—a Liberal Party parliamentarian in the Australian state of New South Wales an anti-communism supporter and, in 1961, a founding member of the Australia-Free China Association—left an indelible mark on people-to-people relations. In 1973, helped establish the Taiwan Travel Service, issuing authorised letters for visas to facilitate ongoing economic and cultural exchanges between Australia and Nationalist China. This initiative continued until 1981. Through the Australia-Free China Association he sponsored Taiwan's first lifesaving association. Darby's anticommunist internationalism brought him a form of belated regard but it was not popular in Australia in the period following PRC

recognition and led to his political isolation within Australia at that time.

People-to-people ties linking Australia and Taiwan were also aided by the growing interest of the Australian public in Asia during the 1950s and 1960s. Frank Clune, an Australian writer, introduced Taiwan to Australians through his work 'Flight to Formosa.' At the same time, local Chinese communities actively sustained social events supporting Taiwan engaging with officials and friends, and fostering cultural exchanges. These events included Chinese students who had connections with Taiwan, further enriching the cultural ties between the communities.

Australian-Asian sociability and travel left a lasting imprint on Australians' understanding of Asia and its cultures, which also played a role in shaping public opinion during shifts in policy making, particularly with respect to Asian immigration. However, despite the evolving dynamics of public engagement with Asia, foreign policy in Australia was predominantly shaped in compliance with international agreements and protocols, which often presented formidable obstacles to pursuing people-to-people interactions outside the scope of formal diplomacy.

From 1974, for example, the Australia government required formal declarations, even from Taiwanese businesspeople and family members traveling from Taiwan to Australia, that their visit did not represent official recognition for either Nationalist China or Taiwan. This, while ostensibly a procedural matter, underscored Canberra's foreign policy priorities which paid little regard to people-to-people engagement and favoured national interests narrowly conceived through trade and geopolitical lenses.

In the 1980s, Canberra came around to acknowledging that people-to-people contacts transcended the Cold War geopolitical framework. The lifting of Taiwan's Martial Law in 1987 marked a pivotal moment, allowing Taiwanese people to travel freely and live abroad. The Taiwanese diaspora in Australia flourished from the late 1980s, and became instrumental in fostering trade, investment, education, cultural ties, and community life in Australia. This shift in perspective reflected a broader recognition of the importance of interpersonal connections beyond traditional geopolitical considerations.

Taiwan's growing middle class played an historic role in supporting non-party candidates, gradually changing the authoritarian politics of the Chiang Kai-shek regime. This internal transformation had a significant impact on Taiwan's political landscape, challenging the traditional power structures and contributing to the

island's democratic evolution.

The case of the late Professor Chwei-Liang Chiou illustrates the complex domestic and international politics of this transitional period. A Taiwan democracy activist who migrated to Australia in 1971, Chiou taught at the University of Queensland for more than 40 years. His writing, critical of the authoritarianism of Nationalist China, led to his blacklisting in Taiwan and a prohibition on his return to Taiwan—a common occurrence during the martial law period. Although Canberra was aware of the case, it failed to leverage insights from his writing. On the contrary, Darby's paper indicates that the Liberal Party used Chiou's case to argue that the government of ROC Taiwan was not based on democratic values, and that economic exchanges with Taiwan remained inconsequential in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition. They failed to read Chiou's experience, as a champion of democratic reform, as a harbinger of things to come in Taiwan.

Starting in the 1980s, Chiou's columns in Chinese language media in Taiwan, the US, and Australia inspired many to discover and understand Taiwanese peoples' aspirations for democracy. At the same time, he lamented that Taiwan had become an orphan in the global village. Taiwanese Australians felt isolated from other Australians and from the broader Chinese community, prompting the emergence of a distinct Taiwanese civic identity in the late 1980s which led in time to significant divisions among local communities related to Nationalist China and Communist China.

A similar transformation was under way in Taiwan. The emergence of a distinctly Taiwanese identity, especially following the first Presidential election in 1996 and the Taiwan Strait Crisis of that time, intensified tensions among Chinese communities in Australia. The issue of Taiwan independence continued to be a focal point in the Chinese Cold War, perpetuating division and ideological conflicts within these communities. Starting in the 1990s, organisations such as the Taiwan Association in Australia and The Australian Federation of Overseas Taiwanese Associations, began urging Australians to support democracy in Taiwan, just as Australia supported democracy elsewhere in the region.

They also appealed to the Taiwanese government. Taiwanese in Brisbane pushed for the opening of a Taipei Cultural and Economic Office in that city and for creation of the Queensland Taiwanese Centre, in 2006 and 2008 respectively, to promote increased economic, educational, and cultural exchanges between Taiwan and Australia. The Taiwanese diaspora's success in appealing to local authorities for

clear ties between Australia and Taiwan is evidenced in expanding 'sister-city' links between Brisbane and Kaohsiung. Their success in sister-city relations has been highlighted and recommended by a recent Australian Strategic Policy Institute report encouraging further partnerships between Australian cities and cities in Taiwan.

## **Decoding the past: Lessons from Cold War documents**

Bilateral relations are being dramatically redefined by new technologies and modes of communication, particularly new spaces for engagement in the social and cultural dimensions. Measured by levels of engagement alone—whether cultural or economic—it is clear that Taiwan and Australia are connected extensively even in the absence of formal diplomatic ties.

The Taiwanese diaspora has played a crucial role in facilitating these engagements, such as the sister-city relationship between Brisbane and Kaohsiung. This is a story that encapsulates the essence of the Taiwan-Australia relationship—a tale of interconnected stories and of resilient bonds that surpass political constraints. From the uncharted territories of Cold War documents to the unexpected sociability of diplomatic exchanges and emergence of Taiwanese diaspora identity, new stories of engagement are emerging, tales woven not just in discourse but through the shared experiences of individuals and the new challenges that Australia and Taiwan confront together with connections that have withstood the test of time.

The Cold War legacy, far from being a faded echo, resonates again in flourishing trade, cultural ties, and shared community life between Australia and Taiwan, reinvigorated by a range of new geopolitical challenges confronting Australia and Taiwan together. Taiwan's evolution from a seeker of formal diplomatic ties to an advocate for people-centric diplomacy mirrors these broader global trends, of nations seeking collective defence against the continuing threat of authoritarian encroachment that takes new forms from one era to the next. As democracies that value human and civil rights, and protect freedom of association, speech and religion, Australians and Taiwanese are in this together once again.

This, indeed, is the heart of the Taiwan-Australia story. Looking ahead, the lessons from these Cold War documents serve as a compass, guiding Australia towards a future where meaningful exchanges and digital-age collaborations are keys to

navigating the complex geopolitical currents of a new era, facing challenges that carry echoes of the past.

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*Image Credit: Photography by Gilbert Yang at the Australian Day celebration of the Taiwanese Community in 2005, prominently featuring the late Prof Chwei-Liang Chiou in the foreground. Courtesy of Flora Chiou.*