

A History of Taiwan's Secret Nuclear Program

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Abstract : This paper analyzes the history of Taiwan's secret program to develop its nuclear weapons during the Cold War. In July 1971, US President Richard Nixon shocked the world when he announced that his national security adviser Henry Kissinger had made a secret trip to China and that he himself had accepted an invitation to travel to Beijing. This huge breakthrough in the US-PRC relationship was followed by Taipei's loss of political legitimacy and international credibility as a result of its UN debacle in the fall that year. Confronted with the Nixon White House's opening to the PRC, leaders in Taiwan felt being betrayed and abandoned, and they were obliged to take countermeasures for the sake of national interest and regime survival. Taipei's endeavor to create an effective nuclear program, including the possible development of nuclear weapons capabilities, fully demonstrates the government's resolution to pursue its own national policy, even if such a policy was guaranteed to undermine its relations with the United States. With hindsight, Taiwan's attempt to develop its own nuclear weapons did not succeed in sabotaging the warming of US-PRC relations. Worse, it was forced to come to a full stop when, in early 1988, the US government pressured Taipei to close related facilities and programs on the island. However, Taiwan's abortive attempt to develop its nuclear capability did influence Washington's and Beijing's handling of their new relationship. There did develop recognition of a common American and PRC interest in avoiding a nuclearized Taiwan. From this perspective, Beijing's interests would best be served by allowing the island to remain under loose and relatively benign American influence. As for the top leaders on Taiwan, such a policy choice demonstrated how they perceived the shifting dynamics of international politics in the 1960s and 1970s and how they struggled to break free and pursue their own independent national policy within the rigid framework of the US-Taiwan alliance during the Cold War.

Keywords : taiwan, richard nixon, nuclear program, chiang Kai-shek, chiang ching-kuo

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