

Review - Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the U.S. Navy

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WONHEE LEE, MAY 27 2016

Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the U.S. Navy
By Bruce A. Elleman
Rowman & Littlefield, 2014

In *Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the U.S. Navy*, Professor Bruce A. Elleman at the Naval War College shrewdly traces the origins and development of U.S. policy in the Taiwan Strait from 1949 to the present day. The central argument of the book is that the presence of the U.S. Navy in the Taiwan Strait has arguably remained “uninterrupted to this day” and contributed to the long-term stability of cross-Strait relations (p. 160). Readers interested in the author’s publications will find that the book is a revised and extended version of his Naval War College Newport Paper, “High Seas Buffer: The Taiwan Patrol Force, 1950-1979.” In the earlier work, the account of the U.S. maritime presence in the post-1979 era remains somewhat inadequately incorporated into the thesis on the Taiwan Patrol Force (TPF), which officially terminated its operations in the area in 1979. For instance, it characterizes the U.S. intervention in the 1995-1996 crisis as “a continuing buffer operation of the TPF.” By explicitly setting the scope of naval operations beyond the TPF’s patrols in this new book, the author presents a more conceptually coherent and inclusive interpretation of the U.S. Navy’s role in neutralizing the Taiwan Strait.

The book is chronologically divided into ten chapters. The first briefly introduces the major historical events about Taiwan’s separation ranging from the mainland from the 17th-century Dutch occupation to the Nationalist Party’s retreat to the island in 1949. The second documents the cross-Strait tensions running high since the late 1940s and the deployment of the U.S. 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Strait after the outbreak of the Korean War. The subsequent five chapters cover a broad range of U.S. actions in the Taiwan Strait during the 1950s. Those include the establishment of Task Force 72, also known as the TPF, within the 7th Fleet, the support for the Nationalist blockade of mainland China, the initiation of the U.S.-led strategic embargo program, and the provision of military and economic assistance to the Nationalists. These chapters also illustrate various aspects of the U.S. Navy’s existence—it upgraded capabilities of the Nationalist Navy, performed shows of force in the Taiwan Strait, and deterred territorial ambitions of both Beijing and Taipei. In particular, the 7th Fleet evacuated Nationalist troops and civilians from the Dachen Islands in the later stage of the 1954-1955 crisis and escorted Nationalist vessels resupplying Jinmen during the crisis of 1958. The eighth examines the nexus between the Nixon administration’s decision to cease permanent Taiwan Strait patrols and its efforts to establish détente with Beijing and Moscow. The ninth narrates the development and conclusion of the crisis of 1995-1996, and the last chapter recounts the post-2008 cross-Strait rapprochement and the mounting Washington-Beijing tensions along the key sea-lanes of East Asia in the 2000s. The conclusion seeks to chart a more manageable course for U.S. relations with both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

The author builds his analysis on reminiscences of key U.S. Navy figures, manuscript and archival collections in the U.S. and U.K., and official documents released by Washington, Beijing, and Taipei. It also draws on the ample secondary literature written or edited by renowned experts in the field of China studies, such as Robert Accinelli, Richard C. Bush, John W. Garver, Ramon H. Myers, and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker to name a few. To be sure, the book’s main strength lies in the treatment of the naval policy of the U.S. as a unique lens through which to investigate the trajectory of the trilateral Beijing-Taipei-Washington relationship. However, what makes the book unusual is not

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its attention to the security dimension of the U.S. Navy's neutralization policy but its attempt to construct a comprehensive narrative of U.S. involvement in East Asia. Throughout the book, the author's emphasis is on the context in which the U.S. Navy's presence in the Taiwan Strait has continued to alter the political, economic, and military landscape of East Asia. For example, concerning the Washington-led strategic embargo against Beijing during the 1950s, the author puts his primary focus on London's worry over its trade with Hong Kong and Beijing's increasing economic dependence on Moscow. Then, he continues to explore the Anglo-American divergence over U.S. Taiwan Strait policy and the impact of the embargo on the deepening Beijing-Moscow split. In this respect, the book serves as a good companion to other scholarly works on cross-Strait relations, the Taiwan factor in American foreign policy, or the Cold War in Asia.

The author's arguments about the logic behind U.S. Navy maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait and its adjacent waters at the turn of the 21st century make the thesis of the book appear less utterly persuasive. Regarding the Bush administration's handling of the Hainan Island EP-3 incident of 2001, the author argues that "the same rationale that led to the creation of the TPF" applied to the proposal of dispatching a U.S. aircraft carrier to the area (p. 136). Still, the question remains whether the *raison d'être* of U.S. Navy patrols can be unequivocally construed as an actual role played by the U.S. Navy. Indeed, as the author notes, the proposal put forward by Admiral Dennis Blair, then commander-in-chief of the Pacific Command, was taken seriously but not implemented—that is to say, the U.S. Navy did not retain a substantive presence in and around the Taiwan Strait at the moment. Rather, to buttress the strategic rationale for U.S. patrol operations, the author could have pointed out the deployment of two U.S. aircraft carriers, the *USS Kitty Hawk* and the *USS Nimitz*, close to Taiwan just days before the Taiwanese presidential election and the referendums on U.N. membership in March 2008. Besides, it would also be worth mentioning recent U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in the part where the author discusses overlapping maritime territorial claims of Beijing and Taipei in the South China Sea.

As a whole, the author makes a strong case for the interplay between U.S. strategic moves in East Asia and its Taiwan Strait policy, thereby elucidating the historical intricacies of the triangular relationship of Beijing, Taipei, and Washington. Despite the long-standing Washington-Taipei security partnership, Asia watchers in the U.S. and abroad are divided over Taiwan's geostrategic significance to the U.S. and its allies in the Asia-Pacific region. While senior officials refraining from making direct statements about Taiwan's position, the Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia" policy announced in November 2011 has neither explicitly included nor excluded Taiwan. Nonetheless, the strategic and operational value of the Taiwan Strait analyzed in the book convincingly reaffirms Washington's decades-long stance that the continuation of cross-Strait peace and stability is vital to U.S. national interests.

About the author:

Wonhee Lee is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at the University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY), specializing in U.S. public policy history and international history. Before joining SUNY, he worked as a researcher at the U.S.-Korea Institute (USKI) at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC. His academic interests lie in U.S. foreign policy in Asia, international relations in Eurasia, and cross-Strait relations. He received his M.A. degree in International Affairs and International Economics from the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University.