

Not Part of China: An Explanation of Japan's Taiwan Policy

By
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On December 3, Hong Kong's main English newspaper, *The South China Morning Post*, [posted](#) on the social media website X, "Breaking: Japan's Sanae Takaichi reaffirms Taiwan is a part of China." The same day, *The United Daily News*, a Taiwanese newspaper, [published](#) a Chinese-language article that mirrored the same claim.

Whether knowingly or not, these headlines promote a false narrative that China wants the world to believe. As an example of complex psychological warfare, the narrative aims to weaken the will of the Japanese public and the international community at large to defend Taiwan against a future Chinese attack. To prevent the weakening of deterrence, it is necessary to set the record straight regarding Japan's policy towards Taiwan.

The 1972 Japan-China Joint Communiqué

The previously cited news reports mischaracterize a comment made by Prime Minister Takaichi, who [told](#) lawmakers, "The Japanese government's basic position regarding Taiwan remains as stated in the 1972 Japan-China Joint Communiqué, and there has been no change to this position." Specifically, she is referring to paragraph 3 of the 1972 communiqué: "The Government of the People's Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People's Republic of China. The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People's Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation."

Importantly, the communiqué does not say that Japan "affirms," "recognizes," "endorses," or "agrees with" the viewpoint of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the communist regime that governs the country today. The communiqué states only that Japan "understands and respects" the PRC's position.

When the United States established diplomatic relations with the PRC, it used similar language. Paragraph 7 of the 1979 U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqué [states](#), "The Government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China." In this context, the word "acknowledges" performs the same function as the phrase "understands and respects" does in the 1972 Japan-China Joint Communiqué.

A key legal distinction lies in whether a government uses the word "recognize," which then constitutes formal acceptance of a claim's legal validity. Japan and the U.S. both stated that they

“recognize” the PRC as the “sole legal government of China.” By recognizing the PRC as the sole legal government of China, Japan and the U.S. were adopting a “One China” policy.

A crucial aspect of the “one China” policy adopted by both Japan and the U.S. is that neither recognizes the PRC’s claim that Taiwan is a part of China; they merely take note of the PRC’s position. Where the American and Japanese policies differ is Japan’s insistence that it “firmly maintains” its stance under Article 8 of the 1945 Potsdam Declaration. Unpacking the meaning of Japan’s reaffirmation of Potsdam requires a review of multiple related declarations and treaties.

Shimonoseki to Cairo to Potsdam

Several treaties and declarations over the last century have shaped how the international community manages the Taiwan situation. Following the First Sino-Japanese War, China’s Qing government [ceded](#), “to Japan in perpetuity and full sovereignty,” the islands of Taiwan and Penghu, as stated within the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki.

Fast forward to before the end of World War II, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Republic of China (ROC) President Chiang Kai-shek issued the 1943 Cairo Declaration, promising the return of territories like Taiwan and Manchuria to China.

At the time, the PRC did not exist. The ROC government replaced China’s Qing government in 1912 and continued to govern China until it was forced out by the Communists in 1949, at which point it took refuge in Taiwan, Penghu, and various other minor islands along the Chinese coast.

Days before the end of the war, the major allies of the U.S., the UK, and the Soviet Union held the Potsdam Conference and issued the Potsdam Declaration, preparing the terms of Japan’s surrender. Article 8 of the 1945 Potsdam Agreement [states](#), “The terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and such minor islands as we determine.”

Following the devastation from the atomic bombings, Japan signed the [Instrument of Surrender](#) at the end of World War II, agreeing to “carry out the provisions of the Potsdam Declaration in good faith” and “take whatever action may be required...for the purpose of giving effect to that Declaration.” Japan transferred administrative control of Taiwan and Penghu to the ROC in 1945. Only a few years after the end of World War II, civil war broke out between the ROC and the PRC on mainland China, leaving Japan no opportunity to formally cede the islands to either rival government. Although the ROC continues to govern those islands to the present day, it never acquired legal sovereignty over them. This is why Taiwan’s status is still often described as “undetermined.”

An International Matter

The Cairo Declaration cannot be implemented as originally intended because the ROC no longer governs China, and even if it did, Japan no longer has the legal capacity to transfer sovereignty. In short, Japan has never recognized Taiwan as part of China. Since 1972, it has acknowledged the PRC's position without endorsing it, while reaffirming its postwar obligation to comply with the terms of Potsdam and Cairo.

As part of re-establishing relationships with the allies, Japan renounced “all right, title, and claim” to Taiwan and Penghu without designating a recipient through the signing of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. Neither the ROC nor the PRC governments were invited to participate, nor were they even mentioned within the treaty.

The San Francisco Peace Treaty is the latest legal document to leave Taiwan's status unresolved, transforming it into an international problem rather than a settled matter of China's domestic sovereignty. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's recent remarks reaffirmed Japan's longstanding position, which is essentially a position of neutrality. Claims to the contrary misread the Japanese Prime Minister's words and the legal history behind them.

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