

BOOK REVIEW

Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC–Taiwan Cross–Strait Tensions, by Bruce A. Elleman.
London: Anthem Press, 2021. ISBN 978-1-83998-556-0 (paperback).

The Taiwan Strait separating the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a vital sea line of communication for the United States and its allies. Recent PRC exercises in response to then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, where the People's Liberation Army Navy crossed the median line—the de facto maritime boundary between the two Chinas—underscored the importance of this narrow strait to the United States. Bruce Elleman's *Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC–Taiwan Cross–Strait Tensions* places the importance of the strait into a historical context in an outstanding, concise history of cross-strait tensions using three case studies centered on the offshore islands that remained under Taiwanese control after the Chinese Civil War: the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, 1954–55; the Evacuation of the Dachen Islands, 1955; and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, 1958. Elleman excellently weaves these case studies together to tell the story of Cross-Strait relations/tensions and of changing American strategic interests and policy in an era of great-power competition.

Taiwan Straits Standoff provides an excellent insight into American strategic decision making at the height of the Cold War. In 1950, Washington intervened in the Taiwan Strait for the first time, establishing the Taiwan Strait Patrol. Elleman demonstrates that Pres. Harry Truman's decision served to protect Taiwan but also severely limited the Nationalists' ability to launch operations against the PRC, thereby preventing a wider conflict as the Korean War raged. Thus, the establishment of the Taiwan Strait Patrol represented the first time the United States acted as a maritime arbitrator in the region, a role Washington still seeks to exercise.

While the United States' first intervened in the Taiwan Strait to prevent a wider war, it was also willing to use the cross-strait tensions to increase pressure on Beijing once the PRC entered the Korean War in November 1950. The offshore island chains were not only potential stepping-stones for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan but also bases from which Nationalist-backed guerillas and pirates launched operations against the PRC, especially shipping. Elleman shows how the Eisenhower administration encouraged Nationalist activities on the outer islands once the PRC entered the Korean War. American encouragement of the Nationalists is an excellent example of Washington utilizing an ally to apply pressure in an era of great-power competition. This pressure alarmed some American allies, most notably the United Kingdom, which had already recognized the PRC as the legitimate government of China. Washington's willingness to con-

front the PRC, albeit surreptitiously, in the Taiwan Strait, however, served to reassure Pacific allies such as Australia, New Zealand, and Japan of the US commitment to contain Asian communism.

The revelation that the United States allowed and encouraged the Nationalists to use the offshore islands to pressure the PRC to negotiate the Korean War ceasefire explains why the PRC began a large-scale bombardment of the Kinmen Islands—Quemoy and Matsu—in September 1954. The PRC operation was not merely an attempt to “mop up” leftover Nationalists forces, as generally understood at the time, but rather an attempt to secure the PRC’s coastline and precipitate a split between Pres. Dwight Eisenhower and Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek. The United States had been wary of supporting the Nationalists on the Kinmen Islands, which are within sight of the PRC but more than 100 miles from Taiwan. Elleman demonstrates that, although the islands were of little strategic value, Washington’s concern over the possible loss of prestige or “face” if the ROC was forced to abandon the islands in the aftermath of the Korean War ensured closer relations between Washington and Taipei.

These closer relations were embodied in the December 1954 US–ROC Mutual Defense Treaty that was signed as the first Straits Crisis raged. In groundbreaking research, Elleman demonstrates that the Mutual Defense Treaty included a secret agreement from Chiang Kai-shek not to launch offensive operations against the mainland without prior American consent. This revelation will lead to a fundamental reinterpretation of US–Taiwan relations and provides a new insight into understanding the cross-strait policy of Taiwan. This revelation also reveals the limitations of Elleman’s sources, which are limited to the US point of view. While understandable, Elleman’s almost exclusive reliance on US sources precludes any real understanding of what was driving policy in Beijing and Taipei and how they interpreted US actions. Future historians who have access to the records in Beijing and Taipei will be able to further flesh out this incredible story and place US policy in a wider Chinese context.

Taiwan Straits Standoff is not merely a history of grand strategy. The chapter on the 1955 Evacuation of the Dachen Islands is a fascinating operational analysis of an evacuation of an allied military force and allied civilians by the US Navy. Although little known or researched, Elleman uses this case study to demonstrate both US commitment to Taiwan and Washington’s willingness to pressure Taiwan while at the same time threatening the PRC with nuclear bombardment if it intervened in a US operation in support of Taiwan.

Taiwan Straits Standoff’s case studies are valuable in and of themselves and ideal readings for an upper-level undergraduate class or as a jumping-off point for future historical research. Elleman, a historian, does not dwell on the lessons for

today that we can learn by studying the 70 years of Cross-Strait tensions. Fortunately, the 2 March 2022 *Indo-Pacific Affairs* podcast where two scholars associated with the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* interview Dr. Elleman allows him to expand on the lessons for today's policy makers and students.¹

Taiwan Straits Standoff should be read by anyone with an interest in the Indo-Pacific, the PRC, or Taiwan. One should not assume that because *Taiwan Straits Standoff* is relatively short it contains little information; it is a rich analysis expertly told and well-illustrated with maps.

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Notes

1. Bruce A. Elleman, "Episode 7 – Interview with Dr. Bruce A. Elleman, US Naval War College," interview by Sze Miller and Shaquille H. James, *Indo-Pacific Affairs* (podcast), 2 March 2022, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.