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The Development of the Two Chinas: From the KMT and CCP's Evolution into the ROC and PRC and the Future Scenarios

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Introduction

The history of modern China is marked by a profound political division that has shaped not only the lives of over a billion people living in China and in Taiwan, but also the geopolitical order of East Asia and of the entire world.

This thesis, *"The Development of the Two Chinas: From the KMT and CCP's Evolution into the ROC and PRC and the Future Scenarios,"* seeks to prove that the current discord between the ROC and the PRC is not only a territorial dispute, but it is a dynamic and evolving conflict characterized by deep historical, ideological and political roots and modern implications.

To do so, this thesis is structured into three main chapters, each examining a distinct historical phase: firstly focusing on the emergence and the interaction between the KMT and the CCP, and then, tracing and analyzing how their respective legacies evolved into two competing Chinese states: the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Mainland China.

The first chapter, *"Historical Context Leading to the Establishment of the KMT and the CCP,"* lays the foundation of the argument of the thesis. It analyzes how the end of imperialism led to the emergence of nationalism and the consequent formation of two mass political parties with two competing visions: the KMT with its nationalist ideals and the CCP with its Marxist-Leninist ideology.

The second chapter, *"The Creation of Alliances and Political Divisions between the KMT and the CCP,"* focuses on the ideological and political divergences and between the KMT and the CCP and the respective shifts in political alliances: from the First and Second United Fronts to the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Civil War, and finally the split between the ROC and the PRC.

The third chapter, *"The Establishment of Two Chinas, Their Relations and Future Scenarios,"* analyzes the establishment of the PRC, the ROC, their relations and the consequences of them in the contemporary global scenario. It compares the political, economic, and ideological paths taken by the PRC and the ROC after the split of 1949, analyzing their internal developments, diplomatic recognition struggles, and cross-strait relations. Moreover, this chapter concludes by outlining the main plausible future scenarios: from the continuation of the status quo to the break out of the armed conflict or peaceful resolution. Each scenario is framed through the lens of current trends, strategic policies, and

the role of international actors such as the United States.

Concluding, the development of the 'Two Chinas' is not just a chain of historical events, but a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and ideological elements that have shaped the current geopolitical order.

1. First Chapter

“Historical Context Leading to the Establishment of the KMT and the CCP”

In order to comprehend the current scenarios between the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China, we must explore the historical developments that led from the millennial imperialism to the separation and development of the “two Chinas”.

1.1 The Fall of the Qing Dynasty and the Consequent Start of the Rise of Nationalism in China

The fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, after the Xinhai Revolution, was a decisive turning point for Chinese history. On one side, it put an end to over two millennia of imperialism, on the other side, it gave the start to the Republic of China in 1912, paving the way to a long struggle towards political stability characterized by the consequent rise of revolutionary and nationalist movements that led to the establishment of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. *“It is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”*¹. In fact, it can be argued that also Chinese nationalism can be seen as a cultural artifacts developed through the influence of internal and external factors, mostly the same demeaning ones that led to the Qing Dynasty’s fall².

For what concerns the internal factors, Qing’s China was characterized by corruption, economic and bureaucratic problems. Indeed, the vast territory’s control and the huge population growth challenged the central government to the point that it lost its authority struggling with local warlords and provincial governors. This led to a general population’s discontent, widespread poverty and lack of trust towards the government. For what concerns the external factors, the last years of Qing’s Dynasty were marked by humiliating military defeats and treaties both with the Imperialist West and Japan.

The external policies of Qing’s dynasty decline started with the two Opium Wars, and their correspictive treaties³. In particular, we must mention the Treaty of Nanjing that put an end to the First Opium War (1839–1842), which was solely fought between the British Empire and the Qing’s dynasty. This dreadful treaty for the Qing’s Empire saw the loss of Hong Kong

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1983): 6.

² Shameer Modongal, “Development of nationalism in China”. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 2:1.

³ Kenneth Pletcher, "Opium Wars." *Encyclopedia Britannica* (February 13, 2025). URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars>. (Last access: 1 March 2025).

Island and the opening of five treaty ports. However, the Second Opium War (1856–1860) was even more devastating and had a more long-lasting impact on the Qing's dynasty and China than the first one. First of all it was not only a conflict between the British Empire and the Qing's dynasty, but it also involved France, Russia and the US. Secondly, after its defeats, China was forced to legalize opium, concede Kowloon and Manchuria, and open even more ports to trade leading to China's loss of control over foreign relations⁴. This gave the start to Western domination in China. In particular in 1860, the British Empire and France took control of Beijing and burned down the Old Summer Palace, the highest symbol of imperial power. Then, they also started establishing some embassies there. This scenario strongly undermined China's sovereignty to the point of starting defining those years: "Century of Humiliation" and leading to the rise of nationalism in China⁵. Having the central government dealing with the Imperialist West allowed the organization of revolts such as the dramatically known Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), which was one of the deadliest uprisings in history: 20-30 million deaths. It originated as an anti-Qing revolt led by Hong Xiuquan, a scholar who imagined himself as the younger brother of Jesus Christ. Even though he did not succeed in overthrowing the Qing dynasty due to the intervention of the Western forces, his rebellion strongly highlighted, once again, the weaknesses of the Qing government and the necessity to rely on local warlords. Moreover, the dramatic defeats in the Opium Wars, led to another impressive turning point for China's image in the global, and particularly Asian scenario: the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). This failure not only proved the diplomatic and military, especially naval and technological skills inferiority in comparison to Japan, determining this latter one as the leading power in East-Asia. But, most importantly, it also saw the Qing government obliged to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Through it, China was forced to recognize Korea's independence, putting an end to Korea's status of Chinese tributary state; to concede Japan trade privileges, to pay it heavy indemnity; and last but not least, to cede the Pescadores Islands and in particular Taiwan to Japan, which can be seen as the core matter at the basis of this thesis and the current dispute on the "two Chinas" between ROC and PRC. In the meantime of these humiliating defeats, the Qing had failed to attempt to introduce some reforms to modernize China and keep up with western powers. Firstly, after the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion, we could mention the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–1895), which included a series of reforms to modernize China keeping the

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Alison A. Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation', Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order", *Pacific Focus* XXXV, No. 1 (April 2010): 4.

traditional Confucian system. Secondly, a more radical attempt to reform China took place after the Sino-Japanese War: the Hundred Days' Reform (1898), whose aim was to transform China into a modern state. However, in the end both these movements failed, deepening popular dissatisfaction, anti-foreign resentment and spreading nationalist ideas such as the one of "saving the Chinese"⁶. This is because before all those failures, Chinese people used to imagine themselves as the center of the world, even though, at that time, China still lacked an official name, a national flag, or any of the defining characteristics of a modern nation-state⁷. As a matter of fact, Liang Qichao, pioneer of the modern Chinese thought who had a central role in the Hundred Days' Reform, even expressed his embarrassment over this, stating, "Nothing makes me more ashamed than the fact our nation has no name"⁸. Nationalism had therefore planted its roots and consequently, Chinese nationalists organized the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), which was an anti-foreign and anti-Christian movement, led by a secret society known as the Boxers: the "Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists". They did attacks on foreigners and Chinese Christians, also besieging embassies in Beijing. In the end, the Qing court, with the Empress Cixi, officially declared war on foreign nations. Nevertheless, this rebellion also failed when an international coalition of eight foreign powers (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the U.S., Japan, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) invaded China, defeating the Boxers and Qing army. In 1901, the Boxer Protocol was signed, leading to even more humiliating consequences for China and even more foreign domination. This emphasizes the necessity of stronger reforms to modernize China while keeping imperial rule in order to save Qing's dynasty. Consequently, the Empress Cixi made the so-called late Qing's Reform. However, in the meanwhile revolutionary groups kept gaining popularity, especially Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance (Tongmenghui), founded in 1905, which reached its tipping point in 1911 with the Wuchang Uprising. The 10th October 1911, in the Hubei province, the Wuchang Uprising took place marking the start of a nationwide revolution: Xinhai Revolution⁹. A provisional government was formed in Nanjing aiming to establish a republic and Sun Yat-sen was elected provisional president. However, since his government lacked military power, he accepted the support of Yuan Shikai, a Qing military general, stepping down as president in Yuan's favor. Then, the last Emperor, Puyi, had to

⁶ Yang Lijun & Lim Chee Kia, "Three waves of nationalism in contemporary China: sources, themes, presentations and consequences". (Singapore: 2010), *East Asian Institute Working Paper* no. 155: 5.

⁷ Ying Jiang, *Cyber-nationalism in China challenging western media portrayals of Internet censorship in China*. (North Terrace: University of Adelaide Press, 2012): 48

⁸ Shameer Modongal "Development of Nationalism in China." *Cogent Social Sciences* 2, no.1 (2016) : 2

⁹ Office of the Historian. 2019. "The Chinese Revolution of 1911." State.gov. United States Department of State. 2019. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/chinese-rev>

abdicate and consequently, on the 12th February 1912 the Republic of China was finally established¹⁰ and was governed by the Beiyang Government (1912-1928).

1.2 The Kuomintang (KMT)

The Kuomintang (KMT), also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party, was the only ruling party of China until 1949.

1.2.1 The Founding of the KMT

The Kuomintang (KMT) is a nationalist, republican and revolutionary party that played a fundamental role in modern Chinese history from its founding during the Qing Dynasty, to its establishment and dominance in the Republic of China (ROC) and its final retreat to Taiwan. It traces its roots in the “Revive China Society” (1894) (兴中会), also known as the “Society for regenerating China”, which was one of the first modern revolutionary groups, created on the 24th November of 1894 by Sun Yat-Sen, during his exile in Honolulu, Hawaii. Sun Yat-Sen, known as the Father of China, was a doctor from Guangzhou that became revolutionary by undermining Qing’s Dynasty, moved by his desires towards a republican form of government for China¹¹. Indeed, taking advantage of the Qing’s defeat in the First Sino Japanese War, he went to Hong Kong, where together with Yeung Ku Wan, president of the Furan Literary Society, merged and planned an uprising in Guangzhou. However, their plans failed, and they were forced by the British Hong Kong government to leave. During that time, various branches of the society were founded around the world, in particular we can mention Taiwan's and San Francisco's in order to expand the Revive China Society and develop its ideas. So, multiple times, Sun Yat-Sen attempted to revitalize the society until 1905, when took place its final mergence with Tongmenghui, also known as “Revolutionary Alliance”, a secret society and an underground resistance movement founded in Tokyo. The Tongmenghui, after the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) with the provisional presidency of Sun Yat-Sen, evolved establishing the Kuomintang (KMT) on 25th August 1912 at the Huguang Guid Hall in Beijing. Sun Yat-Sen became Premier and Huang Xing’s Sun’s deputy. At the Huguang Guid Hall the first elections for the National Assembly took place and the Kuomintang had the majority. At that time, the most influential figure inside the party was Song Jiaoren, who promoted constitutional parliamentary democracy. On February 13, 1912, Sun Yat-Sen decided to

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Simon Long, *Taiwan: China's Last Frontier* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991): 35

abdicate in favor of Yuan Shikai, a former Qing military official, as reward for his helpful contribution during the revolution, hoping he would have supported the Republic. However, it was not like that. Indeed, Yuan Shikai ended China's first attempt towards a democratic republic, by banning political parties and assassinating its parliamentary leader Song Jiaoren. In July 1913, a Second Revolution to depose Yuan Shikai took place. However, this attempt failed leading to the dissolution and exile of KMT and its leaders. Consequently, Yuan Shikai declared himself Emperor of China, bringing back imperialism and leading to the Warlord Era. In the meantime, Sun Yat-sen, during his exile in Japan, established the Chinese Revolutionary Party and then returned to China in 1917 to establish a rival government in Guangzhou, also promoting his Three Principles of the People (Sanmin Zhuyi): Nationalism, Democracy, and People's Livelihood, which became the ideological foundation of then KMT¹². However, he was soon forced out of office and exiled to Shanghai. There, with renewed support, he resurrected the KMT on 10 October 1919, but under the name of the *Chinese Kuomintang*, as the old party had simply been called the Kuomintang. In 1920, Sun and the KMT were restored in Guangdong. In 1923, the KMT and its government accepted aid from Lenin's government and the Comintern, in particular by Mikhail Borodin, a Bolsheviks Revolutionary that strongly advised Sun Yat-Sen in the shaping of the political structure¹³. Indeed, until 1990, the Kuomintang had a Leninist Party structure. Concluding, the founding of the KMT was a decisive moment in China's modern political evolution.

1.2.2 The KMT's Ideologies

The Kuomintang was a nationalist revolutionary party which was influenced by various ideologies over its development. Despite all the influences, the Kuomintang always maintained its core which was based on its founder's idea, Sun Yat-Sen's Three Principles of the People (Sanmin Zhuyi). These principles were conceived in order to develop a strong, unified and modern China, whether in the Mainland or in Taiwan. Indeed, nowadays the Three People's Principles compose the first line of the National Anthem of Taiwan.

These three principles are nationalism, democracy and people's livelihood¹⁴:

The first principle is nationalism (Minzu Zhunyi). Through it, Sun-Yat-sen wanted to reclaim

¹² *Ibid*: 36

¹³ Slavin Morris "Dan N. Jacobs, Borodin: Stalin's Man in China. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. 369 pp.", *International Labor and Working Class History* 20 (1981): 86

¹⁴ SimonLong, *Taiwan: China's Last Frontier* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991): 36

China's sovereignty and advocate for self-determination, in order to create a strong Chinese Nation, opposing imperialism and foreign control over China.

The second principle is democracy (Minquan Zhunyi). Through it, Sun Yat-sen wanted to emphasize the importance of political participation in order to establish a constitutional government.

The third principle is people's livelihood (Minsheng Zhunyi). Through it, Sun Yat-sen wanted to highlight the importance of industrialization and modernization in order to promote economic development while improving social welfare.

The Three People Principles, also known as the Sanmin Doctrine¹⁵ “三民主義”, developed Sun Yat-Sen's political philosophy. He made his first speech on them in Brussels, enabling him to organize the Revive China Society in multiple European cities. Then, Sun expressed these ideas in written, publishing an editorial in *Min Bao* (民報). Moreover, in order to strengthen the KMT, Sun Yat-Sen got the support of the Soviet Union, which reorganized the party, according to Leninism. Inspired by the CPSU, the KMT was structured as a highly centralized, hierarchical party, based on democratic centralism. Later on, after the death of Sun Yat-Sen in 1925 and the rise to power of Chang Kai Shek, the KMT had a more authoritarian turn in order to oppose the Chinese Communist Party, moving away also from Leninism.

The KMT's ideologies had a fundamental role not only shaped its governance in mainland China but also especially after it retreated to Taiwan in 1949, particularly in the transition from authoritarian rule to a multiparty democracy in the late 20th century.

1.3 The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), also known as the Communist Party of China, is the founding and only current ruling party of China, since Mao Zedong's rule and one of the largest in the world.

1.3.1 The Founding of the CCP

The CCP was founded in July 1921 as both a political party and a revolutionary movement by Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu¹⁶ through the help of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Bolsheviks

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ China Briefing, *The Evolution of China's Communist Party, 90 Years in the Making* July 1, 2011 <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/the-evolution-of-chinas-communist-party-90-years-in-the-making/> (Access: 5th March 2025)

and of the Communist International, and consequently inspired by Marxist Theory. Indeed, Chen and Li were the main promoters of marxism during the May Fourth Movement, which is also when the first traces of the rise of CCP can be found¹⁷. The Fourth of May Movement was an anti-imperialist movement that arose from the student protests in Beijing, the 4th May 1919. At that time, many students started protesting in Tiananmen Square against the Chinese Government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles' decision to allow the Japanese Empire to keep the territories of Shandong, previously left by Germany. Consequently, the May Fourth Movement led to the establishment of radical intellectuals who went on to mobilize peasants and workers, strengthening the CCP. So, the Chinese Communist Party embraced the May Fourth Movement and viewed itself as part of the movement's legacy¹⁸. This movement was a turning point in the New Culture Movement (1915-1921) which was a progressive and sociopolitical movement that criticized the traditional Chinese society. The First National Congress of the CCP took place between the 23rd and the 31th July 1921 with a few members, including Mao Zedong. At first, it was held in the Shanghai French Concession then in South Lake and finally led to the establishment of the CCP as a branch of the Communist International, nominating Chen as leader.

1.3.2 The CCP's Ideologies

The CCP's ideology is rooted in Marxism-Leninism, which has evolved according to the changing circumstances, priorities and different influential political leaders; playing a fundamental role in shaping China's political and economic path. As previously stated, the CCP was founded in 1921 on Marxist-Leninist principles, which provided the ideological foundation for its early activities and establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. In particular, Marxism, as formulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, provided a theoretical framework for analyzing class conflict and capitalism's contradictions; while instead Leninism, as developed by Vladimir Lenin, highlighted class struggle and the need of a centralized party to lead a revolution of the working class in order to eliminate feudalism and imperialism, and establishing a socialist society. Then during the early years of the PRC, with the rise of Mao Zedong as political leader, Marxism-Leninism was strongly adapted to China's conditions, creating what became known as Mao Zedong Thought. He highlights the importance of peasants to overthrow the ruling class of that time and reach socialism because

¹⁷ Joseph T. Chen "The May Fourth Movement Redefined." *Modern Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1970): 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

China was mainly an agrarian society. Indeed, Mao's policies, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962)¹⁹ and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), were finalized to accelerate China's socialist transformation through mass mobilization, even though in the end they turned out to be unsuccessful. After Mao's death in 1976, and emergence of Deng Xiaoping as political leader, a new approach to socialism was introduced, later known as Deng Xiaoping Theory: it shifted the focus away from class struggle to economic development. Indeed, under Deng's leadership, the CCP enacted various economic reforms. In particular, we could mention the policy of "reform and opening-up" (改革开放(1978), which turned China into a global economic power while maintaining the CCP's political dominance. Doing this, he introduced the concept that socialism could incorporate market elements without abandoning the party's control, as a primary stage before achieving true communism. From Marxism-Leninism class conflicts to Mao Zedong Thought of revolutionary struggle and mass mobilization, and Deng Xiaoping Theory of economic development, we could affirm that the CCP's ideological flexibility has played a crucial role to allow the party to maintain its political legitimacy while addressing different significant social and economic transformations.

¹⁹ China Briefing, *The Evolution of China's Communist Party, 90 Years in the Making* July 1, 2011 <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/the-evolution-of-chinas-communist-party-90-years-in-the-making/> (Access: 5th March 2025)

2. Second Chapter

“The Creation of Alliances and Political Divisions between the KMT and the CCP”

The years following the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the formation of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party, the two main political parties in China at that time, were characterized by strategic alliances between them. The First United Front (1923–1927) was established to address internal fragmentation caused by regional warlords, while the Second United Front (1937–1945) was created in response to external aggression from Japan. However, these alliances were just driven by necessity rather than ideological alignment. For this reason, those years culminated in the final division between the Republic of China (ROC) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a split which still influences the current geopolitical scenario.

2.1. The First United Front against the Warlord Era (1916-1928)

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Yuan Shikai, a Beiyang Army general, became the first President of the Republic of China under the Beiyang Government (1912-1928). Firstly, he attempted to rule democratically, leading a republican form of government; then he centralised powers, abolishing the parliament, a lot of freedoms and finally, in 1915, declaring himself Emperor²⁰. Consequently, between 1915 and 1916, a civil war, known as the National Protection War, broke out in order to save the Republic of China. During it, many military expeditions took place and led to the declaration of independence of some southern provinces. So, we can affirm that this conflict marked the beginning of the split between North and South China. In the end, Yuan Shikai was forced to abdicate²¹. The years after Yuan Shikai’s death were characterized by uncertainty and the collapse of national power that led to the rise of powerful regional rulers, especially in the southern provinces: the warlords. Indeed, those years are known as the Warlord Era (1916-1928): a decade characterized by powerful military governors²². It was at this moment that the North-South split solidified: the north was in the hands of various warlords from the Beiyang Army, that claimed theirs to be the legitimate national government of China. While instead, the south was in the hands of Sun Yat-sen and his supporters. Indeed, since Sun Yat-sen had stepped

²⁰ Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, “The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949”, *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*, 2361 (2002): 26.

²¹ Jerome Ch’en, “Yuan Shikai”. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (April 4, 2025). URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Yuan-Shikai>. (Last access: 10 April 2025).

²² J. A. G Roberts, “Warlordism in China”, *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 45/46 (1989): 27.

back in favor of Yuan Shikai, the southern provinces' leaders led revolutionary movements against the Beiyang Government. In particular, after Yuan Shikai's death, Sun Yat-sen created a military government in Guangzhou²³ with him as Generalissimo, declaring the Beiyang Government as illegitimate. This is known as the Constitutional Protection Movement. The First Constitutional Protection Movement, which lasted from 1917 to 1920, was a military and political campaign that aimed to protect the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China. However, despite the initial support from various southern provinces and warlords, Sun Yat-sen was sidelined²⁴ by his warlord allies, especially the Guanxi Forces.

Consequently, the First Constitutional Protection Government collapsed. Shortly after, the Second Constitutional Protection Movement was created with Sun Yat-sen as Extraordinary President of the Republic of China, which lasted from 1921 to 1922. During this period, he introduced various reforms in order to modernize the government by reducing the military influences. However, once again, his attempts were undermined by his warlord allies.

Particularly, we can mention Chen Jiongmeng, a Guangdong military leader who staged a coup against Sun, bombarding the presidential palace in Guangzhou. In conclusion, even though the Constitutional Protection Movements resulted to be military and politically ineffective, they represented a fundamental step towards the creation of a legitimate and constitutional governance in China, by emphasizing the need for a strong and centralized form of government, which could be reachable only getting rid of factionalism and warlords. For this reason, during his exile, Sun Yat-sen started reorganizing the KMT and created the Whampoa Military Academy, with Chiang Kai-shek as Commandant. Sun was strongly supported in this by the Soviet advisors of the Soviet Union, moved by the desire to expand communist influence in Asia. They signed the so-called Sun-Joffe Manifesto²⁵. Through which, they formally recognized that China was not ready for "the Soviet system"; but at the same time, they started encouraging collaboration between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT), leading to the formation of the First United Front (1923–1927)²⁶. The KMT-CCP Alliance was a union created with the aim of unifying China, ending warlordism through the Northern Expedition (1926-1928). The Northern Expedition was a military campaign led by the Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek and the NRA, the

²³ "The Manchu Restoration and the Constitutional Protection Movement". *Academy of Chinese Studies*. URL: <https://chiculture.org.hk/en/photo-story/2358> (Last access: 15 April 2025).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Sun-Joffe Manifesto." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 16, 2025. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sun-Joffe-Manifesto>. (Last access: 16 April 2025)

²⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "United Front." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 18, 2018. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Front-Chinese-history-1937-1945>. (Last Access: 16 April 2025).

National Revolutionary Army of the Kuomintang against the Beiyang Government, and aiming to reach the unification of China under a single government²⁷. However, both parties had deeper interests in making this alliance. On one side, the CCP was willing to spread communism within the KMT; while on the other side, the KMT saw this as an opportunity to control the expansion of communism in China. Consequently, these deeper and opposite interests resulted to be the main reason that led not only to the end of the First United Front, but also to the internal split of the KMT. Indeed, the Northern Expedition was characterized by two phases: the first one until 1927, which was distinguished by the internal division of the KMT. And the second one, that led to the unification of China in 1928. During the first one, after the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925, the KMT split into a right-wing faction under Chang Kai-shek and based in Nanjing; and a left-wing faction based in Wuhan and led by Wang Jingwei. This political division was due to Chang Kai-shek's²⁸ gaining of prominence and his desire to marginalize communists to avoid their spread. So, the KMT under Chang Kai-shek, fearing the communists' expansion²⁹, started organizing strikes. For instance, we can mention the Canton Coup, the 20th March 1926, which can be seen as the anticipatory action of the so-called White Terror: the anti-communist campaign that started with the Shanghai Massacre. The 12th April 1927, Chang Kai-shek organized a massive purge in Shanghai, which officially marked the internal split of the KMT, also known as Nanjing-Wuhan split, and the end of the cooperation between the KMT and the CCP: the end of the First United Front. Despite these internal divisions, the Northern Expedition continued with its second phase. Finally on the 29th December 1928, the KMT under Chang Kai-shek reached Beijing defeating the last major warlord's opposition and officially reunifying China under a central government: the Nationalist Nanjing Government.

2.2 The Political Division of the the Civil War (1927-1949) and the Second United Front during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)

The Shanghai Massacre marked the end of the First United Front and the start of the Chinese Civil War in China which lasted over two decades, from 1927 to 1949. This brutal purge of the communist by Chiang Kai-shek signaled the beginning of the rivalry between the two

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Zachary Fillingham. "Backgrounder: A Brief History of China's United Front." *Geopolitical Monitor*, March 22 2019. URL: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/backgrounder-a-brief-history-of-chinas-united-front/> (Last Access: 16 April 2025).

²⁹ Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, "The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949", *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*, 2361 (2002): 28.

parties, shaping China's history and ideological trajectory until today, current political scenario. Indeed, we can affirm that the Chinese Civil War was more than a conflict between two political parties; it is definable as a clash between two completely different visions for China's future. On one hand, the KMT with Chiang Kai-shek looking for a modernization of China through a process of centralization of power and nationalism basing it on the Confucian values; while on the other hand, the CCP with Mao Zedong, moved to the rural area, looking for a class-based revolution, inspired by Marxism-Leninism's ideals. Moreover, this conflict can be considered one of the largest conflicts after the first and the second world war. As a matter of fact, it lasted from the Interwar Period until the Cold War and can be divided into 3 main phases:

The First Chinese Civil War (1927-1937)

Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)

The Second Chinese Civil War (1947-1949)

2.2.1 The First Chinese Civil War (1927-1937)

The reunification of China in 1928 did not bring stability, instead it was the start of an internal conflict between the KMT and the CCP's members: the First Chinese Civil War. Shortly after the Shanghai's Massacre, the KMT with the NRA kept organizing multiple offensives, extermination campaigns against the CCP's sympathizers and members, which firstly attempted to revolt. In particular, we can mention Changsha, Guangzhou, Nanchang's insurrections in August 1927. However, soon they were forced to move to the rural areas where they established soviets. These Communist base areas were firstly created in the Jinggangshan mountains and later in Jiangxi. It was in this latter one that Mao Zedong emerged as leader³⁰. Indeed, in 1931, the Chinese Soviet Republic was finally established with Mao Zedong as Head of State and Head of Government. The CSR was a quasi-state, a State in the State, with Ruijin as capital. Moreover, it was completely independent from the KMT's Nationalist Central Government: it had its army, the Red Army, its education system, its land redistribution programmes and its taxation system. Chang Kai-shek saw the foundation of this State as an outrage³¹, a direct threat to its government. And so, he reacted by organizing the so-called Encirclement Campaigns, which aimed at destroying CCP base

³⁰ Lyman P. Van Slyke, "The United Front in China.", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (1970): 120

³¹ Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, "The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949", *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*, 2361 (2002): 28.

areas, particularly the Jiangxi Soviet, which was the largest and the most developed communist base in China. Specifically, the KMT launched five major military campaigns, which showed Chiang's reliance on military means to consolidate power. Firstly, the Red Army, under the military commander Zhu De, repelled the first four offensives employing guerrilla tactics. However, they were defeated during the fifth campaign because the NRA adopted some Nazi's tactics. So, since the Jiangxi Soviet could not be held anymore, the CCP's members were forced to leave and find a new base through the so-called Long March (1934-1936)³². The 16th October 1934, the Long March began when not only thousands of soldiers of the Red Army, but also families, civilians started these strategic retreats. The journey lasted over a year until October 1935 when a few of the initial marchers finally reached Yan'an, Shaanxi Province, after having covered more than 9,000 kilometers. Indeed, the majority of the marchers died during the march due to starvation, illness and especially exhaustion. Although it represented a military disaster, the Long March has gone down in history as a defining moment in Communist lore. The party was physically and symbolically repositioned in the Chinese political landscape: the party base was repositioned in Yan'an, redefining its identity as a revolutionary movement forged in hardship. Moreover, through this, Mao Zedong's leadership and myth was strongly consolidated among Chinese.

2.2.2 The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)

After the Long March, external threats, especially from Japan, forced the CCP and the KMT to stop hostilities and postpone the Civil War in order to form the so-called Second United Front (1937–1945) to fight Japan in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The Second Sino-Japanese War was a conflict that took place during the Second World War between the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan. It followed the Japanese invasion of Manchuria of 1931. Indeed, on the 18th September 1931, Japan staged the Mukden Incident³³, a false-flag explosion near the South Manchuria Railway, as a way to invade Manchuria, where it established the puppet state of Manchukuo with Puyi, the last Qing emperor. It was for these reasons that after the Long March, many people started arguing that Japanese threats outweighed Communist ones. Consequently, in order to demand the cease of the Civil War and the formation of an alliance, between KMT and CCP, to fight Japan, Chang Kai-shek was

³² Zachary Fillingham. "Background: A Brief History of China's United Front." *Geopolitical Monitor*, March 22 2019. URL: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/background-a-brief-history-of-chinas-united-front/> (Last Access: 17 April 2025).

³³ Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, "The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949", *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*, 2361 (2002): 26.

kidnapped by General Zhang Xueliang. This is known as the Xi'an Incident. In September 1937, the Second United Front was officially created due to shared necessities and not values³⁴. As a matter of fact, a lot of problems due to lack of coordination took place: while the KMT wanted to centralize the military forces by integrating the Red Army with the NRA under the denomination of Eighth Route Army; the communist, instead, wanted to maintain their autonomous control over their own forces and so, created the New Fourth Army in the South. Both sides used the war to strengthen their positions: the CCP emphasizing grassroots mobilization and guerrilla warfare, while the KMT concentrated on conventional warfare and securing foreign alliances. Shortly before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident took place and Japan conquered also Beijing and Tianjin, marking the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Then, Japan kept launching several offensives. Particularly, we can mention the Nanjing Massacre³⁵, especially for which we can refer to the Second Sino-Japanese War as the Asian Holocaust, for the massive quantity of war crimes against civilians that Japan committed. The offensives from Japan were not the only ones that took place, because the hostilities between the KMT and the CCP persisted also during the war. Indeed, in January 1941, the KMT forces suddenly attacked the communists in the south, leading to the death of more than 9 thousands soldiers. This is known as the New Fourth Army Incident. Consequently, the KMT was accused by the CCP of betrayal and they officially stopped collaborating. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, China officially joined the Allied Powers. Consequently, the United States started providing aid to the Kuomintang (KMT) government, initially through the Burma Road and later via airlifts over the treacherous "Hump" of the Himalayas. However, the impact of this support was undermined by the KMT mismanagement. In 1944, Japan launched Operation Ichi-Go³⁶, a major offensive that seized large areas of southern China. Although this victory boosted Japan's position in the conflict, in 1945, after the Battle of Midway and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it was definitely forced to surrender. In conclusion, while on one side the Second Sino-Japanese War resulted in a tragedy, especially in human and material costs: millions of people died and many infrastructures were destroyed. However, on the other side, it was also a unique opportunity to transform and expand the CCP. Indeed, the CCP emerged from the conflict stronger both organizationally and ideologically: it controlled most of rural North and Central China; its army had enormously expanded; and the nationalist's sentiment caused by the war

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Second Sino-Japanese War." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 27, 2025. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Sino-Japanese-War>. (Last Access: 20 April 2025).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

strongly developed and increased in the peasants. As the French historian Lucien Bianco claimed: "It was the war that brought the Chinese peasantry and China to revolution; at the very least, it considerably accelerated the rise of the CCP to power."³⁷ For this reason, many historians consider the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War as the beginning of the Chinese Communist Revolution, with the consequent decline of the KMT. As a matter of fact, the KMT, even though it was still internationally recognized, was strongly weakened due to corruption, inflation, and military overextension. So, after Japan's defeat in 1945, the Chinese Civil War broke out again, but in an internal landscape characterized by a completely different balance of power: the KMT was now in decline, while the CCP, strengthened by war, stood ready to shape China's destiny.

2.2.3 The Second Chinese Civil War (1947-1949)

After Japan's defeat in 1945, the fragile alliance between the KMT and the CCP had no more meaning to exist and consequently, shortly after, a return to full-scale conflict took place. It was in this context that the US first directly intervened in the conflict between the two Chinese parties, marking the beginning of its fundamental "diplomatic" role-a role it still owns in today's conflict between the two "Chinas". In late 1945, they sent General George C. Marshall to intervene in the Chongqing Talks between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. However, while diplomats were discussing ceasefire terms, both the KMT and CCP were trying to secure territorial and political control over the Japanese-occupied areas, especially northern China and Manchuria, which had been occupied by the Soviet Union during the last days of the Second World War. Consequently, this situation allowed the CCP, supported by the Soviet Union, to occupy it when they withdrew. Instead, the KMT kept receiving support from the United States and kept expanding their influence in the urban centers. The ceasefire definitely ended from 1946, when the CCP formed the People's Liberation Army and started engaging in multiple successful military campaigns: such as the Liaoshen, Huaihai, and Pingjin offensives between 1948 and 1949. Through these expeditions, they decimated the KMT forces and conquered some of the major cities such as Nanjing, Shanghai, and Wuhan. These victories were not only due to superior strategy and discipline, but also due to widespread loss of public support towards KMT governance. As a matter of fact, in January 1949, Chiang Kai-shek resigned as President of the Republic of China, although he remained the leader of the Nationalist forces. Consequently, the KMT completely collapsed and its

³⁷ Lucien Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915–1949*, trans. Muriel Bell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971): 199.

leadership and supporters had to retreat to the island of Taiwan. And then, on October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong officially founded the People's Republic of China from the Tiananmen Gate in Beijing³⁸. So, the end of the civil war resulted in the division of China into two “Chinas”, two different political entities, both claiming to be the legitimate government of China: the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland under the Chinese Communist Party, and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan under the Kuomintang. Concluding, even though the Chinese Civil War was concluded, it left behind a legacy of division that continues to shape cross-strait relations today.

³⁸ Office of the Historian. 2019. “The Chinese Revolution of 1949.” State.gov. United States Department of State. 2019. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/chinese-rev>

3. Third Chapter

“The Establishment of two Chinas, their Relations and Future Scenarios”

The years following the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 until today have been marked by parallel developments on either side of the Taiwan Strait. On one side, the People's Republic of China (PRC) rose and evolved under the CCP. On the other side, the Republic of China (ROC), continued its existence and development, firstly under the Kuomintang (KMT) and consequently also under the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Although both entities separated by the Taiwan Strait, have claimed, and in some ways still claim, to be the legitimate government of China and to have full sovereignty over all China, they have also engaged in complex political and economic interactions. These interactions, known as Cross Strait relations, have alternated between military confrontation, deterrence, and periods of relative stability and coexistence. This ongoing relationship continues to shape the current geopolitical landscape and leaves open the possibility for multiple future scenarios.

3.1 The Formation and Development of China: “The People's Republic of China” (PRC)

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was officially established in 1949 by Mao Zedong, marking both the end of the Chinese Civil War³⁹ and the culmination of the Chinese Communist Revolution.

The PRC's origins can be traced back to the Chinese Soviet Republic: a short-lived communist state, also known as Jiangxi, founded by Mao Zedong and Zhu De in the early years of the Chinese Civil War. The CSR was dismantled in 1934 at the beginning of the Long March, which led to the creation of a new CCP's base in Yan'an. Both the CSR and the Yan'an period were fundamental for the consolidation of the CCP's strength, promoting its image as a liberator of the oppressed rural poor, and laying the foundations for its political ideology and governing approach. Indeed, many social reforms first tried in the CSR became central to the PRC's agenda. Key examples include the adoption of a soviet style centrally controlled economy through the Five-Year Plan, and also the implementation of the Land Reform campaigns⁴⁰. The latter one consisted in the redistribution of lands from landlords to peasants, according to the Marxist-Leninist principles⁴¹. These reforms were followed by the

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, “The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949”, *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*, 2361 (2002): 14.

⁴¹ Lyman P. Van Slyke, “The United Front in China.”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (1970): 132.

Great Leap Forward (1958–1962): an attempt to industrialize China through a process of mass collectivization that led to the creation of the so-called People’s Commune. This campaign turned out to be a failure marked by widespread famine and millions of deaths, largely due to extreme centralization of power and suppression of dissent⁴².

At the same time, the Anti-Rightists Campaign was launched (1957-1958) damaging democracy in China. As a matter of fact, it was a persecution campaign targeting intellectuals, capitalists, and political dissenters, branding them as “Rightists.” Consequently, the PRC officially institutionalized its one-party system that still persists in China nowadays. Moreover, Mao’s pursuit of ideological purity continued with the Socialist Education Movement, and culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976): “Ten Years of Madness”⁴³. The main goal was to purge remnants of pre-revolutionary China, getting rid of the so-called “Four Olds”: “old ideas”, “old culture”, “old customs”, and “old habits”. However, all these Mao’s attempts to build a Chinese Communist society turned out to be mostly unsuccessful⁴⁴.

After Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping became the new leader of the PRC. Firstly, he introduced the “Boluan Fanzheng” and many socio political and economic reforms to dismantle the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. However, the CCP kept on maintaining tight political control. Indeed, the violent suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests⁴⁵ proved the CCP’s regime intolerance towards democratic demands.

After this dramatic event, Deng Xiaoping retired and the consequent leaders of the PRC were Jiang Zemin and then Hu Jintao. Under both presidencies, China experienced economic growth, turning the country into one of the greatest powers in the world.

As a matter of fact, in 2001 China joined the World Trade Organization⁴⁶; in 2003, an astronaut was successfully sent to space, making China the third country in the world after the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, in 2008 they hosted the Olympics for the first time and in 2010 the World Expo.

In 2012, Xi Jinping went to power, immediately becoming the most powerful Chinese Leader

⁴² Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, “The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949”, *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*, 2361 (2002): 15.

⁴³ Paul French, “Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe 1958-1962” by Frank Dikötter, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, Vol. 52 (2012): 367.

⁴⁴ Jennifer Lynn Cucchisi, “The Causes and Effects of the Chinese Civil War, 1927-1949”, *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*, 2361 (2002): 16.

⁴⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Tiananmen Square incident." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 20, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tiananmen-Square-incident>.

⁴⁶ Duchâtel, Mathieu, and François Godement. "China's Politics under Hu Jintao." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (2009).

since Mao⁴⁷. Indeed, as soon as he went to power, he increased centralization of power, eliminating presidential term limits, and put efforts to reach the so-called “Chinese Dream of rejuvenation”: revitalization of the country.⁴⁸ Moreover, to do so, he reintroduced Mao’s ideals and principles, launching the largest ideological campaign that China had seen since Mao: a mix of communism, nationalism, and Leninism⁴⁹.

So, the historical path of the PRC from 1949 to the present shows a contrasting interplay between economic reforms that have transformed China into a global economy, and the CCP's commitment to maintain its grip on power.

3.2 The Formation and Development of Taiwan: “The Republic of China” (ROC)

After the Cairo Declaration, in 1943, all the Japanese territories occupied by Japan returned to the Republic of China. And then, in 1945, after the Japanese surrender in the Second World War and its acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, the ROC government began exercising its full jurisdiction over Taiwan⁵⁰ and administering it firstly with Chen Yi, as the Chief Executive. In 1951, Japan signed the Treaty of San Francisco⁵¹, and subsequently the Treaty of Taipei in 1952, through which it officially renounced sovereignty over Taiwan, the Pescadores, the Spratlys and the Paracels Islands. These treaties officially put an end to 50 years of Japanese colonial rule, which had begun in 1895 with the Treaty of Shimonoseki, at the end of the first Sino-Japanese War.

Consequently, after the end of the Chinese Civil War and the consequent foundation of the PRC, the ROC government retreated to Taiwan making it the de facto seat of the Republic of China. At that time, many people, over 1.2 million people moved from Mainland to Taiwan, even though the PRC never officially recognized the sovereignty of ROC on Taiwan⁵².

Initially, the KMT started ruling Taiwan under an authoritarian regime marked by corruption and repression of opponents. This situation caused widespread discontent among Taiwan's native residents, culminating with an anti-government uprising: the 228 February Incident of 1947⁵³. This anti-government uprising was immediately crackdowned by the KMT, which

⁴⁷ Edward White and Joe Leay, “China’s unspoken question: who will succeed Xi Jinping?”, *Financial Times*, February 17th, 2025. (Last Access: 19 May 2025).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Zhao Suisheng. "Xi Jinping's Maoist Revival." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 3, (2016):2.

⁵⁰ Taiwan.gov.tw, "Visa, Passport and Authentication," *Government Portal of the Republic of China (Taiwan)*, https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_3.php (Last Access: 20 May 2025).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

placed the island under Martial Law for 38 years. This is considered one of the longest periods of martial law in modern history.

This era, known as White Terror, was characterized by persecutions and the implementation of sedition laws mainly against communism sympathizers. Indeed, the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion were enacted, greatly expanding presidential powers and banning the formation of new political parties: allowing the KMT to consolidate one-party rule.

Despite the authoritarian regime and the political oppression, this period was also known as the “Taiwan Miracle”⁵⁴. Indeed, the KMT implemented various state-building projects to modernize the country through the implementation of many reforms. In order to foster industrialization and economic development, a land reform was launched, which allowed the redistribution of farmland to tenants, reducing social tensions⁵⁵. Furthermore, the US also intervened in order to modernize Taiwan’s economy, through aid programs. Moreover, the KMT also attempted to foster national identity, by promoting nationalism, suppressing local languages and cultures, and emphasizing loyalty to the ROC.

While this nationalist approach created a climax of tensions with the “mainlanders” who had arrived after 1945 and the native Taiwanese. Nonetheless, the economic reforms enabled Taiwan to turn into a developed and high-income country: a model for other emerging industrial regions. Indeed, by 1991, Taiwan became a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, solidifying its status as one of the Four Asian Tigers, together with South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong. All this process of modernization of Taiwan’s economy was firstly fostered by Yen Chia-kan⁵⁶, who succeeded Chiang Kai-shek, after his death in 1975. President Yen, alongside with the consequent President, Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek, supported the Ten Major Construction Projects.

Moreover, Chiang Ching-kuo started the process of democratization of the nation by restructuring the parliament, lifting the martial law in 1987, legalizing opposition parties, and relaxing media censorship⁵⁷. Furthermore, the government began allowing Taiwan residents to visit their relatives in Mainland China⁵⁸. Between the new political parties, firstly emerged

⁵⁴ Thomas B. Gold, *State and Society in the Taiwan Miracle* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ President.go.tw, "Yen Chia-kan (5th term)," *Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/84> (Last Access: 20 May 2025).

⁵⁷ Shelley Rigger, “Democratic Transition and Consolidation in Taiwan”, *American Enterprise Institute Washington DC*, (2011): 5.

⁵⁸ President.go.tw, "Chiang Ching-kuo (6th term)," *Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/85> (Last Access: 20 May 2025).

from the Tangwai, "outside the party" movement, the Democratic Progressive Parties⁵⁹. So, constitutional democracy was officially restored. Indeed, from the 1990s Taiwan underwent a process of democratization, especially since the presidency of President Lee Teng-hui⁶⁰, who was the nation's first-ever direct elected president. As a matter of fact, from 1991 to 2005, the Constitution of the ROC (Taiwan) underwent seven turns of constitutional revision. First of all, he abolished the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion; then he completely re-elected the members of the legislature and national assembly, finally giving Taiwanese people full representation. Through all these reforms, President Lee contributed to the development of Taiwan's self identity, against the original vision of it just as a government-in-exile. This shift towards a stronger Taiwanese identity was reinforced by the 2000 presidential election, which marked the end of the Kuomintang's status as the ruling party. Indeed, three Democratic Progressive Party's presidents have been elected: Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), Tsai Ing-wen (2016–2024) and Lai Ching-te (2024-Today), reflecting continued democratic evolution and political diversification, and positioning Taiwan as a model of liberal democracy in East Asia.

3.3 The Cross Strait Relations and The Future Scenarios

With the term Cross Strait Relations, we refer to the controversial political and economical interactions that have characterized the relations between the PRC and the ROC due to the dispute regarding the political status of the Island of Taiwan, after its sovereignty and especially administration was transferred from Japan to the Republic of China in 1945, and after the split between the PRC and ROC in 1949. Indeed, since then both the ROC and the PRC have claimed to represent "China," and consequently have sovereignty on the Island of Taiwan. This has resulted in one of the most complex geopolitical conflicts that persists today.

3.3.1 The Cross Strait Relations and The International Recognitions

Originally the Island of Taiwan was inhabited by indigenous Austronesian peoples for thousands years. Then, from the 17th century, Taiwan started being colonized by Western

⁵⁹ Taiwan.gov.tw, "Visa, Passport and Authentication," *Government Portal of the Republic of China (Taiwan)*, https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_3.php (Last Access: 20 May 2025).

⁶⁰ President.go.tw, "Lee Teng.hui (7th term)," *Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/86> (Last Access: 26 May 2025).

powers: firstly, the Dutch⁶¹, secondly the Spanish, and later on also the Chinese Ming and Qing Dynasties. However, for much of the Qing era, the island was just considered and administered as part of Fujian Province. It was only in the late 19th century that the Qing Dynasty began to modernize and integrate the island of Taiwan to the rest of the Empire. In 1895, after the Qing dynasty's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Island of Taiwan was ceded to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Japan immediately integrated the Island into the Empire by modernizing infrastructure and introducing new educational and health systems. Consequently, Japan indirectly contributed to the development of a strong Taiwanese identity that still shapes the current Cross Strait relations. As a matter of fact, Taiwan's experience diverged sharply from the one of Mainland China during the same years. The Japanese rule on the Island lasted 50 years until Japan's defeat in the Second World War. Particularly, from 1949, after the ROC defeat in the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China⁶², the ROC led by the KMT officially started ruling on the Island of Taiwan and multiple other small islands close to Mainland China, such as the Quemoy, the Matsu, the Dachen Islands etc.

From this moment on, two rival "Chinas" existed on either side of the Taiwan Strait, both claiming to be the legitimate representative of all China, including Taiwan. This marked the beginning of the so-called Cross Strait relations leading to a prolonged period of mutual non-recognition and hostility that persists today.

The first escalation of the tensions took place in 1954 with the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-1955): the PRC started bombing the Quemoy and Matsu Islands and moved military units into Fujian Province opposite Taiwan. This situation led to the first intervention of the U.S. which signed the Mutual Defence Treaty with the ROC⁶³. Even though excluding the defense of offshore islands, the treaty underlined the U.S. strategic aim of containing the expansion of communism in East Asia, reflecting the dynamics of the Cold War. Moreover, the U.S. also passed the Formosa Resolution, authorizing President Eisenhower to use military force, including nuclear power to protect Taiwan if necessary. Consequently, the PRC ceased its offensives, ending the crisis. This withdrawal marked a temporary stabilization of the Taiwan Strait. However, by 1958, tensions had escalated again leading to

⁶¹ Thomas B. Gold, *State and Society in the Taiwan Miracle* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986), 24.

⁶² Taiwan.gov.tw, "Visa, Passport and Authentication," *Government Portal of the Republic of China (Taiwan)*, https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_3.php (Last Access: 23 May 2025).

⁶³ Office of the Historian. 2019. "The Taiwan Strait Crisis: 1954-1955 and 1958." State.gov. United States Department of State. 2019. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/taiwan-strait-crises#:~:text=the%20full%20notice,-The%20Taiwan%20Straits%20Crises%3A%201954%E2%80%931955%20and%201958,islands%20controlled%20by%20the%20ROC>. (Last Access: 24 May 2025).

the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958). Once again, it regarded the control over the Quemoy and Matsu Islands and it was once again influenced by the Cold War dynamics.

During the Cold War, and so during the First and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, the ROC was recognized by the U.S, many Western nations and also by the United Nations, as the legitimate government of China. This situation of international recognition stayed stable like this until 1971, when the UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 replaced the ROC with the PRC as the sole representative of China and also endowed it with the permanent Security Council seat⁶⁴. This occurred after the secret visit of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to China, after the U.S. ping-pong team and some U.S. journalists had been invited to China by China's ping-pong team. They were the first U.S. citizens allowed to enter China's territory since 1949. Then, in 1972 also the U.S. President Richard Nixon visited China.

From the United Nations shift in international recognition, also other international organizations and many Western countries switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing⁶⁵. Particularly, in 1979, the U.S. established formal relations with the PRC, signing a bilateral trade agreement, and adhering to "One China" Principle⁶⁶. However, at the same time, it retained informal ties with Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act. This act granted to Taiwan not only cultural and commercial relations with the U.S., but also the provision of defensive arms from Washington.

All these diplomatic shifts marked a turning point in Cross-Strait relations, reducing the ROC's international recognition and increasing its diplomatic isolation, while consolidating the PRC's position and global influence.

Then, from the 1980s, while Taiwan underwent a democratization and modernization process, economic interactions between the "Two Chinas" took place. These economic cooperations took place especially under the KMT administration of Taiwan. We can mention: the 2010 Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) and the 2015 Ma-Xi meeting in Singapore that reflected an attempt to stabilize Cross-Strait relations through pragmatic engagement. However, despite these economic ties, political tensions remained.

Especially after that the pro-independence nationalist Lee Teng-hui won Taiwan's first free presidential elections, despite the Chinese attempt to sway the voters against him, through a series of missile tests. Shortly after the U.S. granted him a visa, making him the first ROC's

⁶⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations."
<https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations> (Last Access: 26 May 2025).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

President to visit the U.S⁶⁷. Moreover, with the following President, Mr. Chen Shui Bian, the ROC became a member state of the World Trade Organization (WTO)⁶⁸.

So, the PRC's narrative of "One China" kept being challenged even more by the emergence of the distinct Taiwanese identity, particularly promoted by the rise of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Indeed, Chen Shui Bian established the "One Country on Each Side" principle in 2002, emphasizing Taiwan as a sovereign state. Furthermore, in 2007, he announces his "Four Imperatives and One Non-issue" policy: to be independent; to rectify its name into "the Republic of Taiwan"; to create a new constitution; to develop; and that there exists "Non-issue" of left versus right in Taiwan politics, but only the issue of independence versus reunification⁶⁹. In order to contrast this, in 2005, the PRC enacted the Anti-Secession Law, recognizing Taiwan as part of the PRC and authorizing military actions.

Indeed, in recent years, on side the PRC has increased the budget for defense; adopted cyber and information warfare tactics; and implemented incursions by PLA aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). On the other side, even though no key international powers recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state, the ROC has strengthened its informal ties with some of them, particularly the United States, Japan, and some European states, which now support the Island for its democratic system. This situation has opened the floor to multiple hypotheses regarding the future scenarios.

3.3.2 The Future Scenarios

Taking into consideration the current trends in PRC's and ROC's domestic politics, military strategies, economic relations, and the evolving geopolitical landscape, there could be several future scenarios between the PRC and ROC.

One of the most likely near-term scenarios is the continuation of the status-quo: the current independence of Taiwan without formal recognition. This scenario relies on mutual deterrence, where both sides recognize the costs of escalation.

One of the most unlikely near term scenarios, due to the potential reaction of the PRC, is instead the de jure independence of Taiwan: independence reached through a process of international recognition or through a ROC's declaration of independence.

This could generate immediate retaliation from the PRC, triggering the most feared scenario:

⁶⁷ President.go.tw, "Lee Teng.hui (7th term)," *Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/86> (Last Access: 26 May 2025).

⁶⁸ President.go.tw, "Chen Shui.bian (10th term)," *Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/87> (Last Access: 26 May 2025).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

the PRC military invasion of Taiwan. China's military attack on Taiwan could trigger a war involving also the U.S.⁷⁰ and there would be global economic consequences.

Another scenario is the gradual integration of Taiwan to Mainland China through gradual economic and political interferences⁷¹.

And a highly speculative but theoretically possible scenario is the regime change in PRC to a new form of government which could be more willing to negotiate a peaceful settlement with Taiwan.

Concluding, the future of the Cross Strait Relations will not be determined by a single factor but by the interplay of multiple agents: PRC's and ROC's domestic politics, international dynamics, economic pressures, and external strategic interferences.

⁷⁰ Bao Xiao, "Andrew Hsia's China Visit and the Future of Cross-Strait Relations," *The Diplomat*, February 14, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/andrew-hsias-china-visit-and-the-future-of-cross-strait-relations/> (Last Access: 27 May 2025)

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

The story of the "Two Chinas" is not simply a chain of historical events, but a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and ideological elements that have shaped the current geopolitical order. This thesis has traced this multifaceted trajectory.

It has started by analyzing how with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the decline of imperialism in China and the ensuing chaos of warlordism led to the rise of two revolutionary forces: the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Though both emerged from the same nationalist and anti-imperialist context, the KMT and the CCP envisioned China's future in completely different ways. On one hand, the KMT embraced republicanism, nationalism, and a vision of a unified China rooted in Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles. On the other hand, the CCP embraced Marxist-Leninist ideology, grounding its revolutionary mission in class struggle, rural mobilization, and eventually, a form of socialism adapted to Chinese realities.

Initially they began with fragile coexistence and cooperation, but then their ideological divide led them to multiple inevitable confrontations which escalated into a full-scale civil war. The result was the emergence of two distinct competing political entities: the Republic of China (ROC), in Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC), in mainland China.

The division between the ROC and the PRC is not only a legacy of the civil war and a territorial dispute for the Island of Taiwan, but also a reflection of two competing visions of China's identity, governance, and future.

Indeed, while the PRC transitioned from Maoist radicalism to economic reform under Deng Xiaoping and then into an authoritarian state under Xi Jinping; the ROC in Taiwan transitioned from authoritarian rule under martial law to one of the most robust democracies in East Asia.

In conclusion, as the international balance of power continues to shift, and both the PRC and ROC face evolving internal and external challenges, the unresolved question of the "Two Chinas" remains one of the most complex and sensitive issues in global affairs. Whether this situation will culminate with confrontation, compromise, or continued ambiguity, the original KMT and CCP's legacy still has a strong influence over the Cross-Strait relations.

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