By Caroline Dynes

Why are the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) so interested in Taiwan? It's a small seemingly inconsequential island that does very little to upset the international arena. Both have their different reasons for having their interests piqued by the island formerly known as Formosa.

From a Chinese perspective Taiwan represents the last vestige of defiance to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and a contradiction of its triumph in the civil war, on top of which it is a symbol of past foreign dominance as it was taken from China by Japan in one of the Unequal Treaties. This failure is dubbed the 'Century of Humiliation', and regaining Taiwan is seen as the last stumbling block to making China great once more, becoming the greatest nation on earth, a status it had held for thousands of years. America's interference in the East Asia region is ostensibly why the Republic of China (ROC) based on Taiwan is able to survive with such a direct threat to their legitimacy so close, across only 90 miles of water.

The US had long had a relatively affable relationship with the Nationalist government in China, and at the end of World War II left them to fight their own battles. It looked likely that the communists would follow the Kuomintang (KMT) across the Taiwan Strait and settle the civil war once and for all. Indeed, shelling of islands like Quemoy was a feature for many years. However, the Korean War broke out in 1950 and it suddenly became imperative to the Americans to find allies in Asia to stand against the tide of communism sweeping the world. Taiwan became strategically important in containing the socialist threat to capitalist ideology. Taiwan became the spokesman for all of China, despite only being in charge of c.20 million of the potential billion Chinese, some of whom identified themselves as ethnically Taiwanese. However, the KMT's international representation of all China was for a limited time, as the PRC found its feet. The importance of America finding substantial allies against the 'Evil Empire', the USSR, took priority.

Taiwan is a group of islands separate from any nation with its own government, currency, language and economy. It is to all intents and purposes independent, and yet is claimed by the PRC to be a renegade province of mainland China. The PRC have been a barrier to Taiwan setting up official relations with other nations around the world ever since it became powerful enough to replace Taiwan in the UN in 1973.

In the history of the ROC there was a specific turning point that led it this juncture in international standing. At the beginning of the 1970s it was becoming increasingly clear that the PRC was gaining support to become part of the UN and the ROC was waning in strength to remain the representative for China. By 1969 48 nations had voted in favour of the PRC and 56 in favour of the ROC. This altered to 51:49 in 1970 and continued in a similar trend for the next couple of years until in 1973 when it was 85:39 in favour of the PRC.

The point to remember is that this did not necessarily represent the end of Taiwan's representation in the UN, but it did mean that they no longer represented China. It had lost that battle, but could have moved past its failure, survived and been recognised as independent by countries then and there.

The KMT had missed this window of opportunity to make Taiwan independent of the mainland because they were too stubborn to accept that they were never going to be able to retake the mainland or would be unable to form a security alliance without the support of the US. Taiwan could have been made independent and having carefully courted many Latin American and African states would have been able to gain the mandatory number of supporting states in order to regain entry into the UN. The PRC would have been too weak at this stage to object forcefully and the question of Taiwan as a sovereign state would have been resolved peacefully. The state of Taiwan would have continued to grow and the PRC would have no longer be tethered to the island, and it would not have become an important part of its national pride to re-obtain it.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant that China lost its bargaining power with the US, and had to rely on the slow burner of burgeoning trade. China has since grown into the US's greatest rival and currently occupies second place in the world to almost everything the US has excelled in. Taiwan is an issue that is the Achilles heel that could bring down the mammoth Chinese nation, and by the US keeping Taiwan under its wing and nuclear umbrella she is able to retain leverage on China.

Currently Taiwan lives in a form of international limbo, as China has grown in strength so its influence on other nations has increased, and has been used to oust the ROC from the international arena almost entirely. This is being done with the express intention of forcing Taiwan into a corner with the only available exit being reunification with the mainland. But although America officially acknowledged the PRC's One China principle, it protected its interests in Taiwan by passing the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979. America did not abandon its relations but just re-branded them. This act ensured the island's security and a promise that America would intervene if China threatened to invade. The Taiwan lobby had a lot of influence in Congress at this point, but today it is unclear as to whether America would stand by its convictions and a risk great power war with a nuclear state in order to preserve the autonomy of a small nation.

The issue of Taiwan has been a sore point in Sino-American relations. Taiwan is stuck as a de facto independent state with a fading possibility of being recognised as a de jure sovereign state. Unless America or China drastically alter their stance on the issue it looks like it will persist for a long time to come. Sovereignty has been shown to be a fluid concept that has altered over the history of the nation-state and one which can be interpreted in a plethora of ways. In the case of Taiwan her internal situation warrants the title sovereign, however, the lack of official recognition internationally holds it back from ticking all the external sovereignty boxes, and by the current definition a nation needs to fulfil both internal and external categories in order to be considered sovereign.

It was always apparent that China had the potential to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of a belated industrial revolution. It had maintained a great civilisation for around 4000 years and still

had the structure in place to revive this power base. It has all the basic factors that compose a powerful nation: an extensive territory, a giant population, and strong governmental control. The PRC was a cohesive huge country of people with a great sense of national pride to remake the once great nation. It has the potential to challenge US pre-eminence in the world and possibly overtake it.

In order to retain power during the Cold War, the US needed to be able to fund its habit of weapons build-ups, and therefore was always looking for new trading partners. By maintaining allies such as Taiwan there was economic benefit, it was a political benefit in the ideological war, and a good buffer in Containment Theory.

Taiwan is a de facto independent state not a de jure one and has no real prospect of becoming one in the near future as China will block all attempts of it doing so. As China gets increasingly stronger so the US and Taiwan are less capable of hindering its efforts to re-assimilate the island into One China. In addition, as the Cold War is over, Taiwan is no longer as useful as it once was to the US.

Taiwan is not considered a sovereign state in the eyes of the international community for a spiderweb of reasons, and yet like a web all strands culminate at one central point. China will not allow it, and America will not necessarily risk a war with China in order to help bring it about. Taiwan will remain a de facto state, and unless something drastic changes will continue to be an international pawn for the US and China.