



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The R.O.C. at the End of WWII

2015 served as the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII which was celebrated by many Asian countries, including the P.R.C. and Korea. Lost among much of this commemoration has been the role of the R.O.C. at the end of WWII, including its contribution to the Chinese victory over Japan and how this influenced subsequent events on the Mainland. These topics were discussed at a Taiwan Roundtable on “The R.O.C. at the End of WWII,” held at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies. The roundtable included opening remarks by Dr. Lyushun Shen, Representative, Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO). Following his remarks, a panel of experts provided their insights, including James Hsiung, Professor of Political Science, New York University, William Kirby, T.M. Chang Professor of China Studies, Harvard University, and Maochun Yu, Professor, US Naval Academy.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Lyushun Shen outlined 5 key factors that are often overlooked when discussing the R.O.C.’s role in WWII. First, R.O.C. forces successfully defeated several Japanese armed divisions while also tying down around 1 million Japanese troops during the war, troops that otherwise would have been freely used against the Allies. Second, while the USSR successfully held off the invasion of Nazi Germany in the later years of the war, this likely would

have been impossible if not for the R.O.C.'s earlier efforts to hold off Japanese forces in the East, which saved the USSR. A third factor is Chiang Kai-shek's mediation efforts between India and the British, in which he urged India not to side with the Japanese but instead to wait for the war to end before focusing on efforts to cast off British colonial rule. This mediation helped to consolidate the wartime alliance against Germany and Japan.

A fourth overlooked factor is the contribution of Chinese expeditionary forces in Burma, which saved 7,000 British troops in the northern part of the country. Lastly, Chiang Kai-shek's post-war policy toward Japan was driven out of benevolence instead of a desire for revenge. For example, Chiang Kai-shek resisted the call for reparations from the Japanese as well as the splitting of Japan into separate territories as occurred in Germany after the war. Ultimately, China's wartime efforts and contributions were global, not just limited to the wartime theater. And it was Chiang Kai-shek who attended the Cairo Conference, not Mao Zedong, setting the stage for the restoration of the Republic of China. Today, the ROC is proud not only of its vibrant democracy but its status as an economic powerhouse.

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After Dr. Shen's remarks, Professor James Hsiung initiated the panel discussion by speaking on the topic of "A Pyrrhic Victory: The War's Costs to the R.O.C. and the Chinese Nation." Professor Hsiung outlined the enormous costs paid by China by the end of the war, including the massive level of human suffering, with up to 6 million military personnel killed, between 16 to 18 million Chinese civilians killed, and more than 40% of the total Chinese population rendered homeless. One of the most significant and lasting costs of having defeated the Japanese was the loss of the Mainland to the Communists. In fact, Professor Hsiung posited that the war against Japan led to two effects that contributed to the post-war rise of communism in China. The first effect was the state of exhaustion and demoralization that the Kuomintang forces were left in, which meant that they were unable to direct enough of their efforts to the Chinese civil war that resumed immediately after WWII. The second effect of the war against the Japanese was that the Chinese

communists were given a much needed respite after the Long March when they were in retreat from KMT forces. So the term “Pyrrhic Victory” refers to the fact that the KMT won the war against the Japanese but ultimately lost the mainland as a result.

Professor William Kirby also spoke about some of the key consequences of the Chinese victory over Japanese forces and the end of WWII. The Chinese victory brought about the end

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of the Japanese Empire which would be replaced by a peaceful and democratic Japan. At the same time, the U.S. emerged as a truly Asia-Pacific power for the first time. Professor Kirby stressed that beyond these geopolitical consequences, there were significant psychological consequences as well. Only after eight years of such violence and loss of Chinese

life could a communist victory in the Chinese civil war even have been conceivable. Furthermore, the atrocities committed by Japanese forces in Nanjing in 1937 helped to turn much of world opinion against Japan and contributed to the view of Japan as a co-conspirator with Germany in committing crimes against humanity.

Professor Kirby also focused his remarks on how China won the war and how it planned for the post-war world. The most intangible factor behind China’s victory was Chiang Kai-shek’s unbending will and refusal to surrender to the Japanese. Equally important was his ability to keep a political-military order more or less intact for eight years. Chiang Kai-shek’s remarkable diplomatic skills also allowed for China to receive aid from three of the world’s great powers in order to defend itself against Japan. A key example of this diplomacy was China’s realignment with the USSR in order to more effectively combat a common enemy in the Japanese. China’s Nationalist government also began to mobilize the economy under its control during the war effort, which would have lasting effects beyond 1945.

Professor Kirby concluded by observing that many young people on the Mainland today do not know that it was the National Government of China, not the Chinese communists, who won the war against Japan. China first truly “stood up” as a nation in 1945 following the National government’s victory over Japanese forces, not after the communist victory of 1949.

In fact, China was poised to take its place among the powerful nations of East Asia at the end of WWII, but because of the Chinese civil war and the subsequent and catastrophic years of the Mao Zedong government, many of the advances China had made by the end of the war had been reversed and it would be many decades before China was able to “stand up” once again on the national stage.

Professor Maochun Yu focused a large part of his remarks on the loss of mainland China to the communists and some of the reasons for this outcome. Professor Yu spoke about wartime command and the initial efforts by Washington to establish a single command over all of the China wartime theater. While Washington did invest significant political and military resources in China during WWII and General Albert Wedemeyer served as Commander of Allied Forces in the China theater, President Harry Truman diverted much needed attention away from China towards Eastern Europe. This was done at the urging of Winston Churchill, who considered the communist advance in Europe to be more important than in China. In fact, President Truman recalled General George Marshall back from China in March 1946 to meet Churchill in Washington to re-orient U.S. strategic priority to focus on Europe, and just one day later the Soviet forces in Manchuria handed over a strategic territory to the communists. This was effectively the beginning of the civil war in China.

General Wedemeyer, who was initially sent by President Franklin Roosevelt to the China theater to establish a unity of command was convinced that a key way to prevent a civil war in China following WWII was for U.S. forces to occupy key strategic posts on the Mainland. Washington did not listen to this advice. Professor Yu pointed to this as evidence of a degree of paralysis in Washington and a major disconnect between Washington and the China theater during the war, which became a significant contributor to the loss of mainland China to the communists.

By Michael Bouffard, Program Coordinator, Sigur Center for Asian Studies

About the Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on

Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers.

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