

**May 29, 1959**

**Despatch No. 175 from American Embassy Taipei to  
the Department of State, 'Role of Military in  
Republic of China'**

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**Summary:**

The document discusses the role of military leadership in China, highlighting its historical significance and current dominance in Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek. This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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revolutionary spirit could have accomplished this goal.

Chiang Kai-shek was first of all a militarist and he remains one today. Here in Taiwan the military is definitely first priority. Chiang relies on military power first of all to preserve his power here. He is also depending on military power as a powerful factor in returning to the mainland. That is essentially why he maintains his forces here at maximum possible strength, and that is why a heavier military burden than perhaps seems necessary is placed on Taiwan at the expense of the economy and cultural advancement of the island.

From time immemorial China has been ruled most successfully by powerful leaders, although that is not to say that local autonomy has not played its part in the vast country that is China and where, until recently, communications with the capital were poor to non-existent. China has never enjoyed what we in the West know as "democratic" or "representative" government. Although the Republic of China has a forward-looking constitution and professes to aspire to the democratic approach, our type of democracy is not likely to be applied among the Chinese people - at least not in the near future. It is in the Chinese character and in the Chinese tradition to approve the Confucian approach to Government: a powerful, purposeful, benevolent leadership, no matter how it comes to power or how representative it may be. The leadership must set a good example for the people and rule them with the least possible interference at the local level. It must rule according to the traditional outlook and in the traditional way. It is a significant fact that parliaments have yet to prove successful in China. The Western idea of majority rule is wholly alien to the Chinese character. The Chinese believe in the solution of problems through time-honored compromise and intricate bargaining, not through majority rule.

Although the Republic of China has a Legislative Yuan now in existence for more than a decade and an institution not without some influence, yet its membership is not such as to inspire much confidence in its qualities of leadership, or those forces needed to maintain political stability and social harmony.

There is some demand - mostly in returned student circles and among politicians out of power - for the democratic or representative approach to government; but it is not an approach that is understood or has any appeal to the great bulk of the Chinese people. Education may change this outlook in time if directed in the right channels, but it is a long shot at best.

Our concept of personal liberty and individualism is not one that has had much currency among the Chinese people. Although the Constitution and the various laws provide individual safeguards, yet the authorities have always found ways and means to circumscribe

58

SECRET  
(Classification)

Page 3 of  
Encl. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
Desp. No. 175  
From Taipei, 9/29/59

personal rights and liberties. That is so today in Taiwan. As for the mainland, all personal liberties have been extinguished by the state. It has been argued that too much genuine liberty would result in license and lead to chaos. The lack of discipline in terms of traffic or squatter usurpation in Taipei today suggests that this theory has some basis. Too much liberty to the people could lead to chaos and therefore to the loss of main objectives.

All these problems of how to rule, how much representative government to give to the people, how much democracy to introduce, how much liberty to accord the people, are problems that must be solved by the individual countries concerned. It is not for the United States to prescribe its political, economic, and cultural values to other countries. There is no insurance at all that they will work in the absence of the institutions we have at home. Therefore, we should not judge a given country by whether it is attempting to adopt our values or professes our political doctrines and aims. We should rather determine whether we will support a given country by such criteria as its determination to defend its independence and its capacity to do so and on the basis of whether such support would, on balance, be in our own interest. There have been times in the past when we have allowed ourselves to be distracted by political or institutional considerations extraneous to primary objectives. This leads to the conclusion that we should not be overly concerned by the fact that this or that country is run by military leaders, but by considerations such as the capability of the military leaders to establish security and stability and to improve the general lot of the people. It would be well enough to look into possibilities of liberalizing tendencies only after security and stability have been assured and to decide in the light of local conditions and traditions what we might be able to do to advance such desiderata.

Applying these criteria to the Asia of today, we should certainly encourage India and Japan, Malaya, and the Philippines to move ahead on the road to democracy and representative Government, but the pace and ways of accomplishment should be left to the countries themselves. Help should be given in accordance with the determination and capacities of these countries to stay free and independent and to want development. In Burma, we would appear best advised to go along with and support General Ne Win if he continues to make progress toward preserving Burma's independence. If we are to support Thailand, we probably have no alternative but to dealing with military cliques in control of the country. We may come to the same alternative in Indonesia. If General Nasution should assume control of Indonesia and show capabilities of restoring stability and preserving Indonesia's independence, then we should give favorable consideration to helping him. When President Rhee passes in Korea, we are likely to have to deal with a powerful military oligarchy. Indeed, we might find such a group more rational and easy to deal with than the stubborn old President.

SECRET

53

SECRET  
(Classification)

Page 4 of  
Encl. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
Desp. No. 175  
From Taipei, 9/29/59

Here in Taiwan, we are dealing essentially with a revolutionary military leadership under Chiang Kai-shek. It appears that we shall continue to have to deal with this leadership for some time to come. Chiang is still fit and may live for some years; if he passes, he is likely to be succeeded by Chen Cheng, another military leader, or some other leader with military backing. If we are to pursue our policies here as we now know them, we have no alternative but to deal with the leadership as it is. We are not in a position to prescribe other leadership, nor is it in our tradition to do so. Moreover, the military leadership here has preserved the continuity of the revolution, has preserved such Chinese culture as remains, and has done a reasonably good job of securing and stabilizing this bastion during the past decade. The regime, despite its inherent military character, has preserved the Constitution, has allowed a certain measure of personal liberty despite the crisis, and has even taken a few hesitant steps to liberalize the economy. It is a regime which has kept its pledges to the U.S. and which has made effective use of the military and economic aid provided by us. The leadership is thoroughly familiar with Communism and utterly hostile to it. While basically military in outlook and giving the military first priority, Chiang Kai-shek is also a politician of the first order and has shown consummate skill in holding the ruling Party together; he has also shown great skill, here on Taiwan at least, in making good use of a sizable number of highly qualified civil officials. If Chiang Kai-shek was not obsessed with the revolutionary determination to recover the mainland, there is but little doubt that Taiwan would be the envy of the whole area in terms of economic and perhaps political contentment today.

In the context of the Communist drive for domination of Asia and the weakness and unsettlement of the free nations on the periphery of Communist China, the paper transmitted by the Department appears to be pertinent. If we are to help maintain the freedom and independence of the Asian nations now outside the sphere of Communism, there will clearly be a need in many of the areas to work with military leadership. We should welcome rather than draw back from this contingency where it serves our own interests. Probably in a number of countries only a strong military organization can furnish the leadership, the drive, the power and organization needed to overcome the multi-pronged offensive of the Communists.

This post disagrees with Professor Pauker's assessment that Southeast Asia will be lost to the Communists in the next decade. It will be only in the event that the U.S. and the rest of the free world abandon these countries to their fate. But continuing and sustained support will be necessary. It appears to be a happy augury that in several countries - Burma among them - the old and ineffective politicians are being replaced by younger, more purposeful military leaders. This reflects an awareness of the Communist menace and of the counteractions that are taking place. These counteractions may not be palatable from the viewpoints of democracy

SECRET

54

SECRET

(Classification)

Page 5 of

Encl. No.

Desp. No. 175

From Taipei, 9/29/59

and liberty, but they may be effective in throwing back Communism. Only after this last bridge is crossed would it seem in order to concern ourselves with the problems of personal liberty, individualism, representative government, free enterprise, et cetera. Even though we may try, it is predictable that these values will be slow in reaching these countries and may never take effect.

This post is in full agreement with Professor Pauker that organization - full blown organization is vastly important key to repelling Communism. As Pauker points out, Communist totalitarianism is highly organized, purposeful, capable of attacking in a variety of ways. The defense should be just as highly organized. In several Asian countries, the military are the only authorities who have the organization at this stage and the wherewithal capable of contesting the advance of Communism.

Our experience with China shows that we can work with military leadership. Our experience of the past decade here in Taiwan shows that almost miraculous improvements can be made on the military side. Equivalent advances can be made on the economic side, although here in Taiwan they are not as spectacular as in the military area. The China experience shows that a military oligarchy can make use of civil officials. Numerous economic and some political reforms have been achieved here in the past decade. Our sustained military and economic aid programs, while handicapped by inability to project long-term programs, have paid off. Contributing to this record has been the substantial number of military and civilian officials and technicians who have been trained or educated in the U.S. But more needs to be done in this field. The military, in particular, need to have more insight into economic forces governing their countries. But if military regimes are to be successful in developing and modernizing backward Asian countries, it appears that they are not likely to have much success in reaching these goals unless they can absorb and make use of civilian officials and technicians and also learn to lean on the forces of private enterprise for help in development. The prospects for bringing this about are not very bright. Possibly if the political and military crisis which pervades Asia could be lifted for once and all, the military forces so necessary now would recede into the background and the modernizing forces we seek in their place would come forward and quickly take over. But so long as Communism presses its ever onward march, this desirable contingency can hardly be expected to eventuate.

  
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