

(UN)AMBIGUOUS MEANING? CROSS-STRAIT NARRATIVES OF UN RESOLUTION 2758

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This Focus Asia paper examines China’s and Taiwan’s narratives about UN Resolution 2758 in the context of current cross-strait relations and the global debate surrounding Taiwan’s UN participation. The paper expounds on what UN Resolution 2758 is and in what historical context it was voted on in the 1971 UN General Assembly. It analyzes the international debate that led up to the resolution’s adoption and argues that it had different meaning to the UN’s voting member-states. The paper also examines how the PRC’s and Taiwan’s narratives of UN Resolution 2758 has evolved over time. For the PRC, the resolution affirmed its “one China principle” claiming that Taiwan is part of China. Its use has not so much evolved but instead intensified. In Taiwan, the narrative about the resolution evolved as it became a multi-party democracy and is now seen in different terms by Taiwan’s ruling DPP and oppositional KMT. For the DPP, the resolution does not give the PRC the right to represent its citizens in the UN whereas the KMT is pragmatic towards the PRC and willing to abide by the “1992 Consensus”. The disagreements between the DPP and KMT present a challenge for Taiwan to have a lasting unified narrative on Resolution 2758. In addition, the growing international push-back against the PRC’s narrative of Resolution 2758 could impact Beijing’s “one China principle” and result in an increasingly tough stance from China in response. Due to the ambiguous nature of UN Resolution 2758 and its high relevance to cross-strait relations, it will remain a contentious issue with more global debate to follow.

Introduction

History has emerged as an area of significant contention between the governments of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC), commonly known as Taiwan. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which maintains that Taiwan is part of the PRC, historical narratives have utility in strengthening its claim. The PRC’s arguments are often built on historical assertions

and that Taiwan has been part of China since ancient times,¹ and that unification with China is the trend of history.² By asserting Beijing’s view of history, the PRC seeks to build an international consensus around its position and prepare the global community for future unification of the two sides of the Taiwan-Strait. These narratives reflect the PRC’s efforts to internationally solidify its “one China

principle”, asserting that there is only one China, under communist rule, and that Taiwan belongs to it.³ In this respect, the PRC’s use of history aims to simultaneously shape the perception of Taiwan’s history and what its future is going to be.

Since taking office for a third consecutive term, Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its President Lai Ching-te have pushed back against the PRC’s efforts to dominate historical narratives. However, rather than merely pointing out where the PRC uses history to its advantage, the Lai administration has launched a counter offensive. This effort appears designed to regain agency in how Taiwan’s history is told and what its future in the international space can be. President Lai’s ambition could be gleaned when he argued that the PRC cannot become Taiwan’s “motherland” because the ROC is older, and that it is instead the ROC that could be the PRC’s “motherland”.⁴ Another example could be observed when President Lai stated that the PRC did not hold Russia to account for territory that China lost to it at the 1858 Treaty of Aigun, implying that the CCP was hypocritical in asserting a historical claim over Taiwan when that did not apply to others.⁵ By undermining the PRC’s arguments and signaling that Taiwan should have agency in how its history is told, President Lai has stepped up efforts to challenge Beijing’s use of historical narratives and its attempts to strengthen the “one China principle”.

A particular point of contention between Beijing and Taipei is the question of Taiwan’s United Nations (UN) participation. From Beijing’s perspective, Taiwan is not entitled to any UN participation leaving it to be represented by the PRC in the international governing body. Beijing has gone as far as to criminalize advocacy for Taiwan’s participation in international organizations where statehood is a requirement.⁶ Taiwan, on the other hand, launches yearly campaigns for meaningful international participation arguing that the PRC does not have the right to represent its citizens in the UN.⁷ In this context, few historical events are as significant as the 1971 adoption of UN Resolution 2758. Interpretations of what the resolution meant and in what light it should be seen today vary sharply across the Taiwan Strait and in the global community.

What is UN Resolution 2758?

The origin of UN Resolution 2758 can be traced to the break-out of the Chinese Civil War. Without its occurrence and aftermath, the resolution would likely never have been conceived. Prior to China’s current communist rule, it was governed by the Kuomintang (KMT) under the ROC. The KMT’s rule was challenged by the CCP in a civil war that began in 1927 and stabilized for a time between 1937 and 1945 to unite China and counter the Japanese invasion.⁸ In February 1946, fighting broke out again and eventually resulted in the establishment of the PRC on October 1, 1949.⁹ In December 1949, the government of the ROC was defeated and retreated to Taiwan. KMT’s leader Chiang Kai-shek re-established the ROC government on Taiwan in 1950. From Taiwan, the ROC was then held forth as the legitimate representative of China, rivaling the PRC’s claim.

Six months before the civil war erupted again, the UN was founded on October 24, 1945, by 51 member-states, including the ROC.¹⁰ From its establishment until October 1971, the ROC represented the whole of China in the UN. However, in a decision on October 25, 1971, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted Resolution 2758, which recognized the PRC as the legitimate representative of China and expelled representatives of Chiang Kai-shek. While the resolution clarified China’s representation, it made no clear mention of the Republic of China, Taiwan, or its status, instead it specifically mentioned the expulsion of representatives of Chiang Kai-shek:

2758 (XXVI). Restoration of the lawful rights of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations

The General Assembly,

Recalling the principles of the Charter of the United Nations,

Considering that the restoration of the lawful rights of the People’s Republic of China is essential both for the protection of the Charter of the United Nations and for the cause that the United Nations must serve under the Charter,

Recognizing that the representatives of the Government of the People’s Republic of China are the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations and that the People’s Republic of China is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council,

Decides to restore all its rights to the People's Republic of China and to recognize the representatives of its Government as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations, and to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all the organizations related to it.

*1976th plenary meeting,
25 October 1971.¹¹*

In recent times, Resolution 2758 has received renewed attention as competing narratives about its meaning have sharpened. On September 28, 2024, PRC's Foreign Minister Wang Yi expounded China's view on both the recent attention and the resolution's meaning concerning Taiwan in UNGA.¹² According to PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he said:

This resolution thoroughly resolved the issue of representation for all of China, including Taiwan, in the United Nations. It clearly states that there are no "Two Chinas", nor does "One China and one Taiwan" exist. On this principal issue, there is no gray area nor room for ambiguity.

这一决议彻底解决了包括台湾在内全中国在联合国的代表权问题，明确不存在“两个中国”，不存在“一中一台”。在这一原则问题上，没有灰色地带，没有模糊空间。¹³

According to the PRC, Resolution 2758 did answer the question of Taiwan's representation in the UN, and the answer is that Taiwan needs to be represented by the PRC. In complete contrast, the other side of the debate claims that the resolution never was about Taiwan's status. In July 2024, the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), a coalition of lawmakers with sympathies for Taiwan, declared that China had misinterpreted Resolution 2758 to claim sovereignty over Taiwan.¹⁴ IPAC emphasized that the resolution only affirmed the PRC's representation in the UN and never addressed Taiwan's political status or its membership eligibility. This perception has resonated in the international community, with countries passing resolutions supporting Taiwan's inclusion in the UN. In Australia, IPAC members wrote a motion concerning the issue, which was passed unanimously in August 2024.¹⁵ Similarly, motions written by IPAC members have been approved in the Netherlands,¹⁶ Canada,¹⁷ the United Kingdom,¹⁸ and the European Parliament (EP) during the autumn of 2024.¹⁹ In

contrast to the PRC's understanding of Resolution 2758, these motions claim that the resolution never took a position on Taiwan's representation. The resolution adopted in the EP states that:

Taiwan has never been part of the PRC; whereas the Republic of China was established in 1912 and the PRC in 1949 [...] whereas UN Resolution 2758 addresses the status of the PRC, but does not determine that the PRC enjoys sovereignty over Taiwan, nor does it make any judgment on the future inclusion of Taiwan in the UN or any other international organization [...] UN Resolution 2758 takes no position on Taiwan; strongly rejects and refutes the PRC's attempts to distort history and international rules.²⁰

Furthermore, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) year-long campaign for meaningful UN participation in 2024, reflected the same message as IPAC's campaign.²¹ All three main issues of the campaign pinpointed that UN Resolution 2758 does not address Taiwan or its representation in the UN. Furthermore, the campaign calls on UN members to raise the notion of Taiwanese representation.

The 1971 Turning Point

The adoption of Resolution 2758, during UNGA in October 1971, was far from a straightforward decision. The complexity of the issue is evident from its repeated discussions in UNGA (1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, and 1970)²² before its final adoption in 1971. The outline of the adopted resolution was not apparent to all members in 1971, and in the spotlight of the dispute stood the ROC's representation in the UN. Several decisions were taken in UNGA before Resolution 2758 was adopted. One of them, a motion asking for a separate vote on the words concerning the expulsion of representatives of Chiang Kai-shek, was rejected by a vote of 59 to 55, with 15 abstentions. The original draft of the resolution²³ was adopted by a vote of 76 to 35, with 17 abstentions, with all other proposals either being rejected or not put up for vote.

The debate leading up to the decision was complex and contained a plethora of different perceptions of the ROC's and Taiwan's representation in the UN,

one of the clearer examples may have been found in the introduction of the adopted resolution, where the 17 authors claimed that:

The reality of the existence of the People's Republic of China cannot, of course, be changed to suit the myth of a so-called "Republic of China", fabricated out of a portion of Chinese territory. It is well known that the unlawful authorities installed on the island of Taiwan, who claim to represent China, remain there only because of the permanent presence of the armed forces of the United States of America.²⁴

One of the authors, Albania, later backed its statement during the plenary debate stating, that the resolution according to them was about guaranteeing Taiwan's representation in the UN by arguing that:

The Chinese province of Taiwan is an integral part of the territory of the People's Republic of China. [...] Shedding crocodile tears [when the US] explained that the expulsion of the Chiang Kai-shek clique would deprive [Taiwan's inhabitants] of representation within the United Nations. But everyone knows that the island of Taiwan is an integral part of Chinese territory and that the Chinese people, 700 million strong including the population of Taiwan, have not been represented in the United Nations for some 22 years.²⁵

Based on these statements alone, one could imagine that for at least 17 of UNGA's members in 1971, the resolution represented a message which validated the narrative of Taiwan being an integral part of the PRC. The other side of the debate, however, reveals that this was not a commonly perceived implication of the resolution. The United States and 18 other countries contributed with their proposal for a resolution, in which both PRC and ROC would be affirmed a seat in the UN.²⁶ This proposal was never voted on, because the original proposal was accepted. One country that could be used to represent the middle ground of the debate is Belgium, who claimed in the plenary debate that for them the decision was about which entity should represent China in the UN, and stated that if ROC instead would have voiced the wish of being seated as the representatives of Taiwan instead of China, they would be positively inclined to approve ROC's continuation as a member of UN.²⁷ Their perception of the decision was voiced by several others during the debate.²⁸ It is, therefore, most likely that the adopted resolution was perceived differently

by different countries and could be agreed upon only because of its room for interpretation. However, the debate makes it clear that the only consensus reached in 1971 was the one adopted in wording—not a specific perception of it.

Let's therefore look closer at the choice of words that lead to ROC's exclusion in the resolution and its possible meaning according to the opinions voiced in the debate. The only place in the resolution that has phrasing related to Taiwan is found in the last paragraph: "and to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the UN and in all the organizations related to it."²⁹ In the plenary debate, references to the ROC generally highlighted both the government led by Chiang Kai-shek and the inhabitants of Taiwan. But the UN's members never reached a consensus regarding whether the Chiang Kai-shek government had the right to claim power over Taiwan, thus emphasizing that the government led by Chiang Kai-shek did not necessarily equal the representation of the people of Taiwan. It was likely difficult to draw any conclusion on this matter as the ROC's representative also stressed that Taiwan was Chinese territory and that the people living on the island were Chinese, not Taiwanese.³⁰ The ROC framed itself as representatives of "Free China", not of Taiwan.³¹ Presumably, a significant reason for why the debate never managed to reach a consensus on Taiwan's representation in the UN in 1971, was that both sides of the Taiwan Strait, the PRC and ROC, wanted to represent China in the UN.

The ROC's Evolving Narrative of Resolution 2758

Following the adoption of Resolution 2758, the ROC's government withdrew from the UN and its affiliated organizations.³² According to Taiwan's MOFA, this decision excluded 23.5 million people from representation in the UN.³³ Since 1993, Taiwan has launched several campaigns seeking international support to address the issue of Taiwan's representation.³⁴ MOFA's online records reveal that proposals submitted to the UN between 1993 and 2008 sought to reinterpret Resolution 2758 as not addressing Taiwan's representation.³⁵ For instance,

the 1993 draft emphasized the rights of “21 million Chinese, who are politically organized as the Republic of China, in the island territory of Taiwan.”³⁶ This indicates that, at the time, Taiwan’s narrative positioned its people as part of a separate entity from Mainland China while still emphasizing their Chinese ethnicity, consistent with ROC’s earlier narrative in the UN.

Subsequent drafts from 1994 to 1996 reiterated these themes, incorporating additional territories like Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu as part of the ROC.³⁷ In 1997, however, Taiwan’s narrative shifted to highlight its democratic evolution.³⁸ The draft resolution referenced Taiwan’s first democratically elected president in 1996 and framed the ROC and PRC as “two Governments coexisting within the spacious boundary of China” while exercising sovereignty over separate territories.³⁹ By 2002, this distinction deepened, as the ROC began to contrast its modern governance with the authoritarian rule of Chiang Kai-shek. This coincided with the DPP becoming Taiwan’s largest parliamentary party in 2002.⁴⁰ By 2004, the narrative evolved and emphasized Taiwan’s transformation into a free and democratic country after 40 years of authoritarian rule.⁴¹ In 2007, Taiwan’s resolution stressed that Resolution 2758 did not resolve the issue of Taiwan’s representation and called for UNGA to accept Taiwan’s democratically elected government as the Taiwanese people’s legitimate representative in the UN.⁴²

The evolving narrative reflects the impact of Taiwan’s democratization and changing political landscape. Early drafts in the 1990s emphasized a shared Chinese identity, likely influenced by the “1992 Consensus” between the ROC and PRC, which allowed for differing interpretations of “one China”.⁴³ However, under DPP leadership (2000–2008), Taiwan’s narrative increasingly positioned its people as a distinct group, emphasizing democracy and sovereignty. The 2024 MOFA narrative closely aligns with the 2007 narrative. In a press release dated September 3, 2024, MOFA stated:

The 23.5 million people of Taiwan continue to be excluded from the United Nations system. The main reason for this unjust phenomenon is China’s deliberate

distortion of Resolution 2758’s meaning, China intends to mislead the international community into accepting that the resolution is equivalent to China’s “One-China Principle”. Moreover, it falsely claims that Taiwan is a region of the People’s Republic of China, and thus gives authorization to China to represent Taiwan in the UN system. Furthermore, the narrative aims to legally eliminate the objective fact that the Republic of China (Taiwan) is a sovereign state and to undermine Taiwan’s strive for its legitimate right of participation in the system of United Nations.

台灣2,350萬人仍持續被遺漏在聯合國體系之外。造成這種不公不義現象的主因，就是中國惡意扭曲聯大第2758號決議的內容，意圖誤導國際社會接受該決議等同於中國的「一中原則」，並且謬稱台灣是中華人民共和國的一部分，以及授權中國在聯合國體系代表台灣，進而從法理上消滅中華民國（台灣）是主權國家的客觀事實，以及抹殺台灣爭取參與聯合國體系的正當權利。⁴⁴

Here, Taiwan’s MOFA portrays China as an antagonist misleading the global community and twisting facts, by equating the resolution with its “one-China Principle”. MOFA rejected the claim that Taiwan is a region of the PRC and criticized China for denying Taiwan’s sovereign status and excluding its people from the UN system. MOFA also framed China’s actions as a violation of fundamental human rights.⁴⁵ In late September 2024, MOFA once again voiced the same narrative, stating “MOFA demands China to stop misleading the international community [concerning resolution 2758]” 外交部要求中國停止誤導國際視聽。⁴⁶

Despite MOFA’s arguments, Taiwan’s parliament the Legislative Yuan, has not yet reached a consensus on Resolution 2758. The DPP maintains that Resolution 2758 was unrelated to Taiwan’s representation whereas the KMT is more hesitant to make such a statement. This is congruent with the KMT’s tendency towards pragmatism with the PRC and abiding by the “1992 Consensus”. During Ma Ying-jeou’s KMT presidency (2008–2016), Taiwan was admitted as an observer in the World Health Organization (WHO) under the moniker of “Chinese Taipei” and as a guest in the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). This has not taken place since the DPP came to power. Although both the DPP and the KMT have advocated for Taiwan’s participation in the UN system, they disagree on the overarching narrative of such inclusion because they disagree on how to relate

to China.⁴⁷ Internally, Taiwan's political parties' inability to agree on Resolution 2758's implications could undermine MOFA's current aim of advancing a global narrative for the ROC. As long as there is a divide on how to relate to China, the PRC can lend its support behind an agreeable KMT government's bid for UN participation and work against the DPP.

The PRC's Steadfast Narrative of Resolution 2758

For the PRC, the adoption of Resolution 2758 was a historic victory and an affirmation of its status as the legitimate government of China. The PRC argues that the resolution restored the rights of the Chinese people and confirmed the "one-China Principle".⁴⁸ According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFA), the U.S. rather than the ROC was the primary obstacle to the PRC's rightful UN seat before 1971. The U.S. is framed as the antagonist by the PRC, while the ROC is framed as a pawn of American interests. The PRC's narrative of Resolution 2758 has not changed substantially in 20 years and was used in similar terms to argue against Taiwan's UN participation during DPP President Chen Shui-Bian's reign (2000–2008).⁴⁹ Today, the PRC continues to stress that Resolution 2758 is a binding affirmation of the "one-China principle", portraying Taiwan as an integral part of its territory.

In 2022, the PRC released a white paper where it described the resolution as "international law," underlining its supposed authority while accusing the DPP of being separatists and enemies of the Chinese people.⁵⁰ In 2024, the PRC's stance on Taiwan hardened further. New legal guidelines introduced harsh penalties, including the death penalty, for advocates of Taiwanese independence, signaling the sensitivity of the issue.⁵¹ In the new legal guidelines, advocating for Taiwan to join international organizations where statehood is a requirement was also criminalized.⁵² The PRC continues to firmly reject alternative interpretations of Resolution 2758, as PRC's Foreign Minister Wang Yi shared: "On this principal issue, there is no gray area nor room for ambiguity" 在这一原则问题上, 没有灰色地带, 没有模糊空间.⁵³

The PRC's intensity in stressing that Resolution 2758 affirms its "one China principle" and threatening legal retribution against those that advocate for Taiwan to join the UN should be seen in a context where the DPP has won three consecutive Taiwanese elections. Beijing views the KMT as more conducive to its goal of unification whereas it views the DPP as separatists. In this regard, firmly opposing Taiwan's UN inclusion under a DPP government and lending its support for Taiwan to be included, albeit as an observer, under KMT governments is a PRC strategy.⁵⁴ In this way, Beijing can reward the government on Taiwan that it finds more conducive to its aims of unification. This in turn becomes another incentive for the KMT to not dispute Beijing's "one China principle" and stand behind the "1992 Consensus" as the party could then potentially deliver some form of UN participation to its constituents.

The PRC's narrative about Resolution 2758 has not been subjective to a similar evolution as in the ROC because there has not been a democratic debate underpinning it. In addition, it rests firmly on the PRC's "one China principle" asserting that Taiwan is part of China. Instead, what has unfolded in recent years with the PRC's narrative and legal pressure can more aptly be described as an intensification explained by the DPP's electoral success along with growing international support for Taiwan's UN participation. This means that the PRC is highly unlikely to change its position and will continue to equate Resolution 2758 with its "one-China principle", regardless of whether the DPP or the KMT governs Taiwan. Instead, what could change will amount to an increase or decrease in the intensity with which the PRC pursues its agenda. Even if the current pressure dissipates in the event of a regime change in Taiwan, the PRC is unlikely to back down from where it has driven the issue as a reminder to the Taiwanese public that a DPP government comes with consequences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the narrative surrounding UN Resolution 2758 has become an important focal point in the debate over Taiwan's status. While the PRC presents the resolution as an undeniable historical and legal affirmation of its "one-China principle",

the ROC's MOFA argues that the resolution never directly addressed Taiwan's status, and therefore, does not invalidate Taiwan's separate identity or its right to representation in international forums. Taiwan's domestic political landscape complicates the situation, with the DPP and KMT offering divergent views on the implications of Resolution 2758 because they are not in agreement on how to relate to China. The DPP emphasizes Taiwan's sovereignty and its distinct political identity, while the KMT is more reluctant to openly challenge the PRC, in line with the "1992 Consensus". This division within Taiwan's political landscape might undermine efforts to present a long-lasting and unified global narrative on the resolution and regime changes in Taiwan are likely to impact its governments approach.

The PRC, on the other hand, frames UN Resolution 2758 as a cornerstone in its assertion of sovereignty over Taiwan. International opinions on whether that is what Resolution 2758 meant remain as divided as they were when the resolution was adopted. There is, however, growing support for Taiwan's inclusion in the UN and an increased focus on how the PRC uses its view of Resolution 2758 to keep Taiwan out of international participation. The PRC's use of Resolution 2758 as a tool to advance its political objectives, combined with increasing legal and military pressures against Taiwan's DPP government, suggests that cross-strait tensions will continue during President Lai's mandate. In this regard, IPAC's stance against China on Resolution 2758 and international voices in support of Taiwan might also be perceived as a growing threat by the PRC. China is trying to portray its "one China principle" as a global consensus and voices like IPAC's present a challenge to this notion, with a tougher approach from the PRC to potentially follow.

What remains clear is that Resolution 2758, despite its adoption over 50 years ago, continues to serve as a center of dispute. The resolution's ambiguity and relevance to cross-strait relations ensures that it will continue to be a matter of contention, with both sides of the Taiwan Strait placing stock in its credibility and power of persuasion. Taiwan's narrative of Resolution 2758 has changed in step with its democratization whereas for China, it has

intensified along with its assertion of the "one China principle". Given the current political climate and the opposing views of Resolution 2758, it is uncertain what concrete steps will be taken to resolve the issue of Taiwan's representation in the UN.

The resolution itself has not provided a clear path forward, and the future of Taiwan's UN participation is likely to depend on the evolving geopolitics surrounding cross-strait relations. While the PRC is unlikely to change its narrative, there is a growing interest in Taiwan's UN inclusion and challenges to China's use of Resolution 2758. This could impact the credibility of the PRC's "one-China principle" as Beijing draws a link between it and the resolution. If the voices arguing that China is misrepresenting Resolution 2758 grow louder and gain momentum, they could in turn also impact what the PRC is ultimately trying to protect, the narrative that Taiwan belongs to China. One thing remains clear in all this unclarity; the debate about what Resolution 2758 means is mired in the same ambiguity as it was in 1971. Regardless of which side ultimately wins the debate, Taiwan's UN participation remains uncertain.

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Endnotes

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