

# From the Backwaters of South China Sea History

## Pratas at the Dawn of the Cold War

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ASIA IN FOCUS

Pratas Island in the South China Sea (SCS) is strategically located near major shipping routes, but its history remains largely unexplored. Occupied by the Republic of China (ROC) since 1946, it faced potential threats from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) simulated military drills in 2020, raising fears of a US-PRC conflict and spotlighting the island's significance. This article delves into Pratas' history, using new sources from the UK National Archives and CIA Archives. It highlights the island's role from the end of WWII in Asia in 1946 to the two Taiwan Strait crises in the 1950s. The island's geopolitical significance in the 1950s was influenced by strategic factors, keeping it relatively unnoticed until its integration into the Cold War dynamics of East Asia by 1958, a position it maintained until 2020.

**Keywords:** Pratas, China, Cold War in East Asia, Taiwan Strait crises, Geopolitics.

In 2014, Bill Hayton published his book *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. The book begins with a hypothetical scenario of how an island dispute between China<sup>1</sup> and the Philippines in the South China Sea (SCS) could escalate into a large-scale war and direct superpower conflict between the United States and China (PRC) (Hayton, 2014: 11–14). Since 2020, an island group largely forgotten in the history of the region dubbed by *The Economist* as the most “dangerous place on earth” has emerged (The Economist, 2021). In late 2020, tensions arose around Pratas Island as reports emerged that a PRC military exercise would simulate an occupation of it (Guo and Liu, 2020). Since then, experts and academics have pinpointed the island - which has been occupied by the Republic of China (Taiwan) since 1946 - as a potential catalyst for confrontation between the US and China. In 2021, both the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Center for New American Security (CNAS) produced reports that identified Pratas as the most tempting SCS military objective for Beijing. CNAS, in their report, found few avenues for the US or its allies to stop an invasion of the island without escalating the conflict (Dougherty, Matuschak, and Hunter, 2021; Blackwill and Zelikow, 2021). With its connection to both the wider SCS conflicts and the issue of Taiwan’s status *vis-à-vis* mainland China, it has emerged from the backwaters of the SCS and

spurred on anxieties of a new Taiwan Strait crisis. On 2 August 2022, tensions across the strait rose following then-US speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan (Tan and Molloy, 2022). As tensions continue to escalate across the strait, it has become as pertinent as ever to fully understand Pratas as a potential new ‘battleground’ in the Taiwan dispute and superpower politics between the US and China.

The contemporary situation and future problems can only be understood fully through a historical framework. Pratas have existed in the shadows of the SCS conflicts since WWII. Hence, it has remained a lacuna in the English historiography on the SCS. However, as this article will show, just because the island has avoided conflict does not mean it can be relegated from the history books. The article will begin to fill in this empty space and, with that, further our understanding of a complex conflict-filled region and a potential new chess piece on the SCS chessboard.

To help us understand the dynamics surrounding Pratas, this article will turn its focus on the watershed period in East Asian history between 1946–1958. It will present the island in the middle of two major historical developments: the Chinese Civil War and the inception of the Cold War in East Asia. Utilising previously unused archival material from the British National Archives and the CIA Archives, the article showcases both

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, China refers to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), founded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), whose government *de facto* governs the mainland and was established in 1949. It is today *de jure* recognised as the representative of China. Taiwan refers to the Republic of China (ROC), founded by the Chinese Nationalist Party Kuomintang (KMT), who escaped to the island of Taiwan and its surrounding islands in 1949 during the Chinese Civil War. The ROC has since governed over the island(s) and existed *de facto* independent but without international recognition.



Figure 1: Map of Pratas in the SCS. Source: <https://istockphoto.com>

British and American interests in the island but argues that neither was committed to actively safeguarding the island from communist takeover. This article argues that, during the 1950s, Pratas' absence came from its subordinate position to the overarching goal of the PRC to defeat the ROC on Taiwan. Once the US entered the region, the environment changed, but it did not alone stop PRC aggression against the offshore islands. This becomes apparent when analysing the first and second Taiwan Strait crises. The crises represent two events during the 1950s where high tensions between the PRC and ROC escalated into armed conflict over islands located in the Taiwan Strait.

This article finds that the PRC's strategic concerns and Pratas' unfavourable geographic position in relation to the goal of defeating the ROC were the main factors that kept the island absent until the end of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis. Following the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, the Cold War battle lines were solidifying, and Pratas had been incorporated into the Cold War disposition of the region.

### Placing Pratas

At the disputed theatre of the SCS, the Spratly, Paracel, and Scarborough Islands have been the main flashpoints taking up the spotlight.

Strikingly, Pratas, the largest of the small islands in the SCS, has remained mostly absent from public contestation. The island, named Dongsha in Chinese, with its 12 square kilometres, is located in the northern part of the SCS, 320 km southeast of Hong Kong, 400 km southwest of Taiwan, and 500 km northwest of Luzon (Heinzig, 1976: 19; Chang, 2016: 1). Pratas is distinctly different from the other SCS islands as it is the only island in the SCS not claimed by two internationally recognised states but rather by China and Taiwan.

This connects Pratas to the Taiwan issue. Therefore, it is pertinent to address another set of islands. Across the strait from Taiwan, a few kilometres off the Chinese mainland, lies many small islands often referred to as ‘the offshore islands’. The Kinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu (Nankan) islands are the largest. These islands were points of armed conflict between China and Taiwan in the 1950s, but Kinmen and Matsu have remained under Taiwan’s control (Rushkoff, 1981: 466). Thus, Pratas can be compared with both the SCS and offshore islands and links the SCS and the Taiwan issue.

### Historiography

Uncontested since the Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia during WWII, Pratas has existed in the backwaters of the SCS. The island has remained but a mention in passing while scholars focus on the Spratly, Paracel, and Scarborough Islands. The SCS historiography is vast. Already by 1924, German general and geographer Karl Haushofer had been one of the first to draw attention to the SCS’s strategic importance (General CIA Records [Hereafter GCR], 1976). Since then, the historiography of the SCS has closely tracked the ever-developing situation in the region.

This is visible in the earliest English-language writings on the SCS conflicts, which were prompted by the 1974 Chinese invasion of the Paracel

Islands. The first book on the topic was entitled *Disputed Islands in the South China Sea: Paracels, Spratlys, Pratas, Macclesfield Bank* and was published in 1976 by Dieter Heinzig, a German historian. Heinzig published the booklet as he wished “... to provide a solid basis of historical information for all those who wish to assess the conflict ... and any future dispute that may arise in the South China Sea” (1). In the short booklet, Heinzig provides historical and geographical information on the islands of the SCS. However, Heinzig’s inclusion of Pratas along with the other disputed islands in the title is slightly misleading, as Pratas has not been disputed between internationally recognised states since WWII.

Since then, only two English scholarly publications have devoted space to Pratas. First was Greg Austin’s book *China’s Ocean Frontier* from 1998. In it, he takes a China-focused approach and gives a comprehensive analysis of China’s incentives and claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands. By spending one paragraph questioning why Pratas was not attacked during the first two Taiwan Strait crises, Austin was the first author to shed light on the island. He did not, however, pursue this question further.

An article published by Bill Hayton (2019) is the only work to dedicate significant focus to Pratas. Hayton examines Pratas during the early 1900s, especially the Pratas Island crisis of 1909, where the Japanese government ended up recognising the Qing government’s sovereignty over the territory. Furthermore, he analyses the event’s role in the early development of China’s territorial claims. However, Hayton’s inquiry focuses on the period between 1909 and 1937. It stops in 1946, where this article picks up.

### A Small Meteorological Station, Big Concerns

A meteorological station was built on Pratas in 1926 by the Republic of China. It provided invaluable meteorological information for British

Hong Kong. In 1937, the Japanese occupied the island and its weather station (GCR, 1956; National Archives [Hereafter NA], 1950a). At the end of WWII, the Japanese were ejected from Pratas, and the ROC forces retook control of the island and its weather station in 1946. Meanwhile, the Chinese Civil War continued on the mainland. On 1 October 1949, the communists proclaimed the People's Republic of China (Granados, 2006: 154.) In the years 1945–50, the US followed a policy of non-intervention and more or less accepted what it saw as the inevitable fall of mainland China to the communist forces (Muller, 1983: 17).

On 25 April 1950, a visiting British naval ship to Pratas reported that the ROC troops intended to soon withdraw from the island. The news raised concerns among British officials (NA, 1950b). Anticipating an invasion of Taiwan, the ROC had withdrawn most troops from the islands in the SCS to concentrate on defending Taiwan itself. In May 1950, ROC troops were withdrawn from Woody Island in the Paracels and Itu Aba in the Spratlys (Till, 2009: 31). Troops, however, remained on Pratas despite the island being located closer to the mainland than to Taiwan and far away from the course the PRC's navy would take in any invasion of Taiwan. The British - clearly concerned about the future of Pratas - had their hands tied due to their position in the Chinese Civil War after it had recognised the PRC on 6 January 1950 (NA, 1950a). Instead, in response to the report of ROC troops withdrawing from the island, the British repeatedly requested the Americans to put pressure on the ROC to maintain its presence and to "Persuade the Chinese nationalists to continue to operate the station on the grounds it is internationally important" (NA, 1950a).

Concerns surrounding Pratas intensified, and, on 5 June 1950, the Governor of Hong Kong sent a letter to the Secretary of State of the Colonies. He proclaimed the inevitable cessation of weather reports if communists took control of the island. He

reiterated the importance of Pratas' weather reports for Hong Kong in defence against typhoons and for the British Navy. A US consulate member, in conversation with the Governor of Hong Kong, stated that "... some action should be taken about Pratas considering the information obtained from this station is vital for security in the area in the event of war, and even during cold war" (NA, 1950a). The Governor believed there was no way to secure the continuation of weather reports from Pratas without essentially occupying the island, and he believed the Americans were willing to contemplate this. On 22 June, the consensus was reiterated in a report from the Meteorological Office to the head of the Admiralty. It stated that one could track the communists advance on mainland China by where weather reports were reduced to basically nil. It also emphasised that the continuation of weather reports from Pratas was of vital importance (NA, 1950a). The island had become entangled in the great power rivalry in the region and with its regional players.

The primary British concern regarding Pratas had been the potential loss of essential weather reports for Hong Kong and the British and US Navy, either through ROC abandonment or PRC occupation. Regardless, the officials assumed they would be denied weather reports. On 14 June 1950, George Henry Hall, the political head of the British Royal Navy, suggested that the Foreign Office convince the ROC to keep running the weather station on Pratas while simultaneously coming to an agreement with the communists about future arrangements for weather reports. British officials were not keen to have such arrangements as they doubted the communists' reliability in future times of crisis. Convinced of the upcoming loss of weather reports, through either a PRC takeover or ROC abandonment, British and US officials laid contingency plans.

Neither the UK nor the US proved to be committed to protecting the weather station on Pratas by military means. Correspondence between

British officials emphasise that their position in the Chinese Civil War following British recognition of the PRC meant they could not contemplate any military actions to safeguard the island (NA, 1950a). Similarly, the US had at the time accepted a ROC defeat to the communists as inevitable. Therefore, their preferred solution was to seek an agreement with the Philippine Weather Bureau to deliver increased weather reports. On 16 August 1950, the Governor of Hong Kong received a letter from the British Legation in Manila confirming that the Philippines was prepared to increase weather reports in the event of cessation of reports from Pratas. The Americans also took part and, on 21 August, in a letter to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs in the Philippines, the American ambassador to the Philippines referred to British requests for increased weather reports and remarked their great value to the US Navy and Air Force. Less than a month later, on 9 September, Hong Kong received a letter from Manila confirming that the Philippine Weather Bureau was now in a position to transmit hourly weather reports from their weather station at Laoag (NA, 1950a). Ultimately, while the weather station gave Pratas strategic value, both the British and American officials seemed to view a communist takeover as inevitable. Thus, in an uncertain post-WWII world, neither proved willing to commit to the island by military means, instead opting for contingency plans. This raises the question: Why did the communists not bring force to bear on Pratas in 1950?

### Enter the 7th Fleet

Initially, one might look to the weak maritime capabilities of the PRC and its non-existent navy prior to 1950. In 1949, the PRC had suffered great losses in a failed attempt to take the island of Hainan, relying on junks and rafts to attack the island situated just a few miles off the southern coast of the mainland. A second offensive in 1950 was more successful, but rather because of the ROC forces' lack of resistance than the

improvements of the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) (Muller, 1983, p.16). In May 1950, the PRC took control of Hainan.

Hainan provided an ideal location from which to launch an invasion of Pratas. In 1950, British officials were convinced the ROC troops on the island would not be capable of stopping any PRC attack (NA, 1950b). According to a memorandum from the Office of Director of Central Intelligence to Henry Kissinger about Pratas in 1974, the ROC had not deployed a proper military garrison on the island until 1955, implying that the ROC troops present on the island prior were only the ones connected to the running of the weather station and not a defensive military force (Library of Congress [hereafter LC], 1974). The PRC had occupied an ideal position to launch an offensive on Pratas, and while its maritime capabilities were weak, it would not have required much effort by the PLA-N to dislodge the ROC forces present on the island - forces that the ROC already had contemplated withdrawing.

There seems to have been little will to prevent a communist takeover of Pratas directly. Contingency plans to get the weather reports elsewhere had been put in place by the US and the UK, the island itself was poorly defended, and the PLA-N, while nearly non-existent, possessed the minuscule requirements to dislodge the troops on the island. After capturing Hainan in May 1950, the PRC was looking to once and for all deal with the Nationalists and began planning the invasion of Taiwan. The probing was set to start in July, and the main assault was set for early August (Muller, 1983: 16-17). For the PRC, in the domestic and international environment in May and early June 1950, there was no strategic incentive to use troops to occupy Pratas. The island, small and isolated, was undoubtedly expected to follow suit in the event of a successful invasion of Taiwan. However, on 25 June 1950, North Korean forces crossed into South Korea, and the Korean War was a fact. Two days later, Harry S. Truman dispatched the US 7th

Fleet to the Taiwan Strait, stating, "... Accordingly I have ordered the 7th Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa" (Truman, 1950).

Until then, the PRC had been preparing for an invasion of Taiwan. With the sudden US presence in the strait, the invasion plans were foiled (Austin, 1998: 72–73). In the wake of Truman's declaration, British officials no longer believed it likely that the communists would launch an invasion of Pratas. On 8 September 1950, the British Admiralty received information from the US 7th Fleet that the ROC intended to keep the island operational (NA, 1950b). With the outbreak of the Korean War, US policy changed to 'active containment', and the Taiwan Strait and the SCS islands were now seen in the light of the emerging Cold War. As a result, Pratas came to take on a new political and strategic meaning. The arrival of the US changed the environment and stymied the PRC's plans to invade Taiwan. It did not, however, stop the PRC from turning its aggression towards other ROC-held islands.

### Pratas and the Offshore Islands

Between 1954 and 1958, two crises took place in the Taiwan Strait that centred around ROC-held islands on the China coast. In 1954, the First Taiwan Strait Crisis transpired. The PRC occupied the Yijiangshan and the Dachen Islands northeast of the Taiwan Strait. As a result of the PRC's aggression, Washington's hand was forced, and it signed the US–ROC Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) on 2 December 1954 (Sheng, 2008: 484–485). With the treaty, the US devoted itself to the defence of Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and "... such other territories as may be determined by mutual agreement" (Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of China. Art. II, V, VI. 1954). The last part of the treaty ushered in a US policy of strategic ambiguity. By keeping unclear which islands it would defend, the US aimed to deter PRC aggression (Tucker, 2009: 14). In 1958,

during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, the PRC showed that regardless of the MDT, it was willing to take some risks and probe the US' resolve. Austin (1998) questions Pratas' absence during the crises as he states that "... a move against ROC (Republic of China) forces in Pratas ... would have been a fairly natural progression" (70). Austin believed the PRC had little reason to infer that the US would react to an offensive on Pratas, and therefore, a different restraint must have been present. The PRC's actions in 1954 and 1958, after the US stationed its 7th Fleet in the Taiwan Strait and signed the MDT with the ROC, show that geopolitical concerns as the only restraining factor on the PRC towards ROC-held sea territories remain unconvincing.

A potential explanation lies in the geographical position of Pratas *vis-à-vis* the mainland and the offshore islands. According to Austin, when planning to occupy the ROC-held islands, the PRC followed a policy of north to south, large to small (Austin, 1998: 71). During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, the focus was put on the coastal Dachen and Yijiangshan islands. Their position close to Shanghai, an economic centre for the PRC, made the ROC's presence on the islands a threat. At the time, most of the PRC's merchant fleet was located in Shanghai, and from nearby coastal islands, especially Dachen and Yijiangshan, the ROC could easily launch air raids against the city (Sheng, 2008: 481). The ROC had already utilised multiple islands stretching from Shanghai down south to the Taiwan Strait to launch naval operations and attacks to disturb the PRC's maritime trade and threaten the mainland (Muller, 1983: 67). The closest big port city to Pratas on the mainland was Hong Kong, which was under British control. Moreover, as Ulises Granados (2006: 171–172) shows using statistics from the 1950s, sea trade remained underdeveloped in the entire Guangdong province, the closest mainland province to Pratas. During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, the position of Pratas *vis-à-vis* mainland economic

centres reduced the island's threat to the PRC and its strategic value.

In July 1958, the PRC began shelling the Kinmen and Matsu islands, launching the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis. Unlike the other offshore islands the PRC had attacked, Kinmen and Matsu are not located close to Shanghai. During the second crisis, the PRC's focus was on shelling the Kinmen and Matsu islands to force the ROC forces to evacuate while avoiding conflict with the US. During a meeting with the Politburo on 25 August, Chairman of the PRC, Mao Zedong said, "Our main purpose in shelling is not to gauge the GMD's [KMT] defences but to gauge the Americans' resolve, to test the Americans' determination." (Sheng, 2008: 491). Pratas was an unsuitable target for this purpose as it is located far outside shelling distance from the mainland. Furthermore, the Kinmen and Matsu islands' size and geographic proximity to the Chinese mainland meant they could serve as launching pads for an attempt to recapture the mainland by the ROC. The short distances to the mainland also provided logistical relief for the PRC as it could launch the attacks without having to traverse large bodies of open water or move into the Taiwan Strait. Since 1955, Pratas had been inhabited by a defensive military garrison positioned on the island by the ROC. This meant the PRC would have to send military vessels across a large stretch of open water that the US 7th Fleet could intercept and force the PRC to either abandon its mission or risk direct confrontation with the US. Unlike the coastal islands targeted during the first and second Taiwan Strait crises, Pratas presented limited strategic value to the PRC. The island could not be shelled from the mainland or be used to shell the mainland, nor did it provide a suitable launchpad for the ROC to invade the mainland. Ultimately, Pratas was of little strategic value in the PRC's plan to defeat the ROC on Taiwan. It could not help the PRC defeat the ROC, nor could it allow the ROC to threaten the PRC on the mainland. As a result, Pratas remained largely overlooked

throughout the 1950s. By 1958, the frontiers of the Cold War were solidifying, and the window that had opened in May 1950 closed quickly.

## Conclusion

This article set out to contribute to moving Pratas out of the shadows of history and shine a light on a pertinent piece of the SCS and Taiwan issue puzzle. The article has shown that while the island has remained outside the spotlight of history since WWII until recently, it has not been void of history. The article shows that Pratas' absence has not been the result of just being unimportant, forgotten, or ignored. Rather, its position followed calculated decisions made by the period's leading powers. Following WWII, the island existed in the consciousness and strategic thinking of the UK and the US, as shown by the sources from British National Archives and CIA Archives. In 1950, the PRC inhabited the position and the capabilities to occupy Pratas with little risk of facing international backlash.

However, this coincided with a period where the island existed as a subordinate goal to defeating the ROC on Taiwan once and for all. The environment began to change with the start of the Korean War and the arrival of the US 7th Fleet in the strait. Nevertheless, as shown by the first and second Taiwan Strait crises, the US presence did not entirely dissuade the PRC from making moves against ROC-held islands. Therefore, the article argues that there were other factors than solely the presence of the US that kept the island absent during the 1950s. When analysing Pratas against the other offshore islands attacked during this time period, its absence from armed conflict and contestation appears to be the result of Pratas' unfavourable geographical and strategic position *vis-à-vis* the mainland. Following the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, the Cold War battle lines were drawn and the US showed its commitment to the ROC - and Pratas has since existed within this framework, a remnant of the Cold War.



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