Cooper: Hello and welcome back to the Xtempore Podcast, offered by Truman State Forensics. Today we'll be discussing the topic of the island of Taiwan. Today we'll also be joined by a special guest, Dr. Kevin Minch. Dr. Minch, how did you become knowledgeable and interested in Taiwan?

Kevin: Well, part of it was my undergraduate career, part of it, uh, has been my work since I've been here at Truman. Uh, when I was an undergraduate student, I was fortunate enough to be a student of uh Pi Chow Chen uh, and he was a native of Taiwan, he had come to the university I was attending, which was Wayne State in Detroit, and uh, he went on after I left to return to Taiwan and he became the national security advisor under uh Lee Teng-hui who was, I believe, the third or fourth president of Taiwan–

Cooper: –That's very exciting–

Kevin: –And then after that uh, he switched parties and became the deputy defense minister under Chen Shui-bian, which was the uh president that followed. So we kept in touch, a lot. I did some research work for him while I was a student, um and so we kind of built this bond about Taiwan policy, China policy, that followed into his years um at the Defense Department, and he would occasionally ask me to do some research work for him, and so that's where that started. Um, but then subsequently for work, I've spent a lot of time both in mainland China and Taiwan, representing Truman.

Cooper: Understood. Very nice to have you on the podcast with us.

Kevin: Thanks, I'm happy to be here!

Cooper: So, just getting into some of the meat and potatoes of the issues surrounding the island of Taiwan, I want to start off by going into some of the history. So, can you elaborate on some of Taiwan's historical relationships with mainland China, and then following the United States?

Kevin: Well, its very complicated–

Cooper: –As all good things are–

Kevin: –As most things in international politics are. Um, so there's a debate that a–a lot of Chinese will have over whether or not China ever actually ruled Taiwan–

Cooper: –Right–

Kevin: –Um, and depending on whether you talk to someone from Taiwan or someone from mainland China, you will get different answers on that question. So, if you talk more ancient China, um, there are certainly migration from mainland China to the island of Taiwan, but prior to that, um, you had a colonial era where different powers ruled over Taiwan. And uh, you had an

indigenous Taiwanese population that is more like Austronesians. So, somewhat similar to um the Pacific Islands, Australia, nor-uh, more Aboriginal in that sense. SO eventually more mainlanders were moving over for commercial reasons to Taiwan. Eventually, uh, in a treaty Japan takes over Taiwan–

Cooper: –Yes! yes–

Kevin: –And rules Taiwan up–as a colony, up through the end of World War II.

Cooper: –Yes–

Kevin: –And at the end of World War II, uh, China under the, uh, nationalist party, the Kuomintang–

Cooper: –mhm–

Kevin: –takes over rule from Japan or Taiwan, and this is the first time where you have modern China having sovereignty over the island.

Cooper: –I see–

Kevin: –There had been periodic sovereignty of some of the dynasties prior to that–

Cooper: –yeah–

Kevin: –But that the first time that the modern republic, uh, in China had control. Uh, and so then in uh, when the communists took over control of mainland China, Chiang Kai-shek–

Cooper: –mhm–

Kevin: –who was then president of uh mainland China, retreats to Taiwan with nationalist troops, a lot of the government officials, and many citizens who fled. And so now they're moving into Taiwan, and now you have this displaced population of native Han Chinese now living in Taiwan, taking a primary role in the government. And it's kind of displacing the people who you might consider to be native Taiwanese–

Cooper: –I see–

Kevin: –or people who had lived there either as indigenous people or later the mainland Chinese who had emigrated there and who lived there under Japanese rule and had not known mainland China as their ruler. So now, the relationship is defined as the tension between mainland China who believes it should have control over Taiwan and all of China–

Cooper: –I see–

Kevin: –and then Taiwan, in the reverse, which has historically held the position that it is the ruler of all of China from Taiwan. And so, both claim to have control over all of China, although that is diminished significantly under the current Taiwanese government.

Cooper: –Right, naturally–

Kevin: –That is the historical perspective, and so the United States has gotten mixed up in that because–

Cooper: –and that was part of the Cold War right, with Chiang Kai-shek?

Kevin: –Correct! So, uh, we supported Chiang after he withdrew to Taiwan. Um, and we recognized Taiwan as the legitimate Chinese government up through the 1970s. And then, Richard Nixon saw a strategic benefit to switching recognition to the People's Republic, because they, despite being communist, opposed Russia. And so, as kind of the "enemy of my enemy is my friend", uh, we flipped allegiances, de-recognized Taiwan, as did a lot of our allies and the UN. The UN seat flips over to the communists–

Cooper: –right, right–

Kevin: –And Taiwan becomes significantly isolated in terms of the number of countries that recognized it despite the United States was still pledging to defend it. And to, uh, to make sure that China proper would not invade, the US has maintained what it calls its "One China" policy. So it basically says there is one China and Taiwan is a part of China, but doesn't commit to who has sovereignty over which.

Cooper: So, with all of–kind of– that vagueness and complications in terms of Taiwan's recognition, um, moving onto our next question, um, how do you think greyzone tactics and strategic ambiguity add to some of the tensions between Taiwan and China?

Kevin: Sure, um, so it's-it's been an interesting period over multiple premieres in China, there was a time, uh, between the 19–late 1990s and say maybe 10 years ago, um, before, um, the current leader of China took office, Xi Jinping, uhh, where relations were warming quite a bit–

Cooper: –hmm, okay–

Kevin: –And so there was a lot of commerce going on between the two, there was regular air traffic–there still is, between the two, and there were some visits from government leaders to each other, um, and that was when the Kuomintang was in charge, now the Democratic Progressive Party has a more not quite declaring independence position, but a more Taiwan is its own thing type position. And so that has shifted how they define their relationship to each other. There was a period there under the Kuomintang where they weren't necessarily going to merge, but they kind of coexisted with each other and lived in that ambiguity. Since Xi has come

to power in China, he's definitely much more nationalistic in terms of wanting to take control of Taiwan. And the DPP, while not declaring outright independence, has taken a stance that is less proChina and more anti-China. And so that's added to the ambiguity. As far as the greyzone is concerned, a lot of what mainland China is trying to do to exert its dominance is to control more of the South China Sea, to do things like surround Taiwan with their ships and buzz the island with their planes. And in the 1990s, they even shot missiles over the island as a way of saying, hey, don't forget, we control you.

Cooper: Now with some of those issues, especially surrounding maritime waters within Taiwan and the South China Sea as a whole, you could see this presents some issues for trading.

Kevin: Absolutely.

Cooper: Now Taiwan is one of the global leaders, if not the global leader in semiconductors. Moving on to another question, how do superconductors and tech trading come into play with China in this way?

Kevin: Well, the funny thing is that there are pretty strong ties commercially between the two. So you would think that, okay, these two countries don't recognize each other and they have competing claims to sovereignty. But there's a lot of Taiwanese investment in mainland China and vice versa. Uh, A lot of the chips that get used by mainland China in their products were produced in Taiwan. Um, The southern provinces of China share a lot of commerce with Taiwan. So there's a lot of economic integration that's already there, which creates a really interesting problem for China exerting too much pressure on Taiwan because Taiwan could theoretically say, okay, no more chips or we're gonna pull the millions of dollars of investment that we have out of the mainland. And it's unclear what the implications of that would be. Uh, And that's one of the reasons why there's certainly uncertainty over if China were to try to take Taiwan back, how aggressive would they get and potentially endangering the chip manufacturing that exists in Taiwan. For us, there's a much broader problem in that most of the chips that we and the rest of the world use are made in Taiwan. So, if there's suddenly a war between Taiwan and China or a blockade of some kind and that disrupts commerce–

Cooper: –then our supply is immediately in jeopardy–

Kevin: –Exactly. So what are we gonna do about our iPhones? What are we gonna do about our AI that we're trying to develop that, in many ways, depends on those chips? And this was proven really well during the pandemic when supply chains were shut down, ships were not getting unloaded in Pacific ports, and we weren't getting those chips. And so US automakers had tons and tons of cars that were just sitting in parking lots, waiting for distribution because they didn't have the chips to operate the computers in those cars. And so the potential for global disruption of any interruption of the flow of those chips is pretty significant–

Cooper: –Pretty large, yeah. Now, with that being said, our date of recording is September 29th. President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping just met in Washington very recently. Do

you think recent talks between President Trump and President Xi Jinping could open the door for China to make any moves on Taiwan?

Kevin: That's tough. And I won't take a position one way or the other on the Trump administration's approach to Taiwan because right now I think it is ambiguous. And that has been the tradition of most presidential administrations

Cooper: –ambiguous by design–

Kevin: –Yes, that it's strategic ambiguity. Um, What has been interesting is the administration, more in the form of Trump himself and his public statements, has sometimes sent conflicting messages over whether Taiwan would be a bargaining chip or not. I think that's the thing that some Taiwanese fear is that the U.S. in exchange for uh, say, better trade relations with China or peace commitments from China might say, okay, we're not gonna defend them, you can have them. Or we'll stop arms sales or something along those lines um. And there were some statements made last year that led people to think that maybe that was a possibility. More recently, there was **supposedly** a discussion of the U.S. selling arms to China, which I guess is now being denied. But the U.S. is apparently continuing its plans for arms sales to Taiwan that doesn't appear to have been stopped. So I think as long as the U.S. doesn't say explicitly “we will not defend Taiwan”, and as long as we continue to supply arms, China's not really gonna know where we stand unless someone explicitly says, outside of our public earshot, “you can go ahead and have them”. I just don't believe that that's going to happen. I think both administrations feel very strongly about protecting Taiwan. I would say the Democratic administrations at least recently seem to be more protective of Taiwan. Joe Biden was much more explicit about, yes, we would go to war over it. But even some of his aides tried to pull that back a little bit and were kind of surprised that he said that.

Cooper: Would that be considered less of an ambiguity action?

Kevin: Yeah, I mean, since the 1980s, we've taken the position of, you know, maybe we would, maybe we wouldn't. And yet, you know, if you follow what goes on enough, we could continue to do arms sales for years.

Cooper: Now if I might ask, are you familiar with what those arms sales might be?

Kevin: It's been a range of goods. It's been jets. It's been more specific technology. I don't know for sure whether they've sold them Patriots or not. Okay, yes. But I would imagine that some kind of anti-ballistic missile technology has been sold. I'm not as familiar with that. I'm pretty confident though in aircraft.

Cooper: I see. I only ask simply because I know we're at a current stockpile low and I know we've been providing for other people, not only in the region, for South Korea and Japan, but also towards Ukraine. So I didn't know if there was a specific…

Kevin: I think the difference there is that sometimes it's not necessarily a direct sale from like the U.S. stockpile, but it may be the U.S. authorizing the purchase of weapons from the producers of those weapons based in the United States. Sometimes it's licensing the ability of local factories to produce, but that is an area I'm a little bit less familiar with.

Cooper: No worries. I appreciate you answering the question, regardless. With that being said, and as we're on kind of the topic of arms and military activity in the Pacific and South China Sea, if a conflict um were to break out for whatever reason, um, do you think that there could be a chance that other regional actors could get involved?

Kevin: I believe you would probably see the involvement of Japan. Yes. In fact, I believe Japan's current government has said explicitly they would get involved. South Korea, probably. Philippines, maybe. Potentially. But I don't know that they've ever made an explicit statement. I mean, part of the problem is is that China has been, uhm, stirring the pot with a lot of Southeast Asian countries because it claims a portion of the South China Sea that Vietnam and a bunch of other states all claim. Would they get involved in a war? I don't know um. A lot of it would depend on what that war looks like. One question that might be there is, OK, if China makes a move on Taiwan, does North Korea make a simultaneous move on South Korea, expecting that there's going to be a larger regional war? And I think people just don't know. If China takes the approach that I think most people believe would happen with an actual invasion, uh, it's probably going to be some kind of an amphibious assault coupled with bombing and um air warfare. And so you're probably going to have a few days before anybody makes an immediate commitment. So I don't think you're looking at a scenario where they're preparing to attack Taiwan and suddenly the U.S. is launching nukes or something like that. I think it's going to be something that's more drawn out, maybe begins with something like a blockade or something like that, that gives time for regional powers to figure out how exactly are we going to do this. But it could also spiral out of control really quickly. And I think that's why people view Taiwan as kind of the Asian equivalent of Ukraine.

Cooper: Yeah, it's that linchpin.

Kevin: In that it could cause a bunch of dominoes to fall.

Cooper: Now, with that being said, I know I've focused mainly on regional actors. Do you see any possible involvement from international actors such as NATO or even the UN?

Kevin: I don't think the UN would get, the UN might get involved in the sense of trying to mediate something. And whatnot. But I don't see any peacekeeping force in Taiwan. And I don't see, you know, we've got to remember that both China and Russia have vetoes in the Security Council.--

Cooper: –Both being P5 members, yeah–

Kevin: So they're not going to allow any kind of resolution on the order of what we did in North- the Korean War–

Cooper: –Yes–

Kevin: –And the only reason we got away with it in the Korean War was because we still had a nationalist government in China–

Cooper: –Right–

Kevin: –And Russia stepped out of the meeting–

Cooper: –Refused to participate, yeah–

Kevin: –And kind of ruined it for themselves.

Cooper: Right.

Kevin: I don't think that kind of scenario is going to repeat itself here. So I don't see the UN getting involved. I think NATO has less immediate interests. But if you see the US go to total war with China, who knows? You know, if we're thinking about a nuclear escalation or something like that, then all bets are off. But I don't know that, say, Britain and France have a burning desire to intervene that far away, nor do they have the capability of projecting themselves in the Pacific the way the United States does. You know, Britain is withdrawn from Hong Kong. You know, there's just no presence there.

Cooper: Now, one final topic on a potential conflict, talking about India specifically, as obviously uh a strong competitor with China, but someone who maybe doesn't have full ties in the region. Do you think Prime Minister Modi or a future Indian government might at all become involved?

Kevin: I think that's highly unlikely unless it starts to go into a broader war. Become more extreme. You know, I think some people have asked the question “if the United States were to get involved in a war in China, would India step in as an ally to the US?” That's a messy situation for them because Pakistan also has nukes and is an ally of China. So what happens there? I mean, those kinds of scenarios, now we're talking about probably a full-on conflict.

Cooper: Well, and the only reason I also bring them up is both India and Pakistan are working on AI pushes, and given the semiconductors in Taiwan, that might put that into jeopardy.

Kevin: But, you know, there's a question there is could India hold itself against China? And I think the only way that-that plays out without a nuclear conflict, this is just my opinion.

Cooper: –Yeah, of course–

Kevin: Is you'd have to have both the US and India directly attacking mainland China as opposed to the US could just take a defensive posture and try to, you know, blockade or protect Taiwan but not necessarily engage in a major offensive action against mainland China. US has war-gamed that out. You know, we're not just going to invade a country of a billion people and expect to make significant gains on their territory–

Cooper: –Right, right–

Kevin: –And I think as we've seen from the war in Iran, bombing alone doesn't do it. So even if the US and China decided to engage in significant restraint and go for a conventional war, which is entirely possible, um, I just don't realistically see them wanting to engage in that level. I think India is going to be keeping its powder dry, so to speak, until there is a good reason to get involved.

Cooper: I see. Then one final question just on the topic of protection. What steps or actions should Taiwan take to protect itself?

Kevin: I mean, it's doing a lot already–

Cooper: –Absolutely–

Kevin: But it's a small country, but it's very strong in terms of its economy. The government is already committing itself to investing significantly more money on defense spending. That's been announced recently.

Cooper: Now, do you know if that includes anything such as drone warfare or anything of the sort?

Kevin: My understanding is that they are doing significant research into drone warfare. They've looked at what's happening in Ukraine, and they're like, that may be the solution. Because if China tries to attack with missiles, if they can develop interceptor capability, I mean, drones ramming into missiles probably isn't going to solve anything.

Cooper: –Maybe not–

Kevin: But drones, say, swarming around incoming aircraft or uhm even making attacks on the mainland, although that's a bit far, there are a couple of islands right off the mainland of China that are likely you can literally see the mainland. It would be great if they positioned a bunch of drones there. It'd be interesting to see what would happen in that kind of scenario. Um Now, China could take those islands probably pretty quickly, but there's a belief that Taiwan could hold off the Chinese a lot longer than people realize.

Cooper: Much like Ukraine?

Kevin: Maybe. I don't know whether they're THAT comparable. But China, we're talking about an army that has never really fought a war outside of its immediate borders. So they've fought a war with Vietnam. They've sent troops into Korea in the ‘50s. But in terms of having anybody in the current generation of the Chinese military leadership or the soldiers having actual live experience fighting, there's been some border skirmishes with India, but that's about it. So they've also not ever had to do, to the best of my knowledge, an amphibious landing on an island. And so that means, OK, if we're going to actually take troops in, we've got to get landing ships that can go up on the Taiwanese shore without getting shot to ribbons.

Cooper: –Right–

Kevin: Or this is where the drones could be active.

Cooper: –Very much–

Kevin: So it's entirely possible that the Taiwanese could mount a much stronger defense than people might initially realize. One of the other things that people may not be aware of is that every Taiwanese, I'm pretty sure every Taiwanese male, I'm not sure if this has been extended to women as well, must go through mandatory military training because they reach a certain age. So everybody's got to do it.

Cooper: –Understood–

Kevin: I've talked to friends over there who've told me stories about what that's like. And it's not maybe as good as like, Switzerland's training for their folks. But everybody has learned how to use a gun. And there are very mountainous regions in Taiwan where people can retreat to and maintain a guerrilla action for a long time. So China might be able to succeed in making inroads on the coast. But it's not going to be an immediate thing. And if that buys enough time for the US to get its ships in or for Japan to get involved or whatever, then it could become a much messier situation. I don't think China is going to take that approach.

Cooper: Right.

Kevin: I think a blockade is much more likely that they'll start with some kind of an attempt to choke them off on their trade rather than a direct attack.

Cooper: And are there any diplomatic protections that Taiwan should take?

Kevin: (sigh) I mean, the problem for Taiwan, unfortunately, is very few countries recognize it. It tends to be smaller countries that flip-flop back and forth between their recognition of Taiwan and China. Sometimes they will buy each other off. So there's often been a fight over which Southeast, not even Southeast Asian, South Pacific islands will recognize them. It doesn't really matter in terms of UN recognition or what those countries can do. Now, there are informal diplomatic relationships. So like the US doesn't officially recognize Taiwan, but we have an

embassy there. We call it the American Institute of Taiwan. And it has all the same functions that you would have for consular services and embassy operations. So there is a diplomatic connection there. And that's probably the strongest relationship–

Cooper: –Yeah, I would say so–

Kevin: –And then Taiwan maintains other similar relationships with other countries. So they certainly have the ability to say “hey, don't forget us!” But whether there's anything that they can do to change ultimately the pressure level on mainland China, I don't know that there's a whole lot more that they can do. I think military preparedness and being able to dig in for a long conflict is probably the best that they can do.

Cooper: I see.

Cooper: Thank you again for joining us for the Extempore podcast. For weekly questions and more, please visit our website at Xtempore.truman.edu and tune in again.