

# Prepare for the Battle for the Past in Advance of the Beijing Summit

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## Introduction

When President Donald Trump finally makes it to Beijing for his state visit and summit with People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping, he could very well find himself receiving history lectures from his hosts. These excursions into the past, focused especially on Beijing's interpretation of the Second World War, will be used to attempt to "educate" the US president and his team on two issues: Taiwan, which, along with trade and investment issues, is at the top of Beijing's summit list, and PRC concerns about US ally Japan. If the US team wishes to ready itself for the battle for the past, it will need to keep in mind some important background and context.

## History is politics for the Chinese Communist Party

It is well known that authoritarian regimes attempt to control historical narratives to advance their domestic and foreign policy agendas. As George Orwell wrote in 1984, "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." This is certainly the case in the PRC, although the PRC is not alone in this regard—witness President Vladimir Putin's Russia and the historical justifications for the war against Ukraine.

Xi, of course, understands the importance of controlling the historical discourse. Just as Deng Xiaoping oversaw revisions to the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1981 ("Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China"), Xi, in 2021, presided over the adoption of "The CCP Center's Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party's Century of Struggle."<sup>1</sup>

Xi has also led the charge at home in attacking "historical nihilism"—heterodox interpretations of CCP history, as well as Soviet history, that do not comport with the approved narrative. In addition, among other provisions, the "Law of the PRC on the Protection of Heroes and Martyrs" (2018) carries potential criminal penalties for slandering individuals in the pantheon of the CCP.

In these ways, the PRC government, and others, attempt to control what is considered a proper understanding of its past to secure the present. In these ways, the legacies of the leadership are enshrined.

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<sup>1</sup> Minxin Pei, "A Tale of Three Resolutions: A Close Reading of Xi Jinping's Version of CCP History," *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 71, Spring 2022, <https://www.prcleader.org/post/a-tale-of-three-resolutions-a-close-reading-of-xi-jinping-s-version-of-ccp-history>.

# Commemorating the end of the Second World War

President Trump and his entourage will find that Beijing's battles for the historical narrative are not confined to the party's domestic political affairs. Over the past few years, the PRC has engaged in a historical campaign that has both domestic as well as significant foreign policy dimensions. In this case, it is not CCP history that is at issue but Beijing's carefully curated interpretation of the Second World War—known in the PRC as the “Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War.”

Throughout 2025, the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the PRC went to great lengths to make commemorating China's role in the allied victory a protracted national event. The range of activities was impressive: academic conferences, television documentaries and docudramas, local commemorations, and feature stories in the state-controlled media. Just yards away from the ancient Marco Polo Bridge, where the Imperial Japanese Army expanded hostilities against China to all-out conflict in 1937, is a refurbished state-of-the-art war museum. All these commemorative activities culminated with a massive victory parade by the Chinese People's Liberation Army on September 3, 2025, showcasing its most current advanced weapons systems.

Beijing's telling of the conflict is decidedly Red Army-centric, which is not unusual as most countries focus naturally on their own efforts in that global conflagration. However, whereas in the West commemorations of the war also showcase the allied effort, the Beijing narrative gives only token recognition to the efforts of the allied forces—including the Nationalist Chinese forces—that fought together in the China-Burma-India Theater.<sup>2</sup> The Beijing narrative also bemoans the lack of appreciation in the West for China's role in the Second World War. Overall, Beijing portrays the war mostly as a “people's war” and a Red Army victory.

Some foreign observers have taken issue with this narrative. In December 2025, both the US Senate and the House of Representatives entered the historical debate by introducing strongly worded resolutions “expressing opposition” to what was described as the CCP's “stolen valor revisionism” regarding the events of the war. Can it be that the battle for the narrative of the Second World War is now part of the larger US-PRC strategic competition?

## Using the past to serve the present

It is unsurprising that the PRC party-state apparatus went to great lengths to commemorate the end of the war. In the first place, for the CCP, VJ-Day and Japan's surrender was a critical moment on their eventual march to power after winning a bloody civil war in 1949; a fratricidal conflict that recommenced almost as soon as the war against Japan ended in 1945. The commemorations also served to burnish the party's nationalist credentials at home and allow it to claim to its citizens (and the world) “*then* we were weak, and *now*, thanks to the CCP, we are strong,” which was one of the big messages conveyed by the PLA's victory parade. Moreover, the struggle against Japan is still an issue that resonates in some quarters in Taiwan as

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<sup>2</sup> The exploits and contributions of the US's American Volunteer Group, known as the Flying Tigers, receives wide official and popular recognition in China, but the story of the much larger American effort in the China-Burma-India Theater receives modest play.

at least one shared experience with the mainland, especially with the opposition Nationalist Party (*Kuomintang*). Thus, the war also plays into cross-Strait relations.

The current political utility of the war notwithstanding, it is also worth remembering that the commemorations also revisited tremendous human sacrifice on a national scale. It is undeniable that the people of China fought desperately, heroically, and alone for many years, suffering untold millions of casualties among soldiers and civilians. Throughout the war, the combined efforts of all Chinese and allied forces tied down approximately 800,000 Imperial Japanese Army forces on the mainland, which precluded their deployment to the Pacific theaters of operations—an effort accomplished at great cost in blood and treasure.

## Taking on heirs

In dealing with some current international issues, today's PRC government is taking on the mantle of one of the war's victorious allied powers. Although the PRC was not established until 1949, it considers itself, and presents itself, as the heir to that role, being the successor government on the mainland to the Republic of China. This serves Beijing's purposes on a couple of accounts. First, it allows Beijing to assert the PRC's status as a founding member of the post-war international order with the right to have a say in adjustments to it. In addition, Beijing's current strategic messaging portrays the PRC as a defender of that post-war system, whereas US actions and policies are portrayed as dismantling the post-war system. Second, as will be addressed subsequently, embracing China's role in the war is a significant dimension of Beijing's claim to Taiwan. Finally, the war is used to bash Japan when the occasion calls for it, with the PRC in the role as victor and Japan relegated in PRC pronouncements to "a defeated axis power." President Trump and his team may encounter these historical assertions when discussions turn to Taiwan, Japan, and other key issues in international security affairs.

## Japan, Taiwan, and Second World War history

The 80th anniversary commemorations of the Second World War are over, but the PRC's focus on the war continues—this time deployed as an integral part of Beijing's responses to comments made by Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae on November 7, 2025.

Specifically, during a contentious exchange with an opposition party member in the lower house of the Diet, Prime Minister Takaichi, when pressed on a hypothetical conflict scenario, stated, "If battleships are used and a naval blockade [in the vicinity of Taiwan] involves the use of force, I believe that would, by any measure, constitute a situation that could be deemed a threat to Japan's survival."<sup>3</sup> Invoking "a threat to Japan's survival" is one of the three criteria for the employment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces embedded

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Ninivaggi, "Takaichi's Taiwan Tumult: A Closer Look at the Japanese Leader's Contentious Remarks," *Japan Times*, Dec. 3, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/12/03/japan/explainer/explainer-japan-existential-crisis/>.

in Tokyo's 2015 security legislation.<sup>4</sup> In effect, a sitting prime minister of Japan stated publicly in an official setting that there could be situations in which Tokyo's armed forces might engage in a Taiwan contingency.

Beijing's responses were swift, multifaceted, and continue as of this writing, triggering the most significant row in Sino-Japanese relations in years. The PRC retaliated with economic responses such as banning the import of Japanese seafood, curtailing Chinese tourism to Japan, canceling cultural exchanges, reportedly increased military pressure around the contested Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, as well as reports of PRC drones in the vicinity of Japan's Yonaguni Island, some 70 miles from the east coast of Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> Beijing also placed restrictions on the export to Japan of critical minerals for use in defense technologies.<sup>6</sup> On the diplomatic front, Beijing took its pique to the United Nations<sup>7</sup> and to a gathering it convened of Southeast Asian countries, including some that were occupied by Japan during the war.<sup>8</sup>

## Resurrecting Cairo, Potsdam, and the Instrument of Surrender

Beijing's rhetorical responses to Prime Minister Takaichi's comments have been shrill, with the state-controlled media, government spokespersons, and the semi-official punditry deployed not only to decry her specific comments but also to accuse Japan of backsliding into 1930s militarism, moving toward rejection of Japan's "peace constitution," walking away from its obligations as "a defeated axis power," abetting the efforts of "splittist elements" in Taiwan, calling into question the status of the island, and ultimately undermining the post-Second World War international order.

Here too, Beijing is pulling on the legacies of the war by resurrecting and invoking three wartime agreements, declarations, or diplomatic instruments: the Cairo Declaration (November 27, 1943), the Potsdam Proclamation (July 26, 1945), and the Japanese Instrument of Surrender (September 2, 1945). It is not out of the question that these wartime events might be raised by the Chinese side during the summit.

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<sup>4</sup> Atsuhiko Fujishige, "New Japan Self-Defense Force Missions under the "Proactive Contribution to Peace" Policy: Significance of the 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security," July 21, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-japan-self-defense-force-missions-under-proactive-contribution-peace-policy>.

<sup>5</sup> "China Suspends Seafood Imports from Japan as Taiwan Row Escalates," *Guardian*, Nov. 19, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/19/china-suspends-seafood-imports-from-japan-as-taiwan-row-escalates>.

<sup>6</sup> Gracelin Baskaran and Meredith Shwartz, "China's Rare Earth Campaign Against Japan," Jan. 13, 2026, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-rare-earth-campaign-against-japan>.

<sup>7</sup> Ambassador Fu Cong Sends a Letter to the UN Secretary-General Expressing China's Position Regarding Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's Erroneous Remarks on China, [https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/czthd/202511/t20251122\\_11758170.htm](https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/czthd/202511/t20251122_11758170.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Dewey Sim, "China Rallies Neighbors Against Japan in Rare Meeting. Will It Work?" *South China Morning Post*, Feb. 6, 2026, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3342540/china-rallies-neighbours-against-japan-rare-meeting-will-it-work>.

## **Resurrecting Issues from the Second World War**

### **PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesman Guo Jiakun (November 27, 2025)**

“China’s recovery of Taiwan is a victorious outcome of WWII and an integral part of the postwar international order. A series of instruments with legal effect under international law, including the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation, and the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, have all affirmed China’s sovereignty over Taiwan.”<sup>9</sup>

### **PRC Ministry of National Defense Spokesman Jiang Bin (November 27, 2025)**

“Japan’s status as a defeated nation in World War II has long been established. International legal documents such as the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Declaration, and the Instrument of Surrender explicitly prohibit Japan from rearming. What the international community needs to be highly vigilant about is that in recent years, Japan has gone against the global trend, attempting to break through the constraints of its ‘Peace Constitution,’ recklessly expanding its military, significantly increasing its defense budget, accelerating the revision of its security policy documents, relaxing restrictions on arms exports, attempting to abandon the ‘Three Non-Nuclear Principles,’ and even fantasizing about military intervention in the Taiwan Strait, posing a serious threat to regional peace and stability.”<sup>10</sup>

### ***China Daily* Editorial (December 2, 2025)**

“This lack of [Prime Minister Takaishi’s] transparency raises questions about Japan’s true intentions and its commitment to international agreements such as the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation, which explicitly affirm China’s sovereignty over Taiwan. These documents are not mere historical artifacts; they are foundational elements of the postwar international order that Japan is legally obligated to uphold... Takaichi’s remarks therefore represent not only a fundamental change of Japan’s position on the question of Taiwan and break the promises Japan has made in its diplomatic documents with China, [but] they also challenge the postwar international order.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun’s Regular Press Conference on November 27, 2025, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202511/t20251127\\_11761822.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202511/t20251127_11761822.html).

<sup>10</sup> Transcript of the Ministry of National Defense’s Regular Press Conference, Nov. 2025, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/xwfy/jt/16424124.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “Fudging Position on Taiwan Question Unmasks Takaichi’s Ulterior Motives,” *China Daily* editorial, Dec. 2, 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202512/02/WS692ed924a310d6866eb2c855.html>.

**Zhong Sheng Editorial in *People's Daily* (December 12, 2025)**

"At a recent debate with opposition party leaders, Takaichi said that 'having renounced all rights and claims under the Treaty of San Francisco, we [Japan] are not in a position to recognize Taiwan's legal status.' This notion that 'Taiwan's status is undetermined' is a distortion of historical fact, echoing her earlier erroneous remark that a 'Taiwan contingency' could constitute a 'survival-threatening situation' for Japan. Such statements once again lay bare her real intention to undermine the post-war international order and pave the way for Japan's military involvement in Taiwan-related affairs....The Cairo Declaration, issued by China, the United States, and the United Kingdom on Dec. 1, 1943, stated that it was the purpose of the three allies that all the territories Japan had stolen from China, such as Northeast China, Taiwan and the Penghu Islands, should be restored to China...The Potsdam Proclamation was signed by China, the United States, and the United Kingdom on July 26, 1945, and subsequently recognized by the Soviet Union. It reiterated: "The terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out. In September of the same year, Japan signed the Instrument of Surrender, in which it promised that it would faithfully fulfill the obligations laid down in the Potsdam Proclamation. These documents, all possessing binding force under international law, constitute a complete legal framework confirming China's recovery of Taiwan."<sup>12</sup>

**PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lin Jian (February 9, 2026)**

"We must solemnly warn the ruling authorities of Japan that the Chinese people's determination to safeguard the core interests of the country is unwavering, their determination to safeguard the victorious outcomes of World War II and the post-war international order is unwavering, and their determination to counter and thwart the provocations of anti-China forces is unwavering."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zhong Sheng, "Japan's So-Called 'Undetermined Status of Taiwan' Argument Represents Ignorance of History, Misjudgment of Reality," *People's Daily*, Dec. 3, 2025, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2025/1203/c90000-20398036.html>. Note: "Zhong Sheng" is a pen name often used by *People's Daily* to express its views on foreign policy and international affairs.

<sup>13</sup> Xinhua, "China Again Urges Japan to Withdraw Wrongful Remarks on Taiwan After General Election," Feb. 9, 2026, <https://english.news.cn/20260209/84417a0f4fd9462296c5e768f1f15a97/c.html>.

## The Cairo Conference: Taking a second look

Of the three historical issues Beijing continues to cite, the one with the most direct relevance to Taiwan is the first Cairo Conference of November 1943—the only wartime meeting among allied leaders attended by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, representing the Republic of China (ROC). In addition to discussing the prosecution of the war against Imperial Japan, President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Generalissimo Chiang looked to the future of post-war Asia and the disposition of Chinese territories taken by Tokyo. The conference ended with the release of a press communique, often referred to as the “Cairo Declaration.”

### The Cairo Declaration

The three great Allies [US, UK, ROC] are fighting this war to restrain and punish the aggression of Japan. They covet no gain for themselves and have no thought of territorial expansion. It is their purpose that Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the first World War in 1914, and that all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa [Taiwan], and the Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China. Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed. The aforesaid three great powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent.

With these objects in view the three Allies, in harmony with those of the United Nations at war with Japan, will continue to persevere in the serious and prolonged operations necessary to procure the unconditional surrender of Japan.<sup>14</sup>

A couple of issues associated with the Cairo Declaration and subsequent early Cold War developments deserve to be highlighted because they are at the root of the complexity of the Taiwan issue.

First, at Cairo, the allied leaders articulated their intention to return to China not only territories taken by Japan during the Second World War but also those territories ceded to Tokyo by the Qing Dynasty as a result of their defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Prominent among those territories intended for return to China was Taiwan (formerly known as Formosa)—a Japanese colony until 1945.

Second, on October 25, 1945, the ROC took physical control of Taiwan when General Andô Rickichi (the last Japanese colonial governor-general) formally surrendered the island to General Chen Yi, representing the Chinese government. Nationalist military forces from the mainland occupied Taiwan forthwith, so there is an argument to be made that the terms of the Cairo Declaration were *de facto* carried out.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943China/d136>.

<sup>15</sup> David M. Finkelstein, *Washington's Taiwan Dilemma, 1949-1950: From Abandonment to Salvation* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), p. 45.

Third, with the start of the Cold War the *de jure* status of Taiwan was left undetermined by the treaties ending the Second World War. Japan formally and legally relinquished its own claims to Taiwan in both the “Treaty of San Francisco” (1951) and the bilateral “Treaty of Peace Between the Republic of China and Japan” (1952). However, neither document designated any entity to exercise sovereignty over the island.

As far as Beijing is concerned, the terms of the Cairo Declaration were not carried out because it considers the PRC the only legitimate government of China to which Taiwan should be ceded. Beijing also does not recognize the Treaty of San Francisco because it was not a party to its proceedings. As a result, the US president and his American delegation may very well be told that the meetings at Cairo in 1943 affirmed China’s sovereignty—meaning, the PRC’s sovereignty—over Taiwan as a major outcome of the war. However, the reality is much more complicated.

## Potsdam and the Instrument of Surrender

As for the Potsdam Proclamation and the Instrument of Surrender of Japan, today’s PRC officials cite these because each contained a clause reiterating the decisions made about Taiwan in the Cairo Declaration. The Potsdam Proclamation simply stated, “The terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and such minor islands as we [the allied powers] determine.”<sup>16</sup> The Instrument of Surrender, by which Japan accepted the terms of unconditional surrender imposed by the Allied powers, merely referred back to the Potsdam Proclamation and, by extension, the terms of the Cairo Declaration: “We [Japan] hereby undertake for the Emperor, the Japanese Government, and their successors to carry out the provisions of the Potsdam Declaration in good faith...”<sup>17</sup>

## Going forward by going backward: The Second World War and the PRC

Harvard historian Rana Mitter has written that “...there is a strong relationship between China’s memory of its experience of World War II and its present-day nationalist identity at home and global role abroad.”<sup>18</sup> Put differently, Beijing is deploying its interpretation of its role in the war to bolster the image of the CCP at home and especially to make its case abroad on the issues of Taiwan, Japan, and its role in the international order.

A summit as important as the one that will take place between President Trump and President Xi in May 2026 is not the moment to engage in historical debates. Summits are not seminars. But on the issues of Taiwan and Japan, the US delegation could very well find itself transported to the past by their hosts. Xi himself has already signaled as much. The official PRC readout of President Xi’s November 2025 phone call with President Trump states, “President Xi outlined China’s principled position on the Taiwan question. He underscored that Taiwan’s return to China is an integral part of the post-war international order. China and

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<sup>16</sup> US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Diplomatic Papers, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945, Volume II, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/d1382Home>.

<sup>17</sup> National Archives of the United States, Surrender of Japan, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/surrender-of-japan>.

<sup>18</sup> Rana Mitter, *China’s Good War: How WWII Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2020).

the US fought shoulder to shoulder against fascism and militarism. Given what is going on, it is even more important for us to jointly safeguard the victory of WWII.”<sup>19</sup> Should the White House take a historian aboard Air Force One?

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<sup>19</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202511/t20251124\\_11759133.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202511/t20251124_11759133.html).

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