THREE CLOCKS OVER TAIWAN

Everyone Is Watching 2027
The Calendar That Matters Has No Round Number

> ***2027 is early and symbolic.***
>
> ***2033 is late and personal.***
>
> ***The dangerous years are the ones nobody has circled.***

THE ANNIVERSARY EVERYONE IS WATCHING

The photograph on the left is from 1927. Mud, straw sandals, rifles older than the men holding them. The photograph on the right is from this month. White gloves, mirror boots, a colour party moving with the precision of a metronome. Ninety-nine years between them, and the caption writes itself. Look how far we have come.

That is the intended reading. It is also why the coming twelve months will produce more strategic commentary on Taiwan than the previous ten years combined.

The hundredth anniversary of the People's Liberation Army falls on **1 August 2027**, and a substantial part of the Western analytical community has decided this is the date on which the island will be taken.

I want to argue that they are reading the wrong clock. There are three of them running, they do not chime together, and the one that matters is not military at all.


1927
TODAY
PLA 99TH ANNIVERSARY

THE PARADOX NOBODY RESOLVED

Begin with the fact that Taiwan's ambiguity was not an accident of the Cold War. It was manufactured, deliberately, by the man who fled to it.

The Republic of China took over the administration of Taiwan on **25 October 1945**, after the Japanese surrender. The government relocated its seat to Taipei on **7 December 1949**, having been chased out of Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chongqing and finally Chengdu. Chiang Kai-shek himself flew out of Chengdu on **10 December**. He never set foot on the mainland again. In March 1950 he resumed a presidency he had resigned fourteen months earlier, and he governed for a further quarter of a century.

What he never did, at any point, was declare independence.

His entire legitimacy rested on the opposite claim. That the Republic of China remained the lawful government of all China, temporarily displaced, and that Taiwan was a province serving as the base for its recovery.

The doctrine had a name, **recover the mainland**. It was not decoration. It was the reason the ROC held the Chinese seat on the Security Council until 1971.

A declaration of independence would have destroyed that claim in an afternoon. It would have conceded the mainland to Mao and reduced Chiang from displaced ruler of a civilisation to president of an island. So he did what displaced rulers do. He crushed the people who suggested it. The **228 Incident of February 1947** and the White Terror that followed were aimed at Taiwanese autonomists quite as much as at communists, and the bodies were counted in the tens of thousands.

Which produces the paradox that still governs the file today.

THE TWO DOCUMENTS

MONTEVIDEO, 26 DECEMBER 1933. A regional treaty signed in Uruguay by sixteen American states, whose Article 1 became the standard definition of statehood. Four criteria: a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. Article 3 adds that political existence does not depend on recognition by others.

Taiwan satisfies the first three more convincingly than a fair number of UN members. Twenty-three million people, administered territory, an elected government, its own currency, passport, army, courts and central bank. It fails the fourth. Not through any internal deficiency, but by external design. Roughly a dozen states recognise it. The rest conduct relations through offices with deliberately boring names.

RESOLUTION 2758, 25 OCTOBER 1971. Seated the People's Republic and expelled the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek. It does not mention Taiwan. It does not name it, does not assign it, does not settle it. It resolves a question of representation, not a question of sovereignty.

Beijing has spent two decades campaigning to have it read otherwise, and the prize is considerable. If 2758 is accepted as having determined Taiwan's status,

Taiwan becomes an internal file and any external assistance becomes interference in the affairs of a sovereign state. The legal architecture for isolating a future action is being assembled now, quietly, in committee rooms, years ahead of anything happening at sea.The vocabulary is conceded first. Everything else follows.

Beijing and Taipei's founding fathers agreed there is one China. They disagreed only on who runs it

THE DECLARATION THAT NEVER CAME

Seventy-seven years later, no president of the Republic of China has declared independence either. Not Lee Teng-hui, not Chen Shui-bian, not Tsai Ing-wen, not Lai Ching-te.

This is not timidity. It is architecture.

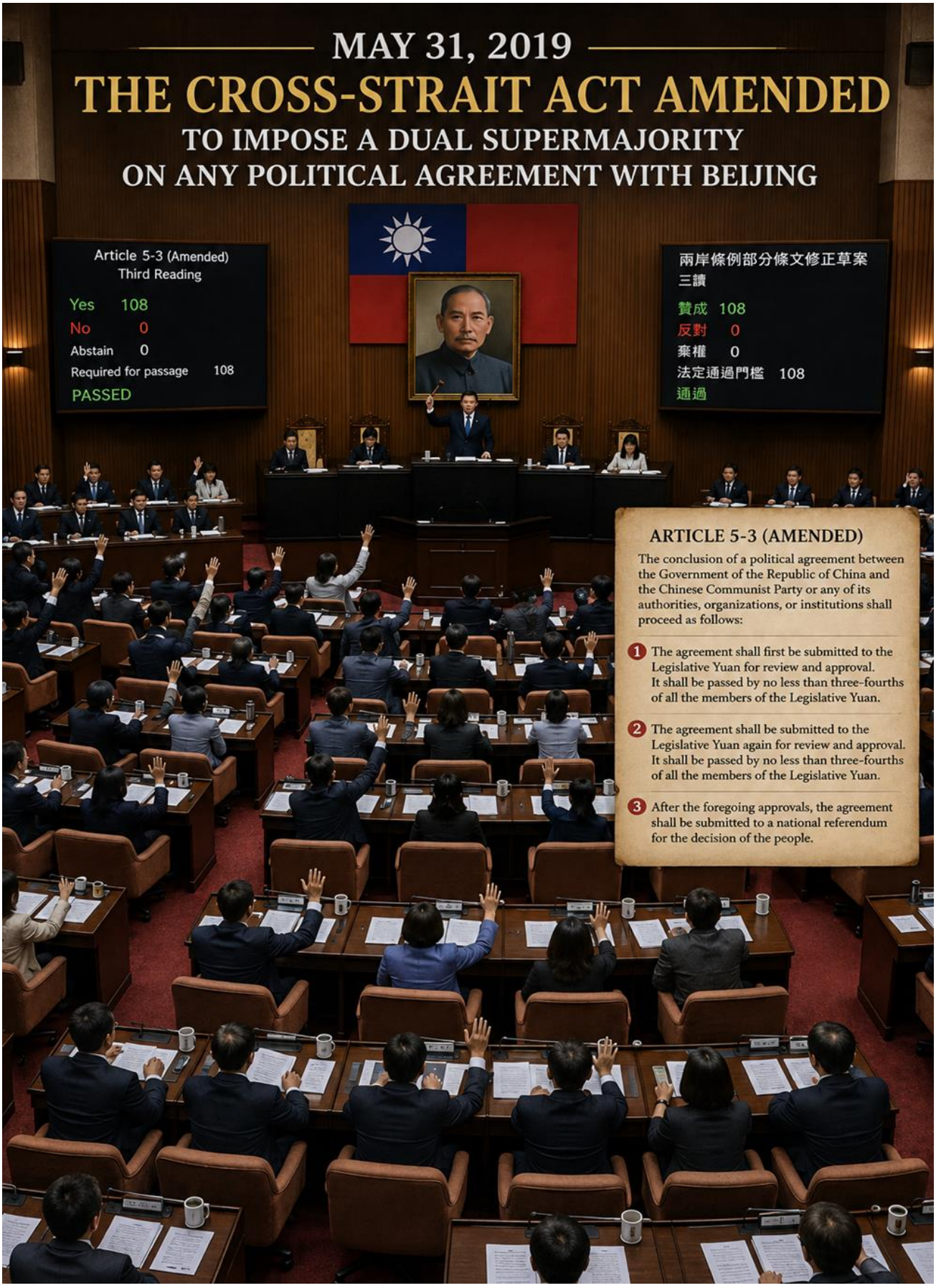
The constitution in force in Taipei was drafted in Nanjing, adopted on **25 December 1946**, and written for a China of thirty-five provinces including Tibet and Mongolia.

It has never been replaced. It has been patched **seven times between 1991 and 2005** through Additional Articles that suspend and override the original text without deleting a word of it. The body remains underneath, like the foundations of a building nobody is permitted to demolish.

That was deliberate too. Writing a new constitution would be the functional equivalent of the declaration Chiang refused to make, which is precisely why Beijing has named constitutional revision as a red line.

The democracy built inside that shell is younger than most commentary assumes. Members of the Legislative Yuan elected on the mainland in 1947 and 1948 simply stayed in office, on the reasoning that their constituencies could not vote.

They became known as the **ten-thousand-year parliament**, and they were finally retired in December 1991, some of them in their nineties. Martial law was lifted in **1987**. The first genuinely elected legislature dates from **1992**.


MAY 31, 2019
THE CROSS-STRAIT ACT AMENDED
TO IMPOSE A DUAL SUPERMAJORITY
ON ANY POLITICAL AGREEMENT WITH BEIJING
Article 5-3 (Amended)
Third Reading
Yes 108
No 0
Abstain 0
Required for passage 108
PASSED
兩岸條例部分條文修正草案
三讀
贊成 108
反對 0
棄權 0
法定通過門檻 108
通過
ARTICLE 5-3 (AMENDED)
The conclusion of a political agreement between the Government of the Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party or any of its authorities, organizations, or institutions shall proceed as follows:
1 The agreement shall first be submitted to the Legislative Yuan for review and approval. It shall be passed by no less than three-fourths of all the members of the Legislative Yuan.
2 The agreement shall be submitted to the Legislative Yuan again for review and approval. It shall be passed by no less than three-fourths of all the members of the Legislative Yuan.
3 After the foregoing approvals, the agreement shall be submitted to a national referendum for the decision of the people.

The first direct presidential election was held in **1996**, under Chinese missile tests designed to influence it, and which influenced it in the wrong direction.

Then Taipei did something clever, and almost nobody outside the region noticed.

In **2019** the Cross-Strait Act was amended to impose a double supermajority on any political agreement with Beijing.

Three-quarters of the legislature to authorise negotiations. Three-quarters again to approve whatever emerges. Then a national referendum carried not by a majority of those voting, but by a majority of **all eligible voters**, which means roughly **9.6 million affirmative ballots**. Constitutional amendment carries a comparable threshold. Nothing has passed since 2005.

> ***The lock that makes independence impossible now makes unification impossible. Symmetry, finally, and both keys thrown into the same harbour.***

THE WRONG ANNIVERSARY

The 2027 date did not originate in Beijing announcing a war. It came from two things braided together in Washington. Admiral Davidson's **2021 testimony**, which was in substance a force-posture argument for an unfunded budget, and Xi Jinping's directive that the PLA achieve certain capability milestones by its hundredth year. A capability milestone is a readiness benchmark. It is not an execution order. It sits inside a published sequence that also contains **2035** for completed modernisation and **2049** for a world-class force. Analysts selected the

only date falling inside a normal career horizon, and an entire genre was built on top of it.

Anniversaries are for parades. No commander in history has chosen to open the most consequential amphibious operation since Inchon on a date the adversary has had six years to circle in red.

But the stronger objection is not about calendars. It is about the men who would have to run it.

Consider the list. **Li Shangfu**, defence minister, removed. **Wei Fenghe**, his predecessor, removed. Two successive command layers of the **Rocket Force**, custodians of the nuclear and conventional strategic deterrent, dismantled. **Miao Hua**, responsible for political work across the entire force, suspended. **He Weidong**, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission itself, the second uniformed officer in the country, removed. Reporting from those investigations included diverted fuel and falsified silo construction.

The standard reading is that Xi is sharpening a blade before using it. I read it the other way entirely.

This is not a leader tightening his instrument. This is a leader who has stopped believing the reports he is handed. The strategic deterrent has been audited twice and found wanting twice. That is not a discovery which makes a man more adventurous. It is a discovery which makes him ask what else in the file is decoration.

And observe the shape of the punishments. Suspended death sentences that convert to life. Expulsions announced in four lines of state media, careers ending in a silence far louder than a trial. Those sentences are not written for the men receiving them. They are written

for the officers still at their desks, who now understand precisely what a failed audit costs.

> ***Men who have been stealing from a programme do not want that program tested under fire. Corruption produce caution, not appetite.***

Two further points, briefly. The PLA is a party army, not a state army with institutional ambitions of its own. There is no Kwantung Army dynamic available here, no theatre commander who can create facts on the ground and dare the politicians to disown him. Careers advance by not failing.

And no serving Chinese officer has commanded a combined-arms operation under fire. The last was **Vietnam in 1979**, and it went badly enough that the institution spent forty years rebuilding itself around never repeating the experience.

The generals are not straining at the leash to test their equipment rather than gain weight in cognac bars. Several of them have just watched colleagues lose everything for the sins committed in those bars, and the survivors have drawn the obvious lesson.

THE CLOCK THAT ACTUALLY RUNS

So if not the army's hundredth year, then what? One man's eightieth.

Xi Jinping was born on **15 June 1953**. At the Party Congress of **autumn 2032** he will be seventy-nine. That congress is the last at which he can install a succession he controls rather than one improvised around him. Anything intended for his own record must be finished before it, not after.

Deng Xiaoping is the precedent in both directions: real power past eighty, and then a collapse in health that left the transition to be arranged around a dying man by people he could no longer supervise.

The economics point the same way. Working-age population contracting, property overhang unresolved, debt service consuming the fiscal room that used to absorb shocks.

The proposition that China is stronger every year than it was the year before stops being self-evidently true somewhere around 2030.

A leadership that believes the correlation of forces has peaked has a rational motive to act while it remains favourable, and no need whatever of a birthday to justify it.

Hence three clocks. The capability clock reaches usable readiness in the late 2020s. The strategic clock, measured against American posture and against Taiwan's own hardening, its extended conscription and its shift to asymmetric procurement, peaks around 2030, give or take. The personal clock closes at the 2032 congress.

Where the three overlap is the window, and it sits roughly between **2029 and 2034**.

THREE ROUTES THROUGH THE WINDOW

ONE. THE BRUTAL ONE.

Full amphibious assault across a hundred and thirty kilometres of the worst sea conditions in the region, against a defended shore, in the two narrow weather windows a year that permit it. Least likely, most discussed, and lucrative for those who model it.

Note however the mechanism by which it might arrive regardless. Not by decision, but by slippage.


TAIWAN
CIVIL DEFENSE
TAIWAN
CIVIL DEFENSE
TAIWAN
CIVIL DEFENSE

A collision, a shoot-down, a boarding that goes wrong, and then a sequence neither capital can stop without visible humiliation.

TWO. THE QUARANTINE.
This is the one to price. Customs enforcement conducted by the China Coast Guard rather than the navy, declared as domestic law enforcement rather than blockade.

No declaration of war, no obvious treaty trigger, and the burden of firing first transferred to whoever chooses to break the cordon. Add the cable dimension, already being rehearsed in plain sight.

Taiwan's undersea fibre landings are few, shallow and repeatedly damaged by vessels that are invariably merchant, invariably accidental, and invariably registered somewhere convenient. An island can be made deaf, blind and financially inert without a shot being fired at it. Insurance rates will do more damage in a fortnight than a missile salvo.

. THE ELEGANT ONE. The route Beijing has always preferred. An agreement signed by a legitimate government in Taipei is legally unassailable. No occupation, no violation of the Charter, no Article 5 question for anybody.

The target is therefore not the island. It is the composition of the Legislative Yuan, and the instruments are already deployed: media ownership, temple networks, business dependency, agricultural purchase agreements applied and withdrawn on the timing of an election calendar. Fifty years of autonomy, one country two systems, the Hong Kong formula polished and re-offered.

On which the only comment required is arithmetic. Hong Kong was guaranteed fifty years in a treaty lodged at the United Nations. It got **twenty-three**.

> ***Fifty years is not a guarantee. It is a schedule.***

THE ASYMMETRY

The recurring Western error is not misreading Chinese intentions. It is assuming they run on a Western calendar.

We negotiate in electoral cycles, budget in single years, and call half a century permanent because it exceeds a career. A civilisation that plans in centuries is not inconvenienced by a fifty-year clause. It is merely patient enough to sign one, and to wait.

The men in the first photograph had straw sandals and no state. The men in the second have carrier groups and the second-largest economy on earth. Ninety-nine years.

> ***In Beijing that is not an achievement worth a parade.***
>
> ***It is a quarter of the plan.***

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