



# Ko Tun-hwa

## passes the Two Chinas, and a New Era of Maritime Strategy, into the Care of Mazu

葛敦華 *Vice-Admiral Ko Tun-hwa, ROCN: 1921-2010.*

**A** GREAT SAILOR-STRATEGIST HAS PASSED into the care of Mazu, the Goddess of the Sea. Ko Tun-hwa, admiral, sailor, strategist, and philosopher, becomes the property and inspiration of generations of thinkers yet to come. He was another of China's great gifts to the world, in a warm and real incarnation of the iconic gifts of Sun-tzu and Admiral Zheng He.

Vice-Admiral Ko Tun-hwa — Tony Ko to his Western friends — passed away peacefully, at the age of 89, and with a full cognizance of his transition, on June 12, 2010, in Taipei, while talking with his daughter, Ming. I had seen him still in the prime of his life; that is to say just a few days before he passed away, in the company of sailors at the Naval Command and Staff College and the National Defense University, and at the Fleet Headquarters of the Republic of China Navy (ROCN), at Tsoying (Zuoying), part of Kaohsiung City. The Tsoying base, the largest naval facility on Taiwan, was a site of his choosing for the ROCN — and the *Kuomintang* leadership to withdraw to, because of its natural harbor — six decades before.

Vice Admiral Ko was clearly happy to be back at the sprawling naval facility. He had the scent of the sea, and he was at home. And although I had known

him for more than three decades — our mutual friend, the great strategic philosopher, Stefan Possony, had introduced us — he had, in that last week we shared together told me more about his personal history than ever before. I believe that I had persuaded him that he must now agree to have his memoirs written. The ROC Navy also agreed, and the Naval Command and Staff College Commandant, Rear Admiral Chou Mei-wu, who was with us, put steps in motion to assign someone to work with Vice Admiral Ko to begin the process. [VADM Ko Tun-hwa (his transliteration, also transliterated as Ge Dun-Hua) had served as the ninth Commandant of the Naval Command and Staff College from 1970 to 1973.]

The officers of the ROCN, and particularly those of 256 Submarine Squadron who presented Tony and me with models of one of their boats, all knew and revered Admiral Ko as an authentic hero of naval combat — from China's war against Japan, through World War II in the Atlantic and Mediterranean with the Royal Navy, to the Chinese Civil War, and the Cold War which followed — and one of the great

architects of the Republic of China Navy. But he was much more than that. Officially, he remained National Policy Advisor to the President of the Republic of China until his death. But, as I said, he was more than that.

I swear that he was happy in the days until his passing. He had another voyage in mind, and he had tasked the shipmates he left behind with challenges which he implicitly demanded they address.

He was a man whose actions as a fighting sailor were greatly respected across the Taiwan Strait. The People's Republic of China's People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) had even erected plaques to commemorate his achievements in the war against the Japanese and in the Chinese Civil War in which he fought for the Nationalist cause. He led the ROCN fleet out of the mainland ports when it became clear that the Nationalists would retire to Taiwan as the communists overran the mainland. But, in various capacities — both intellectual and in terms of leadership — he helped shape the transformation of the ROC Navy, the ROC Armed Forces and Ministry of National Defense, and the strategic philosophies of the ROC itself. In so doing, he also formulated new approaches to the study of the security of sea lanes and chokepoints. The talk we hear, even today, on sea lane security has a lot of Tony Ko embedded in it.

But he was more than the natural successor, in thinking, to writers such as Alfred Thayer Mahan. He was a grand strategist of the mold of Stefan Possony; a geostrategist. He was of the sea, but not constrained to it. Still, he was loyal to Mazu, telling me, on our last sojourn



The Ear of the President: Ko Tun-hwa interprets for Pres. Chiang Kai-shek in a meeting with a US Navy officer in Taipei in 1969 or 1970.

together, that this Goddess bound together the sailors and fishermen on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. And when we parted, for the last time, on June 11, 2010, Rear Admiral Chou took me to the Naval Base at Su'ao, in the north-east of Taiwan, to the only Mazu Temple on a military facility. There we said prayers for the good keeping of Ko Tun-hwa, who was already frustrated by the cane he had recently been forced to use.

There is no doubt that we were commending him to the care of Mazu, after he had given his last sailing orders to us all.

Ko Tun-hwa said, when asked, that he came from Fukien, although the name is now antique in pronunciation and spelling, and even as a geographic descriptor. Now it is "Fujian" or "Fuchou" or "Fouzhou". Anyway, he was born there on August 13, 1921, so he was just short of 90 years old when he passed away, suddenly and unexpectedly. Yet he must have been prepared, and satisfied that his sailing orders were in safe hands. He told Ming: "I think I will just slip away while no-one is looking." And then took his leave.

He was already

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Commitment

embroiled in the war against the Japanese as a young midshipman, engaged on occasion in guerilla operations behind the shifting Japanese lines. It was then that he met *Generalissimo* Chiang Kai-shek. He and other midshipmen in the turmoil of their training and fighting had been ordered to a theater in Nanjing, where Chiang Kai-shek was to treat the US Ambassador to China to a night of Peking Opera. Ko, meanwhile,

had fallen asleep in the back of the theater, and was awakened by a fellow midshipman, pointing to him and saying: "He's the one" to a general in full dress uniform. The general beckoned Ko to follow him to the front row of the theater where he was thrust in front of the *Generalissimo*. "He's the one," the general said. Midshipman Ko, thinking that he must have unwittingly done something wrong, for which he would now



Vice-Admiral Ko Tun-hwa gives his characteristic V for Victory sign aboard the high-speed train from Taipei to Tsoying on June 10, 2010, as his daughter and constant support, Ming, smiles on. Tony Ko was going back to visit the fleet, and particularly, his submarines, two days before he passed away. He was constantly engaged in strategic affairs until his death. — Photograph by the author.





Republic of China National Policy Advisor Vice-Admiral Ko Tun-hwa (left) and former US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger at Strategy2000 in Washington, DC, where both were honored for "Outstanding Contributions to Strategic Progress" with the ISSA Star.

be shot, trembled. Chiang smiled, and said: "Good."

Tony, in 2010, also smiled in the retelling, and said: "I didn't know if I had done something wrong, but I certainly didn't think I had done anything good, either." But then the ROC President said: "We have the American Ambassador here, and he has never seen Peking Opera before. I was told that you spoke English. You will translate for him." As he settled next to the Ambassador, Ko turned to the general who had brought him forward, and asked: "What is happening?" The general described the scene, which was, typically, highly allegorical, and Ko recounted the description of the pageant to the ambassador. This process repeated itself a few times until the Ambassador said: "Do you have to get permission from that general for everything you say?"

Ko said: "No, Excellency; I am from Fukien. I have never seen Peking Opera before; I have no idea what's going on, and I cannot even understand what they are saying." The Ambassador smiled, and said: "Son, just say whatever you like; it doesn't matter to me; don't worry."

Ko was, after a tumultuous and adventurous war, to become Chiang Kai-shek's translator, and clearly forged a great relationship with him, to the point where he became close to both Chiang's mutually antagonistic sons (by different mothers), Chiang Ching-kuo (later President of the ROC) and Chiang Wei-kuo (later a general). But the brief interlude in Nanjing, and in the fighting

against the Japanese, was followed by a diversion which was to become a pivotal point in Ko's education. He was sent, in 1942, to London, as a sub-lieutenant, for more advanced naval education at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich.

This was the height of World War II, and the RN cadets, and their foreign students, were posted frequently for practical training aboard British warships, to learn about combat first-hand. As a result, Sub.-Lt. Ko was to see action at the amphibious operations of D-Day in Normandy — in Operation *Overlord* — aboard a Royal Navy warship, and at the "Second D-Day" in the South of France, aboard a Royal Navy escort carrier supporting the landings of Operation *Dragoon* at St. Tropez. That was on August 15, 1944, two days after Ko's 23rd birthday.

I was oblivious to this part of his history, when, in the Summer of 1986, Tony Ko was in France, and I invited him to my yacht, then anchored off Cannes. I went ashore in the tender, with a couple of crew, to collect Vice Admiral Ko from the pier in front of the Hotel Carlton. My captain (former Royal Navy), aboard the yacht, was nervous about having an admiral aboard, but relaxed as the tender drew alongside, and VADM Ko asked: "Permission to come aboard, captain?" And, then, climbing the steps to board, saluted the quarter-deck and asked if he could join the captain on the bridge. After dinner, with the lights of Cannes sparkling, we weighed anchor and set off at a leisurely pace to the West. Tony Ko spent the night on the bridge.

At dawn, when I joined them, light was just unveiling the beauty of the Gulf of St. Tropez. I remarked: "Not often you see a sight like this." Tony replied: "Not often. Last time for me was 42 years ago, when I was a gunnery officer on a British warship, right here."

Ko devoured the lessons of amphibious warfare, having witnessed first hand the two D-Day landings under very different conditions. This experience, and intense study on amphibious operations, were to be of paramount importance to the ROCN's fighting in the brown-water war against the communists, and then in the *Kuomintang's* withdrawal from the mainland, achieved through the efficiency of the fleet, a few years later; and to the ROC's defensive strategies against the PLAN thereafter. He returned to China, via de-

ployment to the Royal Navy's Far East Fleet, but he also went through the Royal Navy's submarine training school. Still unaware of the extent of his involvement with the ROCN's submarine capabilities, I was surprised to hear another epithet applied to him at the Submarine Squadron HQ on June 11, 2010, when he was called "Father of the ROCN Submarine Service".

Ko went home after World War II to the command of ships (including the destroyer *Nanchang*) and squadrons, fighting with his fleet and moving its cargoes — which included the embodiment of the ROC Command and the national treasures — out of the mainland ports to the safety of their new base on Taiwan. He was called "hero" then, officially and unofficially, at a time when the word meant something.

Tony Ko returned to the United Kingdom for additional military training, and to the US Naval War College, in Newport, Rhode Island, where he graduated in 1957 with the first class of the Naval Command Course, the first course for international officers at that institution. It was there, I believe, that he met Stefan Possony.

**K**O CONTINUED to climb in authority and influence, and, I learned over the years, became one of the quiet powers behind the *Kuomintang* (KMT: Nationalist Party) leadership of the country, and arguably the only one who sought neither prestige nor wealth.

He became head of the War College; was Vice-Minister of Defense; Secretary of the Ministry of National Defense; and held a number of other key appointments, which will be outlined later as we begin to write his full story. He pursued, outside the War College, other intellectual activities, helping to found the Society for Strategic Studies, ROC; acting as Vice-Chairman to the titular chairmanship of Gen. Chiang Wei-kuo (who I was also to meet, as with Chiang Ching-kuo and other ROC leaders, through Tony); and starting the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) organization, which continues as an international working group today.

He participated in many of the conferences of the International Strategic Studies Association (ISSA), including some held in Taipei. At ISSA's *Defense '83* gathering in Las Vegas in 1983, he surprised delegates from the People's Republic of China — who were clearly aware of who he was — when he challenged their rationale behind the PRC's

then-recent invasion of Vietnam. He participated, too, with great enthusiasm, in the ISSA/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* conference in London in 1984: *Lessons of the South Atlantic War*. That conflict had too many lessons for the ROC — and for the PRC — for him to ignore.

In 2000, when he was named National Policy Advisor to the then-President of the ROC (who was not from the KMT), he was also given the highest awards which we at the International Strategic Studies Association could give him: The Stefan Possony Prize, and the Silver Star for Outstanding Contributions to Strategic Progress. His fellow recipient of the Star, at *Strategy2000* in Washington, DC, that year was former US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.

Much of what Tony Ko has written has not been translated from the Chinese, but he also gave many talks around the world in English. He had just finished translating my book, *The Art of Victory*, into Chinese, and during the week we were together in Taipei in June 2010, the ROC Naval Command and Staff College undertook to publish his translation later this year. One of his last official acts was to introduce me at my own lecture to the Naval Command and Staff College, and to then attend, as one of the honored guests, my lecture to the National Defense University (NDU)

at Taoyuan, near Taipei. He was, as ever, eloquent and his voice still vibrant, as he described us as colleagues of the genius, Stefan Possony.

I described, in those fora, Vice Admiral Ko, and Possony, as my teachers. In reality, Tony Ko and Stefan Possony were guides; never lecturing or didactic. They both then left so that the true study of their lessons could begin.

Tony Ko, at age 89, was not lost in the past; he had always seemed annoyed when asked to recount memories of the past. He had his spyglass on a future horizon. He was incredibly good-humored and friendly. “Call me Tony,” he said, when Possony first introduced us, and yet I found it hard 35 or so years later, to call him that in front of a generation of admirals and captains who were demonstrably so full of respect for him that I, too, in their presence, could only refer to him as “Admiral Ko”. As we sat down on the high-speed train from Taipei to the south, to visit Fleet HQ and the Submarine Squadron, Tony — with Ming beside him as his guardian — flashed me a V for Victory sign.

As the message had gone round the British fleet when Churchill was brought in from the cold to resume his rôle as First Lord of the Admiralty, in 1939: “Winston is back”, so there was a clear message: “Ko is back.” Even briefly.

He did not, as I said, live in the past. It was clear from our last discussions all that week that he saw a new mission to reiterate the strategic posture of the Republic of China, not a vision which was preoccupied with the ROC resuming dominance of the entire geographic entity of China, but one in which the Republic of China could have its sovereign identity alongside that of the People’s Republic of China. That meant a final break in the process which has dominated the ROC’s *raison d’être* since 1950.

The ROC was now, in the eyes



Vice-Admiral Ko (right), and Copley on the stern of the MY Moonmaiden of Perth, off Cannes, in the Summer of 1986: On a yacht, or in a military transport flying into Kinmen, Tony Ko ate, drank, and dreamt strategy. “You can never know too many smart people,” he said.

of Vice Admiral Ko, an island maritime nation, and must comport itself thus. The Army, originally transported to Taiwan as a great continental army, with the vision of eventually rolling back to the mainland to remove the communists, could now only be an army of island defense, and the bulk of the mission of projecting the ROC’s interests as that sovereign, island, maritime nation, would have to be in the hands of the Navy and the ROC Air Force. Given that the ROC imports close to 100 percent of its natural resources by sea, the conclusion was obvious to all but those who dwell in the past. To ignore that would be to continue to subordinate the ROC’s sovereignty to either its ally, the United States, or to its putative adversary, the PRC.

In all of this evolving context for ROC defense and strategic planning, Ko Tun-hwa saw a path of sovereignty for the ROC which would ultimately fit honorably and strongly between the PRC and the US, potentially benefitting both, along with Japan and the Republic of Korea, and all those who trade with them, and with the PRC and ROC.

Both Chinas are entering a new world in which maritime reach is critical, and, if somewhat competitive, is not mutually exclusive. As the PLA Navy extends its reach, and the PRC becomes equally a resurgent heartland power linking across Central Asia to the Indian Ocean (via Pakistan and, arguably, Iran), as well as a nascent sea power, the ROC equally must consider itself now an island nation, and a maritime power, with the 25th largest GDP in the world, and with sea lanes vital to its survival.

Thus the two Chinas face a maritime future which is very different from that of the past half-century, and truly in the hands of Mazu, as is my shipmate and soulmate, Tony Ko. ★



Rear Admiral Chou Mei-wu, Commandant of the ROC Naval Command and Staff College (left), Vice Admiral Ko, and the author, Gregory Copley, at Anping Fort, Tainan City, Taiwan, June 10, 2010.