

Nuclear Weapons in the Taiwan Strait

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List of Acronyms

CCP:	Chinese Communist Party
CMC:	Central Military Commission
FRUS:	Foreign Relations of the United States
JCS:	Joint Chiefs of Staff
KMT:	Chinese Nationalist Party
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPC:	National People's Congress
NSC:	National Security Council
OSD:	Office of the Secretary of Defense
PLA:	People's Liberation Army
PRC:	People's Republic of China
ROC:	Republic of China
UK:	United Kingdom
UN:	United Nations
US:	United States

要約

1954 年秋に始まり 1958 年秋に終了した台湾海峡危機に際し、米アイゼンハワー大統領は、台湾・中華民国の防衛を目的に、中国本土に対し核兵器で攻撃する準備を整えていた。この危機対応に従事した米国政府高官は、核兵器使用の威嚇を相手に信じさせることができれば、紛争拡大を抑止すると信じていた。その考えは、通常兵器では勝利が確定できない軍事紛争においては、戦術核兵器の先制使用が必要とする米国核政策の発展に決定的な役割を果たした。本ペーパーの目的は、中国と旧ソ連の公式保存記録(アーカイブ)の調査を含め、台湾海峡危機を詳細に分析し、前述の「核使用」に関する考え方に疑問を呈することにある。台湾海峡危機において、米国が中国に対し核使用の威嚇を行ったことが、軍事紛争の拡大を抑止したとは必ずしも言えず、中国が本来の目的を達成することを阻止するうえでも効果的ではなかったことを実証するものである。

歴史家は、台湾危機を2つの大きな事件に分けて考える傾向がある。「最初の危機」は 1954 年 9 月から 1955 年 5 月までで、「第二の危機」が 1958 年の 8 月から 9 月にかけてのものである。この考え方では、軍事的対立が高まる中で、二つの危機の間に行われた長い米中間の協議が含まれないことになる。1954 年危機は、中国が米国を交渉の場につかせることが大きな目的であったこと、さらにその交渉が物別れに終わったことが 1958 年に軍事活動を活発化させることにつながったこと、などを考えれば、台湾危機はこの中間における米中交渉を含めた一連の「危機」として捉えることが必要だ。そのような捉え方をすれば、米国による核使用の危険性が 1955 年春に最も高かったことを明らかにすることができる。その時、米アイゼンハワー大統領は危機の本質を十分に理解していなかったのである。米中交渉は、結果的にアイゼンハワー大統領が状況を理解する時間を稼ぐことになった。1958 年軍事的緊張が高まる中、状況を理解することにより、アイゼンハワー大統領は核使用の選択肢を外すことを決定したのである。アイゼンハワー大統領が核使用による威嚇ではなく、中国と交渉する意図をみせたことで、軍事的対立が拡大することを回避し、そして危機を解消することができたのである。

台湾をめぐる米中の対立はいまも未解決のまま。台湾は、民族自決権(self determination)を取り戻すべく、民主主義改革を通じて、1972 年に米中が合意した「暫定協定(modus vivendi)」に挑戦を続けている。米中関係は、急速に悪化しており、米中両国とも台湾海峡をめぐる次の軍事対立への備えを続けている。次の危機が明日にでも訪れる可能性があるのだ。現在の中国指導者が、米国による核の威嚇について台湾危機の時と異なった見解をもつとの示唆は得られていない。さらに、中国は当時に比べ、通常兵器の軍事力、並びに核兵器での反撃能力に自信を深めており、もし米国が核兵器で先制攻撃を仕掛けると威嚇してきた場合、当時よりも強く抵抗を示すことになるだろう。実際に、核抑止が効かないで核兵器が使用されてしまったら、米中対立は収束するよりは拡大する可能性の方が高いだろう。

台湾と外交関係を維持している国はごくわずかである。現在の台湾政府に対する国際社会の心情は、当時の蒋介石政権の時と比べても、台湾政府に好意的となるだろう。しかし、米国の同盟国を含めても、台湾の独立宣言を防護する目的で米国が核兵器を使用することを何カ国が支持するかは不透明だ。台湾危機における米国の威嚇政策に対する経験を踏まえれば、何カ国が支持しようが、米国が核使用の選択肢を除外したまま台湾の独立を擁護する政策の方がより多くの支持を得ることができるだろう。

Executive Summary

During the Taiwan Strait Crisis, which began in the fall of 1954 and ended in the fall of 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower prepared to attack the People's Republic of China (PRC) with nuclear weapons to protect the government of Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. US officials involved in the crisis believed credible US threats to use nuclear weapons deterred escalation, and those beliefs played a formative role in the evolution of US nuclear weapons policies that call for the first use of tactical nuclear weapons in a military crisis when victory using conventional weapons is not assured. This examination of the crisis, which includes consideration of documentation from PRC and Soviet archives, calls that belief into question. It demonstrates US threats to attack the PRC with nuclear weapons during the Taiwan Strait Crisis were not necessary to deter military escalation and were not effective in deterring PRC leaders from pursuing their objectives.

Historians tend to split the crisis into two discrete events, a "first crisis" lasting from September 1954 to May 1955 and a "second crisis" in August and September 1958. This accounting excludes the lengthy period of US-PRC negotiations that took place in between these two short periods of heightened military activity. Because forcing negotiations with the United States was an important PRC objective in initiating the crisis in 1954, and the breakdown of those negotiations led to the resumption of heightened military activity in 1958, this period of US-PRC diplomacy must be included in a general description of what was, in fact, a single Taiwan Strait Crisis. This accounting helps reveal the greatest danger of US nuclear use was in the spring of 1955 when Eisenhower lacked sufficient understanding of the crisis. US-PRC talks bought Eisenhower time to comprehend the situation. This understanding led him to take the use of US nuclear weapons off the table during the second period of heightened military activity in 1958. Eisenhower's willingness to negotiate with the PRC, and not US threats of nuclear use, allowed him to avoid military escalation and resolve the crisis.

The US dispute with the PRC over Taiwan remains unresolved, and the people of Taiwan, using democratic reforms to assert their hope for self-determination, are challenging the *modus vivendi* the two sides reached in 1972. US-China relations are deteriorating, rapidly, and both sides continue to prepare for the next military conflict over the status of the island. Another crisis could erupt at any moment. There is no indication the current PRC leadership would view US threats to use nuclear weapons differently today. Moreover, greater PRC confidence in its own conventional military capabilities and its ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons if the United States uses them first are more likely to strengthen rather than weaken PRC resistance to future US nuclear threats. Actually using them after deterrence fails is more likely to escalate the conflict than end it.

Only a handful of nations maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan today. While the current ROC government most likely enjoys far greater international sympathy than Chiang Kai-shek did, it is unclear how many nations, including US allies, would support having the United States start a nuclear war to defend a Taiwanese declaration of independence. Whatever that number might be, it is reasonable to assume, based on the international experience of US nuclear threats during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s, that more nations might be willing to support a US effort to preserve Taiwanese rights to self-determination if it were clear the United States took the option to start a nuclear war off the table.

I. A Crisis Waiting to Happen Again

During the Taiwan Strait Crisis, which began in the fall of 1954 and ended in the fall of 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower prepared to attack the People's Republic of China with nuclear weapons to defend Taiwan.¹ Eisenhower believed he needed to use US nuclear weapons to prevent the collapse of the government of the Republic of China, which still rules Taiwan today. Thomas Schelling, a prominent national security expert since the 1940s, argued the probability of nuclear war during this period was greater than during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Schelling, a Nobel Laureate in economics, said it was "the only time the United States really might have used nuclear weapons" since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II (Schelling 2013).

The historical record supports Schelling's argument. Eisenhower sought and obtained the consent of ROC President Chiang Kai-Shek to use nuclear weapons. The Joint Chiefs of Staff selected targets and positioned munitions. The National Security Council and the State Department agreed that a nuclear attack would be necessary if PRC forces appeared to be preparing to attack the island of Taiwan or the Pescadores, one of several island groups still occupied by ROC forces today. Vice President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles publicly threatened to use nuclear weapons against the PRC, and President Eisenhower reinforced the credibility of those threats.

The imagined Chinese communist assault on Taiwan never came. US officials involved in the crisis believed US nuclear threats deterred it, and those beliefs played a formative role in US nuclear weapons policies that support the first use of tactical nuclear weapons in a military crisis when victory using conventional weapons is not assured. Those policies remain in place today, but we now know they were formed on the basis of incomplete and inaccurate assessments of Chinese capabilities and intentions.

The Taiwan Strait Crisis has not been studied as extensively as the Cuban Missile Crisis, especially for lessons about the consequences and effectiveness of US nuclear weapons policy. Materials newly available from Soviet and PRC archives demonstrate that US threats to attack the PRC with nuclear weapons during the Taiwan Strait Crisis were neither necessary nor effective in deterring PRC leaders from pursuing their objectives. PRC leaders never intended to attack Taiwan or the Pescadores during this period. They were also willing to suffer a US nuclear attack rather than capitulate to unacceptable US demands.

These materials show that the US defense and foreign policy establishment, after exhaustive analysis and discussion, brought East Asia to the brink of nuclear war by mistake. It misunderstood the language, behavior, capabilities, and intentions of the Chinese communist leadership.

Unfortunately, this could happen again as US experts and officials continue to draw the wrong lessons from the Taiwan Strait Crisis.

¹ Historians tend to split the crisis into two discrete events, a "first crisis" lasting from September 1954 to May 1955 and a second one in August and September 1958. This description excludes the lengthy period of US-PRC negotiations that took place in between these two short periods of heightened military activity. Because forcing negotiations with the United States was an important PRC objective in initiating the first crisis and the breakdown of those negotiations led to the second crisis, they should be joined in a general description of what was, in fact, a single Taiwan Strait Crisis.

The issue that precipitated the nuclear crisis of the 1950s remains unresolved. The PRC still claims sovereignty over Taiwan, and it stands on defensible legal and diplomatic ground. The UN General Assembly stripped the ROC government of its UN membership in 1971 when it recognized the PRC as China's sole legitimate government. A majority of UN member states agree that Taiwan is a part of China.

Nevertheless, some ROC political leaders, in accord with the hopes of an increasing number of their citizens, would like to seek recognition as an independent nation. The PRC says it will try to prevent independence for Taiwan with military force if necessary. Although the United States is not obliged by treaty or domestic law to defend the ROC, any PRC use of military force against Taiwan could trigger a US military response.²

Why does this matter today? The Trump administration is developing new low-yield nuclear weapons it says it will use in a war with China. It intends to deploy those weapons in Asia and use them in a crisis if deemed necessary. The administration's Nuclear Posture Review emphasizes that the United States is prepared to use nuclear weapons first in order to defeat China's increasingly capable conventional military forces. In other words, the United States is telling China it will use nuclear weapons even if China does not (OSD 2018).

The PRC did not have nuclear weapons in the 1950s, but it was allied with the Soviet Union and shared much of its communist ideology. European and Asian leaders allied with the United States feared the Taiwan crisis could lead to nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States. President Eisenhower believed the United States could use nuclear weapons against the PRC without much risk of Soviet nuclear retaliation. However, transcripts of conversations between Chinese and Soviet leaders, contained in Soviet and PRC archives, demonstrate that President Eisenhower was wrong.

Today, China has a small but modern nuclear force, medium-range missiles that can reach US military bases in Asia, and long-range missiles that can reach the United States. President Trump's advisors are telling him that low-yield nuclear weapons would help the United States control the escalation of a military conflict with China. His advisors seem to believe the United States can use low-yield nuclear weapons first without risking Chinese nuclear retaliation against the United States or US military bases in Asia. China's official position is that it will retaliate if attacked first.

US-China relations are deteriorating. The two nuclear-armed nations are at odds over the conduct of each other's activities in the South China Sea, in outer space, and in cyberspace. Chinese officials characterize the Trump administration's economic policies toward China as a form of economic warfare. In this general context, US statements and actions that appear to express support for Taiwan's independence could precipitate a military conflict and result in a US decision to start a nuclear war.

As tensions continue to simmer, and before the United States redeploys low-yield nuclear weapons to East Asia, it is useful to look back at the Eisenhower administration's decision to prepare to use nuclear weapons against the PRC. Lessons from that experience can help US decisionmakers assess whether increasing US nuclear capabilities and demonstrating the resolve to use them first in a war with China is a prudent or effective way to maintain regional peace and security.

² The language of the Taiwan Relations Act, enacted when the United States recognized the PRC government in 1979, scrupulously avoids obligating the United States to defend Taiwan in the event of the use of force by the PRC. It only requires the United States to "maintain the capacity" to respond.

II. The Cold War in Asia

Documents in Chinese and Soviet archives challenge longstanding US perceptions of the Cold War in Asia, calling into question US assessments of PRC intentions. They reveal that, from the very beginning of the Cold War, persistent and significant differences separated what US policymakers thought the Chinese communists intended from what they actually intended.

In August 1946, China was in the midst of an internal struggle over who would lead the country. President Truman sent General George C. Marshall to China to try to create a post-war government that would disarm the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and secure the increasingly shaky leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Nationalist Party (KMT) and president of Republic of China. Marshall's mission did not go well despite support from Stalin, who also envisioned a KMT-led government for post-war China (Shen 2012)³.

The two Chinese political parties could not come to terms. They reluctantly established a "united front" to fight the invading Japanese in 1936, but the front collapsed in 1945 not long after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. President Truman sought to prevent renewed fighting between the rivals from erupting into a civil war. Marshall negotiated a ceasefire and obtained an agreement from both sides to write a new Chinese constitution and form a coalition government (Kurtz-Phelen 2018). However, the ceasefire broke down in the spring of 1946, and both parties scrambled to control Manchuria, China's most industrialized region. The United States helped Chiang. The Soviets helped Mao. It was the beginning of the Cold War in Asia.

That same spring, US journalist Anna Louise Strong interviewed Mao Zedong, the enigmatic leader of the Chinese communists, about the future of his party. Strong asked Mao about the role of the atomic bomb. She worried the United States might use it in a war with the Soviet Union. Mao told her that although he recognized the bomb was "a weapon of mass slaughter," it was also "a paper tiger, which the US reactionaries use to scare people." Moreover, Mao believed a war between the United States and the Soviet Union was unlikely: "The United States and the Soviet Union are separated by a vast zone which includes many capitalist, colonial and semi-colonial countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. Before the US reactionaries have subjugated these countries, an attack on the Soviet Union is out of the question" (Mao 1946).

In other words, months before the "Truman Doctrine" of containing communism with military alliances was presented to the US Congress—a moment many historians use to mark the beginning of the Cold War—Mao anticipated how that doctrine would shape the Cold War. He told Strong the United States would use the fear of communism to set up military bases all over the world. The ulterior aim was "to turn all the countries that are targets of US external expansion into US dependencies" (Mao 1946).

Mao believed China was the most important US target and Chiang Kai-Shek an unwitting accomplice. He did not see his fight with the nationalists as a simple civil war but as a struggle to prevent China from becoming a US dependency. Mao's anticipation of the Cold War informed his convictions about China's

³ Shen Zhihua is a prominent Chinese scholar of Sino-Soviet Relations who assembled a large archive of Soviet diplomatic cables and other documents related to its relationship with the PRC that is now housed at East China Normal University in Shanghai. This paper draws heavily on the original Soviet and PRC sources Shen used to write *Wunai de Xuanze*, which is a cable by cable account of Sino-Soviet relations from 1945 to 1959.

place in global politics. Those convictions inspired him to create the crisis that led Eisenhower to prepare to attack Mao's China with nuclear weapons.

How Taiwan Became a Front Line

After Marshall's mission failed, Mao's communists routed Chiang's nationalists. The CCP established a new national government and expected international recognition since it governed almost all of China. The diplomatic winds were in its favor.

Chiang's defeat was the latest in a long line of US disappointments in his leadership stretching back to the war with Japan. In January 1950, over the vociferous objections of Chiang's many supporters in United States, Truman affirmed that the United States had "no intention to utilize its armed forces to interfere in the present situation" or "pursue a course which would lead to involvement in the civil conflict in China" (Truman 1950a).

Chiang relocated the rump of his government to Taiwan, which the ROC recovered from Japan with the consent of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union under the terms for Japanese surrender set out in the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Declaration, and the Instrument of Surrender that officially ended World War II. However, the local population resented Chiang's arrival and resisted the impositions of his government (Chen 2008). Much of their land was confiscated and redistributed to ROC elites. Thousands of protesters were killed, tortured, and imprisoned in what came to be known as the "White Terror" (Wang 2017). Chiang's nationalists ruled the island under martial law and forbade organized political opposition for decades afterwards. His policies created deep divisions between the local population and the new arrivals, and these continue to shape domestic politics on Taiwan today.

The Truman administration anticipated that the PRC would quickly seize the island and depose Chiang's government (FRUS 1949, 489). Those expectations increased as Mao's People's Liberation Army (PLA) mopped up the remaining ROC forces on the mainland (FRUS 1950, 174). One of the largest mop-up operations was on Hainan island. The PLA defeated over 100,000 well-equipped ROC soldiers, sailors, and airmen in a 56-day battle in March and April 1950.

After the PRC victory in Hainan, US officials began to worry the PLA might advance into Southeast Asia. Less than a week after Hainan's "liberation," the Truman administration responded by announcing it would provide aid to the French forces trying to restore colonial rule in Indochina (OSD 2011a). This was the first US step into the conflict in Vietnam.

Despite the PLA's success in Hainan, it failed to capture several other groups of much smaller ROC-held islands a bit farther removed from China's eastern coast. Insufficient PLA air and naval capabilities were a significant factor (Shen 1998). The PLA's limitations forced the PRC leadership to push back its timeline for an assault on Taiwan, which is more than 250 kilometers from the Chinese mainland (Shen 2012).

A few days after Truman announced the United States would no longer come to Chiang's aid, PRC Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi traveled to Moscow to seek military assistance from Stalin. Liu cabled Mao with bad but not unexpected news based on joint Soviet-Chinese analyses of the failed PLA campaigns against the offshore islands. They indicated that a successful military assault on Taiwan would require

significant improvements to PLA air and naval forces and could only be undertaken with large-scale Soviet assistance that Stalin wanted to spread over many years (Shen 2012).

As a result, the threat of an immediate PRC military assault on Taiwan was much smaller than the Truman administration believed.

Taiwan and Korea

US anxieties about the spread of communism in Asia increased dramatically in June 1950 when Kim Il Sung, the Korean communist leader, launched a military campaign to unify his country. Truman believed, incorrectly, that Kim was acting in consort with the PRC, leading the president to reverse course on intervening in the Chinese civil war. The day after Kim attacked the south Truman announced:

The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war. . . . In these circumstances the occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area. Accordingly, I have ordered the 7th Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa (Truman 1950b).⁴

Truman's statement identified "communism," not Kim, as the aggressor. Documents in the Pentagon Papers make clear that this assessment was the product of a US defense and foreign policy establishment "dominated by the tendency to view communism in monolithic terms." This tendency "had its origins at the time of the Nationalist withdrawal from mainland China" (OSD 2011a).

In fact, the Chinese communists vehemently opposed Kim's plan to invade the south and unify Korea, as did Stalin. Neither of Kim's communist allies were confident he could win. Both were worried the United States would intervene and eliminate the communist government in the North. Stalin, however, had a change of heart in January 1950; without Mao's knowledge or consent, he green-lighted Kim's plan to invade the south (Shen 2017).⁵ There is little evidence US analysts and decisionmakers were aware of Mao's opposition to Kim's decision to start a war that the Chinese communist leadership believed Kim would lose.

Truman reversed course on Taiwan because he was concerned Mao would open a second front in a wider war. To the contrary, Kim's misadventure compelled Mao to move forces north to secure the

⁴ Formosa is the name Portuguese traders gave Taiwan. It was commonly used in the United States at the time.

⁵ During their first meeting, on December 16, 1949, Mao told Stalin, "The most important thing right now is to protect the peace. China needs three to five years of peace and respite we can use to restore pre-war economic levels and stabilize the national situation. Resolving China's most important problems depends on the prospect of peace." Stalin assured Mao that "if we make a concerted effort we should be able to preserve the peace not only for 5-10 years but possibly for 20 years or longer." Yet on January 30, 1950, while Mao was still in Moscow, Stalin responded positively to another request from Kim Il-sung to launch a major military campaign to reunify Korea, reversing the existing Sino-Soviet policy of rejecting Kim's repeated requests to support such a campaign. Moreover, in a February 2 cable, Stalin instructed Terenty Shtykov, the Soviet Ambassador to North Korea, to tell Kim not to mention this reversal to other North Korean leaders or Chinese comrades (Shen 2017).

PRC's northeastern border. In response to Truman's decision to defend the ROC, the PLA scrapped preparations for a Taiwan campaign, already delayed because of insufficient military capability (Shen 2012). Rather than being on the offensive, the PRC was forced into a defense posture. Stalin's decision to send military aid and equipment to Kim's Korea instead of Mao's China made things worse.

Truman's Nuclear Threats

The Chinese communists repeatedly warned the United States not to push north of the original dividing line between northern and southern Korea (Shen 2017). Had the United States taken those warnings seriously, the Chinese communists might not have entered the war. Unfortunately, General Douglas MacArthur, commander of UN forces in Korea, convinced Truman the PRC leadership was bluffing.

While Mao was determined to intervene if that line was crossed, PRC military commanders were less certain. PLA General Lin Biao raised the possibility the United States would drop atomic bombs on Chinese cities. He argued against intervention and refused to command troops in Korea. The atomic bomb also intimidated the troops themselves, so much so that northeast regional commanders felt compelled to address their fears (Sun 2013).

The arguments used to console the troops echoed Mao's 1946 comments to Strong. The PLA's Political Department had local commanders tell the Chinese soldiers massing in the border region that the use of the atomic bomb would not be militarily decisive and that US threats to use it were not credible. They said the United States would risk harm to its own forces if it used atomic bombs on the battlefield and would suffer international condemnation if it used them against Chinese cities (Sun 2013).

Mao secured a promise of Soviet Air Force protection for the Chinese mainland and convinced his comrades they had to take the acceptably low risk they might be bombed. With the wholehearted support of the charismatic PLA general Peng Dehuai, Mao won over most of the Chinese military and political leaders who had reservations about intervening in Korea. The leadership united around an assessment that holding the line at the 38th parallel and saving the North Korean communist government was vital to the PRC's security (Shen 2017).

Truman did, in fact, threaten to use nuclear weapons against the PRC during a press conference shortly after the Chinese communists intervened in Korea (Leviero 1950). He had already sent the non-nuclear components for 10 atomic weapons to Guam during the early days of the conflict and informed MacArthur he would make the nuclear components available if necessary (JCS 1950). When Eisenhower inherited the war in 1953, he, too, prepared to use atomic bombs if China did not agree to US terms for an armistice. However, as Mao had anticipated, President Eisenhower found no practical way to use atomic weapons on the battlefield and was concerned about US public and allied opposition to using nuclear weapons (FRUS 1952–1954, 427).

The Chinese communist leadership's experience of US nuclear threats during the Korean War encouraged more serious inquiries into the possibility of China's developing its own nuclear weapons (Sun 2013). Perhaps more important, US attempts to deter Chinese military intervention with threats to use nuclear weapons that were not followed by actual nuclear attacks substantiated Mao's original

intuition about the psychological character of US nuclear threats and the limited military utility of nuclear weapons.

Eisenhower "Unleashes" Chiang Kai-Shek

In February 1953, in his first joint address to Congress, President Eisenhower flipped the script on the link between Taiwan and Korea and threatened to allow the ROC to open a second front in the war on Asian communism (Eisenhower 1953). Chiang used the forces he maintained on the small islands close to China's coast to harass the mainland. While Truman tried to prevent such activity, Eisenhower hoped encouraging more of it would put additional military pressure on Chinese communists (FRUS 1952–1954, 65).

After Eisenhower's address, the ROC, with substantial US military assistance, stepped up aerial bombing and naval shelling of the mainland, as well as attacks on PRC and foreign shipping along the southeastern Chinese coast. In July, 10 days before the signing of the Korean armistice, Chiang mobilized troops stationed on the island of Jinmen to launch a large but unsuccessful attempt to capture the PRC-held Dongshan Islands (Niu 2009).⁶

Chiang never let go of the possibility he could use the offshore islands as footholds for a future military campaign to recover the Chinese mainland and depose the communists. He was encouraged in this by sympathetic voices in the Pentagon and Congress. Eisenhower sought to exploit Chiang's ambitions but did not believe it was possible for Chiang to overthrow the PRC and discouraged him from trying.

PRC and Soviet archives show Eisenhower's policy was counterproductive. They demonstrate the Chinese communist leadership concluded the conflict in Korea was a stalemate and was ready to negotiate an end to the fighting 19 months before Eisenhower assumed office. In May 1951, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee decided on a policy of "talking while fighting" to obtain an acceptable armistice through negotiation (Shen 2017). Eisenhower's pressure tactics stiffened Mao's resolve. He was determined to keep fighting until the United States demonstrated its willingness to negotiate in good faith rather than continuing to try to compel the PRC to come to the table with military force.

Kim opposed the "talking while fighting" policy because he held out hope for unifying Korea with a major offensive. But after Stalin agreed with Mao that victory was out of reach, Kim became anxious to end the war as soon as possible. US bombing was taking a very heavy toll on the civilian population in Korea, and Kim worried about the impact on his political legitimacy after the war (Shen 2017).

Mao refused to reach an agreement because he did not want the United States to think its repeated nuclear threats and the brutal strategic bombing of northern Korea were effective ways to manipulate the PRC. His approach to the negotiations became a point of contention between the PRC and North Korea. On July 15, 1952, Mao cabled an increasingly anxious Kim to explain that appearing to give in to US pressure would be extremely disadvantageous to both of their governments in the long run. Mao

⁶ Jinmen is known in the United States as Quemoy.

warned Kim, “Accepting these US terms under the present circumstances would inevitably inflate its ambitions and annihilate our own power and prestige” (Shen 2017).

There is little evidence Truman or Eisenhower understood this was why the Chinese communists were driving such a hard bargain on ending the fighting in Korea.

US encouragement of ROC military activity from the offshore islands continued after the Korean armistice was signed. On June 23, 1954, the ROC attacked a Soviet merchant vessel, precipitating a July 13 meeting of China’s senior military commanders to discuss how to address increasingly serious concerns about air and maritime security in the region (Niu 2009).

US-supported ROC military activity elevated tensions in the Taiwan Strait to a level that prompted UK Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden to publicly suggest referring the matter to the United Nations (Eden 1960). However well intended, Eden’s recommendation was a significant factor in the creation of the nuclear crisis that was to follow.

US Rejects Dialogue with the PRC

Eden’s statement on Taiwan came during the final week of the 1954 Geneva Conference. The United States, the Soviet Union, France, and the United Kingdom convened the conference to consider “the establishment, by peaceful means, of a united and independent Korea” and “the problem of restoring peace in Indo-China” (FRUS 1952–1954, 525). During the preceding three months of negotiations in Geneva focused on restoring peace in Asia, the United States had refused to engage in substantive discussions with the PRC delegation.

The Pentagon Papers make clear that the United States opposed participating in an international conference with the Chinese communists and relented only to placate the United Kingdom and France. Moreover, the Eisenhower administration took steps to undermine the talks, including providing high-profile support for ROC military activities from the offshore islands (OSD 2011b).

Eden blamed US domestic politics for the US refusal to talk to the PRC. Indeed, debates over how best to fight the war against the communist Chinese figured prominently in the 1952 presidential campaign. McCarthyism was just past its peak and still a popular subject of global reporting when the 1954 Geneva Conference began. US Secretary of State Dulles told Eden on multiple occasions that the US public and their representatives in Congress would not tolerate even the smallest gesture that might appear to accommodate the Chinese communists (Eden 1960).

However, the Pentagon Papers reveal a different set of US motivations. The difficulties of negotiating the Korean armistice led the United States to reject dialog with the Chinese communists. The experience convinced the Eisenhower administration the PRC would act in bad faith in Geneva. US policymakers believed the PRC’s primary goal was to prevent the United States from establishing military alliances in Southeast Asia that might thwart PRC plans “to consolidate gains and to extend their control.” They thought the PRC was using the negotiations to “cover its flanks” with “traditional vassal states” in Northern Korea and Indochina while helping Moscow “deny to the world generally surpluses which

Indochina normally has available thus perpetuating conditions of disorder and shortages favorable to the growth of communism” (OSD 2011b).

The singular goal of the Eisenhower administration at the Geneva Conference was to avoid signing any agreement that would limit US “freedom of action” in Asia.

Chinese communist leaders left the negotiations on Korea with a newfound appreciation for the power of diplomacy. From their point of view, the long process of arriving at an armistice exposed major differences between the United States and its allies on questions related to war and peace in Asia (Shen 2012). Western European allies refused to aid the United States in Korea and were looking for diplomatic exits from Indochina. Most US allies, including Japan, were also eager to end the economic embargo of the PRC and supported its recognition as the legitimate government of China in the United Nations (FRUS 1952–1954, 753).⁷ The PRC leadership began to see diplomacy as a viable way to increase its international stature and solicit international support for domestic economic reconstruction (Shen 2012).

In a major internal address in June 1953, Premier Zhou Enlai articulated the concept of “peaceful coexistence” based on the principles of “non-interference” and “non-intervention” in the affairs of other sovereign states. He argued this approach would win friends in Asia, exploit differences between the United States and its allies, and expose an inherently interventionist United States as the malevolent actor the PRC believed it to be. The Geneva Conference presented what Zhou described to Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov as an unexpected opportunity “to express our positions and principles on all the issues and offer explanations on certain questions so as to resolve some disputes” (Shen 2012).

That is a dramatically different articulation of Chinese communist objectives than the description given by US officials in the Pentagon Papers. Had Dulles been willing to talk to Zhou in Geneva, the dangerous drama that was about to unfold might have been avoided.

III. The Nuclear Crisis

Asian peers and the Western press widely praised Zhou Enlai’s performance in Geneva (Hamilton 1954). He achieved many of the goals articulated in his internal June 1953 address, in particular cultivating the image that the PRC leadership was reasonable, open to diplomacy, and willing to compromise. But during a Politburo meeting in Beijing days before the Geneva Accords were signed, Mao Zedong scolded the absent premier for not giving enough attention to the status of Taiwan (Shen 2012). Zhou worked closely and constructively with Eden in Geneva (Eden 1960). He should have made Eden aware the PRC viewed Taiwan as a domestic matter and that international interference was unwelcome. The British foreign secretary’s call to put the Taiwan issue before the United Nations led Mao to conclude Zhao had

⁷ President Truman imposed a total trade embargo in June 1950 at the outset of the Korean War. The United Nations followed suit in 1951 and US allies initially honored the embargo. However, US efforts to maintain the embargo after the Korean armistice failed to prevent US allies from resuming trade with the PRC (Chen 2006). President Nixon finally lifted the embargo in June 1971 in anticipation of a vote in the UN General Assembly to recognize the PRC government as the sole legitimate representative of China and to expel the ROC government.

committed a “serious political mistake,” one that Mao would now attempt to correct with far less diplomatic means (Shen 2012).

Two days after Eden’s unexpected comments on Taiwan in Geneva, a *People’s Daily* editorial lamented that Zhou’s diplomatic accomplishments had not halted US support for Chiang’s continued harassment from the offshore islands. The editorial claimed the United States was “afraid of the possibility of tensions easing in Asia and the elevation of our country’s international stature.” It argued that the continuing ROC and US military activities from the offshore island proved “the United States is using Taiwan as a military base to attack the PRC.” It warned that if the United States signed a bilateral security agreement with Chiang’s government, “then it is determined to become an enemy of six hundred million Chinese people for a long time and must accept responsibility for the long-term serious consequences this situation will create” (Bu 1954).

A few days later, a second *People’s Daily* editorial excoriated US officials for using “the constant threat of military force” to try to overthrow the PRC regime. It chastised the foreign affairs committees of the US House and Senate for opposing PRC admission to the United Nations as the legitimate government of China. Further, it suggested the US government was elevating tensions in Asia for the benefit of “Wall Street war profiteers” (Wu 1954).

The most problematic editorial—“We Will Definitely Liberate Taiwan”—appeared on July 23, one week after the first editorial and two days after the close of the Geneva Conference. It accused the United States of using Taiwan to attack the PRC with the aim of restoring Chiang’s control over all of China. It said there was a “US military conspiracy using aggressive and provocative behavior that was a serious threat to the peace in Asia and the world which the PRC will not tolerate.” It rejected Eden’s suggestion to turn the matter over to the United Nations and ended with a stern warning. “The Chinese people declare to the world yet again: Taiwan is a part of China’s sovereign territory and the Chinese people will liberate Taiwan” (People’s Daily 1954).

The three editorials were the beginning of a propaganda campaign meant to redress the serious political mistake Mao believed Zhou had made in Geneva. Mao hoped to elevate the status of Taiwan in the international discussion of Asian peace and security in the wake of the Geneva Conference. The propaganda campaign also targeted PRC citizens: neighborhoods were plastered with posters containing slogans similar to the title of the third editorial (Shen 2012).

It is not difficult to imagine how Mao’s propaganda might lead US and international audiences to anticipate a major PRC military mobilization, especially in the context of steadily increased military activity. The day of the last editorial, the *New York Times* reported that two PRC MIGs had shot down a civilian airliner in the waters off Hainan Island (United Press 1954). Not long after completing a military rescue effort in PRC territorial waters, the United States shot down two PRC fighter aircraft within PRC airspace and US naval vessels entered PRC territorial waters near Hainan island (New York Times 1954).

Despite this increased military pressure, the PRC had no intention to attack Taiwan in the foreseeable future, as Mao would later tell Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. The objectives of the propaganda

campaign were to focus international attention on the Taiwan problem and get the United States to the negotiating table (Shen 2012).

PRC Military Planning

As the propaganda campaign got underway, the PRC Central Military Commission (CMC) began to discuss measures to stop US-enabled ROC attacks from the offshore islands. General Peng Dehuai chaired a CMC meeting the day after the Geneva Conference concluded without a US signature on the accords.⁸ The discussion was grounded in a 1952 CMC determination that US military involvement in Korea, the offshore islands, and southeast Asia “constituted the principle threat to New China’s security” (Niu 2009). To the PRC leadership, US behavior in Geneva validated that determination. The day before the conference ended, the Eisenhower administration announced it would either include the ROC in a proposed new military alliance covering southeast Asia or sign a separate agreement on military aid with Chiang’s government (Schmidt 1954).

The CMC dusted off plans to continue mop-up operations started before the Korean War. Those plans called for trying to seize control of the offshore islands, beginning with the Dachens off the coast of Zhejiang province (Niu 2009). They did not call for an assault on Taiwan island itself, which was deemed out of reach because of insufficient PRC air and naval capabilities—a judgment made even before Truman intervened to protect it in June 1950 (Shen 1998).

Mao signed off on the CMC plan on August 8, and the Politburo began to discuss it the next day. On August 19, the US Navy injected more urgency into PRC deliberations by conducting proximity operations in the Dachens. Twelve days later, the CMC finally gave the order to start implementing the plan. On September 3, the PRC started shelling ROC forces on Jinmen Island off the southern coast of Fujian province (Niu 2009).

The shelling was not a prelude to an attack on Jinmen, which contained the largest concentration of ROC forces in the offshore islands. The CMC plan called first for seizing the smallest, most vulnerable islands to the north (Niu 2009). But the shelling was a relatively low-cost and effective means to respond to recent US and ROC provocations. It also helped raise the profile of PRC concerns with international and domestic audiences (Shen 2012). As the shelling of Jinmen continued, the PLA prepared to launch an assault on the Dachens (Shen 1998).

United States Debates Next Steps

In a National Security Council (NSC) meeting six days into the shelling, Dulles told Eisenhower the situation presented “a horrible dilemma.” Neither Dulles nor Eisenhower wanted to go to war with the PRC over the offshore islands, which all the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) agreed were not necessary to the

⁸ The Geneva Conference attempted to end military hostilities in Indo-China and Korea. US unwillingness to talk to the PRC made discussions on Korea impossible. British, French, and Soviet willingness to work together with the PRC led to formal agreements on the cessation of hostilities in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. US unwillingness to be bound by those agreements was a decisive factor in their ultimate collapse and the resumption of large-scale military conflict in Vietnam (DOS 1957).

defense of Taiwan, but the island outposts were very important to Chiang Kai-shek. He not only refused to surrender them, but he also deployed a disproportional amount of military resources and his best-trained soldiers on the highly vulnerable islands close to the Chinese mainland (FRUS 1952–54, 293).

JCS Chair Admiral Arthur Radford made the case for defending the offshore islands. Radford, who spent most of his career fighting in the Pacific, argued that failing to defend the offshore islands would “commit the United States further to a negative policy which could result in a progressive loss of free world strength to local aggression until an all-out conflict is forced upon us” (FRUS 1952–1954, 291). Dulles and Eisenhower were not convinced. They decided, as Eden had months earlier, to try to diffuse through the United Nations what they came to see as a crisis (FRUS 1952–1954, 293).

However, Chiang responded to Eden’s suggestion to refer Taiwan’s status to the United Nations with the same antipathy that Mao did (FRUS 1952–1954, 339). He immediately issued a scathing public rebuttal, repeating many of the same legal and historical justifications for Chinese claims to sovereignty over Taiwan that were articulated in the *People’s Daily* editorials (Rosenthal 1954). From Chiang’s point of view, the Chinese civil war was still being fought, the contest over Taiwan and the offshore islands was part of that war, and the United States should be all in on his side (FRUS 1955–1957, 112).

As intermittent PRC shelling of Jinmen continued throughout fall 1954, Eisenhower negotiated a new mutual defense pact with Chiang and made the ROC a priority recipient of US military supplies and equipment (FRUS 1952–1954, 459). The United States deployed new nuclear weapons, including warheads, to US-occupied Okinawa not long after signing the pact with the ROC in December (Norris, Arkin, and Burr 1999). Eisenhower considered deploying US nuclear weapons in Taiwan the following spring.

While Radford argued such deployment was essential to defend the offshore islands, the NSC recommended excluding nuclear weapons from the defense pact with the ROC. Eisenhower refused to take a public position (FRUS 1952–1954, 452). Privately, however, he pleaded with Chiang to halt all military activities against the PRC and to redeploy ROC military assets away from the offshore islands and back to Taiwan (FRUS 1955–1957, 189). Chiang refused and continued to lobby his many US supporters, including Radford, to get Eisenhower to help him return to the mainland and overthrow the PRC government.

The PRC Proceeds as Planned

On January 10, 1955, PRC air and naval forces attacked the ROC at sea and in the main harbor of Dachen island. Reports in the *People’s Daily* claimed five ROC naval vessels were destroyed (People’s Daily 1955a). The next day, PRC aircraft littered all of the Dachen Islands with “propaganda bombs” containing a declaration of intent to “liberate Taiwan” and encouragement to ROC forces to switch sides (People’s Daily 1955b). This combination of an initial attack followed by an appeal to cross over was effective in many of the battles of the Chinese civil war.

PRC domestic propaganda connected the struggle over the offshore islands to US alliance-building efforts in Europe and Asia. It linked the October 1954 Paris Agreement, which brought a sovereign West

Germany into NATO, with the February 1955 establishment of the South East Asian Treaty Organization as parts of a “conspiracy” to make US allies dependent on US economic assistance and enlist them in “war preparations” against the socialist bloc (Zhengqu 1955; Y. Jiang 1955). The new US defense pact with the ROC was characterized as evidence of how these alliances would be used to attack the Chinese mainland (B. Jiang 1955).

While this propaganda narrative fit the general observations on the post-war world order Mao shared with Anna Louise Strong in 1946, Mao did not believe the PRC was under siege in 1955. In early March, at the height of the crisis, the Chinese leader told Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev that the PRC had the initiative. The United States was in a bind, he argued, and rising tensions over the offshore islands worked to his advantage. The PRC military campaign was creating friction between the United States and its European allies, as well as raising the PRC’s stature among the nonaligned nations of Asia (Shen 2012).

Mao’s confidence may have been a product of Eisenhower’s response to the Dachen campaign. A mid-January PRC offensive put ROC troops on the Dachens in serious jeopardy. Publicly, Dulles tried to downplay the significance, but privately the NSC concluded the islands would fall without direct US military intervention (FRUS 1955–1957, 23). Eisenhower did not want to commit US forces. Instead, he pressed Chiang to withdraw (FRUS 1955–1957, 26). The ROC leader was furious and extracted a promise from Eisenhower to defend Jinmen and Mazu⁹ in return for capitulating (FRUS 1955-57, 30). Worse still, Eisenhower felt compelled to ask Khrushchev to get the PRC to halt its offensive so the United States could safely help Chiang evacuate his forces (FRUS 1955–1957, 27).

That conversation led Khrushchev to ask Mao where things were heading, especially after the focus of the offshore island campaign shifted south to Jinmen and Mazu. Mao told Khrushchev that military preparations for a campaign to take the two island groups could take three to four years, but that even when those preparations were complete, “starting a military campaign would depend on the disposition of US forces in the offshore island region.” Mao was in no hurry to take the two offshore islands because “maintaining a tense situation” gave the PRC the initiative and made it difficult for the United States over the longer term. For this reason, the United States might force Chiang to withdraw, either unilaterally, as he did in the Dachens, or through international negotiations (Shen 2012).

On the longer-term goal of liberating Taiwan, Mao assured the Soviet leader, “We understand, as long as US military forces are there, we are not about to launch military activities against Taiwan and the Penghu [Pescadores] islands.” But Mao also told Khrushchev he did not want things to quiet down. The offshore island campaign was creating international pressure on the Eisenhower administration to do what it refused to do in Geneva: negotiate in earnest with the PRC. Maintaining that pressure in the run-up to a meeting of Asian and African nations in Bandung in April, Mao argued, “might be beneficial to us in creating an opportunity to resolve the Taiwan problem” (Shen 2012).

After the initial shelling of Jinmen that started the crisis, the PRC shelled the island on six other occasions between October 1954 and the fall of the Dachen Islands in February 1955. All were shorter

⁹ The islands of Jinmen and Mazu were more commonly known by their Western names, Quemoy and Matsu, at the time.

and less intense than the opening volley. The PRC stepped up the pace in March, shelling Jinmen six times that month. At the same time, it continued to build roads, railroads, airfields, artillery emplacements, and other militarily useful infrastructure in the adjacent region of the mainland. This activity created panic in Washington, London, and Paris.

The United States Prepares New Nuclear Options

The perceived need for more US military assistance to the ROC heightened Eisenhower's concern that confronting communists in numerous localities around the world was generating expectations the United States could not meet and costs it could not afford. Speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations in January 1954, Dulles said it was unwise "to become permanently committed to military expenditures so vast that they lead to practical bankruptcy." At the same time, Dulles argued that "local power" could not contain communism (Dulles 1954).

The administration concluded that the only way to solve this problem was to reinforce the anticommunist struggles of allied foreign governments with "the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power." Dulles told US foreign policy experts this strategy had succeeded in Korea, where "the fighting was stopped on honorable terms" because the administration confronted Mao "with the possibility that the fighting might, to his own great peril, soon spread beyond the limits and methods which he had selected" (Dulles 1954).

However, PRC archives, particularly Mao's July 12, 1952, letter to Kim on the question of negotiations to end the war, indicate Dulles was mistaken (Shen 2017).

As the Dachens were being evacuated in mid-February, Eisenhower told the NSC he believed the surrender of Jinmen and Mazu could precipitate the collapse of Chiang's government (FRUS 1955-57, 115). Dulles told the president he was now convinced the PRC was preparing to attack Taiwan. The Joint Chiefs warned that thwarting that attack would require large-scale US bombing of the Chinese mainland, which, they cautioned, could precipitate a wider war.

On March 6, Dulles returned from a long trip to Asia with a warning to Eisenhower that the "use of atomic missiles" might be necessary. The president agreed (FRUS 1955-1957, 141). There are indications the United States was already prepared to use them. The Soviets reported the United States had already deployed nuclear weapons in Taiwan (*South China Morning Post* 1955a). The US immediately denied those reports, although the nuclear-armed U.S.S. Midway, which carried nuclear bombs that could be delivered by fighter aircraft, was on patrol off the southern Chinese coast (Norris, Arkin, and Burr 1999). In a radio address the following evening, at Eisenhower's direction, Dulles stated that United States "has sea and air forces now equipped with new and powerful weapons of precision which can utterly destroy military targets without endangering unrelated civilian centers." Dulles mentioned "atomic missiles" that are "becoming conventional for war." *The New York Times*, summarizing the address, referred to them as "tactical nuclear weapons" (Abel 1955a).

Dulles explained the administration's position on the use of nuclear weapons to Walter George, who was president pro-tempore of the Senate and who, as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,

arranged congressional hearings the afternoon before Dulles addressed the nation. In a memorandum recalling the conversation, Dulles noted:

I said that I felt that under present conditions it would be impossible for us to stand by and do nothing while the Chinese Communists took over Quemoy and Matsu by force. The psychological repercussion on Formosa and in Southeast Asia would, I thought, make it almost certain that most of Asia would be lost to us. I then said that an effective defense of these islands would require the use of atomic weapons because it would not be possible to knock out airfields and gun emplacements with conventional weapons in the face of Chinese manpower and the capacity to rebuild (FRUS 1955–1957, 142).

Dulles went on to say that the nuclear weapons they planned to use “had practically no radioactive fallout and were entirely local in effect.” However, a few weeks later, during a presidential luncheon with several members of Congress, Dulles warned, “The use of these weapons could well result in a fall out which in turn might kill many thousands of Chinese” (FRUS 1955–1957, 179). This discrepancy is hard to explain, but subsequent discussions indicate Dulles understood there would be significant fallout from the limited use of tactical nuclear weapons. As preparations to use nuclear weapons became more concrete in early April, Dulles drafted a policy memo stating the scale of the planned nuclear strikes was “so considerable” that “there would be risk of large civilian casualties through after-effects, and indeed the inhabitants of Jinmen and even Taiwan might not be immune under certain atmospheric and wind conditions” (FRUS 1955–1957, 194).

The administration was also concerned with the potential political fallout of using nuclear weapons to defend the offshore islands. At a March 10 NSC meeting, Dulles expressed concern: “We might wake up one day and discover we were inhibited in the use of these weapons by negative public opinion” (FRUS 1955-57, 146). Dulles had cause to be concerned. Radioactive rain from a March 1, 1954, US test of a thermonuclear weapon in the Bikini Atoll contaminated a Japanese tuna-fishing boat and sickened the 23 crew members who witnessed the blast. They returned to port with severe symptoms and were hospitalized. The incident generated considerable media attention and precipitated a worldwide backlash against nuclear weapons and their testing. The political effects were particularly dramatic in Asia. During the year between the test and Dulles’s comments to the NSC, over 32 million Japanese—a third of the entire population—signed a petition, started by a group of Japanese housewives, to ban atomic weapons (Wittner 2009).

As a result, Dulles attempted to mitigate the potential political fallout. He directed the NSC to take “urgent steps to create a better public climate for the use of atomic weapons” to defend Taiwan (FRUS 1955–1957, 146). At a March 15 press conference, the secretary said that “the likelihood of using city-destroying bombs in a war went down as the availability of smaller atomic weapons went up.” He went on to claim, “The new weapons offer a chance for victory on the battlefield without harming civilians” (Abel 1955b).

Two days later, in prepared remarks to the Executives Club of Chicago, Vice-President Richard Nixon made it clear that should war break out over the offshore islands, the United States would be forced to use nuclear weapons:

It is foolish to talk about the possibility that the weapons that might be used if a war breaks out in the Pacific would be limited to the conventional Korean and World War II types of explosives. We are not prepared to fight that kind of war. Our forces could not fight an effective war in the Pacific with those types of explosives if they wanted to. Tactical atomic explosives are now conventional and will be used against the targets of any aggressive force (Johnston 1955).

Nixon was articulating in public new administration guidance on the use of nuclear weapons approved by the president a week earlier. On March 11, Eisenhower met with National Security Adviser Robert Cutler to discuss revisions to US policy on the use of nuclear weapons. Cutler recommended, and Eisenhower agreed, they should eschew existing guidance that dictated much greater caution in the use of nuclear weapons than in the use of conventional weapons. They decided the “present situation” with the PRC required reverting to an earlier policy: “In the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons as available for use as other munitions” (FRUS 1955–1957, 150).

The New York Times ran a lengthy article on “limited atomic war” three days after Nixon’s speech. Paraphrasing Eisenhower’s remarks during a press conference the day after Nixon spoke, it said limited atomic war was a new strategy where “a whole new family of so-called tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons” could be “used like bullets.” The article contained a detailed list of new weapons, including several Dulles may have been thinking about when he used the term “atomic missiles:” the “Honest John free-flight artillery rocket,” the “Army’s Corporal guided missile,” and the “Matador and Regulus pilotless bombers” (Baldwin 1955).

The targets selected by the Joint Chiefs included roads, railroads, and airfields all along the southern Chinese coast from Ningbo to Guangzhou. Radford, Dulles, and Eisenhower believed aerial reconnaissance of PRC preparations indicated the Chinese communists would be ready to launch an assault on the offshore islands in late April. The commander-in-chief of the Pacific sent a memo on April 8 to the chief of the navy warning they would need to be able to respond quickly:

When they are ready, they will then strike with such a tremendous force that a most immediate and strong American retaliatory effort will be required, the decision for which must be made in Washington without delay. Under these conditions there is a much greater likelihood that success will depend upon the immediate use of atomic weapons (FRUS 1955–1957, 199).

Japanese Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama made statements to the Japanese press indicating he had been approached about stockpiling US nuclear munitions at US military bases in Japan (*South China Morning Post* 1955b). The Eisenhower administration authorized the delivery of the nonnuclear components of US nuclear bombs to US bases in Japan at the same time it deployed nuclear weapons in what was then US-occupied Okinawa (Norris, Arkin, and Burr 1999). Chief of Staff of the Army General Matthew Ridgeway informed Radford that up to six Honest John nuclear artillery batteries deployed in Europe and another scheduled for delivery to Japan could be diverted to Taiwan (FRUS 1955–1957, 192). As the plans for nuclear strikes against the PRC became more concrete, Dulles worried the United States did not have enough of these new tactical nuclear weapons. He warned his senior staff, “We cannot splurge our limited supply of atomic weapons without serious danger to the entire balance of power” (FRUS 1955-57, 175).

IV. A Chance for Diplomacy

Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Joint Chiefs were increasingly worried about a sudden, massive PRC assault. In a telegram of April 8, General William Chase, commander of the US Military Assistance Group in Taiwan, expressed concern about the buildup of PRC airfields and aircraft along the southeastern coast. Chase's ROC counterpart requested "early concurrence in our bombing of enemy airfields in Swatow, Foochow and Luchou." Chase recommended green-lighting an ROC attack, saying it was "justified from a purely military view and from the viewpoint of psychological reaction upon East Asia" (FRUS 1955–1957, 196).

Nevertheless, the president and his secretary of state decided it was unlikely the PRC would attack before the conclusion of a conference of Asian and African nations in Bandung, Indonesia, scheduled for late April. The two men conferred on Chase's request and agreed to wait until after the conference when, according to Dulles, they "might be able to see more clearly ahead and judge either that there would be war or peace in the area." Eisenhower felt the proposed ROC bombing would undermine US Asian allies attending the conference. He defended taking the military risk to support diplomacy, arguing "it is oftentimes necessary to take heavy liabilities from a purely military standpoint in order to avoid being in the position of being an aggressor and the initiator of war" (FRUS 1955–1957, 201).

Chase, the Joint Chiefs, Dulles, and Eisenhower were wrong about the risks of an imminent PRC attack. In his March 5 response to Khrushchev's inquiry about PRC intentions, Mao told the Soviet leader it would be several years before they were ready to try to take the offshore islands; even then it was unlikely as long as US military forces remained in the region (Shen 2012).

Mao also told Khrushchev he believed it was beneficial to maintain a state of tension over the offshore islands because it was responsible for the growing diplomatic pressure on the United States to negotiate the Taiwan issue with the PRC. Both the United Kingdom and India were actively trying to broker talks. Their concern was to prevent another major war in Asia in which the United States might use nuclear weapons. India agreed with both the PRC and Chiang's ROC that Taiwan was an inseparable part of China. The United Kingdom supported the United States in offering to exchange control over the offshore islands for a PRC promise not to use military force to settle the Taiwan issue (Shen 2012).

Mao told Khrushchev the PRC hoped "to use India to pressure the UK to get the United States to yield." The PRC would broaden its diplomatic strategy at the Bandung conference:

Our intention, during the period of the Asian-African conference, is to create opportunities to resolve the situation in the Taiwan area through engagement and discussions, possibly through the offices of the three countries of Indonesia, Myanmar and India. This may be beneficial to us. Doing it this way, of course, does not exclude engagement with England, especially because of the engagement between the Soviet Union and England that is primarily aimed at bringing about a resolution of the offshore island problem by connecting it with the Soviet proposal for the ten nation conference. We think the organization of the ten nation conference will require a relatively long period of multifaceted diplomatic activity" (Shen 2012).

Khrushchev was hoping to resolve the Taiwan problem in the context of a broader diplomatic effort that included working with the United Kingdom and France to resolve post-Geneva problems in Indochina. Mao's remarks indicate he had little confidence Khrushchev's efforts would succeed. It was the first of several disagreements on how to handle the Taiwan problem, and these would eventually play a significant role in the disintegration of Sino-Soviet relations.

The Bandung Conference

The Bandung Conference, a meeting of 29 African and Asian nations described in the opening speech as "the first intercontinental conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind," was not sympathetic to the US view of China (Sukarno 1955). The organizing committee's decision to invite the PRC and not the ROC to represent China, especially in light of the invitations extended to the governments of both North and South Vietnam, was an unambiguous statement of opposition to the Eisenhower administration's approach to the offshore island crisis and the status of Taiwan.

Most of the delegates had personally suffered the indignity of European colonial rule. They sought to protect their hard-won independence from the politics and economics of the Cold War. President Sukarno of Indonesia expressed this in his opening address:

We are often told "Colonialism is dead." Let us not be deceived or even soothed by that. I say to you, colonialism is not yet dead. How can we say it is dead, so long as vast areas of Asia and Africa are unfree. And, I beg of you do not think of colonialism only in the classic form which we of Indonesia, and our brothers in different parts of Asia and Africa, knew. Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control and actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation (Sukarno 1955).

The Eisenhower administration felt threatened by the hope of most delegates, including Sukarno, to create the group of nonaligned nations that eventually came to be called the "Third World." Dulles could not abide what he saw as "neutralism" in a winner-take-all struggle against international communism where every nation and its leaders were either with the United States or against it (*New York Times* 1956). He worked with US Asian allies to get the others to align with the United States and reject engagement with the PRC (FRUS 1955–1957, 180).

Despite US efforts, the PRC delegation was very well-received. Premier Zhou Enlai was reported to be humble, accommodating, and ecumenical in his approach to other participants. He treated the minority of national delegations allied with the United States with the respect and attention he gave the majority who sought greater economic and cultural independence. At the same time, he directed attention to US behavior that deeply worried all the Asian delegations (Prashad 2007). Nothing in this behavior was more important than US nuclear weapons policy.

Sukarno devoted a significant portion of his opening address to the dangers of nuclear weapons:

Not so very long ago we argued that peace was necessary for us because an outbreak of fighting in our part of the world would imperil our precious independence, so recently won at such great cost. Today, the picture is more black. War would not only mean a threat to our independence, it may mean the end of civilization and even of human life. There is a force loose in the world

whose potentiality for evil no man truly knows. Even in practice and rehearsal for war the effects may well be building up into something of unknown horror.

Not so long ago it was possible to take some little comfort from the idea that the clash, if it came, could perhaps be settled by what were called “conventional weapons”—bombs, tanks, cannon and men. Today that little grain of comfort is denied us for it has been made clear that the weapons of ultimate horror will certainly be used, and the military planning of nations is on that basis. The unconventional has become the conventional, and who knows what other examples of misguided and diabolical scientific skill have been discovered as a plague on humanity.

And do not think that the oceans and the seas will protect us. The food that we eat, the water that we drink, yes, even the very air that we breathe can be contaminated by poisons originating from thousands of miles away. And it could be that, even if we ourselves escaped lightly, the unborn generations of our children would bear on their distorted bodies the marks of our failure to control the forces which have been released on the world (Sukarno 1955).

The Indonesian president borrowed language the Eisenhower administration used to argue that there was no difference between nuclear and conventional weapons and to prepare the US public to accept the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Asia. But Sukarno presented it in a context that undermined the diplomatic and moral standing of the United States and increased sympathy for the PRC.

Zhou Enlai reciprocated with official PRC expressions of sympathy for the victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as for the Japanese fisherman who died due to the radioactive fallout from a US nuclear weapons test. He pointed to growing public opposition to the nuclear arms race and popular support for the elimination of nuclear weapons. And he reminded delegates who obtained their independence by standing up to foreign intimidation that threats to use nuclear weapons “can frighten into submission no one who is determined to resist.” To the contrary, Zhou argued, it “can only place the threat-makers in a more isolated and confused position” (Zhou 1955).

Many of the delegates, as well as representatives of the governments of Japan, England, and France, criticized the Eisenhower administration’s approach to the offshore island crisis (Prashad 2007).

Zhou, however, was not honest with the delegates about how PRC leaders were planning to express their determination to stand up to what they called US “nuclear blackmail” (Sun 2013). In the months before the conference, the Chinese Communist Party collected signatures on a petition to abolish nuclear weapons. The PRC government-initiated petition copied nongovernmental antinuclear signature campaigns in Japan and other nations. In a series of editorials, the *People’s Daily* supported all of them (Hsieh 1962). But on March 5, a few days before Dulles threatened to use nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait, the *South China Morning Post* quoted two PRC scientists who said nuclear weapons were “not as horrible as the Americans claimed” and that “underground shelters could protect humans from the original thrust, heat and radiation of the atomic blast” (*Chinese Morning Post* 1955a). More important, at a CCP Central Committee meeting in Beijing on January 15—four months before Zhou took the podium in Bandung—Mao Zedong officially green-lighted China’s own nuclear weapons program (Sun 2013).

Throughout the conference, Zhou let it be known the PRC was willing to talk with the United States. US allies communicated this to Dulles. On the last day of the conference, Zhou stated it publicly:

As to relations between China and the United States, the Chinese people do not want to have war with the United States. We are willing to settle international disputes by peaceful means. If those of you here would like to facilitate the settlement of disputes between China and the United States by peaceful means it would be most beneficial to the relaxation of tensions in the Far East and also to the postponement and prevention of a world war (Chou 1955).

Dulles' aides immediately discounted the significance of Zhou's offer. Undersecretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr., derisively described Zhou's lengthy statement at the end of the conference as "merely a press release" (FRUS 1955–1957, 217). He warned Eisenhower not to respond directly for fear of lending Zhou's offer greater international credibility. Acting Assistant Secretary for East Asia William Sebald argued the offer "was designed, as were the Chinese Communist tactics at Geneva, to establish a basis for throwing the onus for Far Eastern tensions on the United States" (FRUS 1955–57, 217). But Dulles told Eisenhower they should "be prepared to indicate receptivity to any ceasefire proposal" and credited the PRC's "apparently more pacific mood" to the efforts of US allies at the conference. Eisenhower agreed and directed Dulles to take that line at an upcoming press conference (FRUS 1955–1957, 220).

Many US reporters focused on the positive impact of US Asian allies, who were believed to have prevented the communists from making Bandung an anti-American affair (Durdin 1955a). The *New York Times*, however, also printed the full text of Zhou's statements, accompanied by several stories that favorably assessed his performance in Bandung (Durdin 1955b).

The PRC achieved its most important objective. At the end of the conference, a broader coalition of US allies tried to persuade the United States to talk to the PRC, including nations like Ceylon and the Philippines that, at Dulles' request, delivered the scathing assessments of international communism that drove US reporting. However, war now seemed far less likely and the tension Mao believed worked to the PRC's advantage was suddenly relieved.

The Interregnum

International anticipation of PRC-US negotiations, which played a role in bringing them about, removed the crisis atmosphere but did not stop either side from continuing to prepare for conflict. The PRC continued to shell the island of Jinmen and to construct the regional infrastructure that worried the Joint Chiefs and the ROC. The United States continued a military buildup in Taiwan that included deploying US nuclear weapons on the island (Norris, Arkin, and Burr 1999). Despite these preparations, after Zhou's statement the offshore-island issue gradually dropped out of the headlines and off the diplomatic agendas of the nations that had expressed so much concern prior to Bandung.

The Eisenhower administration's top priority after the conference was not opening talks with Mao but assuaging Chiang Kai-shek. The Bandung Conference demonstrated the ROC had little support in Asia, even among US allies. Favorable comments from British government officials on Ceylon's proposal to dissolve Chiang's government and hold a vote on self-determination for the island appeared in the Hong

Kong press (FRUS 1955–1957, 209). Chiang’s supporters in Washington warned him that Eisenhower was dispatching Admiral Radford to Taipei to discuss withdrawing from the offshore islands and negotiating a ceasefire with the PRC. Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson cabled Dulles from Taipei on April 25, the day Radford arrived, to warn the secretary that Chiang was “visibly shaken” when he discovered those rumors were true (FRUS 1955–1957, 218).

Chiang rejected Eisenhower’s proposal to withdraw, telling Radford that if he did “even a child would not believe that his government would be assisted by the US in holding Taiwan itself” (FRUS 1955–57, 219). Robertson told Dulles that Chiang believed evacuating the offshore islands “would be a surrender to the communists which would endanger support of overseas Chinese and his own people.” He was unmoved by Radford’s warning that the United States could not defend the offshore islands without the use of nuclear weapons, which would alienate and endanger US allies while inviting the risk of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union (FRUS 1955–57, 219). ROC Foreign Minister Yeh told Ambassador Rankin that Chiang and his advisers were disturbed by Radford’s visit and it would “require a great deal of effort to repair the damage to Chinese confidence in the United States” (FRUS 1955–1957, 230).

Secretary Dulles did more damage at a press conference on April 26 when he indicated the United States would be willing to negotiate a ceasefire with the PRC without ROC participation (Dulles 1955). Three days later, Eisenhower reinforced this message in his first public remarks on Zhou’s offer (Eisenhower 1955). ROC Ambassador to the United States Wellington Koo quickly confronted Dulles with ROC objections that complicated further US consideration of direct negotiations with the PRC.

Ambassador Koo asked Dulles about the efforts of Britain, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and other nations to broker talks and wanted to know if the United States had taken any action in response to Zhou’s statement. Dulles told Koo the United States was trying to get the PRC to agree to a ceasefire. Koo told Dulles it was his understanding that “a ceasefire agreement is usually considered to require more than one party.” Koo did not understand how that could happen “when there would be only one contesting party involved in the talks.” Koo told Dulles the ROC had no intention of talking to the PRC about a ceasefire and that “his government, and not the United States, was the other party in the hostilities.” Dulles told Koo, “What the United States wants in effect is a unilateral renunciation of the use of force by the Communist Chinese.” Dulles confessed that he did not think this was possible, and did not expect to sign a formal agreement with the PRC, but that a de-facto ceasefire was possible (FRUS 1955–1957, 239).

The expectations of the PRC leadership were not much different. Mao told Khrushchev he did not think the Taiwan issue would be settled by negotiations in the foreseeable future, but they could “allow the Americans to occupy Taiwan for a period of time and not attack Taiwan” (Shen 2012). That said, Mao emphasized that during such a period, the PRC “cannot recognize the legality of US occupation, cannot abandon the slogan of liberating Taiwan and cannot recognize ‘two Chinas.’ If the Americans are satisfied with this situation, perhaps they would be willing to exchange the offshore islands for an illegal temporary period of stability” (Shen 2012).

Unfortunately, the two sides would have to wait another 17 years before agreeing to a similar arrangement. During President Nixon's visit to the PRC in 1972, they concluded an agreement that has kept the peace in the Taiwan Strait for almost 50 years.

Deputy Undersecretary of State Robert Murphy wrote a memo suggesting Eisenhower authorize the same kind of "direct secret contact" with the PRC leadership that Nixon eventually used to arrange his visit to China (FRUS 1955–1957, 231). Murphy even suggested Pakistan, which helped Kissinger arrange Nixon's visit, as one of the nations Eisenhower might use as a go-between. But Dulles, who read Murphy's memo, never acted on it. Instead, Dulles sent a message to the US Embassy in Pakistan informing the US ambassador to tell Prime Minister Ali the United States would prefer that Pakistan defer on Zhou's invitation to go to China because it would "elicit public evidence of Peiping's acceptance in the community of nations" (FRUS 1955–1957, 232).

The United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, NATO, and the UN Secretary General all urged Dulles to talk to the PRC. At a NATO ministerial meeting in Paris in early May, Belgian Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak raised concerns about continuing US deference to the ROC. The Europeans, Spaak asserted, "differed with the United States view of Chiang Kai-shek, considering that his role in Asia was over and his statements were frequently dangerous." He argued that "recognition of the People's Republic of China was inevitable" and essential to any resolution of the Taiwan problem (FRUS 1955–1957, 246).

The ROC government knew it was isolated and worried that US support would waiver. But Dulles defended Chiang in Paris as an ardent anticommunist and "a man of personal integrity" who "made a formal agreement not to attack the mainland except in the case of imminent necessity" (FRUS 1955–1957, 246). Dulles also did everything he could to reassure ROC officials. Ambassador Karl Rankin promised Chiang the United States would rebuff all third-party offers to broker talks and that the US view of the PRC would not change. Rankin added that the Eisenhower administration still believed "[n]o one could be entirely sure of Communist intentions, except that they were always bad" (FRUS 1955–1957, 236).

Dulles conveyed his disinterest in talks with the PRC to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov in a conversation in Vienna following the NATO meeting. When his Soviet counterpart "facetiously brought up the question of Formosa" and suggested including the PRC in upcoming four-party talks among the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and France, Dulles told him "there need be no great hurry" to resolve it (FRUS 1955–1957, 249):

It has been 60 years since China had held Formosa and the fact that Formosa was not still Japanese was wholly due to the fact that the US had had the power to take Formosa away from Japan. Indeed the control of China over Formosa before the Treaty of 1895 had been tenuous for centuries. Surely the situation could continue another decade or longer if the alternative was the risk of war within a year (FRUS 1955–1957, 249).

Dulles warned Molotov about the "build-up of airfields on the Mainland opposite Formosa." He added that the United States "used its influence with the Chinese Nationalists to restrain them from attacking these positions." But, he continued, "It was difficult to keep this situation from breaking out into war." He asked Molotov to reciprocate by limiting military assistance to the PRC and using Soviet influence to

restrain PRC leaders. Dulles suggested the United States and the Soviet Union work together to get the PRC and the ROC to renounce the use of force “without prejudice to conflicting claims” (FRUS 1955–1957, 249).

Molotov may have seemed flippant because he knew the PRC had no intention of trying to capture the offshore islands or Taiwan at that time. Mao had told the Soviets that as long as the United States and the ROC restrained themselves, the de facto ceasefire Dulles sought already existed and would remain in place (Shen 2012). Molotov was silent on the question of Soviet assistance, but a month later the Soviet ambassador to China told the US ambassador to the Soviet Union they had given the PRC “scientific and technical know-how in the atomic field which would eventually enable them, if they so desired, to produce nuclear weapons.” He warned that “in another one to five years China would be so strong that no other country would be able to tell her what to do” (FRUS 1955–1957, 265).

On May 13, Dulles pointed Eisenhower to a speech Zhou gave to the Standing Committee of the PRC’s National People’s Congress (NPC) in which he said, “The Chinese people are willing to strive for the liberation of Taiwan by peaceful means as far as this is possible.” Dulles wrote, “It may be a response to the statements we have often made that just as in the case of divided Germany, Korea and Vietnam, unification must be sought only by peaceful means and not by force.” Ten days later, Dulles drafted a letter to Zhou saying his remarks on Taiwan to the NPC were an acceptable basis “to arrange for mutually agreeable negotiations” aimed not only at obtaining a ceasefire but “on the larger question of relaxing and eliminating tension in the Taiwan Area” with “more permanent arrangements to insure peace” (FRUS 1955–1957, 256).

The letter was never sent. There is no documentation in the files of the Department of State or the Eisenhower Library indicating why. It was the closest Dulles came to seriously considering high-level talks with the PRC leadership.

US allies continued to try to broker talks. On May 26, the UK ambassador to the United States delivered a message from their ambassador in Beijing recalling a meeting in which Zhou agreed to talk directly with Chiang Kai-shek. His only condition was that the talks could not take place in the context of any international diplomatic contact, although they could be held “in parallel or in succession” to talks with the United States or other nations so long as the international and domestic tracks did not become “mixed up” (FRUS 1955–1957, 262).

Instead, Dulles authorized contact at the ambassadorial level with PRC representatives in Geneva. The initial focus was to be on the release of US airmen shot down during the Korean War who were still held by the PRC (FRUS 1955–1957, 263). Immediately after Zhou’s closing speech in Bandung, the State Department announced that the immediate release of the US airmen was a test of PRC sincerity. In late May, Dulles told the Indian government the UN Secretary General’s failed efforts to facilitate the release of the airmen indicated a level of PRC “recalcitrance” that was “not encouraging” (FRUS 1955–1957, 257).

Dulles told the president the United States should not make the release of the airmen a precondition (FRUS, 1955–1957, 296). Nevertheless, the issue seriously undermined prospects for substantive talks

on the offshore islands and Taiwan. The negotiations on the return of the airmen eventually became a major source of acrimony and suspicion on both sides. Even after an agreement on the airmen, arguments over implementation continued to inhibit progress on resolving the offshore island crisis.

An agreement on the airmen was announced on September 10 (FRUS 1955–1957, 53). PRC diplomats then suggested they discuss the economic embargo and the elimination of tensions in the Taiwan area. The United States demurred, suggesting the next items on the agenda should be US servicemen missing in action from the Korean War and a general renunciation of the use of force. The PRC appears to have been annoyed and confused by the US suggestion they focus on topics that could have been resolved during the Geneva Conference in 1954 (FRUS 1955–1957, 56). Nevertheless, it accepted the US proposal to discuss a mutual renunciation of the use of force between the PRC and the United States.

US negotiators rejected the PRC's initial draft of a proposed joint statement. However, after several constructive sessions, the lead US negotiator, U. Alexis Johnson, cabled Dulles to report the "PRC has now presented a draft which very closely follows line of argument I have been taking in meetings. They therefore have grounds for anticipating its acceptance with little modification" (FRUS 1955–1957, 111).

Dulles cabled back expressing "general agreement" that "both sides appear to making progress in arriving at an appropriate announcement." However, he instructed Johnson to tell the PRC they needed to show "good faith" on the implementation of the agreement on the airmen before the United States could agree to move forward. He also added new language requiring the PRC to "renounce the use of force in general, and with particular reference to the Taiwan area, except in individual and collective self defense" (FRUS 1955–1957, 114).

Wang Bingnan, the lead PRC negotiator, told Johnson the PRC agreed that the "heart of the Sino-American dispute is precisely centered on Taiwan so it goes without saying the new draft covers this question." But he also said, "[T]he present situation in the Taiwan area is that the US side has initiated use of force and is threatening use of force in interfering with the liberation of Taiwan and the coastal islands." The PRC initially insisted the United States remove its military forces from Taiwan but dropped that as a talking point as talks on the renunciation of force continued to progress (FRUS 1955–1957, 118).

The principle sticking point became US insistence on the inclusion of the language on "individual and collective self defense." In early November, Dulles told Johnson he felt the PRC's refusal to include the language indicated it was "obviously seeking meaningless wording that would not tie their hands" (FRUS 1955–1957, 92). Johnson told Dulles he believed the PRC's "genuine position" was that accepting the language would amount to "abandoning their overall position" that the dispute with the ROC was a domestic matter (FRUS 1955–1957, 100). The quality of the negotiations began to deteriorate after months of fruitless conversations on what constituted self-defense in US-PRC relations. On January 12, a frustrated Wang told Johnson that if the United States could claim a right to self-defense in Taiwan, "there is no more justice in the world." He then asked Johnson if the United States would concede a Chinese right to self-defense in San Francisco if it were occupied by PRC forces (FRUS 1955–1957, 129).

Dulles, perhaps inadvertently, put a stake through the heart of the negotiations in an interview with *Life* magazine published a week later. He repeated the claim that US threats to bomb targets in the PRC with nuclear weapons brought its leaders to the negotiating table in Korea. He also claimed the administration prevented the PRC from sending troops into Vietnam by sending two US aircraft carriers armed with tactical nuclear weapons into the South China Sea in 1954. Finally, Dulles said similar threats to attack the PRC with nuclear weapons “finally stopped them in Formosa” (Shepley 1956).

Wang opened the following meeting with a “long and strong attack” on the statements in the *Life* article, which he described as “clamor for atomic war against China.” He told Johnson this “blackmail” would impede their discussions because it raised questions about US sincerity to “peacefully settle questions between China and the United States.” Johnson accused Wang of “entirely uncalled for and gross libel” (FRUS 1955–1957, 132).

Despite another several months of genuine efforts by both lead negotiators to restore mutual confidence, they never resumed the steady progress the two sides had been making toward a joint statement on the renunciation of the use of force. On March 2, Zhou told the Indian ambassador, “We see in present American tactics a hidden conspiracy on the part of the USA to cheat and deceive China” (FRUS 1955–1957, 155). On May 15, Dulles told Johnson the latest PRC language on the renunciation of force was “by all odds the shrewdest and most dangerous proposal to date.” He instructed Johnson to “be careful that while rejecting Communist proposal we do so in such a way as not to furnish grounds for break” (FRUS 1955–1957, 175).

Over the course of the following year, Johnson routinely started his increasingly less frequent cables to Dulles on the talks in Geneva with words like “uneventful” or “no progress made.” Wang would complain to Johnson about his “general repetition of worn-out arguments” (FRUS 1955–1957, 283). The only matters of substance discussed were the implementation of the agreement on the release of the Americans still held by the PRC and arrangements for US correspondents to visit the PRC. Occasionally, the two would talk about the US trade embargo. The discussion of the renunciation of the use of force never resumed in earnest.

In November 1957, Johnson was moving on. He advised Dulles his replacement should be “another officer of ambassador rank,” even if that meant shifting the talks to Warsaw because of the Department of State’s staffing difficulties in Europe at the time (FRUS 1955–1957, 298). Instead, Dulles decided to continue the talks with First Secretary Edwin Martin, who had been attending the talks as an assistant to Johnson. Wang took it as a sign the United States was changing the nature of the talks (FRUS 1955–1957, 304). The PRC waited months before sending a letter to Martin on March 25, 1958, stating that the PRC could not consent to a “unilateral change in the level of the Sino-American ambassadorial talks” or “to leave the talks in a protracted suspension.” The letter was not signed by Wang but by his assistant, Lai Yali, who was of the same diplomatic rank as Martin. Several weeks later, the PRC Foreign Ministry issued a public statement charging, “For the past four months, the United States has been using fraudulent tricks to stall the Sino-American talks” (FRUS 1958–1960, 8).

On June 30, the PRC issued a statement claiming the United States had broken “the agreement between China and the United States on holding talks at the ambassadorial level” and demanded a resumption

within 15 days (FRUS 1958–1960, 15). A few weeks earlier, Ralph Clough, director of the Office of Chinese Affairs, had told the consulate in Geneva there was “little eagerness here” to resume what “has been for the past two years a sterile exercise” (FRUS 1958–1960, 14). On July 1, Dulles told the press he would not be bullied by the PRC’s deadline (Dulles 1958). Yet two days after it passed, on July 17, Dulles directed Martin to tell Wang that the US Ambassador to Poland, Jacob Beam, would resume the talks (FRUS 1958–1960, 18). Unfortunately, military activity would replace diplomatic discussion for the next several months.

V. Military Options Reconsidered

On July 29, 1958, the PRC shot down two ROC aircraft on what the ROC called a “routine patrol” over the PRC-held Dongshan islands. The ROC conducted thousands of flights over the mainland after Zhou Enlai’s speech in Bandung shifted the focus of the offshore islands crisis from military to diplomatic solutions. The PRC occasionally interdicted those flights, but this incident led US Ambassador to the ROC Everett Drumright to warn Dulles the loss of the aircraft “worsened an already tense situation” in Taipei.¹⁰ The ROC government, Drumright said, was “uneasy” about “mass mainland demonstrations” and the “shuttling of aircraft between Manchuria and Southeast China.” The ROC defense minister warned there was a possibility some elements in the ROC government might try to take things in their own hands and bomb PRC airfields as an emergency self-defense measure (FRUS 1958–1960, 20).

Keeping a lid on ROC military activity was a constant US concern. Chiang frequently complained about the talks with the PRC and did everything he could to undermine them. More important, Chiang ignored Eisenhower’s advice and stationed more than 100,000 troops on the offshore islands. The chief of US naval operations in the Pacific told Eisenhower, “This had been done deliberately and in fact made Taiwan a hostage.” Secretary of Defense Donald Quarles argued, “Chiang’s policy in this regard was designed to put pressure on us.” Eisenhower “expressed some annoyance over what he considered to be Chiang’s pressure to get us involved.” The ROC president’s most persuasive argument in defense of his behavior had been that holding the islands was essential to maintaining the belief that his government would soon return to the mainland and vital to the survival of his government (FRUS 1958–1960, 52). However, Eisenhower was beginning to question Chiang’s reasoning.

The Joint Chiefs, which took a look at the available intelligence on August 2, saw “no evidence of a Chinese Communist build up or other military moves” (FRUS, 1958–1960, 23). They reached this conclusion with full knowledge of all the PRC preparations that were just starting in spring 1955; the construction of airfields, road, and railroads were now near completion. But at a National Security Council meeting on August 7, Dulles’ brother Allen, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, reported things were “heating up” in the Taiwan Strait. PRC fighter planes were filling hitherto unoccupied bases on the mainland opposite Jinmen. Eisenhower reminded everyone attending that the

¹⁰ On July 17, the PRC Central Military Committee ordered Minister of Defense Peng Dehuai to begin moving fighter aircraft into recently constructed airfields on the southern Chinese coast in Fujian and Guangdong. He put the airfields on alert but also said the planes should not fly outside of PRC airspace. This was one of a series of military steps taken for a planned resumption of heavy shelling of Jinmen and Mazu Island. On July 27, Mao ordered the air force and navy not to attack ROC aircraft unless attacked first. The two ROC planes were downed two days later (Xu 1992).

United States “had no warrant” to defend the offshore islands unless what they were seeing was a prelude to an attack on Taiwan (FRUS 1958–1960, 26).

Dulles met with Quarles the next day and told the secretary of defense that “unlike the situation in late 1954 the offshore Islands were now sufficiently integrated with Taiwan and a sufficiently large proportion of GRC troops were stationed on the Islands.” Because of this, Dulles felt “an attack on the Offshore Islands would now constitute an attack on Formosa itself” (FRUS 1958–1960, 28). Eisenhower disagreed and on August 12 told Dulles that taking the islands would not help the PRC take Taiwan (FRUS 1958–1960, 31). Two days later, he told the NSC there is “no strategic value to the offshore islands;” he reminded the members, “[W]e decided against committing ourselves to the offshore islands” in 1953. Eisenhower warned, “[W]e should be very careful” and “not take instantaneous action” that might widen the conflict (FRUS 1958–1960, 33).

Renewed Debates about the US Use of Nuclear Weapons

Despite Eisenhower’s statements, the Joint Chiefs and Undersecretary of State Robertson continued to push for a presidential commitment to defend the islands. On August 15, Acting Secretary of State Christian Herter called a meeting with the chiefs to discuss the situation. Everyone attending from State agreed with the chiefs that the “loss of these islands would inevitably lead to attacks on Taiwan.” Moreover, the chiefs argued, turning back a direct assault or defeating a long blockade “would require nuclear bombing of mainland bases” (FRUS 1958–1960, 34).

On August 15, after the initial discussion with the chiefs, Herter recommended they inform the Soviets the United States “would prevent the seizure or successful interdiction of the islands.” But as other voices in the administration began to weigh in, pressure abated for preparing to make the US position on the offshore islands clear, and therefore for preparing nuclear contingencies to assure the United States could deliver on that commitment. Assistant Secretary of State for Policy Planning Gerald Smith, who would later be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his work as the chief US delegate to the Strategic Arms Limitation talks with the Soviet Union, argued that the Department of Defense should reexamine options to defend the islands with nonnuclear options. If the chiefs persisted in the view this was not possible, then defending the islands was not worth the risk. Smith argued that the United States should persuade Chiang to withdraw and that the consequences of withdrawal for Taiwan and US credibility in Asia would not be as cataclysmic as others assumed (FRUS 1958–1960, 63).

As planning for nuclear use proceeded over the next several weeks, JCS Chair General Nathan Twining told Dulles that he planned to limit the initial attack to five coastal airbases and would use “7–10 kiloton airburst bombs” that would create “virtually no fallout.” This would destroy the planes and the ground facilities, leaving the runways usable.¹¹ If that did not stop the PRC, Twining felt the administration “would have to face up to the possibility of having to conduct nuclear attacks deep into China as far north as Shanghai involving Communist nuclear retaliation against our positions in Taiwan, Okinawa and perhaps elsewhere” (FRUS 1958–1960, 62).

On August 23, Allen Dulles informed his brother that the PRC had “subjected the islands to extremely

¹¹ Twining noted that ground bursts would be better but were too “dirty.”

heavy bombardment.” The Secretary of State’s immediate reaction was to reach out to “the good offices of some acceptable third power” or the UN Security Council to find “the basis for a peaceful *modus vivendi*.” He later told Acting Secretary Herder the case for holding the islands was not “altogether defensible” since Chiang was using them “as an active base for attempting to ferment civil strife and to carry out widespread propaganda” (FRUS 1958–1960, 41). He then left for a weeklong vacation cruise on Lake Ontario.

The next day Eisenhower called a meeting at the White House to discuss the situation. First, Allen Dulles briefed the meeting on the latest intelligence, which indicated the extremely heavy shelling was a one-day event. Herder thought the United States needed to clarify why the offshore islands were important. Eisenhower put it plainly: “Our involvement with these islands would be for one reason and one reason alone, namely, to sustain the morale of the ROC which had deliberately committed major forces to their defense contrary to our 1954 advice” (FRUS 1958–1960, 43).

Twining then submitted a new draft of the operational directive he intended to give the US Taiwan Defense Command, including a paragraph on the possible use of nuclear weapons. By this time, however, Eisenhower was beginning to evidence serious doubts about the importance of the islands and had increasing reservations about the potential costs of defending them. The president approved the draft but directed the language be revised to make clear that “the matter must be brought back to him again for decision before any such use” (FRUS 1958–1960, 43). On August 29, at a second White House meeting, the language relating to “atomic strikes if ordered” was stripped out of the directive altogether (FRUS 1958–1960, 52).

Later that day, the chiefs cabled the commander in chief of the Pacific to inform him that even if the PRC launched an assault to take the offshore islands, “it is anticipated that atomic weapons would not be used.” Only “when, in the opinion of the United States authorities, the ChiComs have extended the battle to international waters in the vicinity of Taiwan and the Penghus” would the United States “extend action as appropriate.” The cable emphasized that atomic weapons could not be used “until specific authority had been obtained from the President” (FRUS 1958–1960, 53).

Despite Eisenhower’s decision not to use nuclear weapons to hold the offshore islands, Twining continued to press the point. In a September 2 meeting with the chiefs, Dulles asked Twining how he planned to respond if the PRC launched an all-out assault. Twining said they would have to “strike at Communist shore batteries and airfields with small atomic weapons.” He claimed “all the studies carried out by Defense indicated this was the only way to do the job.” His remark followed an observation by Admiral Burke that “our experience in attacking Japanese-held islands in the Pacific in World War II indicates the 85,000 defenders of Jinmen could put up a determined resistance.” The three men reached a consensus that “it was not necessary to have the authority to use nuclear immediately after the commencement of a major attack,” but that “it would be necessary to do so ultimately against a determined enemy” (FRUS 1958–1960, 62).

Dulles then inquired about a second scenario in which the PRC started “massive shelling” that “threatened to result in a breakdown of the morale of the ROC defenders.” General Maxwell Taylor said that experience in Korea suggested “physical elimination of the gun emplacements could be effected only by nuclear fire,” although US forces could “severely harass” the defenders with conventional fire

and napalm. The group then considered a third scenario in which the PRC started a heavy bombing campaign. In this situation, Taylor said, “nuclear weapons would certainly have to be used” (FRUS 1958–1960, 62).

The conversation then turned to the justification for using nuclear weapons and risking a global nuclear war to hold the offshore islands. Burke said that what was at stake was not just “the loss of some small islands but rather the possible loss of a whole nation.” Dulles agreed, commenting that “nothing seems to be worth a world war until you look hard at the effect of not standing up to each challenge as it is posed.” Burke then proclaimed, “[T]he argument that nothing is worth a world war was the reason why the Communists had been winning all along” (FRUS 1958–1960, 62).

Dulles mentioned that the US Ambassador to Japan had warned that “if the U.S. initiated the use of nuclear weapons in defense of the offshore islands, the Japanese government might be forced to demand the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Japan.” Dulles then asked, “[I]f anticipated reactions against our use of nuclear weapons were to be so hostile that we would be inhibited from using them . . . was our reliance on their use correct and productive.” Burke dismissed the opposition in Japan as “inspired by the Communists in order to deter us.” He said it was confined to “leftist labor elements” and “did not reflect the thinking of the government of Japan,” which would eventually “come to realize our action was in their best interest.” If the United States was unwilling to use nuclear weapons, he believed, “we faced the prospect of losing the whole world in ten years.” Twining opined the use of nuclear bombs in Korea would have shortened the war and saved lives. He “did not understand the public horror at the idea of using nuclear weapons and insisted we must get used to the idea” (FRUS 1958–1960, 62).

Two days later, Smith wrote to Dulles. He argued, “if we use nuclear weapons, our intervention may force Japan, the Philippines and other Asian nations further in the direction of neutralism and eventual accommodation with Peiping.” He characterized a summary on the consequences from the chiefs as “too light a treatment.” Smith told Dulles that the current national intelligent estimate concluded, “If the US used nuclear weapons in meeting local Bloc aggression in the Far East there would be a grave risk the Communists would retaliate in kind.” If the nuclear bombing expanded, as planned, to the cities of Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou, “Peiping and its Soviet ally would probably feel compelled to react with nuclear attacks at least on Taiwan and the Seventh Fleet.” Smith felt they would then be faced with the choice of accepting defeat or “launching SAC in large scale nuclear attacks” that would “very probably lead to general war with the USSR” (FRUS 1958–1960, 63).

The PRC’s Nuclear Calculus

About a month after opening the door to a negotiated settlement at the Bandung Conference in spring 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai explained PRC thinking about the liberation of the offshore islands. In a letter to the Soviet Embassy, Zhou wrote that he saw a chance for a diplomatic solution:

But realistically, before we complete the construction of roads and airfields in Fujian, before we complete the deployment of our forces, while we’re still unable to capture even one or two of the tiny islands in the vicinity, the armed forces of the United States and Chiang Kai-shek are not going to leave Jinmen and Mazu (Shen 2012).

By January 1958, the roads and airfields were ready; the Fujian regional commander put together a plan to bring airplanes into Fujian and prepare for a military campaign to recover Jinmen and Mazu. He hoped artillery bombardment and naval engagement would affect a blockade of the islands. Fighter aircraft would protect the mainland and there would be no engagement in international waters or with US forces (Xu 92). The idea was to compel Chiang to withdraw with the fewest casualties possible.

The PRC leadership approved the plan in early March. The final decision on timing would be left to Mao (Shen 2012).

In early July, a PRC intelligence estimate concluded the United States did not believe the PRC would attempt to liberate Taiwan and would therefore indefinitely avoid holding serious discussions about the Taiwan issue. Progress at the Geneva talks stalled after *Life* magazine published Dulles' incendiary comments on nuclear brinkmanship in January 1956 and declined precipitously after the United States downgraded its representation. PRC leaders hoped resuming military pressure on Chiang might get the United States to force Chiang to abandon the offshore islands and negotiate on Taiwan in earnest. When fighting erupted in the Middle East on July 15, Mao decided to set in motion the plan for a military campaign against the offshore islands (Shen 2012).

Mao used Khrushchev's visit to Beijing in early August 1958 to send a message to the United States about the strength of the Sino-Soviet alliance, but he neglected to tell the Soviet premier he was about to launch a military campaign against the offshore islands. Khrushchev was understandably upset when it started without forewarning not long after he returned home. More important, Khrushchev was alarmed by renewed international concern that the conflict over the offshore islands could lead to nuclear war (Shen 2012).

Khrushchev sent Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to Beijing on September 5 to inquire about Beijing's intentions. He was instructed to discuss a letter Khrushchev was preparing to send to Eisenhower. Gromyko met separately with Zhou and Mao the next day, and both Chinese leaders told him the PRC had no intention of occupying the offshore islands or liberating Taiwan. Zhou released a public statement the same day indicating the PRC was willing to return to the negotiating table (Chou 1958). All three agreed on the strategy of using military tension to pressure Chiang and the Americans to withdraw voluntarily, while taking care to avoid US casualties or any military activity outside of the immediate area around Jinmen island (Shen 2012).

Gromyko then brought up the question of Soviet nuclear protection.

Unlike spring 1955, when Eisenhower, Nixon, and Dulles all publicly threatened to use US nuclear weapons against the PRC, Eisenhower did not do so in 1958, despite considerable pressure from both State and Defense to make the necessary preparations and authorize the weapons' use. However, Eisenhower's restraint did not stop the United States and the international press from discussing the threat of US nuclear use in stories about the renewal of military activity in the offshore islands.

Mao cryptically told Gromyko that China's strategy in the event of a US invasion was to "lock the gate and beat the dog." They would draw US forces into central China and then defeat them. It was a strategy

they believed succeeded in the war of resistance against Japan and the Chinese civil war against Chiang's nationalists. It is unclear if Mao actually believed the United States would attack China or if he was speaking rhetorically. Gromyko took Mao seriously and questioned whether that would work in the nuclear era. Mao reportedly replied, "What's to be afraid of with the atomic bomb? We don't have it but will in the future. And though we don't have it, you do" (Shen 2012).

Mao's dismissal of the possibility was in keeping with his general view that nuclear weapons were a "paper tiger." But Gromyko interpreted this to mean the PRC expected Soviet nuclear protection in the form of attacks against US troops if they invaded China.

Gromyko's aide, though, recalled no PRC expectation of Soviet nuclear protection. The PRC translator remembered Mao saying:

Our policy is to take the complete responsibility for such a conflict ourselves. We don't need you to get involved. We're not like the Nationalists. We won't drag the Soviet Union underwater. War with the Americans is something for the future, not a problem in the immediate present. We're not going to be attacking Taiwan, please tell that to Khrushchev (Shen 2012).

The next day, Zhou met with Gromyko before he returned to the Soviet Union. The PRC premier told Gromyko the leadership had considered the possibility of a regional war with the United States that might involve the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Chinese cities. If that happened, there was no PRC expectation the Soviet Union would get involved. Only if the United States used larger nuclear weapons and threatened to widen the war should the Soviet Union use its nuclear weapons to give the United States a punitive retaliatory strike (Shen 2012).

Three weeks later, on September 27, the Soviet Central Committee wrote to the PRC Central Committee, thanking PRC leaders for not expecting them to enter the war. The committee also warned the PRC leadership the Soviet Union could not sit on the sidelines if China were attacked:

The Soviet Union possesses terrifying weapons that can not only prevent a war, but can annihilate our common enemy. If the Soviet Union did not help if China suffered a nuclear attack, this would be a great catastrophe for the entire Socialist bloc. We can say, an attack on China would be an attack on the Soviet Union (Shen 2012).

That is exactly what Khrushchev had written in his telegram to Eisenhower three weeks earlier, on September 7:

An attack on the Chinese People's Republic, which is a great friend, ally and neighbor of our country, is an attack on the Soviet Union. True to its duty our country will do everything in order together with People's China to defend the security of both states, in interests of peace in the Far East, the interest of peace in the world. Nothing would be further from the truth than an attempt to assess this, my message to you, as an intention to exaggerate unnecessarily and even more to utter some kind of threats (FRUS 1958-1960, 73).

Khrushchev was more explicit in a second telegram, sent on September 19:

Those who nurture plans for an atomic attack on the PRC should not forget that not only the USA but the other side as well possesses atomic and hydrogen weapons and also the appropriate means for their delivery, and if such an attack is made on the PRC, the aggressor will immediately receive a proper repulse with these very means (FRUS, 1958–1960, 110).

The PRC leadership was gratified by this level of Soviet support but it did not last long. Several months later, in part because of reservations about Mao's decisions during the Taiwan Strait Crisis, Khrushchev halted all Soviet aid to the PRC nuclear and missile technology programs.

The End of Crisis and the Aftermath

US threats to use nuclear weapons did not intimidate the PRC leadership or prevent it from pursuing any of its objectives. But US conventional military support for ROC forces on the offshore islands played a decisive role in finally bringing this four-year episode in US-China relations to a close. The Eisenhower administration ordered the US Navy to help resupply the offshore islands after the renewed heavy PRC shelling severed ROC supply lines in fall 1958. The success of this effort discouraged the PRC leadership, which was not seeking a wider military conflict, especially with the Americans, from continuing to use the offshore islands to create a crisis atmosphere.

Vice Admiral Roland Smoot, commander of US forces in Taiwan, concluded, "Containment of the Taiwan emergency is largely attributed to immediate reaction by the US in positioning of forces." PRC archives indicate he was right. When it became clear that the US Navy had taught the ROC how to indefinitely resupply the offshore islands, and that PRC attempts to affect a blockade had failed, the PRC dialed back the shelling and announced a unilateral ceasefire (Shen 2012).

Smoot also concluded, "The US reaction very likely deterred the ChiComs from invading one or more of the off-shore islands." However, PRC archives demonstrate that Smoot was mistaken on this point. At no time did the PRC leadership intend to invade Jinmen or Mazu. Its hope, from the initiation of the PRC military campaign against the two islands in winter 1955 until the abatement of the crisis in fall 1958, was to combine military pressure and international diplomacy to persuade the United States to convince the ROC to withdraw (Shen 2012).

Eisenhower tried but failed to give the PRC precisely what it was hoping for, but Chiang refused to withdraw from the offshore islands. Eisenhower was willing to risk a nuclear war in March 1955 because he believed what Chiang, ROC officials, the US Embassy in Taipei, and the Asia experts at State and Defense were telling him: the loss of the offshore islands would lead to the loss of Taiwan and a loss of faith in the United States throughout Asia. But by fall 1958, Eisenhower had come to question that hypothesis and pushed Chiang to take other steps to stabilize the situation.

On September 29, after confirming the resupply problem had been solved, Eisenhower told JCS Chair General Twining, "[S]omething must be done to make Chiang more flexible in his approach." An increasingly frustrated president told Twining he "did not like to wage a fight on the ground of someone else's choosing." Twining said he would "get some thinking started in the Pentagon as to what could be done with Chiang to get him out of the offshore islands" (FRUS 1958–1960, 140). Eight days later, Eisenhower sent a memo to Dulles suggesting they offer Chiang "an amphibious capability that could lift

in one load fifteen or twenty thousand troops” in exchange for an agreement to “remove all or nearly all his garrison from the offshore islands.” Eisenhower reasoned Chiang “could sell both himself and his people on the proposition that by this action he would have increased his strength and his position in the area” (FRUS 1958–1960, 166).

Admiral Smoot echoed Eisenhower’s concerns about Chiang in a mid-October telegram to Vice Admiral Frederick Kivette, commander of the Seventh Fleet:

As I look back over the tension created by artillery bombardment of Jinmen two facts become clear to me. First the resupply problem was in fact never a problem. The panic was created not by the military but by the ROC using the incident to involve the US in their never to die hope of returning to the mainland (FRUS 1958–1960, 187).

Dulles prepared a set of talking points intended to persuade Chiang that maintaining the illusion he could recover the mainland through provocative rhetoric and military harassment of the PRC was a losing strategy. He also offered Chiang an alternative course of action that would protect and strengthen his political legitimacy.

Dulles traveled to Taipei to present the US case to Chiang in person, making four key points:

1. The great danger faced by the ROC is not primarily military, but political. It stems from the world’s longing for conditions of peace and the feeling of almost all free world countries that the relationship between ROC and PRC not only endangers the peace, but that the ROC wants it to endanger the peace.
2. The international political situation today is serious as regards the ROC. Except perhaps for the Republics of Korea and Vietnam, the USA is the only vigorous supporter of the ROC. . . . It is doubtful whether even the US can long protect the ROC under present circumstances.
3. Free world opinion . . . wants to see a liquidation of the “civil war” which carries with it the risk of general war.
4. It devolves upon the ROC, and the US, in consultation with it, to find a reply to these dangers, just as we have found a reply to the direct military threats. Such a reply exists, and is, we believe, to be found in a fresh approach to the mission of the ROC as spokesman for Free China (FRUS 1958–1960, 196).

Chiang’s initial reaction was not encouraging. His antipathy toward abandoning the civil war was reinforced by a resumption of PRC shelling after several weeks of relative quiet (FRUS, 1958-60, 196). Chiang told Dulles his visit provoked the shelling and they should focus their discussion on the use of military means to stop the shelling once and for all. Dulles responded by telling Chiang “he knew of no one in the US military establishment who believed that conventional weapons could be used to knock out deeply emplaced guns. Only nuclear guns could do that job effectively.”

Chiang asked whether tactical nuclear weapons would be sufficient. Dulles told him, “[T]here is no tactical atomic weapon in existence which could be used at Jinmen to knock out enemy gun emplacements that would not have the power of the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bombs. The use of such a weapon at Jinmen would kill millions of people.” Chiang responded by saying he “is not an expert of

nuclear physics” and did not “have an appreciation of the effect of fall-out and other aspects of nuclear bombing,” but something must be done to protect his troops on the island. He warned Dulles that if the United States had no viable options, he might be forced to bomb mainland positions himself (FRUS 1958–1960, 204).

Yet, in a joint communique issued two days later, Chiang did exactly what Dulles had asked. He committed the ROC to a new policy where “the principle means of successfully achieving its mission” of “restoring freedom to its people on the mainland” was to become “the authentic spokesman for Free China” and “not the use of force” (FRUS 1958–1960, 209). The following day Eisenhower cabled Chiang to commend him.

I consider it important that your Government should have declared that its success in restoring freedom to the Mainland Chinese depends principally upon the minds and hearts of the Chinese people, and not the use by your Government of force. This free-world principle, not accepted by the Communists, sets us apart from them and morally above them. Your enunciation of that principle will, I am confident, be welcomed throughout the free world (FRUS 1958–1960, 212).

It was. Eisenhower cabled Chiang several weeks later with the evidence. He wrote, “I assure you that reports we have received from capitals around the world are most encouraging and indicate that the communique has met with an almost uniformly favorable response” (FRUS 1958–1960, 237).

Chiang’s agreement to renounce the use of force to recover the mainland ended the offshore island crisis that had begun in September 1954. Eisenhower denied the ROC permission to resume reconnaissance flights over the mainland. He refused requests to resume US naval patrols “which come within the falsely claimed Communist twelve mile limit” (FRUS 1958–1960, 230). Despite considerable resistance from US and ROC officials who were critical of what they described as “a policy of complete non-provocation,” the chief of US naval operations cabled the commander of the Pacific Fleet to report that Eisenhower’s “firm but unprovocative stand is beginning to pay off with gain in public support for the way situation has been handled” (FRUS 1958–1960, 235).

Dulles believed the administration had “initiated a definitive and important reshaping” of ROC policy that put the Republic of China in same category as other countries divided by communism (FRUS 1958–1960, 215). Eisenhower told Twining he believed another “emergency requiring immediate automatic action will not happen” (FRUS 1958–1960, 219). A Special National Intelligence Estimate on “Probable Developments in the Taiwan Strait Crisis” concluded, “Peiping’s leaders are using military power primarily as a political weapon, and that they are not committed to the immediate capture of the islands at all costs” (FRUS 1958–1960, 220).

The PRC continued periodic shelling of the offshore islands until the day it formally established diplomatic relations with the United States in 1979. But the shelling never regenerated a crisis atmosphere or the attendant international concern it might lead to a nuclear war. The ROC still controls the offshore islands of Jinmen and Mazu.

VI. Conclusions from the Past

The historical record presented here, as described in US, PRC and Soviet archives, supports five conclusions about the US threat to use nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait.

- It did not alter or contribute to the defeat of PRC objectives.
- It did not help the United States obtain its objectives.
- It did not deter aggressive PRC behavior.
- It did not strengthen the US negotiation position.
- It did not reassure US allies.

Not only were US threats to use nuclear weapons not helpful, but ample evidence indicates they were counterproductive.

PRC Objectives

PRC and Soviet archives reveal the Chinese communist leadership had two key objectives at the outset of a crisis Mao Zedong created to obtain them. The most important was to raise the international profile of the Taiwan issue. The second was to halt ROC military harassment of the mainland from the offshore islands. By the end of the crisis in fall 1958, the PRC had achieved both objectives.

The PRC leadership also hoped, but did not expect, to dislodge ROC forces from the offshore islands. They succeeded in the Dachens but failed in Jinmen and Mazu.

The PRC strategy was to use military force to create a tense atmosphere that put pressure on the United States to negotiate with the PRC on the problems created by ROC forces on the offshore islands and the ultimate status of Taiwan. Eisenhower's success in getting Chiang to withdraw from the Dachens was an early indicator this strategy might work. Had Eisenhower succeeded in persuading Chiang to withdraw from Jinmen and Mazu, the PRC leadership would have succeeded far beyond its initial expectations.

Chiang's refusal to withdraw from the two islands led the Eisenhower administration to threaten to use nuclear weapons. Documents from Soviet and PRC archives show that US nuclear threats did not alter PRC strategy or behavior. More important, they did not prevent the PRC from obtaining its objectives. To the contrary, US nuclear threats made the PRC strategy more effective by heightening the sense of crisis. They increased international pressure to a degree that compelled the United States to enter into bilateral negotiations with the PRC and, once those began, to avoid being held responsible if they failed.

US Objectives

The Eisenhower administration sought to both avoid a war with the PRC and preserve Chiang's government on Taiwan. Unfortunately, it took four years for Eisenhower to realize those objectives had never been in serious jeopardy.

From the outset of the crisis, the PRC consistently took steps to avoid a war with the United States. The archives show that at no time during the four years of the crisis did the PRC leadership intend to launch a major military assault against Taiwan, Jinmen, or Mazu as long as US military forces remained in the region.

Early administration assessments of the fragility of Chiang's government, particularly the belief that it would collapse if Chiang failed to maintain faith in an imminent return to the mainland, created a sense of panic within the US government. That inhibited more objective and accurate assessments of risks to the ROC's survival and support for the United States throughout East Asia.

The US threat to use nuclear weapons played no role in furthering US objectives. To the contrary, it increased the fear of war and further undermined already crumbling international support for the ROC. It also accelerated international efforts to accommodate PRC claims to the offshore islands, China's seat in the United Nations, and Taiwan itself.

Eisenhower responded differently the second time the PRC leadership attempted to use military means to create a sense of panic. He had reassessed the political situation and concluded the greatest threat to Chiang's government was not PRC military provocations but the ROC's lack of allied and international support. As a result, Eisenhower minimized the US military response and personally intervened to make sure the crisis did not escalate. He stripped language on the possible use of nuclear weapons out of US planning documents and made no public threats.

The Eisenhower administration finally took steps to address the situation by convincing Chiang to forgo the provocative diplomatic and military behavior he deemed essential to the ROC leader's political legitimacy. Chiang's public renunciation of intent to use military force to reunify China dispelled international fears of a wider war and solidified his international position. The PRC then lost the initiative it had gained in the fall of 1954 when Mao provoked the crisis.

Deterring PRC Aggression

At the outset of the crisis, several weeks after the capture of the Dachen Islands, Mao assured a worried Nikita Khrushchev he had no intention of launching a military assault on Taiwan. He also cast doubt on the possibility of a successful military campaign against Jinmen and Mazu:

In order to confidently carry out military operations to liberate Jinmen and Mazu we are expeditiously constructing militarily useful roads and airfields in Fujian province. This preparatory work will take approximately six months to a year to complete. It will take approximately three to four years of effort to extend the rail link from Yingtan in Jiangxi province to Xiamen in Fujian province. It is our view that even when we complete this preparatory work to capture Jinmen and Mazu, the decision whether or not to start military operations will depend upon the disposition of US military forces in the region at that time (Shen 2012).

In spring 1955, the PRC believed that US conventional forces in the region were sufficient to deter the PRC from launching a military assault on the offshore islands and Taiwan. While the United States may

not have known this at the time, documents show that its threat to use nuclear weapons was unnecessary, and therefore cannot be said to have deterred the PRC.

Eisenhower was willing, if Chiang would have agreed, to exchange the offshore islands for a PRC commitment to renounce the use of force to settle the Taiwan question. He felt compelled to publicly threaten to use nuclear weapons only because he believed the PRC shelling of Jinmen was a prelude to an imminent assault on Taiwan and the Penghu islands. No such assault was planned. As Mao told Khrushchev:

We ourselves understand that as long as US military forces remain there we will not launch a military campaign to liberate Taiwan and the Penghus. Thus, after the offshore island problem would be settled, the situation in the Taiwan area would naturally calm down. It would then become very difficult to negotiate any outcome concerning the Taiwan question. It is precisely because of this that we have not yet launched a military assault to liberate Jinmen and Mazu and thus kept the situation with the offshore islands constantly tense. Only this has caused the United States to become especially anxious to have the United Kingdom act as an intermediary to explore the possibility of Eden's so-called "peaceful resolution" (Shen 2012).

Mao's letter is dated March 5, 1955. Dulles did not threaten to use nuclear weapons against the PRC until March 7. Since the PRC had no intention of attacking Taiwan before the United State issued any threat to use nuclear weapons to stop them, accounts of the crisis that claim such threats deterred a PRC attack on Taiwan or the offshore islands are wrong.

The PRC continued shelling Jinmen for years after the United States issued its first nuclear threats. Mao was never deterred from continuing to use this form of military provocation to attempt to maintain the crisis atmosphere he hoped would lead to a negotiated transfer of Taiwan to the PRC.

Even toward the end of the crisis in 1958, when the Soviet Union, rather than the United States, was concerned about the risk of a nuclear war, the PRC leadership remained undeterred from pursuing its objectives. Both Mao and Zhou Enlai told the Soviets they were willing to risk a US nuclear attack. Moreover, PRC and Soviet archives show the PRC leadership had no expectation the Soviets would retaliate on their behalf.

Mao and Zhou may have been willing to endure these risks because they concluded, as they had in Korea, that the probability of a US nuclear attack was quite low. They believed strikes that created massive fallout and large-scale civilian casualties would invite widespread international condemnation. They also believed the use of tactical nuclear weapons would not be decisive militarily. Dulles' ultimate rejection of Chiang's inquiries about the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons against the PRC gun emplacements shelling Jinmen suggests that PRC assessments of the risks of a US nuclear attack were accurate and not, as Khrushchev later came to believe, a product of irrational bravado.

Negotiating Positions

The US government did not want to negotiate with the PRC. It avoided high-level contact with the PRC delegation during the 1954 Geneva Conference and pressured allies into keeping the PRC out of the

United Nations. After the experience of negotiating the armistice in Korea, the Eisenhower administration was convinced the PRC would never negotiate in good faith.

The PRC leadership wanted to negotiate with the United States. It sought to raise its international profile, weaken the US economic embargo, and claim representation for China in the United Nations. It also hoped to persuade the United States to abandon Chiang's government and bring an end to the Chinese civil war, just as Truman had announced he was prepared to do in January 1950.

The US threat to use nuclear weapons magnified a crisis Mao created to get the United States to the negotiating table. The anxiety created by the prospect of nuclear war helped the PRC mobilize international opinion in support of bilateral negotiations between the United States and the PRC.

Once direct talks with the PRC began, the United States sought to obtain what Dulles described to the ROC as "a unilateral renunciation of the use of force by the Communist Chinese." US ambassador U. Alexis Johnson informed Dulles that the PRC negotiator, Wang Binnan, was close to accepting proposed US language on a joint statement. But not long afterwards *Life* magazine quoted Dulles lauding the imagined effectiveness of US nuclear threats against the PRC in Korea, Vietnam, and the Taiwan Strait. Wang took personal offense at Dulles' comments in *Life* and during the next meeting made an official protest of what he described as an attempt at blackmail. Progress toward a joint statement on the renunciation of the use of force stalled and never resumed.

The US threat to use nuclear weapons undermined US diplomacy in this case, as on other occasions during the crisis.

Allied Responses

The US threat to use nuclear weapons did not reassure a single US ally other than the ROC itself. The United Kingdom, France, NATO, and Japan all felt endangered by the possibility the crisis over the offshore islands could escalate into a wider war between the United States and the PRC, with the potential for precipitating a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. All expressed their discomfort with the US decision to threaten nuclear use.

The Eisenhower administration acknowledged allied anxieties during its internal deliberations on how to respond to the crisis. In March 1955, Dulles complained to the NSC that the United States could be inhibited from using nuclear weapons because of widespread opposition. He initiated a public relations campaign to try to mitigate that opposition. In the fall of 1958, the US ambassador to Japan warned Dulles a US nuclear attack on China could result in a Japanese request for US forces to leave Japan (FRUS 1958–1960, 62).

When Dulles conveyed that message to the joint chiefs and US military commanders in the region, they dismissed the warning out of hand. They characterized Japanese antinuclear sentiment as the inconsequential product of a small group of Japanese leftists influenced by communist propaganda. They admitted that while initial Japanese reaction to US nuclear use might be problematic, "government and informed leaders would come to realize that our action was in their best interests."

In fact, not long after the US threat to use nuclear weapons was announced in March 1955, more than a third of the entire Japanese population—32 million people—signed a petition, started by a group of housewives, that called for an end to nuclear testing and the abolition of nuclear weapons. In the fall of 1957, after the first joint nuclear weapons training exercise conducted with the participation of the Japanese Self Defense Force, the joint chiefs themselves received a set of troubling questions from senior Japanese officials concerned about US plans to use tactical nuclear weapons to defend US military bases in Japan (JCS 1958).

A few days after the meeting with the chiefs, Assistant Secretary of State Smith warned Dulles the chiefs were being glib about Japan's concern and the extent of the antinuclear movement. He said that if the United States used nuclear weapons to try to resolve the offshore island crisis, not only Japan but the Philippines and other Asian nations may move "further in the direction of neutralism and eventual accommodation with Peiping" (FRUS 1958–1960, 63).

The US threat to use nuclear weapons during the Taiwan Strait Crisis had a demonstrably negative effect on US allies, especially US allies in Asia.

Post-Crisis Nuclear Buildup

The documentary evidence demonstrates that US government officials prepared to attack the PRC with nuclear weapons during the Taiwan Strait Crisis because they misunderstood PRC intentions and overestimated both PRC military capabilities and the role nuclear threats would play in influencing PRC actions. These deficiencies continued to influence US China policy. In the wake of the crisis, the United States deployed thousands of nuclear weapons in the region in anticipation of further Chinese communist aggression. By the end of Eisenhower's term in office, the United States had packed approximately 1,700 nuclear weapons on US military bases in Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea, Guam, and US-occupied Okinawa. Under Kennedy, the numbers rocketed up to 2,400 and peaked at 3,200 during the final years of the Johnson administration (Norris, Arkin, and Burr 1999).

Two key developments in the early 1970s, both foreshadowed in the events of the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s, contributed to a dramatic reduction in the number of US nuclear weapons deployed in East Asia. The first was Japanese public opposition to the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Japan, which forced the governments of Japan and the United States to agree to remove all US nuclear weapons from Okinawa when it was returned to Japan in 1972. The second was Nixon's decision to accept the *modus vivendi* on Taiwan that Mao was willing to offer Eisenhower in 1955 had Dulles been willing to engage in high-level talks with the PRC leadership. The United States halved the total number of US nuclear weapons deployed in East Asia by the time Nixon left office, and no US nuclear weapons remained in Taiwan, Japan, or the Philippines by end of 1977 (Norris, Arkin, and Burr 1999).

The rapid removal of thousands of nuclear weapons from a stockpile the United States spent decades building up in East Asia calls into question the necessity of their deployment in the first place. The PRC remained a communist country with a radical ideology and an abysmal human rights record that did not relinquish any of its territorial claims in the region or the right to use force to resolve them. One thing

that did change was US unwillingness to talk with the PRC leadership, which it could have done in 1955, or even in 1949 immediately after the founding of the PRC. Nixon's 1972 visit changed US public opinion of the PRC almost overnight, even though the PRC, in the midst of Mao's "Cultural Revolution," had yet to change at all.

PRC Recognition and the Taiwan Relations Act

The balance of international opinion on the legitimacy of the PRC and ROC governments shifted dramatically and decisively in the PRC's favor with the October 1971 passage of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, four months before Nixon went to China. The resolution did more than simply admit the PRC to the UN, as later UN resolutions would admit East Germany in 1973 and North Korea in 1991. Instead, the United Nations decided to:

restore all its rights to the People's Republic of China and to recognize the representatives of its Government as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations, and to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all the organizations related to it (UN 1971).

The UN vote was the product of continuous PRC efforts to cultivate support among the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia, efforts that began at the Bandung Conference in 1954. It was also a stark repudiation of US China policy since the 1949 establishment of the PRC. The language of the resolution lends international credibility to PRC claims that the ROC government has no international legal standing and that the PRC is therefore entitled to govern all Chinese territories under ROC control.

The United States recognized the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China in 1979. It simultaneously terminated diplomatic relations and withdrew its recognition of the ROC. But Congress, in an extraordinary assertion of legislative authority over the executive branch's conduct of foreign affairs, qualified the presidential decision to terminate "governmental relations between the United States and the governing authorities on Taiwan recognized by the United States as the Republic of China prior to January 1, 1979."¹²

Congress imposed its qualifications through domestic law. It passed the Taiwan Relations Act, "to make clear that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means." The act empowered Congress to compel the president "to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character" and "to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan." It also declared, "Whenever the laws of the United States refer or relate to foreign countries, nations, states, governments, or similar entities, such terms shall include and such laws shall apply with such respect to Taiwan."

¹² Taiwan Relations Act. Public Law 96-8. U.S. Statutes at Large 14 (1979): 14–21.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479>.

The net effect of the Taiwan Relations Act was to establish Taiwan as an independent legal entity under US domestic law and that its security and well-being were important to the United States. Every US president since Jimmy Carter has accepted the act's exceptional impositions on the president's power to conduct foreign affairs with China. In this way, the US government reframed but did not resolve the dispute with the PRC at the root of the Taiwan Strait Crisis. The PRC is not bound by the Taiwan Relations Act and has never renounced the right to resort to force to reunify a divided China.

VII. Lessons for the Next Taiwan Strait Crisis

The US dispute with the PRC over Taiwan remains unresolved, and the people of Taiwan, using democratic reforms to assert their hope for self-determination, are challenging the *modus vivendi* the two sides reached in 1972. US-China relations are deteriorating, rapidly, and both sides continue to prepare for the next military conflict over the status of the island. Another crisis could erupt at any moment. The most important lesson from the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s is that US threats to use low-yield or nonstrategic nuclear weapons are unlikely to deter the PRC leadership. Actually using them after deterrence fails is more likely to escalate the conflict than end it.

An Evolving Dilemma

Until 1999, when the ROC's first directly elected president, Lee Teng-hui, unilaterally announced that the relationship between the ROC and the PRC should be established on the basis of a "state-to-state relationship," the two governments had agreed Taiwan was a part of China (Faison 1999). The United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union consented to the ROC's recovery of Taiwan from Japan under the terms for Japanese surrender set out in the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Declaration, and the Instrument of Surrender that officially ended World War II.

Throughout the course of the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the Eisenhower administration made statements and took actions consistent with the assumption that Taiwan was part of China. None was more important than the October 23, 1958, joint US-ROC communique ending the crisis:

The United States, its Government and its people, have an abiding faith in the Chinese people and profound respect for the great contribution which they have made and will continue to make to a civilization that respects and honors the individual and his family life. The United States recognizes that the Republic of China is the authentic spokesman for Free China and of the hopes and aspirations entertained by the great mass of the Chinese people. . . . The Government of the Republic of China considers that the restoration of freedom to its people on the mainland is its sacred mission (FRUS 1958–1960, 209).

The language of the joint communique leaves little doubt the US government agreed that the ROC government, which exercised sovereign control over the island of Taiwan, was the sole legitimate representative of all of China. Whatever qualifications Dulles may have expressed during the course of the crisis, particularly in his comments to Molotov questioning China's historical claim to the island, in the end he viewed Taiwan as an integral part of a divided China. In a memo summarizing the US position articulated in the joint communique, Dulles wrote:

Posture adopted by GRC [Government of the Republic of China] puts Republic of China in same category as other countries divided by Communism. Thus in divided Korea, Republic of Korea accepts armistice which denies it use of force to reunite Korea. GVN [Government of Viet-Nam] also accepts armistice which prevents use of force to reunite Viet-Nam. In Germany Adenauer has renounced use of force to bring about reunification. This declaration of GRC is comparable (FRUS 1958–1960, 216).

Much of official Washington has forgotten its previous, longstanding position that Taiwan is a part of China, but Beijing has not.

The problem with that previous US position is that it never took into account the wishes of the people who live in Taiwan. The US government portrayed Chiang Kai-shek as the leader of a “free” China, but his government was ruthlessly autocratic. The Generalissimo, as he was called, ruled Taiwan as an authoritarian strongman under a permanent declaration of martial law until his death in 1975. He turned the government over to his eldest son, Chiang Ching-Kuo, who ruled until his death in 1988. Both men used extrajudicial violence, including secret police, arbitrary arrests, and torture, to oppress dissent.

It was not until martial law was lifted in 1987 that the people of Taiwan were allowed to speak and assemble freely for the purpose of participating in self-government. Advocates of alternative conceptions of Taiwan not grounded in the history of the Chinese civil war could now express their opinions, organize adherents, and compete in elections.

The PRC responded by trying to intervene in Taiwan’s rapidly evolving democratic politics, with the aim of maintaining the old consensus with Chiang’s ruling Nationalist Party. In 1995, the PRC leadership authorized a series of military exercises, including launching missiles at targets just off Taiwan’s coast. Many US and ROC observers believe the exercises were intended to sway the first direct election of an ROC president in the island’s history. The United States responded by sending two aircraft carrier groups to the region. The incident reignited a sense of crisis in the Taiwan Strait and increased US government anxieties about PRC military capabilities and intentions.

The winner of the ROC election, Lee Teng-hui, was a member of the ruling Nationalist Party but also a native-born Taiwanese. During the election, some opponents accused Lee of harboring the desire for an independent Taiwan—a claim validated by his strong public support for independence after he left office. The opposition Democratic Progressive Party, which is even more closely associated with the idea of independence, held the presidency from 2000 to 2008 and regained it in 2016. Tsai Ying-wen, who won the 2016 election, explicitly rejected the old consensus that Taiwan is part of China but stopped short of advocating independence.

In 2005, the PRC expressed its determination to “never allow the Taiwan independence secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from China under any name or by any means.” It promulgated an anti-secession law that says the “state shall do its utmost with maximum sincerity to achieve a peaceful reunification.” But should its utmost fail, the law also allows for the use of “non-peaceful means and other necessary measures” if Taiwan’s governing authorities reject the possibility of unification or declare independence.

According to the law, Tsai's rejection of the old consensus could be considered a justification for non-peaceful action. The current PRC leadership is using increasingly hostile rhetoric and substantive economic penalties to press Tsai to reverse course and accept the old consensus. It is not working. Shortly after her reelection by a large majority in January 2020, Tsai told the BBC, "We don't have a need to declare ourselves an independent state. We are an independent country already and we call ourselves the Republic of China, Taiwan" (Sudworth 2020).

Lessons for the Next Crisis

The US Taiwan Relations Act mandates that it is "the policy of the United States to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States." Further, the act requires the US government "to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan."

Today, some US analysts and officials still believe, as did Dulles and Eisenhower, that the United States needs low-yield, nonstrategic nuclear weapons to protect Taiwan and cope with the broader security challenges posed by a "rising" China. But during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s, US preparations and expressions of intent to use such weapons proved counterproductive. They failed to deter the PRC leadership, undermined international support for Taiwan, and subverted bilateral negotiations that could have resulted in a PRC commitment not to resort to force to resolve the dispute.

At the time, the PRC leadership believed that limited US use of tactical nuclear weapons would not be militarily decisive. It also believed that US use of tactical nuclear weapons in ways that would kill large numbers of civilians was highly unlikely because of the moral, diplomatic, and geopolitical costs to US standing in East Asia and the world.

After carefully considering their options, Dulles and Eisenhower eventually came to the same conclusion. Toward the close of the crisis in fall 1958, Dulles told Chiang Kai-shek that US nonstrategic nuclear weapons were not the military solution he imagined they might be when the crisis started:

The danger lies not in the size of the bomb but in how it is exploded. If an atomic bomb is exploded on or in the ground, then there would inevitably be a heavy loss of human life. On the other hand if an atomic bomb was exploded in the air, the explosion would have no effect on gun positions (FRUS 1958–1960, 204).

There is no indication the current PRC leadership would view US threats to use nuclear weapons differently in a future Taiwan Strait Crisis. Moreover, greater PRC confidence in its own conventional military capabilities and its ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons if the United States uses them first are more likely to strengthen rather than weaken PRC resistance to future US nuclear threats. A classified textbook on the operation of China's missile forces instructs, "The principal form a future regional war will be conventional fighting under conditions of nuclear deterrence." The authors imply

that China can continue to prosecute a conventional war with no fear of US nuclear escalation as long as China maintains an effective ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons (Yu 2004).

Some US analysts and officials believe the United States could use a limited number of regionally deployed low-yield, nonstrategic nuclear weapons to stop an attack on Taiwan. Brad Roberts, deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear and missile defense policy under President Barack Obama, has argued that such an attack “might not be seen to be inviting or legitimizing a nuclear retaliatory strike” by the PRC leadership (Roberts 2016). Elbridge Colby, deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development under President Trump, has argued that China would be unwilling to retaliate with nuclear weapons because it “would mean courting defeat or near-suicidal escalation” (Colby 2018).

It is impossible to know for certain how the PRC leadership would respond, but the same classified PRC textbook instructs that “after suffering a nuclear attack,” China’s nuclear forces would conduct “limited but centralized” retaliatory strikes on “influential targets of great strategic value” that would “create great terror in the psychology of the enemy and in this way achieve the strategic objective,” which in this case would be halting continued US military action in support of Taiwan (Yu 2004).

This disconnect between how US officials think contemporary PRC leaders would respond and what those leaders may be preparing to do draws attention to another important lesson from the Taiwan Strait Crisis. The US government’s unwillingness to engage the PRC leadership after it won the Chinese civil war and expelled its Nationalist rivals from the mainland made it almost impossible for US analysts and officials to adequately assess PRC intentions.

The US misjudgments identified in this short paper are considerable. The US government mistakenly assumed PRC leaders supported Kim’s decision to try to unify Korea. It ignored PRC warnings not to cross the 38th parallel and unnecessarily prolonged the fighting in Korea by trying to bomb PRC leaders into submission. It misjudged the intent of PRC efforts to negotiate during the Geneva Conference of 1954 and misinterpreted the shelling of Jinmen and Mazu as a prelude to an invasion of Taiwan. If Dulles had decided to talk to the PRC leadership about their intentions instead of assuming he already knew what they were, Eisenhower would have learned that Mao was willing to negotiate an agreement on Taiwan that would have changed the US calculus on Vietnam and the conduct of the Cold War with the Soviet Union in 1955 instead of 1972.

While there is a much greater degree of communication between PRC and US leaders today, misunderstanding and miscommunication continue to trouble US-China relations. In the 1950s, US assumptions about PRC intentions were based on academic ideas about monolithic communism and the “domino theory.” Today, they are based on international relations theory and questionable hypotheses about the behavior of “rising” powers rather than frank discussions with the PRC leadership. Most important, there is surprisingly little official discussion of the Taiwan issue, and no active efforts to search for diplomatic alternatives to the current use—by both sides—of political posturing and threats to resort to force to address the most likely cause of a future military conflict between China and the United States.

US unwillingness to engage PRC leaders in substantive discussions about Taiwan troubled US allies in the 1950s, and it continues to trouble US allies today. At the time of the crisis, the ROC enjoyed very little

international support, even among US allies. Allied and neutral nations were extremely wary of the potential consequences of a US first use of nuclear weapons and incredulous that the Eisenhower administration would risk those consequences to protect the government of Chiang Kai-shek.

Only a handful of nations maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan today. Many have signed agreements with the PRC consenting to its claim that Taiwan is a part of China and that the PRC is the sole legitimate representative of China. While the current ROC government most likely enjoys far greater international sympathy than Chiang Kai-shek did, it is unclear how many nations, including US allies, would support having the United States start a nuclear war to defend a Taiwanese declaration of independence.

Whatever that number might be, it is reasonable to assume, based on the international experience of US nuclear threats during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s, that more nations might be willing to support a US effort to preserve Taiwanese rights to self-determination if it were clear the United States took the option to start a nuclear war off the table.

Near the end of the crisis in September 1958, the simple ability of the US Navy to teach ROC forces how to keep the offshore islands resupplied proved to be the key to solving the military problem at the heart of the crisis. The alarming assessments originally presented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of State in March 1955—assessments that had President Eisenhower convinced that using nuclear weapons to prevent the PRC seizure of two small islands was the only way to avoid a “collapse of Asiatic resistance to the Communists”—proved to be gross exaggerations (FRUS 1955–1957, 41). Thus, another lesson from this experience for contemporary US decisionmakers is the importance of questioning military advice, consulting diverse opinions, exercising independent judgment, and acting with patience. Eisenhower’s ability to do all those things prevented a nuclear war. Had General Radford been president in 1955, the outcome might have been very different.

There is no guarantee the US electorate will always elect a president with Eisenhower’s combination of knowledge, experience, and temperament. As a result, the history of US deliberations on the use of nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s suggests it is imprudent to permit a single person to launch a nuclear attack. As long as nuclear weapons exist, an effective way to prevent the next Taiwan Strait Crisis from triggering a nuclear war is to build requirements for consultation and deliberation into the process of authorizing their use.

There is one final lesson from the Taiwan Strait Crisis, not for decisionmakers but for the people of the United States. Public demonstrations of concern about the consequences of nuclear war and citizen-supported statements opposing the use of nuclear weapons can constrain US decisionmakers and prevent rash decisions to start a nuclear war.

At the beginning of the crisis Dulles complained to the NSC, “We might wake up one day and discover we were inhibited in the use of these weapons by negative public opinion” (FRUS 1955–1957, 146). Toward the end of the crisis, the US ambassador to Japan warned Dulles that Japanese public opposition to the use of nuclear weapons could create a situation where “if the U.S. initiated the use of nuclear weapons in defense of the offshore islands, the Japanese government might be forced to demand the

withdrawal of U.S. forces from Japan” (FRUS 1958–1960, 62). The Assistant Secretary of State for Policy Planning added that public opposition to the use of nuclear weapons in “the Philippines and other Asian nations” might push their governments “further in the direction of neutralism and eventual accommodation” with the PRC (FRUS 1958–1960, 63).

Regardless of whether these assessments were correct, they were a constraining factor in US deliberations on the use of nuclear weapons. Dulles posed a question to the military commanders in the Far East: “If anticipated reactions against our use of nuclear weapons were to be so hostile that we would be inhibited from using them except in the NATO theater or in retaliation against a Soviet attack, was our reliance on their use correct and productive” (FRUS 1955–1957, 146)? That the Secretary of State felt compelled to ask that question demonstrates that sustained expressions of concern from a critical mass of ordinary people can impact US decisions on the use of nuclear weapons.

It is discouraging that the seminal dispute igniting the Cold War in Asia remains unresolved. It is disappointing that decisionmakers in the United States and the People’s Republic of China continue to prepare to settle the issue with military force. Indeed, official US and PRC assessments repeatedly conclude that a future conflict over Taiwan is the primary driver of an accelerating arms race between the two nations.

This examination of the role of nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s concludes that US preparations and expressions of intent to use nuclear weapons were counterproductive. They advanced the interests and objectives of the PRC and undermined the interests and objectives of Taiwan and the United States. The historical evidence lends no support to current US proponents of deploying low-yield or nonstrategic nuclear weapons in East Asia. It argues against the United States making public policy pronouncements of an intent to break the taboo on the use of nuclear weapons that has held since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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