

## The First and the Second Taiwan Strait Crises in Cold-War Asia: An Overview

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the geopolitical confrontation between the United States and Communist China during the first Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-55) and the subsequent 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis. It argues that the crises in the Taiwan Strait had the potential to escalate into a global confrontation, unlike the proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam. The Taiwan Strait crises went on for almost twenty years (1950s-1970s), affecting neighboring countries' political developments, and while they were mostly confined to direct military actions by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China, they had the potential to bring the world to the brink of a nuclear war. This topic is significant because, unlike the proxy wars between superpowers, the Taiwan Strait crises posed a more credible risk, thereby underscoring the volatility of international relations and strategic dynamics of the Cold War period.

**Keywords:** Taiwan Strait, Formosa Resolution, Taiwan, Republic of China, People's Republic of China (PRC), India, Soviet Union, Cold War, Communism, diplomatic history, military aid, nuclear conflict.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 under Mao Zedong after the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) concerned the US since this development aggravated Cold-War tensions in Asia. This event had the potential to tip the balance in favor of communism in the newly decolonized countries of Asia. The PRC and the US found themselves embroiled in numerous contentious disputes, one of the major points being the island of Taiwan. Taiwan, strategically situated between the East and South China Seas, roughly a hundred miles off the coast of mainland China, was part of the Qing dynasty until it was transferred to Japan after the former's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Following the end of the Second World War, Taiwan remained a Japanese colony until the Japanese surrendered to the US in 1945, and consequently, while it was considered a part of China as outlined in the Potsdam Declaration, it became the place where the leader of the Nationalist Party, Chiang Kai-shek, retreated with his military and established his government after losing the civil war. In March 1950, the Republic of China (RoC) was established in Taiwan with its provisional capital at Taipei. Both the nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek in Taipei and the communist government under Mao in Beijing claimed to be China's legitimate government. After the end of the Second World War, territories like Manchuria and Taiwan that had been taken over by the Japanese Empire

were returned to China in accordance with the 1943 Cairo Declaration.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, with the Nationalist government situated in Taiwan after the Civil War, the debates over Taiwan's status became the center point of a dispute between the two Chinese governments that had significant global implications.

In this paper, I demonstrate that the US government made presumptuous miscalculations, believing that they could transform Taiwan into a strong base to counteract communism. What the US ignored was the underlying strategy of Taiwan's government that aimed to navigate between the US and the PRC in securing its own economic and political security. I contend that despite the opposing Chinese forces' intentions for territorial integration and repossession and the US pursuing a strategy of communist containment, none of the parties actively sought outright war. Diplomatically, the Taiwan government aimed to capitalize on US interests in establishing Taiwan as a strategic base for Cold War containment in Asia. Simultaneously, the Taiwan government negotiated with its communist counterparts to address the Taiwan Strait crises. Conversely, the PRC was perplexed by the increasing US interest in a less geopolitically significant region than other hotspots in Asia during the Cold War period. The PRC perceived this as a continuation of Western aggression toward Asian countries, an unwanted interference akin to a new form of colonialism. Therefore, examining the protracted conflict in the Taiwan Strait during the 1950s to the 1960s, this paper analyzes the potential for the conflict in the region to escalate to a nuclear level.

The scope of this paper is limited to an analytical overview of the Cold War environment in Asia within the context of the first two Taiwan Strait crises. My focus is on US foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s, with a brief discussion on the role of India and the Soviet Union as mediators, emphasizing the global significance of the crises. As a result, I focus less on Taiwan's role in this historical period and do not claim to provide a comprehensive history of the crises. After briefly analyzing the historiography, my primary focus is on diplomatic sources, through which I hope to offer non-specialist readers an accessible introduction to the crises.

While Cold War historiography often focuses on the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the geopolitical implications of the crises in the Taiwan Strait were severe, especially considering the potential of a global conflict going nuclear in the region if the US had militarily engaged. The crises in the Taiwan Strait need to be more prominent within the historiography of the Cold War. It is imperative, then, to begin this essay with a glance at some of the foundational works. The unavailability of de-classified Chinese sources before the 1990s led many scholars to rely on sources from the Office of the Historian at the US Department of State, in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, and other US-based archives to write histories of the Cold War related to China and Taiwan. This has meant scholarship has been predominantly from the US perspective focusing on US foreign policy and US military strategy in the region. However, after the declassification of Chinese documents and archival records in the 1990s, more recent scholarship

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<sup>1</sup> "A Brief History of Modern China and Taiwan," Background and Overview, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/programs/international-security-program/archives/asia-division/background-and-overview>.

has undertaken historical research by looking at the Chiang Kai-shek administration's diplomacy and the PRC's foreign and domestic policies.

Before delving into some of the foundational contributions to the historiography of the crises, it is noteworthy to mention that I will look at works in the English language only. The scholarly works discussed below highlight the significance of the Taiwan Strait Crisis as a crucial historical event requiring scholarly attention. The geopolitical implications of the crises profoundly affected the two Chinese governments and superpowers that had to constantly modify their foreign policy agendas in response to events unfolding in Asia.

Earlier works focusing on Western diplomacy and foreign policy objectives often neglected the distinct socio-cultural milieu of non-Western societies. Works like Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* underscore the Eurocentric approach of analyzing the East through the West and how European ideals have influenced the history-making of colonized countries, eclipsing their unique individuality.<sup>2</sup> This context frames the historiographical discussion below, where the first half emphasizes the Western perspective in analyzing the actions and motivations of non-Western nations. The second half counters this Eurocentric approach with Asian perspectives, absent in prior works.

Warren Cohen's *America's Response to China: An Interpretative History of Sino-American Relations* discusses changes in American policy towards China, particularly highlighting the clash between the US policy of containment and China's domestic policy of modern development.<sup>3</sup> Robert Accinelli, in his work *Crisis and Commitment: United States Policy towards Taiwan, 1950-55*, uses traditional diplomatic documents from US archives and British and Canadian records to emphasize the US strategy of unformalized stabilization to prevent direct military action in Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> Bruce Elleman's work *Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the U.S. Navy* discusses the role of the US Navy in the Taiwan Straits (1950-1979), and extends this argument in his 2021 publication *Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC-Taiwan Cross-Straits Tensions* by stating that the Eisenhower administration's objective was to pressure the PRC without engaging in a full-blown conflict.<sup>5</sup> These scholars rely on Western sources from the US, Britain, and Canada and focus primarily on the Western perspective in the Cold War.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Cohen argues that until 1949 China was seen as "distant and tangible" by the United States, but with the establishment of a Communist government, the United States policy of containment was in direct opposition to China's domestic policy of modern development. Warren Cohen, *America's Response to China: An Interpretative History of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 165-68.

<sup>4</sup> He argues that while the US saw Taiwan as an essential base in the Pacific and Quemoy and Matsu as strategic islands of interest to wage a silent-limited war and prevent communist expansion, they were careful to avoid direct military action, thereby nurturing a "strategy of unformalized stabilization...to foster the coalescence of a de-facto two Chinese arrangement." Robert Accinelli, *Crisis and Commitment: United States Policy towards Taiwan, 1950-55* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 237.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the role of the U.S. Navy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 years of PRC-Taiwan Cross-Straits Tensions* (New York and London: Anthem Press, 2021). Other works like Foster Rhea Dulles's *American Policy toward Communist China, 1949-1969* expand on the Cold War years in talking about the uncertainties faced by the Truman administration when

A shift in the historiography occurred when scholars began to utilize Chinese and Taiwanese documents alongside available Western primary sources. The new scholarship delved into diplomatic, political, and domestic policies pursued by both the PRC and RoC during the Taiwan Strait crises, providing a more comprehensive perspective. Shu Guang Zhang's *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958* uses de-classified Chinese documents to argue that "deterrence as a strategy was a predominant theme in the policy assumptions and objectives of both the PRC and the United States."<sup>6</sup> By looking at the Korean War and the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the author questions interpretations of the Chinese Communists as the aggressors and the US as a defender of Taiwan. Zhang finds that both Beijing and Washington greatly underestimated each other both in the short-term and long-term engagements.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Simei Qing's *From Allies to Enemies: Visions of Modernity, Identity, and US-China Diplomacy, 1945-1960* explores US perceptions of Chinese governance and diplomacy, emphasizing the misjudgments and misunderstandings that led to the transformation of the US-China relationship.<sup>8</sup> She makes use of the phrase "inside out and outside in" to emphasize equal treatment of both the US and Chinese perspectives on events during the Cold War.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, Hsiao-ting Lin's *Accidental State: Chiang Kai-shek, the United States, and the Making of Taiwan* challenges the notion that the establishment of Taiwan as a state was pre-conceived, arguing that it was a result of continuous deliberations between the US and the Nationalists based on developing events.<sup>10</sup> Adding to this revisionist approach, Jay Taylor's *The*

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Mao Zedong declared the formation of the PRC in 1949. He argues that during this period, US political leaders were undergoing severe doubts about their former accommodation to the Kuomintang-nationalist government, and the differences in opinions and conflicts that ensued between the top tier of the US administration. The author skillfully brings out the personalities, ideologies, and partisan conflicts when talking about Dean Acheson, Senator McCarthy, and John Dulles. He argues that McCarthy was the harbinger of the hostilities between the US and communist China because he had limited the nation's intellectual response to the newly emerging China; Dulles's idea of an American crusade against China's communism further complicated it. Foster Rhea Dulles, *American Policy toward Communist China, 1949-1969* (New York: Crowell, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Shu Guang Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>7</sup> During the Taiwan Crisis, Beijing saw the US-Taiwan security treaty not as a defensive but as a planned imperialist strategy. Therefore, to minimize the risk of a full-scale war with the US, Beijing adopted a policy of "not open belligerence" and started shelling the island of Quemoy. On the other hand, this action by Beijing led to the finalization of the treaty between the US and Taiwan. See Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, 183.

<sup>8</sup> She asks, "Was the transition from allies to enemies created by the fallout from counterproductive foreign policies on both sides, the bitter fruit of repeated misjudgments of each other's intentions, or the fatal consequences of an illusion—the perceived incompatibility of national interests and principles?" According to her, it was the combination of all these factors that transformed the US and China into enemies. Simei Qing, *From Allies to Enemies: Visions of Modernity, Identity and US-China Diplomacy 1945-1960* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Qing refers to the fact that the shortsightedness of the Western-educated class of policymakers to comprehend the cultural differences of non-Western Asian societies led to repeated erroneous foreign policy decisions throughout the Cold War, where both sides misjudged each other's intentions. See Qing, *From Allies to Enemies*, 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Lin uses "newly released sources like the Republic of China (RoC) official files, KMT records, and the personal papers of top leaders, including Chiang Kai-shek, and T.V. Soong." Lin explains the creation of Taiwan "was the outcome of many ad hoc, individualistic factors and decisions related to war or alliance maintenance, or even serendipity....the complex and critical role of the U.S. government and various American individuals, as well as the U.S. policy, as consistent determining forces in shaping this accidental island state." Hsiao-ting Lin, *Accidental State:*

*Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* uses Chiang Kai-shek's diaries to challenge the perception of the Taiwanese head of state as a weak leader entirely dependent on Washington, and portrays him as "a pragmatic compromiser, backing down and making concessions to warlords, Japanese, Communists, and Americans in negotiated settlements that he considered tactically wise."<sup>11</sup> The Taiwan Strait Crises remain an understudied topic in Cold War history, particularly from a non-Western standpoint, and more research needs to be done to understand these events' influence on the superpowers and the geopolitical repercussions of prolonged conflict in the region.

### **The First Taiwan Strait Crisis**

After the establishment of the Nationalist government in Taiwan, the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, located near mainland China, became contested territories for both Chinese governments that wanted to use the islands as steppingstones for reclaiming the mainland and Taiwan, respectively. When the 1950 revision of the 1945 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance brought significant technological and military aid to the PRC, the US sought an alliance with Taiwan amidst its engagement in Korea to counter the growing communist influence in the Asia.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the US, seeking favorable dealings with the PRC, wanted India, a strong Chinese ally at the time, to join the UN Security Council.<sup>13</sup> However, India refused, remained officially neutral, and recognized the PRC which complicated matters for the US both politically and strategically.

In 1954, discussions between the USSR and Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the PRC, addressed US aid to Taiwan including the potential US presence in the Taiwan Strait and the PRC's need for improved military technology. The Soviet Premier Malenkov recommended the use of a "long-range heavy bomber division (of TU-4s)," but Zhou favored "a division of long-range aircraft equipped with jet technology."<sup>14</sup> The USSR believed that China's presence in Southeast Asia would dissuade the US from using Korea as part of its containment policy, and the USSR favored China's territorial claims on Taiwan. Moreover, correspondence between Zhou and the Indian Ambassador R. K. Nehru in 1955 revealed that the US avoided challenging Taiwan's disputed status.<sup>15</sup> Irrespective of this, the US equally resisted accepting the PRC's claims on

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*Chiang Kai-shek, the United States, and the Making of Taiwan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), Kindle Edition 2016, Introduction.

<sup>11</sup> Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Harvard, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 52.

<sup>12</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation, between Soviet Premier Georgy M. Malenkov and Zhou Enlai, July 29, 1954," Wilson Center Digital Archive, November 20, 2011, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111272>.

<sup>13</sup> Anton Harder, "Not at the Cost of China: New Evidence Regarding US Proposals to Nehru for Joining the United Nations Security Council," *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper 76 (March 2015), 1-2, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/cwihp\\_working\\_paper\\_76\\_not\\_at\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_china.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/cwihp_working_paper_76_not_at_the_cost_of_china.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation, between Soviet Premier Georgy M. Malenkov and Zhou Enlai."

<sup>15</sup> The Indian government stood in favor of China's claim over Taiwan as Ambassador Nehru stated, "On the overall issue, we sympathize with China; except for American special interest groups, everyone in the world with a brain sympathizes with China." "Minutes of Conversation between Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and the Newly Appointed

Taiwan due to its geostrategic significance in the Cold War. However, India's non-alignment stance and support of the PRC's position regarding Taiwan created challenges for the US whose presence in the region was called out as an "interference" by the Indian government. What resulted was a never-ending process of diplomatic maneuvers, political hand-holding, and military instigations by the US, Soviet Union, and emerging Asian powers.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, the Taiwan Strait's strategic importance came into focus for the US. Fearing a potential PRC military campaign against Taiwan while engaged in Korea, the Truman administration declared the Taiwan Strait as neutral waters to prevent an escalation of hostilities between the two Chinese governments. After the Korean War ended in 1953, the Eisenhower administration lifted the US naval blockade in the Taiwan Strait. Chiang Kai-shek then stationed troops on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu.<sup>16</sup> The Nationalist government also found the offshore islands of Quemoy, Matsu, and Tachen to be strategic locations to use as a springboard for retaking the Chinese mainland, and military aid from the US made these garrisons all the more dangerous for the PRC.<sup>17</sup> Mao viewed this as an opportunity to reclaim Taiwan, initiating the first Taiwan Strait Crisis in September 1954 by bombing the Quemoy, Matsu, and Tachen islands.

While this first crisis ended within a year with the US carrying out an evacuation of civilians and Nationalist soldiers from the islands, they continued providing economic and military aid to the exiled Nationalist government to strengthen the defense of the islands against future strikes. The US formally drew up the Formosa Resolution in January of 1955, affirming their interest in the region, and started negotiations with the PRC to cease the bombings of the Quemoy and Matsu islands. While the resolution pledged US defense of Taiwan in case of a communist invasion, it did not explicitly state what actions the US would take. This was deliberately left vague due to US engagement in Korea and Indochina, and more importantly, so as not to provoke the Soviet Union further, which was now active in Vietnam.

Even with the passage of the resolution, the dispute over the island of Taiwan would continue well into the 1960s and the 1970s. The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis drew global attention, and rather than being limited to the competing Chinese governments, the increasing involvement of the US also pulled the Soviet Union and India into the deliberations for a solution. The presence of the US in the Taiwan Straits concerned the Soviet Union because the US intended to build a strategic base for their Cold War diplomacy. For countries like India, the possibility of getting pulled into a conflict between superpowers threatened its neutrality, or worse, threatened its very existence if the conflict were to involve nuclear weapons. Therefore, both the Soviet Union and India found diplomacy the appropriate means to assuage the PRC and prevent any engagement detrimental to their own geopolitical goals.

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Indian Ambassador to China Ratan Kumar Nehru, November 5, 1955," Wilson Center Digital Archive, June 23, 2012, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114701>.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Szonyi, *Cold War Island: Quemoy on the Front Line* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 65.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

The PRC acknowledged the intricate US-Taiwan relationship when the US was unwilling to fully engage with the PRC on behalf of Taiwan due to strategic considerations. Despite this, abandoning Taiwan was also not an option for the US. Since 1954, the PRC was engaged in diplomatic discussions with the Soviet Union and received support from leaders like Ho Chi Minh and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who criticized US support for Chiang Kai-shek. Conversations between Zhou and Nehru in October 1954 revealed the PRC's concerns about US reconnaissance planes over China. Zhou analyzed US interference in Taiwan as a desperate attempt by the capitalist superpower to control the fate of Asian nations, influenced by frustrations with the Korean armistice terms and the situation in Indochina.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Zhou revealed the PRC's awareness of American intelligence operations around mainland China, US military air drops in Quemoy and Matsu, and the capture of Taiwanese spies trained in the US.<sup>19</sup> Nehru, rather than expressing concern over captured spies, sought a diplomatic strategy to isolate the US internationally. Both Mao and Nehru felt that the US was significantly underestimating the potential of India and China and, in doing so, had intentionally isolated these two countries, especially when creating organizations like the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO).<sup>20</sup> Mao was troubled by US military investments in Asian countries like Korea and Indochina, and the US desire to make a base out of Taiwan. Nehru believed that the US, despite its technological and financial superiority, failed to consider the human factor and the will of the people of smaller nations.<sup>21</sup> The First Taiwan Strait Crisis raised significant geopolitical concerns for the PRC, the Soviet Union, and India regarding the US presence in the region with the potential for catastrophic consequences in the event of direct superpower intervention to support their allies. As the crisis continued, the possibility of US intervention to contain the situation brought the world dangerously close to a nuclear war.

### **The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis**

By the late 1950s, Communist China emerged as a dominant player in the international theatre after taking an active role in negotiating terms at the Geneva Conference of 1954. Due to continued US involvement in the region, Mao halted negotiations with the Nationalist government and resumed bombing Quemoy in August 1958, thus initiating the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis. With this escalation, a considerable number of members of the US President's cabinet were in support of a more aggressive stance which included the use of nuclear weapons. General Nathan Twining, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that "American planes [could] drop around 10-to-15-kilotons of bombs" near the coast of Mainland China to destroy the armaments from which the attacks on the Quemoy were coming.<sup>22</sup> General Twining argued that the option to strike

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<sup>18</sup> "Minutes of the First Meeting between Premier Zhou Enlai and Nehru, October 19, 1954," Wilson Center Digital Archive, March 23, 2015, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121746>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Minutes of Chairman Mao Zedong's First Meeting with Nehru, October 19, 1954," Wilson Center Digital Archive, September 16, 2013, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117825>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "The Air Force Role in Five Crises, 1958-1965," 19.

the mainland and even “attack airfields in Shanghai” would become necessary to force the Communist government to lift its blockade and bring about a swift end to the crisis, but he admitted that such an action might lead to severe nuclear retaliation over Okinawa and Taiwan.<sup>23</sup>

Irrespective of the presence of nuclear armaments in the Pacific, the US was still deliberating their use. Admiral Arleigh Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, informed Admiral Harry D. Felt, Commander-in-Chief of the US Pacific Command (CINCPAC), that “if the United States were to be involved in a conflict with Communist China, then it is important to limit the use of weapons to non-nuclear in nature.”<sup>24</sup> The reason for this statement stemmed from the recent moratorium declared between the US and the Soviet Union on conducting nuclear tests. Thus, the use of nuclear weapons would draw the Soviet Union’s attention to China. In a 1958 communiqué, the Soviet government declared that “the Soviet Union will make a stern warning to the USA but will not take part in the war. Only if the US uses large yield nuclear weapons, and in this way, risks widening the war, will the Soviet Union make a retaliatory strike with nuclear weapons.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in a letter dated September 19, 1958, Khrushchev “warned” President Eisenhower “that a world war was possible and said that the Soviet Union would honor its commitments to Communist China.”<sup>26</sup>

This critical declaration was received by the US Embassy in Moscow, which “interpreted the letter at the time as the clearest warning by Moscow in the postwar period of the circumstances under which it would go to war. However, it declared that Moscow did not want or expect a war and that there was no domestic preparation for war, and concluded with the observation that the Khrushchev letter was aimed largely at world opinion.”<sup>27</sup> It was clear that neither the US nor the Soviet Union were inclined to engage each other on a nuclear level, despite their veiled ultimatums, since both were heavily vested in the geopolitical developments surrounding the islands off mainland China. More importantly, Admirals Felt and Burke stated that President Eisenhower considered the repercussions of their strategy and, therefore, decided not to move forward with the decision of a nuclear attack. In one United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations telegram report sent by foreign secretary Selwyn Lloyd, dated September 22, 1958, the secretary mentioned his recent interactions with President Eisenhower over the Formosa (Taiwan) issue:

At my meeting with the President this morning he began by saying that he did not see a solution to the problem of the off-shore islands [Quemoy and Matsu] that made sense. The Nationalist position on the islands is militarily ridiculous. Even if they wanted to invade the mainland, possession of the islands did not help. What they needed for that purpose

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>25</sup> “Letter, Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the Chinese Communist Party, on the Soviet Union’s Readiness to Provide Assistance to China in the Event of an Attack, September 27, 1958,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, June 6, 2013, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117028>.

<sup>26</sup> Morton H. Halperin, *The 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis: A Documented History* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1966), 345, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_memoranda/RM4900.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM4900.html).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 345-46.

was a good amphibious potential. He had offered that to Chiang provided the islands were evacuated, but without success....The President was however ready to “bribe” Chiang in any reasonable way to remove his forces, but Chiang always replied that if the Nationalists left the islands, he himself would go. The United States has been considering whether it was possible to have an independent regime in Formosa without Chiang, but they had not found suitable people yet.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the evident dissatisfaction with the Nationalist regime in Taiwan, the US was unwilling to give up. The US wanted to use the Taiwan Strait Crisis for geopolitical benefit and sought to convert Taiwan into a strategic base for their policy of communist containment. This would demonstrate US diplomatic and strategic prowess to communist countries. To this extent, the US approved military aid to the Nationalists to defend the islands of Quemoy and Matsu and provided Chiang with “F-86s armed with Sidewinders—a heat-seeking air-to-air missile—and F-100 tactical fighters for his airmen.”<sup>29</sup>

The telegram from foreign secretary Lloyd went on to state that when questions were raised regarding the military position of the US on the Taiwan question and whether the President was thinking of using nuclear weapons against Communist China. Lloyd wrote, “I returned to the topic more than once and eventually he [Eisenhower] said very firmly that his own personal view was that it was out of the question to use nuclear weapons for a purely local tactical counter-battery task. If nuclear weapons were to be used they should be ‘for the big thing.’ ...[W]hen you use nuclear weapons you cross a completely different line.”<sup>30</sup> The telegram stated that irrespective of the advice from his Joint Chiefs of Staff, Eisenhower was averse to the use of nuclear weapons because he felt it was not only excessive for a “local tactical counter battery task” but that it would change if there was a direct threat to the US Seventh fleet.<sup>31</sup> Despite the President’s words, the looming threat of a nuclear engagement concerned the countries in the region, particularly India; the intensification of the crisis in 1958 and the Soviet acknowledgment of retaliatory measures to any US military engagement involving China and Taiwan made the probability of a global nuclear conflict actual. However, in a recorded conversation of the Basic National Security Policy between President Eisenhower, Admiral Arthur Radford, and General Taylor on July 2, 1959,

[the President] said, if our vital interests became involved, we certainly should use nuclear weapons. Secretary Herter agreed. The President said that he had tried to find language to meet this problem which he seemed to equate to the problem of how much authority should

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<sup>28</sup> “United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations Telegram 1071 to Foreign Office, September 21, 1958,” National Security Archive, accessed October 13, 2022. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4316143-Document-05-United-Kingdom-Mission-to-the-United>.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, “The Air Force Role in Five Crises, 1958-1965: Lebanon, Taiwan, Congo, Cuba, Dominican Republic,” United States Air Force Historical Division Liaison Office, June 1968, accessed October 13, 2022, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb249/doc10.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> “United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations Telegram 1071 to Foreign Office,” 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

be delegated to field commanders to use nuclear weapons. The President said that the crux of the matter was that we just could not deploy ground forces all over the world. Main reliance would have to be placed on nuclear weapons and mobile forces.<sup>32</sup>

This shows that the US continued to deliberate on its military strategies in the South China Sea without completely rejecting the nuclear alternative. By the 1960s, with the situation in Vietnam worsening, the US government realized the futility of physically interfering in Taiwan and looked to a “strategically positioned nuclear arsenal and ‘mobile forces.’”<sup>33</sup> Eisenhower decided that the US would reinforce Taiwan’s aerial defense and sent an Air Force squadron with 12 fighter planes, 1,472 personnel, and 860 tons of cargo to Taiwan in early September, in addition to two aircraft carriers and over 50 Marine aircraft.<sup>34</sup> These reinforcements from superior US military technology strengthened the Nationalist position on the islands and prevented them from falling to communist forces. As a result, on October 6, 1958, the communist Chinese Minister of National Defense Marshal Peng Dehuai declared a week-long ceasefire. Additionally, Indian and Soviet ambassadors repeatedly advised the communist Chinese leadership to negotiate with their nationalist counterparts to peacefully resolve the crisis, rather than continuing military engagement.<sup>35</sup>

Reference to such discussions can be found in correspondence between Indian Ambassador Parthasarathy Gopaldaswami and Zhou in 1958. The Chinese premier expressed his gratitude to India for its effort at the United Nations to petition for “China’s right of representation” in the organization.<sup>36</sup> Upon further inquiries about the Chinese policy towards the US and Taiwan, Zhou’s statement explicitly affirmed the communist Chinese position that Taiwan was considered part of the mainland despite its claim to independence. He stated that the PRC was willing to peacefully settle the Taiwan issue if Chiang’s troops withdrew from the offshore islands and the US agreed to stop interfering in China’s “domestic” affairs. He mentioned that the two Chinese states were in the process of negotiating a unification of Taiwan with communist China, albeit in secret, mainly because they felt that the US might hamper any peace talks that did not involve it.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Department of State, “Memorandum of Conversation, Military Paragraphs of Basic National Security Policy, July 2, 1959,” National Security Archive, accessed February 16, 2024, [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4316144-Document-06-Memorandum-of-Conversation-Military\\_2](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4316144-Document-06-Memorandum-of-Conversation-Military_2).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “The Air Force Role in Five Crises, 1958-1965,” 22-23.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, “Discussion between N. S. Khrushchev and Mao Zedong, October 2, 1959,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, November 20, 2011, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112088>; “Memorandum of Conversation, between Soviet Premier Georgy M. Malenkov and Zhou Enlai;” “Memorandum of Conversation: Premier Zhou Receives Indian Ambassador to China Parthasarathy, September 30, 1958,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, April 2, 2013, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116576>.

<sup>36</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation: Premier Zhou Receives Indian Ambassador to China Parthasarathy.”

<sup>37</sup> During this conversation, when asked by the Indian Ambassador regarding any progress on the “secret” negotiations with Taiwan, the Premier mentioned, “The Chinese government and Jiang Jieshi are in indirect negotiations, but these are often sabotaged by America.” “Memorandum of Conversation: Premier Zhou Receives Indian Ambassador to China Parthasarathy.” “As Chairman Mao says, America has stuck its head into the noose of the Taiwan Strait; should it stick its head further in, or withdraw from the noose? ...America is now going back and forth between the two [options]; it looks like America will not change at present, so let’s just let it keep going back

This statement reflected the PRC's unwillingness to back down from military options which emerged from the anxiety surrounding Chiang's willingness to play both the PRC and the US against one another. Zhou hinted at this during his conversation with an Indian ambassador in 1958, and the fact that the PRC was losing faith in negotiations that would ensure the US acceptance of Chinese claims over Taiwan and the withdrawal of US forces from the Taiwan Strait.

[America] have already trespassed within 12 nautical miles of China, sometimes even within three nautical miles, and moreover have done so together with Jiang Jieshi's warships; the American air force provides an escort for Jiang Jieshi's warships and has also trespassed into our airspace many times. America has assembled forces not only from Japan but from other military bases, not only strengthening its navy in the Taiwan Strait but also actively equipping Jiang Jieshi's troops with new weapons. Jiang Jieshi's launch of Sidewinder missiles with F86 fighter jets...is proof.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, the Soviet Union wanted the PRC to find a peaceful solution to the crisis because it was concerned about the global perception of the PRC as an aggressor. During a conversation between Nikita Khrushchev (after he visited Washington) and Mao in 1959, the former presented the Soviet perspective on this issue:

[N. S. Khrushchev]: The main idea of the Eisenhower message is that there should be no war. We do not want war over Taiwan.

[Mao Zedong]: So what should we do then? Should we act as the US says, that is declare the non-use of force in the area of Taiwan and move towards turning this issue into an international issue?

[N. S. Khrushchev]: We would think you ought to look for ways to relax the situation. We, being your allies, knew about the measures you undertook on the Taiwan Question, and today I am hearing for the first time about some of the tenets of your position in this area. Should it be appropriate for us as allies to exchange opinions on all these questions that might involve not only you, but also your friends into events? We could search for ways to promote the relaxation of international tensions without causing damage to the prestige and sovereign rights of the PRC.

[Mao Zedong]: We do not want war with the United States.

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and forth. America has two aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait region called 'Midway' and 'Prowler;' fine, we will just let them 'prowl' 'midway.'" Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

[N. S. Khrushchev]: One should not pose the issue this way. Neither you nor I want war - this is well known. The problem is that not only does the world public opinion not know what you might undertake tomorrow, but also even we, your allies, do not know it.<sup>39</sup>

This conversation revealed that Khrushchev was rooting for a peaceful settlement and that behind his argument to leave Taiwan temporarily under Chiang's control lay deeper strategic intentions. The Soviet Union "made an effort" to play the role of arbiter between the PRC and Washington, and Khrushchev was cautioning the PRC about the need to maintain an excellent international standing without any military invasion because war might hamper public opinion and the PRC's position in world politics.<sup>40</sup>

To add to his argument, Khrushchev added, "A while ago Lenin created the Far Eastern Republic in the Far East of the Soviet Union, and Lenin recognized its [sovereignty]. Keep in mind that this republic was established on the territory of the Soviet Union. It was unbelievable, but Lenin temporarily put up with this. Later, as it ought to be, the Far Eastern Republic merged with the Soviet Union."<sup>41</sup> It can be derived, then, that Khrushchev was asking Mao and Zhou to consider this strategy to reunify with Taiwan later, without military force and without drawing attention from the international community. Moreover, Khrushchev was also interested in developing better relations with the US and wanted to prevent the escalation of this conflict because it would increase diplomatic tensions between the two superpowers. The relationship between the PRC and the Soviets would soon deteriorate under Khrushchev because the PRC disagreed with his policy of "peaceful co-existence" and a new "soft attitude" towards the US.

## Conclusion

The Taiwan Strait Crises transcended a mere local conflict between the two ideologically opposed Chinese governments. They parallel the Cuban missile crisis in significance with the potential for nuclear engagement between the US and Soviet Union. By the 1960s, Southeast Asia had emerged as a paramount concern for the US that sought to promote Vietnam's unification under a noncommunist government and to counter Chinese-backed resistance in North Vietnam. While the initial US stance aimed at treating the Soviet Union and the PRC differently, the Korean War compelled a reassessment due to the evident collaboration of the two communist powers in Korea. For the US, then, "Formosa would remain in the American sphere outside Mao's grasp, down to the present."<sup>42</sup> The fear of a nuclear war over the Taiwan Strait and the immediate threat to Taiwan's autonomy would diminish significantly with the US and the PRC deeply entrenched in the Vietnam War. However, disputes over Taiwan's status would persist, leading to a third crisis in the mid-1990s. The situation further intensified after the 2016 elections when "President Tsai

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<sup>39</sup> "Discussion between N. S. Khrushchev and Mao Zedong."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Richard C. Thornton, *Odd Man Out: Truman, Stalin, Mao, and the Origins of the Korean War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2000), 381.

Ing-wen rejected her predecessor's formula for increased cross-Strait ties."<sup>43</sup> In 2019, communist Chinese President Xi Jinping adhered to the "1992 Consensus" asserting Taiwan's connection to the mainland.<sup>44</sup> However, the newly elected Taiwanese president contested this claim, emphasizing the "One China policy's multiple interpretations" and its potential to eliminate Taiwanese sovereignty against the wish of the Taiwanese people.<sup>45</sup> Presently, tensions between the PRC and Taiwan continue to escalate, as evidenced by numerous RoC declarations regarding communist China's threat and allegations of Taiwan attempting to establish "two Chinas" despite the "one China principle."<sup>46</sup> This ongoing dispute once again threatens global stability and this time the US may be drawn into a conflict with the PRC which has grown into a superpower of its own.

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<sup>43</sup> Lindsay Maizland, "Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense," Backgrounder, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Last updated April 18, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-relations-tension-us-policy-biden>. Accessed January 25, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "MOFA response to false claims made in joint statement between PRC and Uruguay regarding Taiwan," Republic of China (Taiwan), November 23, 2023, [https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News\\_Content.aspx?n=1328&s=116023](https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1328&s=116023).