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# THE POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ON TAIWAN STRAIT CRISIS AND ITS EFFECT ON THE U.S.A- CHINA RELATIONSHIPS FROM 1954 TO 1958

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper analyzes the United States' position during the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954 to 1955 and 1958, focusing on how alliance commitments, nuclear signaling, and crisis diplomacy shaped subsequent U.S.-China relations. Using declassified U.S. and Chinese materials and recent scholarship, I show that Washington paired a mutual defense guarantee to Taiwan with calibrated threats and limited military moves to deter Beijing while avoiding major war. Eisenhower's administration linked the protection of offshore islands to Formosa's defense, raised alert levels, and signaled readiness to escalate, yet ultimately prioritized conventional options and negotiations. The outcome entrenched strategic separation across the Strait, institutionalized a long period of deterrence and tacit restraint, and hardened political estrangement until rapprochement. These episodes illustrate the constraints of nuclear coercion, the value of controlled escalation, and the enduring impact of crisis management on great-power competition in East Asia. Implications for contemporary cross-Strait stability and policy are discussed.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Taiwan Strait Crises; Eisenhower Administration; Nuclear Deterrence; Quemoy And Matsu; U.S.-China Relations.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Cold War era saw military and political conflicts between the Eastern and Western blocs, often escalating into international crises across various regions. Intense economic, political, and military rivalries fueled these events, pushing both sides to expand their ideological influence while occasionally nearing nuclear confrontation. <sup>(1)</sup>

Crisis management focused on preventing military escalation, avoiding nuclear war, and managing volatile situations without compromising strategic goals. Powers carefully balanced control, steering events toward resolution while avoiding direct armed conflict <sup>(2)</sup> Wisdom, restraint, and flexibility, including concessions, were crucial in resolving crises involving major powers or their allies. This cautious approach helped avert nuclear disaster and direct military confrontations. <sup>(3)</sup> The Taiwan issue has remained a central point of contention in Sino-American relations since the communists rose to power in 1949, shaping decades of diplomatic and political dynamics between the two nations<sup>(4)</sup>.

Taiwan emerged as a key flashpoint, igniting tensions among major powers. This study will examine the United States' position on the Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-1958) and its impact on US-China relations.

## 2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

- The research helps shed light on the historical events that shaped international relations between the United States and China, contributing to an understanding of the historical and political context of US-China relations.
- The research contributes to enriching the academic literature on international relations and stimulates further studies on historical crises and their impact on international relations.

## 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954 and 1958 and their impact on US-China relations, thereby helping to understand the historical and political contexts of US-China relations.

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

*Xuegong Zhao (2023), The Limits of Confrontation: nuclear weapons, The 1958*

*Taiwan Strait Crisis, And China-U.S. Relations.* <sup>(5)</sup>

This article uses declassified Chinese and U.S. archival materials to reexamine the contest between China and the United States during the 1958 offshore islands crisis through the lens of nuclear deterrence, revealing the constraints of action during this confrontation between two powers and the limits of the U.S. nuclear threat.

*Pang Yang Huei (2019), Strait Rituals: China, Taiwan, And the United States in the Taiwan Strait Crises, 1954-1958.* <sup>(6)</sup>

Pang Yang Huei's *Strait Rituals* examines the two early Cold War Taiwan Strait crises. Drawing from newly available and overlooked archival sources in China, Taiwan, and the United States, Pang demonstrates that policymakers in Taipei, Beijing, and Washington had a greater understanding of one another's intentions than other scholars have recognized. Whereas many Cold War and US-China relations scholars have stressed how Beijing's bombardments of the Guomindang (GMD)-controlled offshore islands heightened tensions between China and the United States, Pang contends that the crises laid the groundwork for future conflict resolution.

### *1. The United States' Position on the Success of the Chinese Communist Revolution Of 1949:*

The success of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 marked a significant shift in the post-World War II geopolitical landscape. Following the war, the Soviet Union emerged as the leader of a global socialist bloc, while the United States solidified its role as the dominant force within the liberal capitalist world. <sup>(7)</sup>

This post-war era saw an intensification of ideological differences, resulting in a deep and seemingly irreconcilable divide between communist states and liberal democratic nations. The disruption stemmed from the overarching bipolarity shaping global affairs. <sup>(8)</sup> The conflict between the Eastern and Western blocs became profoundly ideological, framed as a clash between liberal democracy and totalitarianism during what came to be known as the Cold War rivalry characterized by competition and confrontation without direct military. <sup>(9)</sup>

The communist revolution in China, spearheaded by Mao Zedong, stands as one of the most significant global events in the aftermath of World War II. On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was officially established with its capital in Beijing. The

communists triumphed over the nationalists of the ruling Kuomintang Party, led by Chiang Kai-shek, who had been closely allied with the United States.<sup>(10)</sup>

Ultimately, faced with a series of decisive defeats, Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan (then known as Formosa) along with approximately two million supporters. This group comprised primarily bureaucrats from the previous government and business leaders. Once on the island, they proclaimed the creation of the National Chinese State, with Taipei designated as its capital.<sup>(11)</sup>

The Chinese Civil War concluded with the retreat of Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters to the island of Taiwan, where they formed the Republic of China, commonly referred to as the Taiwanese government. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, under the leadership of Mao Zedong<sup>(12)</sup>. During this historic event, Mao Zedong stated that the newly founded nation was prepared to engage in negotiations with all interested countries to establish diplomatic relations rooted in equality, mutual respect for sovereignty, and territorial integrity.<sup>(13)</sup>

With the victory of the communist revolution in China, Mao Zedong emphasized that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the only legitimate authority representing all the peoples of the Republic of China.<sup>(14)</sup>

CIA documents indicate that the People's Republic of China (PRC) government has become a dominant and entrenched regime on the mainland. The primary goals of this regime include dismantling the Nationalist Republic of China (NRC) government and seizing control of Taiwan.<sup>(15)</sup>

#### ***4.1. The Soviet Union's Position on the Success of the Chinese Communist Revolution Of 1949***

On October 2, 1949, just one day after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, Moscow officially recognized the communist government in China and withdrew its support for Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist regime. This move extended to rejecting the legitimacy of the Chinese nationalist delegation within the United Nations.<sup>(16)</sup>

The Moscow-Beijing alliance, rooted in shared ideology and mutual goals against the non-communist world, dates back to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. For Chinese leaders, this alliance is crucial, especially as a reliable source of arms and military supplies.<sup>(17)</sup>

Naturally, relations between the Chinese Communist Party and Moscow were close during the final stage of the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949), and

then after the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, the relationship between them became more intimate.<sup>(18)</sup>

The victory of the communist revolution in China naturally paved the way for strengthened ties with the Soviet Union. On June 30, 1949, Mao Zedong underscored the importance of this partnership, emphasizing China's commitment to aligning with nations that uphold equality.<sup>(19)</sup>

The Soviet Union acknowledged the new Chinese government. Within this framework, Stalin committed to training Chinese personnel and supplying them with warships, recognizing the People's Republic of China's urgent need for naval and air capabilities to reclaim Taiwan. This necessity became particularly pressing after Kuomintang supporters had established a naval and air base on the island.<sup>(20)</sup>

#### ***4.2. The United States' Position on the Success of the Chinese Communist Revolution In 1949.***

The United States maintained a hostile approach toward the Chinese Communist Revolution from its inception and throughout its aftermath. It actively supported Chiang Kai-shek's regime in Taiwan and refused to acknowledge the Communist government in Beijing.<sup>(21)</sup> During this period, it effectively prevented the People's Republic of China from gaining membership in the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly, instead assigning China's seat to Taiwan as the representative of the Chinese people. The Taiwan issue has remained the central point of contention in Sino-American relations since the Communist Revolution's success in 1949.<sup>(22)</sup>

President Eisenhower, in his presidential papers, expressed firm opposition to admitting Red China to the United Nations, believing that most Americans would share this stance.<sup>(23)</sup> CIA documents indicate that Nationalist China's main objective is to reclaim the mainland and overthrow the Chinese communist regime.<sup>(24)</sup> Mao Zedong and the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party were deeply focused on the issue of gaining international recognition for the communist system in China.<sup>(25)</sup>

The United States aimed to isolate the new regime in China by reinforcing its exclusive support for the Chiang government in Taiwan as the legitimate representative of the Chinese people.<sup>(26)</sup>

The State Department memorandum, issued as Circular Instruction No. 1452 on August 12, 1958, and titled *The Position of the United States on the Question of Recognition of the Chinese Communist Regime*, conveyed Washington's stance that denying

diplomatic recognition to the regime in Beijing aligns with the best interests of both the United States and the broader free world.<sup>(27)</sup>

President Truman announced a formal policy of non-intervention in January 1950, underscoring that the United States held no hostile intent toward Taiwan (then known as Formosa) or other Chinese territories. He emphasized that the U.S. had no interest in special privileges, military bases, or interference in China's civil conflict and ruled out any military engagement on Taiwan. Acheson firmly supported this approach, reiterating the commitment to avoid military involvement.<sup>(28)</sup> Nonetheless, the outbreak of the Korean War later that year fundamentally altered U.S. strategic priorities in the region, leading to a significant reconsideration of its policies.<sup>(29)</sup>

The Department of State's Circular Instruction No. 1452, dated August 12, 1958, highlighted the U.S. policy of denying diplomatic recognition to communist China to deter its influence in Asia.<sup>(30)</sup> The People's Republic of China (PRC) regarded Taiwan as an inseparable part of its territory and aimed to reunify it with the mainland.<sup>(31)</sup>

On the other hand, the United States sought to detach Taiwan from Chinese control and promote its independence for strategic reasons. Taiwan occupies a key position within the chain of American military installations in Southeast Asia, stretching from Okinawa in Japan to the Philippines. To protect this network of bases and ensure Taiwan's potential utility as a strategic asset in any conflict with China, the U.S. opposed the island's return to Communist China.<sup>(32)</sup> Following the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, one of President Truman's immediate responses to the crisis was to instruct the American Seventh Fleet in the Pacific to deploy to the Taiwan Strait. This move was driven by concerns that the People's Republic of China might attempt to reclaim Taiwan by force from nationalist control.<sup>(33)</sup>

During the Korean War, China's crossing of the Yalu River led Western powers to adjust their strategy and back Taiwan.<sup>(34)</sup> The U.S. dispatched the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait to deter Mao Zedong from attacking Taiwan and check Chiang Kai-shek's plans to invade mainland China.<sup>(35)</sup> American documents reveal that US policy toward China post-communist revolution hinged on two key factors :

First, communist China, as part of the Soviet Union's global strategy, aimed to dismantle free nations and establish communist dominance. Openly hostile toward the United States and the free world, its aggression has reached levels unseen since the

Korean War .

Second, East Asia's proximity to China and its vulnerable position—marked by limited self-governance experience, colonial suspicion of the West, and social-political shifts tied to modernization—made it particularly susceptible to communist expansion.<sup>(36)</sup>

#### ***4.3. Treaty Of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance Between China and the Soviet Union, 1950***

The Sino-Soviet Treaty, officially known as the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, was signed on February 14, 1950, between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. This agreement followed the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 and marked a significant development in international diplomacy during the Cold War era. It is widely considered a milestone in global relations, playing a pivotal role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the time and having a profound impact on global politics, particularly during the Korean War (1950–1953).<sup>(37)</sup>

Article 1 established a mutual commitment between the two nations to take all possible measures to prevent any resurgence of aggression or peace violations by Japan or any other country. Should either party face an act of aggression, the treaty obligated the other to provide immediate and comprehensive assistance, whether militarily or through other means. Additionally, both parties pledged to remain actively engaged in contributing to international initiatives that uphold peace and security worldwide, guided by a spirit of genuine cooperation. The treaty itself carried a term of thirty years, with the option for renewal.<sup>(38)</sup>

The formation of a strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing carried both regional and global implications, challenging the British American collaboration and necessitating a reevaluation of their respective roles on the world stage. The signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty in 1950 undoubtedly played a pivotal role in shaping international relations during the Cold War era.

American apprehensions over the treaty were rooted in broader worries about the expansion of communist ideology and the potential for military collaboration between these two powers.<sup>(40)</sup>

The researcher argues that the communist triumph in the Chinese Civil War had profound repercussions for the Cold War, marking a substantial blow to Western interests and a historic achievement for the Soviet Union and the wider

communist bloc. The 1950 Treaty of Amity, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance between China and the Soviet Union stands out as a key moment in shaping Cold War-era international relations.

#### **4.4. The US Position on the Taiwan Strait Crisis 1954-1955**

The term "crisis" typically denotes a pivotal moment, or a state marked by difficulty, tension, and apprehension, necessitating a critical decision and potentially leading to enduring negative consequences. In political science, international crises are regarded as significant global political events. Coral Bill describes an international crisis as a critical juncture in the dynamics between parties, where rising conflicts reach a point that threatens to alter the nature of inter-state relations.<sup>(41)</sup>

**In general, there are two basic conditions for defining a crisis as an international crisis:**

- It destabilizes the international order and relations between two or more major powers, making them challenging.
- It changes the nature of the relationship and interaction between two or more major powers, with the potential for hostility between them to escalate to the point of military confrontation.<sup>(42)</sup>

Regarding the Taiwan Strait crisis, in 1951, In 1951, CIA agents began arriving in Taiwan under the name Western Enterprises. Over 600 agents trained guerrilla forces, gathered intelligence, and managed propaganda facilities. By 1953, U.S. officials saw Taiwan as a key base for psychological warfare against mainland China. That July, CIA Deputy Director General Charles Cabell emphasized that the offshore islands were crucial for intelligence operations.<sup>(43)</sup>

During his first year in office 1953, Eisenhower officially embraced the doctrine that, in the event of conflict, the United States would treat nuclear weapons as readily available as any other type of armament. His administration authorized the deployment of the first battlefield nuclear weapons to Germany in November 1953, oversaw a significant expansion of nuclear arsenals and delivery systems, championed "massive retaliation" as a foundational element of U.S. defense strategy, and issued nuclear threats during the closing phase of the Korean War as well as to dissuade Beijing during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954-1958.<sup>(44)</sup>

On December 2, 1954, the U. S. signed a Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan<sup>(45)</sup>. additionally, Taiwan joined the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) as a member when the organization was

established in December of the same year.<sup>(46)</sup>

The establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 was merely a consequence of the Cold War, as isolating China and defending Southeast Asia were paramount in Washington's vision.<sup>(47)</sup>

Anti-communist tensions peaked in 1954, coinciding with the spread of anti-communist fervor. The imprisonment of two American pilots on spy charges in China deeply shocked policymakers in Washington, further exacerbating concerns about communist aggression in Asia.<sup>(48)</sup>

Following the conclusion of the Korean War in July 1953, the Chinese Communist Party leadership turned its attention to the Taiwan issue, triggering the First Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-1955. In September 1954, the People's Republic of China launched an artillery bombardment on a cluster of small coastal islands situated between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, including Quemoy (Kinmen), the Pescadores, and Matsu, which were under Taiwanese control. Both sides claimed sovereignty over these territories: the People's Republic of China asserted they were part of its territory, while Taiwan insisted, they belonged to it.<sup>(49)</sup>

Although the People's Republic of China fired 6,000 artillery rounds at Quemoy in just five hours on September 3, the absence of any military buildup around the Kinmen area made it clear to Taipei that Mao Zedong had no intention of invading the island. The CIA also quickly ruled out the possibility of an amphibious assault, although the bombardment caught the Eisenhower administration by surprise.<sup>(50)</sup>

On September 3, 1954, China initiated a significant artillery assault on the Quemoy and Matsu Islands, triggering the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. In response to this attack, the United States formalized a Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan on December 2, 1954.<sup>(51)</sup>

President Eisenhower stated in his presidential papers: "Communist China has pursued a series of provocative political and military actions, establishing a pattern of aggression. This goal, they declare, is the invasion of Formosa. In September 1954, the Chinese Communists opened heavy artillery fire on Quemoy Island, one of the natural routes to Formosa, which for many years had been under the absolute control of the Republic of China. Then came increasingly intense air attacks on other free Chinese islands, especially those near the Tachen Group north of Formosa."<sup>(52)</sup>

The islands situated in the Taiwan Strait off the mainland coast of China have historically been regarded as a critical line of defense against the

People's Republic of China. These strategic outposts also held significant importance for the Chiang regime in Taiwan, which saw them as potential steppingstones for reclaiming mainland China<sup>(53)</sup>. However, US President Eisenhower perceived the Chinese artillery strikes targeting these islands as a possible precursor to a full-scale invasion of Taiwan—a territory that the United States was committed to defending under the framework of a mutual defense treaty.. In response, Eisenhower<sup>(54)</sup> placed US forces on heightened alert, dispatching additional troops to the region armed with nuclear weapons, signaling a stark warning regarding the use of such weapons if necessary. He further requested authorization from Congress to deploy military force to safeguard Taiwan's security. Congress approved this measure on January 29, 1955, marking a notable moment in American history as it granted the president discretionary authority to utilize military force should he deem it appropriate.<sup>(55)</sup>

A January 1955 US National Security Council report outlined the Chinese Communist regime's hostility toward the United States, predicting efforts to invade Formosa and undermine American influence in Asia through infiltration and subversion<sup>(56)</sup>.

the Chinese government declared on April 23, 1955, its willingness to negotiate. Shortly after, on May 1, the People's Liberation Army suspended its bombing of the islands, leading to a temporary resolution of the crisis. On April 23, 1955, Chinese I<sup>(57)</sup> Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai "stunned" the Asian delegates at the Bandung Conference by announcing China's willingness to settle disputes with the United States through peaceful means, paving the way for secret Sino-American ambassadorial talks in Geneva that began in August. A sort of truce was reached, with China continuing to press the islands, but direct fighting subsided.<sup>(58)</sup>

In 1955, the Republic of China moved a division from Taiwan to Quemoy despite objections from the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group in Taiwan. The Joint Chiefs of Staff downplayed concerns, stating the move neither weakened Taiwan's defenses nor significantly bolstered Quemoy's. Chiang, however, continued reinforcing, eventually stationing 100,000 troops—one-third of the Nationalist force—on offshore islands, with 85,000 in Quemoy alone. In 1954, Eisenhower halted covert mainland operations but permitted limited intelligence raids in 1955. This led the Nationalists to resume commando attacks from Quemoy and Matsu, along with training for larger assaults.<sup>(59)</sup>

On August 2, 1955, US Secretary of State Dulles expressed hope that the Chinese Communists would abandon force to achieve their goals<sup>(60)</sup>.

Later, on August 4, 1955, President Eisenhower, when asked about negotiations over Quemoy, Matsu, and Formosa, stated that the situation would remain unchanged for now. Regarding a possible summit to ease Asian tensions, he responded it was not the right time.<sup>(61)</sup>

Incidents of harassment continued between the nationalists, supported by the United States, and the People's Republic of China. Eisenhower stated in his presidential papers in 1956: "The Chinese Communists shot down one of our planes off the coast of China."<sup>(62)</sup>

By 1957, hostilities had escalated, with US aircraft dropping propaganda leaflets over Beijing and other cities encouraging revolution against the communists. Meanwhile, the United States built an airbase in Taiwan for B-52 bombers and announced the deployment of Matador missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, emphasizing their practical effectiveness in delivering atomic strikes.<sup>(63)</sup>

CIA documents state that open psychological warfare—radio broadcasts, rumors, and written propaganda—was the order of the day in early 1957.<sup>(64)</sup>

The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-1955 represented a significant episode of military confrontation between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (Taiwan), which operated under the protection of the United States. In response, the United States bolstered its support for Taiwan through the provision of military aid and a declarative policy that framed any aggression against Taiwan as tantamount to aggression against the United States itself. This stance underscored Washington's commitment to its strategic alliance with Taipei.

#### ***4.5. The Role of the United States in the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis Of 1958***

The offshore islands remained a major obstacle in U.S. policy toward East Asia. The United States was pushing for a long-term separation between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, creating a "two Chinas" situation. Even as U.S. officials aggressively fortified Taiwan's defenses, they continued to urge the Kuomintang (KMT) to abandon Quemoy, Matsu, and other offshore islands. However, the KMT refused to withdraw its forces and continued to increase the number of troops stationed there, making them bases for harassing attacks on Chinese coastal areas.<sup>(65)</sup> By the summer of 1958, the number of KMT troops

stationed on Quemoy and Matsu had risen to 110,000, representing one-third of the party's total ground forces, and the party invested hundreds of millions of dollars to reinforce military installations on the offshore islands. Quemoy became one of the most heavily defended locations in the world. <sup>(66)</sup>

#### ***4.6. The Crisis Is Renewed, And China Is Bombing the Islands***

On 17 July 1958, just two days after US Marines arrived in Lebanon, Mao Zedong authorized preparations for a potential confrontation with the United States in the Taiwan Strait. <sup>(67)</sup> CIA documents state that Khrushchev's warning that the Soviet Union and the entire socialist bloc would support the Chinese communists in defeating any Chinese nationalist attack. <sup>(68)</sup>

The leaders of the People's Republic of China had been considering reclaiming Quemoy, Matsu, and other islands off China's southeastern coast since the end of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954-55 and thus formulated operational plans and made military preparations. The US intervention in Lebanon provided the ideal opportunity for China to launch the bombardment of Quemoy and Matsu. <sup>(69)</sup>

Reconnaissance images captured by a U-2 aircraft revealed extensive Chinese military activity near the mainland's coastline, hinting at a potential invasion of Taiwan. In response, the United States affirmed <sup>(70)</sup> its staunch opposition to any territorial changes brought about by military aggression and underscored its commitment to act under the provisions of the Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan. <sup>(71)</sup>

According to a statement by President Eisenhower: On the morning of August 23, 1958, the Chinese Communists initiated a heavy bombardment of Quemoy, an island situated in the Formosa Straits near the China coast. Another island in the same region, Matsu, also came under attack. Both islands have historically been part of Free China and have never fallen under Communist control. <sup>(72)</sup>

On August 23, PLA ground artillery and six coastal artillery battalions on the Fujian Front began shelling Quemoy, destroying Greater and Lesser Quemoy <sup>(73)</sup>. The Chinese Nationalists claim that more than 300 artillery pieces, including 152mm and 122mm guns, participated in the artillery attacks on Quemoy on August 23. <sup>(74)</sup> Secretary of State Dulles convened senior State and Defense officials, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to address the islands issue. They agreed the president should announce that Taiwan's ties with the offshore islands had become inseparable, and any attack on the

islands would no longer be considered isolated. In such an event, nationalist forces would respond, backed by U.S. support. The Strategic Air Command put five nuclear-capable B-47 bombers on alert in Guam. To deter China and reassure Chiang, the administration released Dulles's letter to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on August 23, highlighting closer Taiwan-offshore islands relations and warning about the risks of Chinese aggression. <sup>(75)</sup>

Eisenhower understood that using nuclear weapons against China would almost certainly provoke a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, which was bound to China through a treaty of alliance and friendship. <sup>(76)</sup>

CIA documents state that the Chinese Communists continued their artillery bombardment of the Kinmen/ Quimoy Islands on August 26. Chinese Communist warships continued their movements toward the Santo Bay area, just north of the Matsu Islands. <sup>(77)</sup>

The State Department's August 1958 statement stated: "The legitimate and generally recognized government of China still exists, and in Taiwan it is steadily developing its political, economic, and military strength. The Republic of China Government controls the strategic island of Taiwan, and through its stable military force—one of the largest in the free world in Asia—it represents a powerful deterrent to renewed communist aggression". <sup>(78)</sup>

#### ***4.7. US Position on Chinese Shelling of Islands***

The United States reacted swiftly to the Chinese bombardment, taking decisive action on the first day of the crisis to support the Nationalists. Eisenhower quickly surmised, much as he had during the 1954 crisis, that the Chinese artillery strikes were likely the prelude to a full-scale invasion of Taiwan—an island the United States was obligated to defend under the terms of a mutual defense treaty. <sup>(79)</sup> In response, he placed American forces on high alert, promptly dispatched the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait, and deployed additional nuclear-equipped units to the region. His strategy centered on deterring Chinese aggression through a formidable display of military strength, paired with an unambiguous commitment to protecting Taiwan. <sup>(80)</sup>

Through a mutual defense agreement with the United States, Nationalist China received large-scale shipments of military equipment from the United States, which, along with advisory assistance from MAAG, enabled it to significantly strengthen its armed forces. <sup>(81)</sup>

Eisenhower states in his presidential papers: "Today in Korea and free China, our assistance supports the preservation of national will and independence under the muzzle of Communist guns." <sup>(82)</sup> During a press conference on August 27, 1958, President Eisenhower reiterated the United States' commitment to supporting the Republic of China in its stance on Taiwan and the nearby offshore islands. A State Department statement on August 28, 1958, emphasized the United States' opposition to any forceful change in the status of the Taiwan Strait. <sup>(83)</sup>

The US government ordered a massive show of force by US forces in East Asia. Within days, the United States had mobilized six aircraft carriers, with 96 nuclear-capable aircraft, three heavy cruisers, 41 destroyers and destroyer escorts, seven submarines, and more than 20 other vessels. The US military had assembled "the most powerful air-sea strike force in its history" in the Taiwan Strait area. <sup>(84)</sup> To ensure that these actions would attract China's attention, Eisenhower ordered the Department of Defense to leak some of the news to the press. <sup>(85)</sup>

To threaten China with the possibility of war, the Joint Chiefs of Staff instructed the B-36 heavy strategic bomber wing to maintain a "general war posture" and be ready to assist in the Taiwan Strait at any time. The US Navy also landed six 8-inch howitzers capable of carrying nuclear warheads on Quemoy Island. Secretary of the Air Force James Douglas publicly declared that US forces were prepared to use nuclear weapons against China in defense of the island. <sup>(86)</sup>

The President ordered reinforcements for the Seventh Fleet and bolstered air defense operations in Taiwan. He also approved U.S. Navy escorts for Nationalist resupply missions conducted in international waters. As a result, the Seventh Fleet's presence expanded significantly, comprising five aircraft carriers, three cruisers, forty-one destroyers and escorts, and seven attack submarines. <sup>(87)</sup>

Eisenhower, fearing world public outrage over the use of nuclear weapons, advocated for the initial use of conventional forces to assist Taiwan. However, he strongly asserted his right to decide whether and when to use nuclear weapons, insisting that such weapons should be used only to defend Taiwan and only as a last resort. <sup>(88)</sup> In his memoirs, Eisenhower noted that he had decided to defend the offshore islands but hoped to intervene gradually, exhausting all conventional warfare options before resorting to a nuclear strike. He withheld approval of a public statement of an unconditional American commitment to defend the offshore islands using

nuclear weapons if necessary. To avoid inciting public alarm, Eisenhower even canceled a planned nuclear test, arguing that he "did not believe it was an opportune moment for a major test in the Pacific". <sup>(89)</sup>

At a White House meeting on August 25, the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented Eisenhower with a position paper indicating that while attacks on the mainland might initially have to be conventional for political reasons, "we would need atomic strikes on the Chinese mainland to stop the Chinese Communists effectively and quickly." The Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that "the United States must conduct operations that bring about rapid operational cessation. Prolonged operations will degrade military capabilities for operations in other theaters or for general warfare". <sup>(90)</sup>

On September 3, 1958, with Eisenhower's approval, Dulles issued a statement on the Taiwan Strait Crisis in which he declared that the security and protection of Quemoy and Matsu were becoming increasingly linked to the defense of Taiwan... The United States had made military arrangements so that a presidential decision, if taken, would be followed by timely and effective action. <sup>(91)</sup> CIA documents state that the Chinese Communists had the military capabilities to launch a successful amphibious operation against the islands. <sup>(92)</sup>

CIA documents state that the loss of the offshore islands, under any circumstances, would severely weaken the morale of the mainland population in Taiwan. The impact of this loss would be even greater if the Nationalist forces on the islands were defeated by a Chinese Communist attack. <sup>(93)</sup>

A White House statement issued on September 6, 1958, titled "United States Readiness to Resume Ambassadorial Geneva Talks to Negotiate an Agreement Renouncing the Use of Force in the Taiwan Area," <sup>(94)</sup>

As tensions escalated during the crisis and Chinese forces continued their bombardment of the islands, President Eisenhower suggested that the United States might consider deploying nuclear weapons against China. <sup>(95)</sup>

On September 11, 1958, President Eisenhower addressed the nation about the Formosa Strait crisis, explaining its dangers to peace. He recounted events starting August 23, when the Chinese Communists heavily bombarded Quemoy and Matsu islands—territories long part of free China and never under Communist control. The attacks caused severe damage, killing or injuring over 1,000 civilians, while naval blockades aimed to isolate Quemoy's 125,000 residents. Though no landing attempt was made,

China declared its intent to seize the islands. <sup>(96)</sup>

The US National Intelligence Estimate dated September 16, 1958, assessed the likely course of action by the Chinese Communists in the near term. It predicted that they would persist in their military harassment and blockade of Kinmen, aiming to make the island indefensible and shifting accountability for the next move to the United States. <sup>(97)</sup>

The Defense Department's Far East Bureau advised Dulles that one or two low-yield nuclear weapons could be used immediately against Fujian airfields, thus preempting an attack on Quemoy. The Bureau also urged consideration of a larger-scale attack without triggering a U.S.-Soviet nuclear war. <sup>(98)</sup>

#### **4.8. The Position on the United States' Threat to Strike China with Nuclear Weapons**

The Eisenhower administration's nuclear deterrence policy and its assertive stance aroused widespread concern and opposition at home and abroad. American public opinion was not unanimous, but there was generally overwhelming support against the administration's position on whether the United States should assist the Kuomintang in defending the offshore islands (73 percent of letters were against; 82-90 percent of survey respondents favored going to the United Nations, with 62 percent against any intervention if it risked all-out war and the use of nuclear weapons). <sup>(99)</sup>

He told George V. Allen, director of the United States Information Agency (USIA), told Dallas that the United States had already dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. Using such weapons again in the Far East would provoke a strong international reaction that would be politically damaging to the United States. <sup>(100)</sup>

CIA documents state that reactions in Western Europe, the Near East, South Asia, and Africa to US actions in the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis were unfavorable, Major U.S. allies such as Britain, France, Canada, Japan, and Australia, as well as other countries, also opposed the Eisenhower administration's hardline stance. They feared that any military action by the United States would lead to war with the People's Republic of China and emphasized that the use of nuclear weapons would have dire consequences. They pressured the U.S. government through various means, urging it to abandon its plans for intervention and favor a negotiated settlement rather than a war over the offshore islands. Reports in the American press conveyed a "critical—even hostile—position" among

key allies in Europe and Asia, not only regarding US military action on the offshore islands but also US policy toward China in general. <sup>(101)</sup>

#### **4.9. The Position of the Soviet Union**

The Soviet Union exerted a significant deterrent influence on American policymaking during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis. <sup>(102)</sup> According to the CIA's analysis, even if the United States limited its use of nuclear weapons to the vicinity of Quemoy and Matsu, it could not rule out the possibility of a Chinese and Soviet retaliation against the Seventh Fleet and U.S. bases in Taiwan. If U.S. <sup>(103)</sup> nuclear weapons were used extensively against the Chinese mainland, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union would almost certainly engage in a nuclear retaliation against U.S. bases and military forces deployed in the Far East. The Soviet Union could also supply China with nuclear weapons to avoid direct involvement in the conflict. The CIA report estimated that "at some point, at a heightened level of damage and increased risk to the Chinese system, the Soviets might directly attack U.S. forces engaged in China, including the bases from which these forces operate, in the face of the attendant risk of general war." <sup>(104)</sup>

CIA documents state that on September 5, Pravda repeated strong expressions of Soviet support for communist China but did not commit the Soviet Union to direct military intervention. <sup>(105)</sup>

Khrushchev sent a strongly worded letter to Eisenhower on September 7, denouncing the policy of nuclear threats and warning that such tactics were no longer viable. He also criticized the presence of the American Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait, emphasized that Moscow possessed both atomic and hydrogen nuclear weapons, and cautioned the United States against any nuclear action against China, as it could lead to a global conflict. The situation grew increasingly delicate, raising fears of a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union <sup>(106)</sup>

Khrushchev emphasized that any U.S. attack on the People's Republic of China would be viewed as an attack on the Soviet Union and would thus trigger a Soviet nuclear response. He declared that the Soviet Union would work closely with the People's Republic of China to defend the security of both countries. <sup>(107)</sup>

On September 8 the White House announced that the President had received from Chairman Khrushchev a letter in which he referred to the Taiwan Straits situation as "a dangerous situation." The release stated that the United States had already

recognized the danger and hoped that it would be mitigated by resumption of the Ambassadorial talks between the United States and the Chinese Communist régime. The release added that the President hoped that the Chinese Communists would not again, as in the case of Korea, use armed force to achieve territorial ambitions, and that we would welcome the Soviet Government's concerning itself with this aspect of the matter. <sup>(108)</sup>

The Sino-Soviet alliance also played a crucial role in thwarting the United States' use of nuclear weapons. Although China did not consult with or even inform Soviet leaders before launching the attack on Kinmen, Nikita Khrushchev's visit to Beijing in late July 1958 signaled to U.S. policymakers and military leaders that the Soviet Union supported China's actions. <sup>(109)</sup>

#### 4.10. End of the Taiwan Strait Crisis 1958

At a National Security Council meeting on August 14, Eisenhower, fearing a possible nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, explicitly rejected the Joint Chiefs of Staff's proposal to use nuclear bombs. He stated, "We should not be drawn into expanding the area of conflict, and thus possibly induce the Soviet Union to provide support to its principal ally, leading to a general war." He specifically emphasized that the United States must exercise great care and attempt to "establish firm limits of action. <sup>(110)</sup>" Eisenhower later frankly admitted in his memoirs that, compared to the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, "the present situation contained new dangers that seemed to make the American position more difficult". <sup>(111)</sup>

According to the CIA's assessment, if the United States used nuclear weapons extensively to defend offshore islands, the Soviet Union might respond with nuclear attacks on Taiwan, the U.S. Seventh Fleet, and possibly other targets. However, more limited and localized U.S. nuclear strikes might avoid Soviet action and force Chinese leaders to halt their offensive. Intelligence experts predicted that the use of nuclear weapons in the Far East would cause widespread concern among U.S. allies that the conflict could lead to a general war. The United States would be widely condemned by public opinion, especially in Asia, for its use of nuclear weapons and would arouse strong hostility across Asia. The report warned that inflicting large-scale civilian casualties on Asian civilians could have "serious consequences for the anti-communist stance in Asia. <sup>(112)</sup>

The crisis ultimately deescalated when Mao announced on October 6, 1958, that China would cease shelling the islands if American warships

withdrew from the Taiwan Strait. <sup>(113)</sup> The U.S. complied by pulling back its fleet, leading to an end to the bombardment. While nuclear deterrence played a crucial role in resolving the crisis, Eisenhower refrained from resorting to nuclear weapons despite his earlier threats, acknowledging the unpredictable consequences of armed conflicts. <sup>(114)</sup>

Eisenhower was more cautious about the use of nuclear weapons, emphasizing that under no circumstances could nuclear weapons be used without his prior approval. On September 6, he again informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that a U.S. air attack against mainland targets could only be ordered with his approval. In a conversation with Selwyn Lloyd, the British Foreign Secretary, Eisenhower emphasized that "if nuclear weapons are to be used, it must be an all-out effort, not a local one" and that the United States "does not plan to use nuclear weapons in any local situation at present." Dulles also agreed not to undertake new military action and believed that maintaining the status quo was the most important goal. He began to consider the possibility of demilitarizing the offshore islands and instructed Marshall Green, advisor to the State Department's Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, to inform the Joint Chiefs of Staff that no "provocative actions" should be taken in the Taiwan Strait <sup>(115)</sup>. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Arleigh A. Burke cabled that the State Department "considers it particularly important that we avoid any action that is provocative or that might appear provocative to world opinion." Vice Admiral Wallace M. Beckley sent the following warning: "Remember, the shot you fire will be heard around the world, perhaps in the hall of the United Nations." Vice Admiral Anthony Blackburn, commander of the Taiwan Patrol Force, stated that U.S. forces could only engage Chinese forces in self-defense in response to an offensive action. <sup>(116)</sup> The U.S. government also urged the KMT to proceed with caution, consult with Washington before taking any action, and avoid provoking incidents or presenting the United States with a *fait accompli*. <sup>(117)</sup>

CIA documents indicate that the rapid and strong support provided by the United States in the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis was highly reassuring to the People's Republic of China. The crisis also served to demonstrate the critical extent to which the PRC depended on the United States for its survival, and the consequent need to avoid any actions that might jeopardize that survival. <sup>(118)</sup>

The researcher believes that the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis is a clear example of how major powers

influence regional conflicts. The United States and the Soviet Union played crucial roles, each seeking to protect its strategic interests under tense circumstances.

The interventions of the United States and the Soviet Union contributed to maintaining the balance of power in the region. While the United States supported Taiwan, the People's Republic of China relied on the Soviet Union, resulting in a state of relative stability. The crisis did not lead to a final resolution of the dispute between China and Taiwan, but rather exacerbated tensions between the two sides. The role of major powers in the crisis also demonstrated how international tensions can influence regional conflicts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Taiwan Strait crises of 1954-1958 represented a defining moment in U.S.-China relations, characterized by heightened military tensions and strategic maneuvering. The U.S. commitment to defending Taiwan solidified its role as a key player in East Asian geopolitics and established a long-term adversarial relationship with the PRC. The crises not only influenced U.S. foreign policy but also set the stage for future diplomatic interactions, ultimately leading to a complex relationship that has evolved over the decades.

The crises solidified the U.S. commitment to Taiwan and deepened the divide between the U.S. and the PRC, fostering a long-term adversarial relationship.

Both China and the United States showed restraint and adaptability in dealing with the crisis, and tried hard to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control. Even as the two countries engaged in a military show of force, Sino-American diplomatic talks continued. Information exchange and familiarization with the other side played a significant role in easing tensions. The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis embodied the fundamental characteristics of US-China relations in the 1950s: limited confrontation and negotiation. Both sides were aware of the significant risk of a large-scale military conflict, and after the crisis was resolved, the Taiwan Strait remained relatively calm for a long time.

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