

Testing Massive Retaliation

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Credibility and Crisis Management in the Taiwan Strait

For eight months in 1954 and 1955, much of the world wondered whether the U.S. would go to war with the People's Republic of China over Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu) in the Taiwan Strait. The crisis was an early test of the Eisenhower-Dulles doctrine of "massive retaliation." Was the American threat to protect its commitments by using anything in its arsenal, including nuclear weapons, a credible one? How should such commitments and threats be signalled, to whom, and when? Could they be effective to promote U.S. interests?

As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles recognized during the crisis, the U.S. would shortly reach the point when it would have to "face up to the question whether its military program was or was not in fact designed to permit the use of atomic weapons." He feared that the longer the U.S. went without using these weapons, the less would be their deterrent value. Dulles and Eisenhower recognized that the U.S. was thus approaching the brink of nuclear war over strategically trivial islands. However, they appeared to believe that U.S. credibility was on the line, and that if their approach didn't succeed, their entire defense policy might be undermined.

The documentary record of the decision-making process in Beijing, Moscow, and Taipei remains closed to researchers, thereby precluding a complete and balanced history of the crisis, but on the American side much of the highest-level material has recently been declassified. As a consequence it is now possible to trace the evolution of American policy in considerable detail. The documents reveal the Eisenhower administration struggling to preserve important strategic assets in the Far East in the face of competing diplomatic, political, and bureaucratic forces. To President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Arthur Radford, and nearly everyone else of influence in Washington, a secure Taiwan in friendly hands represented the *sine qua non* of American policy in the Strait. Beyond this, however, opinions rapidly diverged, and considerable disagreement arose among decision-makers over the issue of the offshore islands. Much of it involved the fact that any course of action would antag-

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onize groups in positions to inflict damage on the administration, the United States, or both. What would please the Republic of China (ROC) would provoke, to one degree or another, the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Soviets, the NATO allies, and a significant portion of moderate-to-liberal opinion in America. Soothing the Communists and allaying the war fears of Europeans would set off Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) and the Nationalists on Taiwan as well as conservatives in the United States, and it might demoralize friends and clients in Asia.

Over the whole affair hung the nuclear question, more pressing than ever with the recent development of fusion devices on both sides of the cold war. Were atomic weapons necessary to defend the offshore islands? Would the threat of their use deter attack, or widen the area of conflict? Were they a special breed of armaments, or simply big bombs? Could they be utilized in a strictly tactical sense, or would escalation inevitably follow? How would American and world opinion respond to their use? To their non-use? To threats of use that were not carried out?

The story of the Eisenhower Administration's handling of this early major test of the massive retaliation doctrine is a sobering one. Eisenhower and Dulles succeeded in avoiding war while protecting the American position on Taiwan, but their success owed as much to luck as to skill, as they themselves privately admitted. They found themselves forced to the brink of a major conflict over an issue intrinsically unrelated to American security, as they also admitted. Although they repeatedly attempted to narrow the focus of the American commitment so as to exclude territory not worth defending, they ultimately failed to do so. Constrained by the demands of domestic politics, by considerations of international credibility, and not least by the limitations of their strategic policy, they felt control slipping from their hands.¹

1. The literature on the general subject of crisis management is quite extensive. Representative are Glenn D. Paige, *The Korean Decision: June 24–30, 1950* (New York: Free Press, 1968); Coral Bell, *The Conventions of Crisis: A Study in Diplomatic Management* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); Charles F. Hermann, ed., *International Crises: Insights from Behavioral Research* (New York: Free Press, 1972); Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); John R. Oneal, *Foreign Policy Making in Times of Crisis* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982); and Michael Brecher, ed., *Studies in Crisis Behavior* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979). Oneal's book contains further titles and an overview of the literature.

On the specific issue of the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954–55, the best-informed works are O. Edmund Clubb, "Formosa and the Offshore Islands in American Policy," *Political Science Quar-*

Retreat or Defend: First Cost Estimates

After their flight from the mainland in 1949, the Nationalist forces of Jiang Jieshi had occupied Jinmen and the other offshore islands, and the PRC had never managed to oust them. (See map, p. 123.) In fact, the Republic of China had garrisoned the islands with some 70,000 regular and guerrilla troops and had used them as bases for raids on the mainland. While Washington refrained from publicly encouraging these harassing operations, officials in the Truman administration had quietly expressed their appreciation that the raids tied down a sizable Communist force that might have caused trouble in Korea. On the whole, however, the view in Washington was that while the islands were useful, they were probably not worth fighting for.²

By September 1954, when the PRC began shelling Jinmen, the situation had changed considerably—or so it seemed to Eisenhower's new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Radford. After the stalemate in Korea

terly, Vol. 74, No. 4 (Winter 1960), pp. 517–531; Morton H. Halperin and Tang Tsou, "United States Policy toward the Offshore Islands," *Public Policy*, Vol. 15 (1966), pp. 119–138; Leon V. Sigal, "The 'Rational Policy' Model and the Formosa Straits Crisis," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June, 1970), pp. 121–156; George and Smoke, "The Taiwan Strait Crises, 1954–1955," in *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, ch. 9; J. H. Kalicki, *The Pattern of Sino-American Crises: Political-Military Interactions in the 1950s* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), ch. 6; Hungdah Chiu, "The Question of Taiwan in Sino-American Relations," in Hungdah Chiu, ed., *China and the Taiwan Issue* (New York: Praeger, 1979), ch. 6; Bennett C. Rushkoff, "Eisenhower, Dulles and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis, 1954–1955," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (August, 1981), pp. 465–480; Thomas E. Stolper, *China, Taiwan, and the Offshore Islands* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1985); and Leonard H. D. Gordon, "United States Opposition to Use of Force in the Taiwan Strait, 1954–1962," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (December, 1985), pp. 637–660.

The works by Rushkoff, Stolper, and Gordon are the first to utilize previously classified sources to any significant extent. None of the three authors, however, had access to the most important materials in the recently published volumes on the period in the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office). The pertinent numbers are Volume XIV in the 1952–1954 set, published in 1985, and Volume II in the 1955–1957 set, published in 1986. While the *Foreign Relations* series at one time drew almost exclusively on State Department records, these volumes, like others recently published, also include material originating in the White House, the CIA, and the Defense Department. For the period of the 1954–55 crisis, as for much of the Eisenhower administration, the most significant items are the memoranda of discussions at meetings of the National Security Council. More than any other president since its creation, Eisenhower took the NSC seriously and used it as the essential instrument of policy formation. These memoranda, therefore, and the documents that support them provide extremely revealing insights into the making of foreign policy in the mid-1950s.

2. See memorandum of discussion, 213th NSC meeting, Sep. 9, 1954, *FRUS: 1952–54*, Vol. XIV, p. 581. A useful chronology of events relating to the offshore islands can be found in the Karl Lott Rankin papers at the Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

and the French collapse in Indochina, Radford argued, the West sorely needed a victory in Asia. Speaking for the majority of the military leadership,³ he declared that the United States could not afford to back away from this most recent Communist challenge. He conceded that Jinmen and the other offshore islands did not possess sufficient importance to warrant, on strictly military grounds, an all-out defensive effort. But he contended that the loss of the islands would discourage, perhaps fatally, the ROC and other countries looking to America for protection. At the same time, the PRC attack provided a wonderful opportunity to knock Beijing down a few notches. An unsuccessful assault on the islands, Radford said, would constitute “a serious political and psychological reverse for the Communists and a corresponding lift for all anti-Communist forces in the Far East. The loss of ‘face’ on the part of Communist leadership could have far reaching consequences.”⁴

The military leadership made explicit from the outset that a defense of the islands would require counterattacks on the mainland. General John Hull, Commander in Chief for the Far East, asserted that defending forces would have little alternative to such counterattacks since Jinmen lay under the guns of the PRC and within easy aircraft range of the mainland. Therefore, Hull argued, there existed a “serious likelihood that the situation would progress rather swiftly to that of general hostilities with Communist China.” Under these circumstances, the United States should be prepared to act with whatever force was necessary to achieve success, “including the use of atomic weapons.”⁵

The State Department contended that the disadvantages of losing the offshore islands did not overbalance the turmoil that another war with the PRC would create in the American alliance system. Since the Communist victory in 1949, European leaders, particularly the British, had looked askance at America’s China policy, believing it needlessly provocative and more likely

3. The principal dissenter was Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, who, not coincidentally, had also advised against intervention in Indochina five months before. At that time as well, Radford had been at the fore of those calling for military action against the Communists. On the general question of intervention at Dienbienphu, see John Prados, *The Sky Would Fall: Operation Vulture: The U.S. Bombing Mission in Indochina, 1954* (New York: Dial Press, 1983); and George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: ‘The Day We Didn’t Go to War’ Revisited,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (September, 1984), pp. 343–363.

4. In State Department to Manila (U.S. Embassy), Sep. 3, 1954, *FRUS: 1952–54*, Vol. XIV, p. 557. See also memorandum of conversation, Sep. 7, 1954, decimal file 793.00/9-754, State Department records (record group 59), National Archives, Washington.

5. Hull to JCS in Radford to Wilson, Sep. 11, 1954, *FRUS: 1952–54*, Vol. XIV, p. 598.

to drive Beijing into Moscow's arms than otherwise. Moreover, the British argued, by intervening in China's civil war the United States tended to inflame anti-Western sentiment throughout Asia, complicating the affairs of the Commonwealth and rendering the British position in Hong Kong and Malaya more precarious than it already was. Finally, they feared that American belligerence would lead to world war. British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden told Dulles that a commitment to the defense of Jinmen might place NATO in a "terrible wicket."⁶ Dulles and Eden did not always communicate well, but in this case the secretary of state got the point. Reflecting on the question, Dulles commented that a decision to defend Jinmen almost certainly "would alienate world opinion and gravely strain our alliances." He added, "This is the more true because it would probably lead to our initiating the use of atomic weapons."⁷

In the White House, Eisenhower shared Dulles's caution about outrunning the allies; at the same time, the president recognized the need to keep touch with his base of popular support. While not ignoring the influence of Asia-Firsters like Majority Leader William Knowland, the so-called "Senator from Formosa," Eisenhower believed that, at the moment, the public at large had no stomach for a war against China. Perhaps after further provocation by Beijing, perhaps after appropriate preparation by the administration—but not now. The president agreed with Dulles's assessment that popular sentiment would be "sharply divided" regarding an overt American commitment to the offshore islands and that any precipitate moves by the administration might provoke a "serious attack" in Congress. In fact, Eisenhower considered the stakes higher than Dulles realized. The president asserted that if he acted without the consent of Congress he might supply his critics with "logical grounds for impeachment."⁸

Guessing Intentions: The Soviet Union and the Two Chinas

The biggest unknowns in the administration's policy equation involved the reactions of the Soviet Union, the PRC, and the ROC to any move by the United States. The Soviets weighed in at the beginning of October when

6. Notes of conversation attached to O'Connor to Dulles, Sep. 19, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 649.

7. Dulles memorandum, Sep. 12, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 611.

8. Memorandum of discussion, 214th NSC meeting, Sep. 12, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 613.

First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev helped celebrate the fifth anniversary of the People's Republic of China by affirming the support of the Soviet people for their Chinese comrades in the latter's quest to liberate Taiwan.⁹ Although American leaders could not tell whether socialist fraternalism extended to a Soviet willingness to go to war over the offshore islands,¹⁰ Ambassador Charles Bohlen in Moscow believed that Khrushchev's speech, coming immediately in the wake of a hardline statement by PRC Premier Zhou Enlai (Chou En-Lai), put the Kremlin "solidly behind the Chinese position." Bohlen did not think the Soviets wanted a general war, but he feared what he called the "self-intoxicating effect" of Communist rhetoric, and he cautioned that an accidental war could not be ruled out.¹¹

Although the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) thought Bohlen exaggerated Khrushchev's clout with the PRC,¹² Eisenhower took the Soviet connection seriously. He recognized that the aims of Moscow and Beijing were not identical, but he believed that in this case the Russians would be forced to stand up for their largest ally. "When we talk of general war with Communist China," the President commented at a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), "what we mean is general war with the USSR also." The Kremlin, Eisenhower argued, could not afford *not* to honor its commitments. For all the Russians' reliance on force, the Soviet system, like that of the United States, ultimately rested on credibility. "If the Soviets did not abide by their treaty with Communist China and go to war in support of their Chinese ally, the Soviet empire would quickly fall to pieces."¹³

American decision-makers could only guess regarding Beijing's designs.¹⁴ A special national intelligence estimate (SNIE) incorporating the views of the CIA, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Joint Chiefs commented unhelpfully

9. See *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1954, p. 1.

10. Stolper, *China, Taiwan, and the Offshore Islands*, p. 19, makes the point that Khrushchev promised the support of the Soviet *people* on the Taiwan issue, not that of the Soviet *government*. The distinction appears to have been lost on American officials.

11. Moscow (U.S. Embassy) to State Department, Oct. 2, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952-54, Vol. XIV, p. 674.

12. CIA Director Allen Dulles characterized Khrushchev as "rather a brash fellow" who for reasons unclear had received "a lot of latitude" from his associates in the Kremlin. Memorandum of discussion, 216th NSC meeting, Oct. 6, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952-54, Vol. XIV, p. 689.

13. Memorandum of discussion, 221st NSC meeting, Nov. 2, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952-54, Vol. XIV, p. 827.

14. American military intelligence did suggest that in light of a present insufficiency of PRC forces for major amphibious operations, and due to the operational advantages of springtime weather for an invasion, an attack on Taiwan itself was at least several months away. "Chinese Communist Capabilities and Intentions with respect to Formosa," Oct. 12, 1954, 091 China, Radford files, JCS records (record group 218), National Archives.

that the PRC doubtless intended to seize the offshore islands “at some time” and that the Communists would probably undertake “probing actions” to test American resolve. If they encountered no appreciable American resistance, they would continue to push. If they ran into American opposition, they might push anyway, believing that even if the U.S. didn’t back off, they could portray it as an imperialist aggressor.¹⁵

Jiang’s intentions were nearly as unfathomable. “We are always wrong when we believe that Orientals think logically as we do,” Eisenhower told the NSC.¹⁶ The logical course, it seemed, would be for Jiang to withdraw the Nationalist forces from their exposed positions on the offshore islands. As Eisenhower put it, the islands were “so small and so very close to the mainland” that sooner or later they would have to fall to the PRC.¹⁷ But there was no guarantee that Jiang saw matters in the same light. All appearances, in fact, suggested that the ROC president intended to defend the offshore islands to the last man.¹⁸ Whether this represented heroism or a martyr complex was hard for Eisenhower to tell, but it certainly did not suggest common sense.

Other administration officials, however, found Jiang’s actions far more comprehensible. Robert Bowie, director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, argued that Jiang aimed to defend the offshore islands not *despite* the difficulty of the task but *because of* that difficulty. What constituted a danger to the United States, Bowie contended, represented an opportunity to the ROC president:

Chiang recognizes that his only hope of achieving his paramount ambition of returning to the Mainland lies in large-scale U.S. military involvement with the Chinese Communists. To Chiang the offshore islands are important not so much for defense of Taiwan or for demonstrating Nationalist military prowess but because they offer the most likely means for involving the U.S. in hostilities with the Chinese which could expand to create his opportunity for invasion.¹⁹

15. Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 100-4-54), Sep. 4, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952-54, Vol. XIV, p. 563. The State Department’s Office of Chinese Affairs thought the “current parlous state of Western unity” in the post-Geneva period would encourage testing by the PRC. Memorandum on SNIE 100-4-54, Sep. 17, 1954, CA 306.11a, State Department records, National Archives.

16. Memorandum of discussion, 237th NSC meeting, Feb. 17, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955-57, Vol. II, p. 279.

17. Memorandum of discussion, 221st NSC meeting, Nov. 2, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952-54, Vol. XIV, p. 827.

18. See Robertson to Dulles, Apr. 25, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955-57, Vol. II, p. 510.

19. Bowie to Dulles, Apr. 9, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955-57, Vol. II, p. 473.

Bowie concluded that an American commitment to the offshore islands would be dangerous. Such a commitment might or might not deter the Communists, but it certainly would encourage Jiang to further provoke them. The only solution, he contended, was a forthright declaration that the United States had no intention of participating in the defense of the islands.

Dulles's First Plan: Trading a Treaty for Mediation

While Eisenhower and Dulles pondered their options,²⁰ hostilities in the Taiwan Strait escalated. Artillery exchanges led to air raids; the fighting spread to the sea lanes as Nationalist ships attacked mainland coastal traffic and Communist torpedo boats responded by sinking an ROC destroyer escort.

Facing the growing possibility of a full-scale assault on the offshore islands, and simultaneously confronting the challenge of the administration's first midterm elections,²¹ Dulles devised a two-part strategy for keeping a lid on the situation in the Strait. The first part involved an attempt at mediation: referring the PRC–ROC dispute to the United Nations, which presumably would call for a ceasefire. The idea had obvious attractions: by turning the issue over to the UN Security Council, the administration could spread

20. Decision-making during the crisis in the Taiwan Strait was definitely a joint Eisenhower-Dulles affair. As such, the affair suggests that both the traditional view of Dulles as prime mover of American foreign policy and the recent correction offered by the "Eisenhower revisionists," which puts the president in complete and nearly total command, provide an overly simplistic picture of the true situation. Each school defies summary in a note, but for a start on the former see Roscoe Drummond and Gaston Coblentz, *Duel at the Brink: John Foster Dulles' Command of American Power* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960); and Richard Gould-Adams, *The Time of Power: A Reappraisal of John Foster Dulles* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962). On the latter: Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); and Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, Vol. II: *The President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

21. It would be too much to imply that the world revolves around the American electoral calendar, or that American leaders fabricate trouble to fit their political timetables, but the regularity with which international crises have appeared in the months before elections is striking. In the first two decades of the cold war: the Azerbaijan affair occurred in 1946; the Berlin blockade, in the summer of 1948; the outbreak of the Korean war, in June 1950; Dien-bienphu and the inception of the offshore islands affair, in 1954; the Suez and Hungarian crises, in 1956; the American intervention in Lebanon and second round of the offshore islands controversy, in 1958; the U-2 fiasco, in 1960; the Cuban missile crisis, in 1962; the Gulf of Tonkin affair, in 1964. It might be argued that after 1964 Vietnam was a chronic crisis. To some degree, of course, these examples simply demonstrate that the world is a dangerous place. On the other hand, it is not so easy to create a similar list for odd-numbered years.

responsibility for finding a solution or blame for failing to do so. At the same time, referral to the United Nations would force the hand of both the Soviets and the PRC. Dulles explained:

This move could put a serious strain on Soviet-ChiCom [Chinese Communist] relations. If the S.U. vetoed the move, that would gravely impair its "peace offensive" and then the U.S. would win a measure of support from allies and world opinion now lacking. If the Soviets did *not* veto, the ChiComs could react adversely, and might, indeed, defy the U.N. In that case the ChiComs would again become an international outcast.²²

Of course referral to the UN had disadvantages as well. Once the Council took up the issue, there was no telling quite what it would do. As Dulles admitted, the administration could not "wholly control the situation."²³ Furthermore, any ceasefire the Council might propose would almost certainly be based on the status quo. This might well touch off a strong political reaction in the United States: conservatives would probably consider acquiescence in the status quo tantamount to recognition of the Communist government in Beijing. Realizing the hazards involved, Dulles sought to keep the American hand in this UN initiative hidden. He worked through a proxy, New Zealand; he concealed the plan under the code name "Oracle"; he stamped reports and memoranda concerning the whole business—which had relatively little to do with national security per se—"top secret."

An additional problem was the distinct likelihood that Jiang would veto any ceasefire measure, because acceptance of the status quo would destroy Nationalist dreams for a return to the mainland, the very *raison d'être* of Jiang's regime. When Karl Lott Rankin, the American ambassador in Taipei, learned of Dulles's UN plan, he warned against it, predicting a "violently unfavorable reaction" from Jiang. Unless the United States took steps to cushion the shock, Rankin contended, Jiang would interpret referral to the UN as "another Yalta."²⁴

To keep Jiang and his U.S. supporters happy, Dulles proposed the second half of his plan: a mutual-security treaty for the ROC. For many months Taipei had been pestering Washington for such a pact. The administration

22. Dulles memorandum, Sep. 12, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 611.

23. *Ibid.* See also various records for this period in files 793.00 and 793.5, State Department records, National Archives.

24. Taipei (U.S. Embassy) to State Department, Oct. 5, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 682. Rankin's retrospective account of the crisis can be found in Karl Lott Rankin, *China Assignment* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964).

did not object to the idea in principle; the NSC noted that a non-Communist Taiwan in the middle of the Pacific island chain was “essential to U.S. security.”²⁵ But first one thing and then another delayed action on a treaty: attempts to end the war in Korea, the possibility of intervention in Indochina, the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. The outset of the crisis in the Strait threatened to stall treaty talks further,²⁶ but Dulles soon decided that the administration should try to swap a U.S.-ROC defense pact for Jiang’s pledge not to denounce UN consideration of the dispute. Eisenhower approved Dulles’s plan,²⁷ and during the second week of October the administration dispatched Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson to Taipei to persuade Jiang.

Not surprisingly, negotiations for the trade proved difficult. Robertson described to Jiang the advantages of appealing to the UN, pointing out that if the Soviets, on behalf of Beijing, vetoed a ceasefire proposal, “the Chinese Communist regime and its claim to a position in the UN would be further discredited.” If the Russians chose not to veto, “the island positions would be provisionally secured, and the grave consequences of their loss would be avoided.”²⁸

But Jiang was not impressed. Suggesting that referral to the UN was the first step toward a sellout, he accused the Americans of abandoning him as the French had abandoned the Vietnamese. “Like all Asians,” he told Robertson, “the Chinese have watched the situation in Indochina closely. After the negotiations at Geneva, all of Indochina was surely doomed. The beginnings of negotiations with the Communists will eventually lead to the loss of Formosa.” Jiang declared that he had heeded American advice before, against his own better judgment, and it had only led to “disaster” for his people. Why should he listen now?²⁹

Robertson responded that of course what the Republic of China chose to do was strictly its own business; but he added that American intelligence

25. NSC 5503, “U.S. Policy toward Formosa and the Government of the Republic of China,” Jan. 15, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 30.

26. Walter Bedell Smith to Robertson, Sep. 1, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 555.

27. See Dulles to Robertson, Oct. 7, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 708; memorandum of telephone conversation, Oct. 7, 1954, *ibid.*; State Department to Taipei (U.S. Embassy), Oct. 18, 1954, 793.5/10-1854, State Department records, National Archives; Dulles to Robertson, Oct. 8, 1954, 793.5/10-854, State Department records, National Archives.

28. Memorandum of conversation, Oct. 13, 1954, 793.5/10-1354, State Department records, National Archives.

29. *Ibid.*

sources indicated a serious possibility of an all-out PRC assault against some of the offshore islands, and he predicted that no amount of skill and courage on the part of the ROC military would suffice to defend them. More to the point, he declared that it was “highly doubtful” that President Eisenhower would commit American forces to the defense of the islands and “engage in what might in fact become a major war with Communist China.” This was as close as Robertson came to delivering an ultimatum, and he quickly softened the message by commenting that when the matter came before the UN the United States would want to reaffirm, “perhaps more formally,” its connection with the ROC.³⁰

Realizing, apparently, that they had no choice, Jiang and his associates spent much of the next two days attempting to secure this “more formal” connection on the most favorable basis possible. They sought to define the treaty area to include the offshore islands. Robertson flatly rejected the idea. They insisted that a treaty be signed *before* the UN took up a ceasefire proposal. Robertson, lacking definite instructions on this point and basically sympathetic to Jiang’s position, indicated that he would relay the suggestion to Washington.³¹

The administration eventually accepted Jiang’s condition,³² and Dulles put the UN plan on hold while negotiations for a treaty took place. After considerable wrangling and some Nationalist leakage of the administration’s bargaining position—which prompted grave warnings from the Americans that such indiscretions were “very harmful” to fruitful discussions³³—Dulles on November 23 initialed a treaty specifically pledging the United States to defend only Taiwan and the nearby Penghus (Pescadores). With evident relief the secretary of state reported to Eisenhower: “This has been a difficult negotiation but the result, I believe, stakes out unqualifiedly our interest in Formosa and the Pescadores and does so on a basis which will not enable the Chinese Nationalists to involve us in a war with Communist China.”³⁴

Dulles’s Second Plan: Pulling Jiang Back and Bringing Congress Aboard

If Dulles thought the worst was over, he soon recognized his mistake. Just as the treaty talks were ending, the PRC announced the espionage conviction

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. See memorandum by Douglas MacArthur Jr., Oct. 14, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 755.

33. Memorandum of conversation by McConaughy, Nov. 6, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 870.

34. Memorandum by Dulles, Nov. 23, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 929.

of thirteen American fliers shot down over China during the Korean War. Predictably, this action provoked cries of outrage in the United States; Senator Knowland went so far as to demand a blockade of the China coast.³⁵ Although at least a few of the individuals involved were in fact agents of the CIA,³⁶ the administration did not concede the point and consequently had to share, to some degree at least, the public expressions of outrage. As a result, Dulles chose to delay still further the submission of the ceasefire resolution to the Security Council, requesting New Zealand to postpone its initiative until the furor subsided.³⁷

But when in January the Communists succeeded in capturing one of the offshore islands—a small member of the Dachen (Tachen) group, some two hundred miles north of Taiwan—the administration was forced to reconsider its basic approach. Heretofore, Eisenhower and Dulles had resisted making an explicit and public statement of American intentions in the Taiwan area; they preferred, as Dulles remarked, to “fuzz up” the matter and retain as much freedom of action as possible.³⁸ The sentencing of the American fliers, however, and the heightened pressure on the Dachens seemed to indicate that the policy of obfuscation was failing to restrain the PRC. On January 19 Dulles told Eisenhower that he was becoming increasingly concerned that doubt as to American intentions was having a “bad effect” on American prestige in the area. Fighting in the Dachens, whose fall to the Communists appeared imminent, had especially damaged American credibility. “It was in many quarters assumed that we would defend the islands, and our failure to do so indicated that we were running away when actual danger appeared.”

To counter this perception, Dulles proposed to pressure Jiang to evacuate the Dachens, which were even less defensible than the other offshore islands, while simultaneously asking Congress for explicit authority to deploy American forces to defend Taiwan and such of the surrounding area as the president considered important.³⁹

35. *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1954, p. 1. The administration rejected the idea, but took the precaution of investigating the legal basis for a blockade. The conclusion of the State Department's Office of Chinese Affairs was that some justification could be found in the actions and directives of the United Nations relating to the Korean War—but not much. Cowles to Robert Murphy, Nov. 29, 1954, CA 230 TS, State Department records, National Archives.

36. See diary entry for Dec. 2, 1954, Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *The Diary of James C. Hagerty: Eisenhower in Mid-Course, 1954–1955* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 121; and Dulles telephone conversation, Dec. 1, 1954, Dulles papers, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

37. Memorandum of conversation by Bond, Nov. 30, 1954, *FRUS*: 1952–54, Vol. XIV, p. 961.

38. Memorandum of discussion, 221st NSC meeting, Nov. 2., 1954, *ibid.*, p. 827.

39. Memorandum of conversation by Dulles, Jan. 19, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 41.

Although the Joint Chiefs objected to giving up the Dachsens,⁴⁰ Eisenhower accepted Dulles's package. As soon as the new Congress convened, the secretary set to work selling his proposal to the legislature, inviting key members of the House and Senate to the State Department for an explanation of the administration's strategy. Referring to the Nationalist occupation of the offshore islands as "a matter of historic accident, rather than one of military planning," Dulles described the ROC situation on the Dachsens as nearly hopeless. These islands were so close to the mainland and so far from Taiwan that PRC planes could carry out raids and return to base before ROC fighters responded. As a result, defense of the Dachsens would require the use of American aircraft carriers, which, he suggested, could not be spared from more important assignments elsewhere. On the other hand, Jinmen could be covered by the ROC Air Force; in addition, its location opposite the logical staging point for an amphibious assault on Taiwan gave it a strategic value the Dachsens lacked. If the United States did not take the action he proposed, Dulles said, there would occur "a falling of the islands one by one, including Jinmen, involving wiping out more than 100,000 of the best Nationalist troops, a drop in morale on Formosa so that the defense of Formosa would be extremely difficult and might require considerable replacements of Nationalist and United States troops." As to the effect on American prestige: "We would be charged with turning and running and making excuses, and the whole effect on the non-communist countries in Asia would be extremely bad."

Arthur Radford, also present at this session, underlined Dulles's argument regarding the significance of ROC morale. Should Jiang and his people come to believe that they could not rely on the United States, they might decide to throw in the towel. Since Taiwan must not fall to the Communists, Radford continued, this would leave the United States in a bad spot. "We might have to go in ourselves."

Some of the congressional leaders asked what kind of military action could result from the administration's plan. Alexander Wiley, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wanted to know what would happen if the Communists attacked an American aircraft carrier. The Russians, Wiley said, had the best submarines in the world, and they had "more in the Far Eastern area than we have in our total fleet."

40. Joint Intelligence Committee, "Intelligence Estimate of the Situation in the Tachen Islands," Jan. 22, 1955, 381 Formosa, JCS records, National Archives.

Radford responded that the situation was under control. He contended that the Soviet navy would not intervene; if it did, the American fleet could "take care of it."

Wiley asked what the administration would do if Jiang did not agree to evacuate the Dachen. "We would be in a hell of a fix," Dulles admitted. But the Secretary went on to express confidence that with proper persuasion the Nationalists would go along with the administration's plan.⁴¹

Dulles and Radford went from this meeting to a session of the NSC. Allen Dulles, Director of Central Intelligence, described the military buildup in the Dachen area and predicted a major assault at any moment. The ROC position there, he added, was precarious, morale was low and resupply difficult. Even retreat, should Jiang approve evacuation, might prove dangerous and costly.

Eisenhower's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Robert Cutler, contended that the entire offshore islands question required rethinking. Suppose Jiang consented to pull out of the Dachen; wouldn't the United States be more committed to Jinmen than ever? Was this what the administration wanted? Cutler asserted that an American guarantee for Jinmen would "almost certainly involve the United States in military actions on the mainland of Communist China." Communist aircraft, he argued, would attack American planes, which would then pursue the attackers over PRC territory. One thing would lead to another, and before long the U.S. and the PRC would be at war.

Eisenhower responded that in some respects the matter was out of American hands. If the Communists wanted war, he said, there was "nothing we could do to prevent it." But the president added that he agreed with Dulles that the proposed strategy, by making more explicit the nature of America's intentions, would actually decrease the risk of war. At the moment, the administration's China policy was in a condition of "dangerous drift." Something must be done to recapture control of the situation.

Foster Dulles conceded that drawing a line around Jinmen would involve a risk of general war with the PRC, but he gave such an outcome "less than a 50-50 chance." Beijing, the secretary asserted, did not want to "get tough with us in a big way" just yet.

Treasury Secretary George Humphrey raised the issue of Moscow's objectives. "Nothing in the world," he argued, "would please Soviet Russia so

41. Memorandum of conversation, Jan. 20, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955-57, Vol. II, p. 55.

much as to get the United States involved in hostilities with Communist China.”

Eisenhower granted that Humphrey was probably right, but still the president chose to follow Dulles’s lead. Eisenhower admitted that the offshore islands would be difficult to defend, and he understood the larger hazards their defense involved. But the “psychological consequences” of allowing a Communist takeover were too great to accept. The administration faced a “concrete test” of its resolve, and it could not back down. Adjourning the meeting, the president directed Dulles to move ahead with his proposal.⁴²

On January 24 the White House sent a message to Congress explaining American policy with respect to Taiwan and the offshore islands. Describing the “pattern of aggression” by the PRC against Nationalist positions, and declaring that the seizure of Taiwan by an unfriendly power would “seriously dislocate” the Western position in the Pacific, Eisenhower asserted the necessity of taking firm measures “designed to improve the prospects for peace,” including preparations for the use of American military power. Reiterating Dulles’s point that the present deployment of ROC forces was the result of “historical rather than military reasons”—but without mentioning the *Dachens* by name—the president declared that the United States stood ready to help the ROC “redeploy and consolidate” its troops. He urged speedy ratification of the ROC mutual-security treaty. Most significantly, he requested special congressional authorization to commit American forces to the Strait, but “only in situations which are recognizable as parts of, or definite preliminaries to, an attack against the main positions of Formosa and the *Pescadores*.”⁴³

With this statement the administration sought to reassure Jiang, his congressional supporters, and everyone else who might be listening that it considered Taiwan worth a fight; at the same time it avoided an explicit commitment to the offshore islands. Dulles earlier had spoken of the desirability of clearing up confusion about American policy in the Strait, but while working on the president’s message he had concluded that it would be best not “to nail the flag to the mast” regarding particular islands.⁴⁴ As a result,

42. Memorandum of discussion, 232nd NSC meeting, Jan. 20, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 69.

43. Eisenhower message to Congress, Jan. 24, 1955, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1955* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 207.

44. Memorandum of discussion, 233rd NSC meeting, Jan. 21, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 89; memorandum of conversation, Jan. 21, 1955, CA 306.11a, State Department records, National Archives.

any decision on the use of American forces in the Taiwan area remained up to President Eisenhower, whose military judgment few legislators would care to challenge.

Eisenhower's Approach: Focusing the Commitment Still Further

Politically, Dulles's maneuver proved an immediate success. The House at once passed the "Formosa Resolution," authorizing the administration to commit American forces in the Strait; the Senate, despite some last-minute worries on the secretary's part,⁴⁵ concurred a few days later. For good measure, the Senate ratified the mutual-defense treaty by an overwhelming margin.⁴⁶

On the Asian front the reaction was mixed. Jiang grumbled but went along with the Dachen evacuation, evidently believing that by doing so he was tying the United States more closely than ever to Jinmen and Mazu. Zhou Enlai publicly reaffirmed Beijing's view that Taiwan was "an inalienable part of China's territory," and he denounced the United States for shielding "the traitorous Chiang Kai-shek clique."⁴⁷ Through private channels as well, the PRC premier took a hard line, emphasizing that the American statement left little room for compromise. "It was a war message," he told a British diplomat. Obviously intending that his comments be passed along, Zhou declared that China was not afraid of the United States and would fight to defend its interests.⁴⁸

The Russian response was harder to gauge. From Moscow, Ambassador Bohlen cabled the opinion that although the Kremlin showed "no inclination" to initiate hostilities over an area as peripheral to vital Soviet interests as Taiwan, Moscow could not allow the United States to bully a fellow socialist country. Soviet leaders, Bohlen contended, would face "a terrible dilemma" if war broke out. "Confronted with a choice between involvement in a war in which they had no direct interest and abandonment of their chief and

45. Dulles telephone conversation, Jan. 25, 1955, Dulles papers, Eisenhower Library.

46. On the Formosa Resolution, the vote in the House was 410 to 3; in the Senate, 83 to 3. The Senate ratified the treaty by a vote of 65 to 6.

47. In Noble Franklin, ed., *Documents on International Affairs 1955* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 445-446.

48. Zhou's remarks in memorandum from British government to U.S. State Department, Jan. 28, 1955, *FRUS: 1955-57*, Vol. II, p. 157. The British chargé d'affaires, Humphrey Trevelyan, describes this conversation in greater detail in *Living with the Communists: China, 1953-5; Soviet Union, 1962-5* (Boston: Gambit, 1972), pp. 142-144.

possibly only real ally in [the] world, it is impossible in advance to say which decision would be made." Bohlen added that no matter what Moscow decided, there existed definite limits on the ability of the Kremlin to keep the PRC in line. "It seems increasingly obvious that [the] Soviet Government does not have [a] controlling influence [on] Chinese actions."⁴⁹

In Washington, the American intelligence community sifted through these and other reports and concluded that although Beijing was probably not looking for a large war, with passing time the Communists would become "increasingly impatient and less cautious" and might "miscalculate" American responses. There existed, therefore, a significant possibility that the United States and the PRC would find themselves in a conflict neither intended. Should this happen, the analysts asserted, Beijing would probably do "all in its power" to bring in the Soviet Union. Moscow would not eagerly join the fight but would, in the last analysis, "give the Chinese Communists whatever local military support appeared necessary to preserve the Sino-Soviet alliance and prevent the destruction of the regime."⁵⁰

Eisenhower and Dulles were no more sanguine. At a January 27 meeting of the NSC, the president said that Moscow seemed to be encouraging Chinese aggression. The Russians, he declared, were "undoubtedly doing all they could to involve the United States in Asia and in a general war with Communist China." Dulles agreed, pointing to the political and diplomatic advantages the Kremlin stood to gain, especially in Europe, from American overcommitment to the Far East. In Britain particularly, the secretary said, a wave of anti-Americanism could be expected to follow the outbreak of hostilities between the United States and the PRC.⁵¹

Radford, as usual, viewed the situation with greater optimism. Russia and the PRC, the JCS chairman said, were "bluffing." The administration should call the Communists' bluff. And if war with the PRC did come—well, worse could happen. The Joint Chiefs were not foolish enough to be planning a land war against the hundreds of millions of Chinese; fighting would take place only at sea and in the air, where the United States enjoyed overwhelming superiority. The worst difficulties in such a conflict would be wholly on

49. Moscow (U.S. Embassy) to State Department, Jan. 27, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57. Vol. II, p. 147.

50. Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 100-3-55): "Communist Reactions to Certain Possible U.S. Courses of Action with respect to the Islands off the Coast of China," Jan. 25, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 125.

51. Memorandum of discussion, 234th NSC meeting, Jan. 27, 1955, *ibid.*, p. 135.

Beijing's side, starting with how to "get at us if we don't choose to be got at."⁵²

Through the first half of February, the administration concentrated on helping the ROC evacuate the Dachsens. Unsure whether Communist forces would contest the retreat, American military officials took no chances. With Eisenhower's approval,⁵³ the JCS gave the commander of the Seventh Fleet authority to conduct reprisals against bases from which attacks on American forces originated.⁵⁴ At the same time, the Joint Chiefs ordered the Strategic Air Command (SAC) to begin, on an "urgent basis," target selection for an "enlarged atomic offensive" against the PRC.⁵⁵

Although the evacuation itself went unchallenged by the PRC, the administration had no time to relax. While PRC units moved into the Dachsens, Beijing maintained its propaganda offensive, increased its military buildup opposite Taiwan, and rejected an invitation from UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld to send a representative to the UN to discuss a peaceful resolution of the conflict.⁵⁶

Eisenhower found the Communists' actions downright provocative. "You know," he told Press Secretary James Hagerty, "they are certainly doing everything they can to try our patience. It's awfully difficult to remain calm under these situations. Sometimes I think that it would be best all around to go after them right now without letting them pick their time and the place of their own choosing."⁵⁷

Although Eisenhower in this instance was essentially letting off steam, the administration began girding psychologically for war. New intelligence reports indicated that the PRC and the Soviet Union might consider a small-scale conflict to their advantage; the same reports indicated a strong possibility that such a war would not remain limited.⁵⁸ Dulles returned from Taipei,

52. *Ibid.*; memorandum of conversation, Jan. 27, 1955, CA 306.11, State Department records, National Archives.

53. Radford to Nathan Twining et al., Feb. 5, 1955, CCS 381, JCS records, National Archives; Hagerty diary, Jan. 29, 1955, Hagerty papers, Eisenhower Library.

54. Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) to U.S. Army, Pacific (USARPAC) et al., Jan. 30, 1955, CCS 381, JCS records, National Archives.

55. JCS to Commander, Strategic Air Command (COMSAC), Feb. 1, 1955, CCS 381, JCS records, National Archives.

56. *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1955, p. 1.

57. Hagerty diary, Feb. 3, 1955, Hagerty papers, Eisenhower Library.

58. Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 11-4-55): "Review of Current Communist Attitudes toward General War," Feb. 15, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955-57, Vol. II, p. 273; Robert Totten for

where he had delivered the mutual-defense treaty, convinced that the problem in the Strait was “much more virulent” than he had realized. The United States, Dulles said, must prepare itself for a “quite serious showdown.”⁵⁹ The secretary told the NSC that he saw “at least an even chance” that the United States would have to fight. Although the administration had avoided an explicit commitment to Jinmen and Mazu, much of the world considered the defense of those islands a test of American resolve, and if the Communists attacked, the United States might have to hit back. Dulles went so far as to declare that war was “a question of time rather than a question of fact.” Having been “pretty well convinced” by the arguments of Radford and the military chiefs, he believed that such a war would quickly go nuclear. But he hoped the administration could find a way to delay the conflict, in order “to create a better public climate for the use of atomic weapons.”⁶⁰

Eisenhower concurred on the advantages of playing for time,⁶¹ and during the next few days the administration set about trying to foster the “better climate” Dulles spoke of. On March 12 the secretary described “new and powerful weapons of precision” which American scientists had added to the free world’s arsenal, explaining that these devices could “utterly destroy military targets without endangering unrelated civilian centers.” Dulles added that the administration was prepared to use these weapons in the event of war in the Strait.⁶² Vice President Richard Nixon offered his opinion that “tactical atomic weapons are now conventional and will be used against the targets of any aggressive force.”⁶³ Eisenhower, asked whether such comments accurately reflected administration policy, responded, “in any combat where these things can be used on strictly military targets and for strictly military purposes, I see no reason why they shouldn’t be used, just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else.”⁶⁴ European on-lookers, especially the British, reacted strongly, feeling that the U.S. was treading far too close to war.

Joint Intelligence Group to Radford, Mar. 16, 1955, 091 China, Radford files, JCS records, National Archives.

59. Minutes of cabinet meeting, Mar. 11, 1955, Eisenhower papers, Eisenhower Library.

60. Memorandum of discussion, 240th NSC meeting, Mar. 10, 1955, *FRUS: 1955–57*, Vol. II, p. 345; memorandum for the record, Mar. 11, 1955, Dulles papers, Eisenhower Library.

61. Memorandum for the record, Mar. 11, 1955, Eisenhower papers, Eisenhower Library.

62. Townsend Hoopes, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), pp. 278–279.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

64. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, p. 239.

Behind the scenes, the president sent his closest personal aide, Colonel Andrew Goodpaster, to Honolulu to confer with the American Pacific commander, Admiral Felix Stump. Stump reassured Goodpaster that the Communists were not quite ready to start a war. Preparations for a full-scale assault on Mazu, Stump said, would require at least another month, while the groundwork for an invasion of Jinmen would take twice as long. Thus, he believed, the president and the secretary would probably get the period of grace they desired.⁶⁵

But time only strained the situation more. Through the first part of April, American intelligence sources reported continuing Communist reinforcement of the Taiwan area.⁶⁶ ROC military leaders requested American support—which Eisenhower refused—for mine-laying operations in the Jinmen channel.⁶⁷ Radford began agitating for preemptive strikes against PRC airbases, arguing that such moves made sense not only militarily but politically. In the event war came, Radford said, critics would be likely to ask “Pearl Harbor type” questions if the administration were caught at a disadvantage. Radford also asserted that the crisis in the Far East would not end until China got a “bloody nose,” and he advocated a declaration to the effect that the United States would consider further strengthening of Communist positions provocative.⁶⁸ In addition, lest any confusion exist in the minds of the Communists, he advocated telling Beijing and Moscow directly that the United States would use “all means available” to defend the offshore islands.⁶⁹

Eisenhower rejected Radford’s advice, and resisted subsequent recommendations for bombing PRC radar complexes, sending nuclear-armed rocket batteries and a division of American troops to Taiwan, or shifting an additional Strategic Air Command bomber wing to the Pacific.⁷⁰ Less convinced

65. Goodpaster memorandum to Eisenhower, Mar. 15, 1955, Eisenhower papers, Eisenhower Library.

66. Stump to Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Carney, Apr. 8, 1955, 381 Formosa, JCS records, National Archives; Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group (CHMAAG) Formosa to JCS, Apr. 7, 1955, *ibid.*

67. Radford in memorandum for the record, Mar. 11, 1955, Eisenhower papers, Eisenhower Library; CNO to CINCPAC, Apr. 6, 1955, 381 Formosa, JCS records, National Archives.

68. Memorandum of conversation, Mar. 26, 1955, *FRUS: 1955–57*, Vol. II, p. 400.

69. Radford to Wilson, Mar. 27, 1955, 091 China, Radford files, JCS records, National Archives.

70. See CHMAAG Formosa to CINCPAC, Mar. 27, 1955, 381 Formosa, JCS records, National Archives; Ridgway to Radford, Apr. 5, 1955, *FRUS: 1955–57*, Vol. II, p. 452; Herbert Hoover, Jr. to Dulles, Apr. 1, 1955, *ibid.*, p. 439; Gen. William Chase to Stump, Apr. 8, 1955, *ibid.*, p. 465; Radford briefing paper, Mar. 31, 1955, 091 China, Radford files, JCS records, National Archives.

than Dulles that a war was at hand, and less eager than Radford to start one, Eisenhower refused to be rushed into anything.

All the same, the president realized that events could not be allowed to continue on their present course. As he argued in a note to Dulles, the administration was widely perceived to be committed, politically if not legally, to the defense of Jinmen and Mazu, territory it considered essentially unimportant. If the Communists decided to attack, the United States might find itself in a major war it did not wish to fight. On the other hand, he continued, for the administration to renounce a defense of the offshore islands would invite Communist adventurism abroad and conservative criticism at home. Something had to be done. "The only logical course of action is to attempt to bring about reasonable changes in the situation rather than to remain inert awaiting the inevitable moment of decision between two unacceptable choices."⁷¹

Eisenhower proposed a diplomatic initiative designed to persuade Jiang to reconsider the importance of the islands—to convince him that they should be treated as "outposts," which, while important, were not essential to the security of Taiwan proper. The objective, the president said, would be to "make clear that neither Chiang nor ourselves is committed to *full-out* defense of Quemoy and the Matsus, so that no matter what the outcome of an attack upon them, there would be no danger of a collapse of the free world position in the region." If Jiang agreed, the United States would step up its military aid program, increase the American air group already on Taiwan to a full wing, and send "a couple of regiments of Marines" for moral support.⁷² After further consideration, Eisenhower decided to improve the offer by including a promise to deploy nuclear weapons on Taiwan and to blockade the China coast in the area of the Strait.⁷³

Even so, Eisenhower recognized, Jiang might balk at giving up the offshore islands—which is what, in essence, the president's proposal amounted to⁷⁴—

71. Eisenhower to Dulles, Apr. 5, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 445.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Memorandum of conversation by Dulles, Apr. 17, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 491; memorandum for record by Rankin, Apr. 29, 1955, Rankin papers, Princeton. For further details, see Gordon H. Chang, "To the Nuclear Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 96–122.

74. This point came up in the 1960 election campaign, with the Democrats alleging that the Eisenhower administration had attempted to persuade Jiang to withdraw from Jinmen and Mazu, and the Republicans denying the charge. In his memoirs, Eisenhower took pains to defend his actions in the affair, reproducing part of the memorandum in which he outlined the plan to Dulles, as a means of demonstrating that he had no intention of forcing Jiang back from

and he argued that on psychological and other grounds the administration must move cautiously. "To protect the prestige of Jiang and the morale of his forces, any alteration in military and political planning should obviously be developed under his leadership; above all, there must be no basis for public belief that the alterations came about through American intervention or coercion."⁷⁵ For this delicate mission, Eisenhower first sought the services of Congressman Walter Judd, who was even more outspoken than Knowland in his devotion to the welfare of the ROC. The Minnesota Republican initially agreed, but upon reconsideration backed out.⁷⁶ Eisenhower then tapped Walter Robertson and Arthur Radford, both of whom were known for their strong support of the ROC.⁷⁷

While the president laid plans for softening up Jiang, Dulles took advantage of the approaching Bandung conference of Asian and African nations to work the diplomatic back channels. Hoping that Zhou would want to make a peaceful impression at what was, in some respects, the PRC's coming-out party, Dulles directed the State Department to advise America's Asian friends how to encourage Zhou's conciliatory tendencies. To the governments of Japan, Pakistan, Thailand, Iran, Iraq, and Egypt, the department sent suggestions that their attitudes at Bandung might have a signal effect on whether there would be peace or war in the Far East.⁷⁸ To the Philippine government the administration provided a draft resolution for submission at Bandung calling on all parties "to renounce forthwith the use of force or the threat of force" in the Taiwan Strait.⁷⁹ To the British, whose Commonwealth connections provided a reliable communications link to India, Dulles said

the islands. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change 1953-1956* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 481, 611-612. In a narrow sense, Eisenhower was right. The president did not feel he was in any position, politically or diplomatically, to force Jiang to retreat from Jinmen and Mazu. Nonetheless, he would have been delighted had Jiang made such a decision on his own, and the essential purpose of the Robertson-Radford mission was to encourage such thinking. In particular, Eisenhower wanted Jiang to begin treating the islands as "outposts," i.e., as expendable. Jiang, of course, saw where such an idea would lead, which is why he rejected it. Stephen Ambrose, in Eisenhower's defense, suggests that Robertson and Radford missed the subtlety of Eisenhower's plan. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, p. 244. What seems more likely is that they, with Jiang, simply thought through the "outpost" notion to its logical conclusion and were willing to call a spade a spade.

75. Eisenhower to Dulles, Apr. 5, 1955, *FRUS: 1955-57*, Vol. II, p. 445.

76. Dulles telephone conversation, Apr. 11, 1955, Dulles papers, Eisenhower Library.

77. Indeed, before accepting their assignment, both men expressed doubts about the President's basic idea. Dulles telephone conversation, Apr. 13, 1955, Dulles papers, Eisenhower Library.

78. State Department to U.S. Embassy, Ankara et al., Apr. 8, 1955, *FRUS: 1955-57*, Vol. II, p. 466.

79. Attachment to memorandum of conversation, Apr. 8, 1955, *ibid.*, p. 465.

that if assurances could be obtained through Bandung that the Communists would not attack Taiwan itself and would leave the offshore islands “to be fought for,” such a guarantee would be a “considerable contribution.”⁸⁰

Jiang doubtless would have been infuriated had he learned that the administration was suggesting to other governments that the islands should be “fought for”; as it was, he found the mission of Robertson and Radford distasteful enough. Rumors had drifted from Washington to Taipei that their aim was to get Jiang to give up Jinmen and Mazu. On learning that the rumors were essentially correct, Jiang was, as Robertson described it, “visibly shaken.”⁸¹ For five hours the two emissaries tried to explain the advantages of the administration’s proposal, but Jiang would have none of it. He accused the United States of renegeing on the agreement he claimed it had made at the time of the evacuation of the Dachens. Robertson replied that the United States had committed itself only to the security of Taiwan, not to Jinmen and Mazu. In any event, Robertson added, the situation had changed since January; President Eisenhower was now convinced that he could not use American forces for the defense of the offshore islands without a “large loss” of public support at home and abroad. The United States government was not, Robertson continued, telling Jiang how to manage ROC affairs, and certainly was not ordering him to give up the offshore islands. It was merely saying that he had better not count on American help in defending them.

But Jiang refused to budge. Even if the United States would not stand and fight, he and his people would. They had retreated far enough. “Soldiers,” he said, “must choose proper places to die. Chinese soldiers consider Quemoy [and] Matsu are proper places for them.”⁸²

Off the Hook—for the Moment

Jiang’s rejection of Eisenhower’s proposal would have left the administration in as precarious a position as before,⁸³ had not the Communists suddenly

80. Memorandum of conversation, Apr. 7, 1955, *ibid.*, p. 453. The full extent of American pressure on allies and clients attending the Bandung conference remains unclear. A sense of that pressure can be inferred from a reference by C. D. Jackson, former White House aide and still administration insider, to “some heavy work by Allen Dulles’ boys” in preparing friendly Asian states for the conference. Jackson to John Jessup, Oct. 5, 1955, Jackson papers, Eisenhower Library.

81. Taipei (U.S. Embassy) to State Department, Apr. 25, 1955, *FRUS: 1955–57*, Vol. II, p. 509.

82. Summary of conversation in Robertson to Dulles, Apr. 25, 1955, *ibid.*, p. 510.

83. Eisenhower’s initial reaction was to tell Dulles, “We are still on the horns of the dilemma.” Eisenhower to Dulles, Apr. 26, 1955, *ibid.*, p. 522.

decided to call a halt to the confrontation in the Strait. Dulles had hoped Bandung might produce motion toward a settlement, but he hardly expected Zhou's "sensational initiative," as Kenneth Young, the director of the State Department's Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs, described it.⁸⁴ At a luncheon hosted by the Prime Minister of Ceylon, and later at the closing session of the Bandung conference, Zhou declared that China did not want war with the United States, and he proposed negotiations to ease tension in the vicinity of Taiwan.⁸⁵

Eisenhower seized the offer,⁸⁶ and within a short time the immediate crisis was over. The details of the dénouement required some time to work out, but over the next few months the shelling of the islands stopped, the PRC released the American prisoners from the Korean war, and American and PRC representatives began direct discussions.⁸⁷

The Administration came away from the crisis congratulating itself on its skillful handling of a dangerous business. Dulles publicly asserted that the Taiwan Strait affair proved the worth of the administration's bold approach to foreign policy. "Some say we were brought to the verge of war," he declared. "Of course we were brought to the verge of war. . . . If you run away from it, if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost."⁸⁸ Eisenhower boasted in his memoirs that he had steered a steady course "through narrow and dangerous waters between appeasement and global war." He declared that during the eight months of the crisis "the Administration moved through treacherous cross-currents with one channel leading to peace with honor and a hundred channels leading to war or dishonor."⁸⁹

Recent students of the Eisenhower era have concurred with this judgment, paying tribute especially to the manner in which the president kept his

84. Kenneth T. Young, *Negotiating with the Chinese Communists: The United States Experience 1953–1967* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 44. As to Dulles's expectations regarding Bandung, in the wake of Zhou's proposal the secretary of state commented that conference had come out far better than expected, that "the friendly Asian countries" had "put on an amazing performance." Minutes of cabinet meeting, Apr. 29, 1955, Eisenhower papers, Eisenhower Library.

85. *New York Times*, Apr. 23, 1955, p. 1, and Apr. 24, 1955, p. 1. Opinions differ as to why the PRC chose to back down at this time. Kalicki, for example, emphasizes the deterrent effect of American statements in prompting PRC leaders to shift to non-belligerent tactics in their quest to gain Taiwan. Kalicki, *Patterns of Sino-American Crises*, pp. 150–152. Stolper places greater weight on domestic political developments in the PRC, adding that Beijing retreated partly to prevent the issue of the offshore islands from being separated from the question of Taiwan. Stolper, *China, Taiwan, and the Offshore Islands*, pp. 98–108.

86. See Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, p. 244.

87. See Young, *Negotiating with the Chinese Communists*, p. 45 ff.

88. James Shepley, "How Dulles Averted War," *Life*, Jan. 16, 1956, p. 70 ff.

89. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, p. 483.

intentions hidden at the moments of greatest stress.⁹⁰ The administration did avoid war, and it emerged from the crisis with its basic objective, a secure Taiwan, intact. Eisenhower deserves credit for resisting repeated advice from the military to draw a nuclear line around the islands.

On the other hand, one cannot escape the fact that the crisis in the Strait was largely self-inflicted. "Perhaps," Dulles said, at the March NSC meeting in which he predicted at least an even chance of war, "we should have taken this problem more seriously at an earlier time."⁹¹ Through inattention more than anything else, the administration allowed the idea to develop that American credibility was connected to the defense of the islands. Had Eisenhower or Dulles stated plainly, before the issue became a center of world attention, that Taiwan itself was what they were interested in, events would not have taken them to the edge of war over territory they deemed fundamentally insignificant.

Further, the outcome was nothing to brag about. Taiwan was safe—but its security had never been in serious doubt, as American intelligence sources reported from the beginning. And the administration, by signing a treaty with the ROC and publicly committing itself to the defense of Taiwan, had narrowed its options for the future. In this respect Jiang, not Eisenhower and Dulles, was the big winner. As for the offshore islands, the cause of all the trouble, their future remained as uncertain as ever. They continued to be hostages to the PRC, ready for use whenever the Communists needed a pretext for confrontation with the West. Not surprisingly, when Beijing sought such a confrontation three years later, the administration was again forced nearly to war.⁹²

Ratifying the New Look

These considerations raise some basic questions regarding the crisis. Why, really, did the administration make such a fuss over the islands? Why did it risk damage to friendly relations with the Europeans, whose cooperation was far more central to American security than Taiwan's ever would be?

90. See Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, pp. 65–66; and Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, p. 245.

91. Memorandum of discussion, 240th NSC meeting, Mar. 10, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 345.

92. On the second Taiwan Strait crisis, see Stolper, *China, Taiwan, and the Offshore Islands*, ch. 8 and bibliography; Gordon, *United States Opposition to Use of Force*; Kalicki, *Pattern of Sino-American Crises*, ch. 8; and George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, ch. 12.

Why did it scare the wits out of half the world by openly threatening nuclear war?

Political and diplomatic factors played an important role, of course. No Republican administration could lightly disregard the wishes of the China bloc, a significant element of its party. And Eisenhower certainly sought to avoid the appearance of retreating in the face of aggression. Superpowers, he believed, have reputations to maintain.

But a more complete answer would seem to lie in the fundamental strategic posture of the United States in 1954. Ten months before the crisis in the Strait began, Eisenhower approved NSC 162/2, which effected a basic change in American national security policy. Asserting that a sound economy was as essential to American defense as a strong military establishment, and that the United States could not afford both a conventional and a nuclear deterrent, NSC 162/2 authorized early use of nuclear weapons in any conflict with the Communists.⁹³ The paper itself, of course, was top secret, but on the obvious grounds that a deterrent only deters if the other side knows about it, the administration soon made the new policy public. In a widely noted address of January 1954, Dulles described what was quickly dubbed the doctrine of "massive retaliation," declaring that the United States was prepared to make use of its "massive retaliatory power" to punish aggression by responding "vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing."⁹⁴

From the beginning, massive retaliation ran into credibility problems. The Soviets also possessed atomic weapons; would the United States risk escalation and retaliation in circumstances not involving vital American interests? Many observers thought not. Nor did the events of the first part of 1954, when the Eisenhower administration made threatening sounds about military intervention in Indochina but, in the end, let the French lose, do anything to silence the skeptics.⁹⁵

93. The operative sentence was: "In the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions." NSC 162/2, Oct. 30, 1953, *FRUS*: 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 577. Although it is now somewhat dated, Glenn H. Snyder's "The 'New Look' of 1953," in Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn H. Snyder, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962) remains in many ways the most sophisticated treatment of the revised policy.

94. Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 147.

95. For the debate over massive retaliation, see Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, ch. 5; Paul Peeters, *Massive Retaliation: The Policy and Its Critics* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959); and Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 103 ff.

What the administration faced, therefore, in the autumn of 1954, was an erosion of credibility of its nuclear deterrent, upon which, as cuts in conventional forces proceeded, the administration was placing more and more reliance. Popular antipathy toward nuclear weapons was growing, heightened particularly when an American hydrogen-bomb test showered lethal fallout on the crew of a Japanese fishing boat.⁹⁶ It therefore appeared to administration leaders that the longer the United States went without using nuclear weapons, or without at least making a serious show of considering their use, the less of a deterrent they would become.

That this unsettling trend played a significant role in administration thinking shows most clearly in the record of an NSC meeting at the height of the crisis. Radford, who had been advocating giving the Communists a “bloody nose” from the outset, repeated his advice, and he reminded the president that the “whole military structure” of the United States had been built around an assumption of the availability of nuclear weapons. Dulles, who often differed significantly with Radford, admitted in this case that perhaps the JCS chairman was right. The Communists, Dulles said, probably would not take the administration seriously until it decided to “shoot off a gun” in the area. He added that very shortly the United States would have “to face up to the question whether its military program was or was not in fact designed to permit the use of atomic weapons.” If the Administration continued to allow popular sentiment against nuclear weapons to grow, “we might wake up one day and discover that we were inhibited in the use of these weapons by a negative public opinion.” Having just returned from a visit to the Pacific, the secretary of state noted “very great concern on the part of our military people in the Formosa area with respect to this particular problem.” Dulles asserted that it was a matter of “vital importance” that American leaders “urgently educate our own and world opinion as to the necessity for the tactical use of atomic weapons.” If they could not make these weapons usable, he concluded, “our entire military program would have to be drastically revised.”⁹⁷

96. On reactions to the radioactive poisoning of the *Fukuryu Maru*, and to the broader question of nuclear testing, see Robert A. Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate 1954–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

97. Memorandum of discussion, 240th NSC meeting, Mar. 10, 1955, *FRUS*: 1955–57, Vol. II, p. 345. Although possessing considerably less influence than Dulles and Radford, Rankin agreed on the possible need for war. “A military engagement,” he told Robertson, “may well be necessary to convince the enemy that we mean business.” Rankin to Robertson, Mar. 13, 1955, Rankin papers, Princeton.

In view of these arguments and public statements by the administration, it seems inescapable that much of the intensity of the affair derived from a desire on the part of American officials to enhance the credibility of their basic defense posture. It would be too much to say that the administration as a whole was deliberately looking for an excuse to demonstrate its resolve to use nuclear weapons, although Radford seems to have been. But it would appear that once administration officials found themselves confronted with a challenge, their wish to prove the plausibility of the nuclear threat made them disinclined to look for a peaceful resolution. Had matters remained entirely under their control, their propensity toward escalation might not have mattered much. Dangerously, as they soon discovered, events did *not* remain under their control, and the situation eased only when the PRC chose to call off the confrontation.

Perhaps, then, the significant lesson of the Taiwan Strait affair involves the unanticipated effect in crisis situations of decisions made in other areas for other reasons. Eisenhower adopted the “New Look” of NSC 162/2 largely as a cost-cutting measure. While he obviously understood that greater reliance on atomic weapons would limit his choices in the future, he surely did not anticipate losing control of the decision whether to go to nuclear war over some inconsequential islands off China. In itself, this fact is not especially remarkable; history abounds with unforeseen consequences. Nonetheless, at present, when American leaders are debating the merits of shifts in defense planning hardly less radical than Eisenhower’s New Look—the Strategic Defense Initiative, for example, or the Maritime Strategy—the example of how an analogous change three decades ago contributed materially to a close brush with war bears pondering.