

The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-55 and U.S.-R.O.C Relations

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Abstract

On September 3, 1954, Chinese artillery began shelling Quemoy (Jinmen), one of the Kuomintang-held offshore islands, setting off the first Taiwan Strait Crisis. This paper focuses on the crisis and analyzes the following three questions: (1) What was the policy the U.S. took towards the Republic of China (R.O.C), especially towards the offshore islands, to try to end the Taiwan Strait Crisis? (2) What were the intentions of the U.S. government in trying to end the Taiwan Strait Crisis? And (3) how should U.S. policy towards the R.O.C. which led to solving the Taiwan Strait Crisis be positioned in the history of Sino-American relations? Through analysis of these questions, this study concludes that the position the U.S. took to bring an end to crisis, one which prevented China from “liberating Taiwan” and the Kuomintang from “attacking the mainland,” brought about the existence of a de facto “two-China” situation.

Keywords: Taiwan Strait Crisis, Quemoy, Jinmen, U.S.-R.O.C. Relations, Two-China

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Introduction

On September 3, 1954, Chinese artillery began shelling Quemoy (Jinmen), one of the Kuomintang-held offshore islands, setting off the first Taiwan Strait Crisis. This paper focuses on the crisis and analyzes the following three questions: (1) What was the policy the U.S. took towards the Republic of China (R.O.C), especially towards the offshore islands, to try to end the Taiwan Strait Crisis? (2) What were the intentions of the U.S. government in trying to end the Taiwan Strait Crisis? And (3) how should U.S. policy towards the R.O.C. which led to solving the Taiwan Strait Crisis be positioned in the history of Sino-American relations? Through analysis of these questions, this study concludes that the position the U.S. took to bring an end to crisis, one which prevented China from “liberating Taiwan” and the Kuomintang from “attacking the mainland,” brought about the existence of a de facto “two-China” situation.

1. The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-55 and Its Post-Cold War Implications

Following the end of the Cold War, China began to display its military might against Taiwan which provoked a new Taiwan Strait Crisis.¹ The visit by Taiwan’s President Lee Teng-hui to the U.S. in June 1995 sparked the rise in tension between China and Taiwan. Increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait peaked during Taiwan’s presidential election in March 1996, at which time the U.S. sent an aircraft carrier into the Taiwan Strait in a demonstration of force towards China.

The outbreak of a new Taiwan Strait Crisis posed a threat to surrounding countries in East

¹ James R. Lilley and Chuck Downs, eds., *Crisis in the Taiwan Strait*, National Defense University Press, 1997.

Asia. In April 1996, in the aftermath of the crisis, the Japan-U.S. Joint Security Declaration was announced between those two countries. At the same time both countries redefined the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty and took the opportunity to review the Guidelines for Defense Cooperation. The problem of whether Taiwan should be contained within the Guidelines' scope of application, referred to as "circumference matters," became one of the critical issues in the process of the review. Ultimately Taiwan's inclusion in these matters was left as "ambiguous."

Historically speaking there have been two Taiwan Strait crises, the first which broke out in the mid 1950s during the Cold War period, the second in the mid 1990s after the normalization of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China in 1979 and the end of the Cold War. The normalization of Sino-American diplomatic relations drastically changed Taiwan's international position. However, the U.S. has maintained its defensive commitment to Taiwan even after the break in diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the Republic of China (R.O.C.) and the expiration of the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty. Moreover, this commitment has not changed even in the post-Cold War period.²

Further evidence of this commitment has been the movement toward realizing the passage of the "Taiwan Security Enhancement Act" in the U.S. Congress since the spring of 1999. Were this bill to be approved, it would allow the U.S. to provide Taiwan with weapons having offensive capabilities, a break with the U.S. stance of providing Taiwan with weapons for defensive purposes only.³ Such a change would undoubtedly increase the strain between

² Nancy B. Tucker, *Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States, 1945-1992: Uncertain Friendship*, Twayne Publishers, 1994.

³ *Washington Post*, October 3, 1999, p. A26.

China and Taiwan which would in turn increase the possibility of a new Taiwan Strait crisis involving the United States. It is my intention in this paper to examine the implications of the past Taiwan Strait crises, most specifically the first one of 1954-55,⁴ in order to help avoid the outbreak of disputes between China and Taiwan which could lead to a new Taiwan Strait crisis and a possible breakdown in relations between China and the U.S.

2. Interpretations of the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-55

In September 1954 Chinese artillery began shelling Quemoy, one of the Kuomintang-held offshore islands, and the opening phase (the so-called “September Crisis”) of the first “Taiwan Strait Crisis” broke out. The U.S. Eisenhower administration ordered the 7th Fleet to recommence patrolling the Taiwan Strait. Following the Korean War, the Taiwan Strait Crisis was a time bomb, which could have brought about a large-scale military collision between the U.S. and China once again. The United States, however, chose not to follow a path which could have led to a direct military confrontation with China. It chose instead to take various peaceful approaches to settling the situation.

⁴ The reason that the accumulation of studies referring to the 1954-55 Taiwan Strait Crisis has not been so substantial to date is due to the fact that part of the period of the crisis, which is contained in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-54, Vol. XIV (1) (FRUS)*, was not opened to the public until the 1980s. Furthermore, it is also because the diplomatic relations materials of the Chiang Kai-shek regime were highly inaccessible because Taiwan had been under martial law until 1987. Moreover, it seems there is no chance that the materials detailing what motivated the outbreak of the Taiwan Strait Crisis will be opened to the public, and under present conditions the clues to knowing China’s intentions at the time of the crisis will remain hidden. On the other hand, it has become increasingly clear how the U.S. government responded to the Taiwan Strait Crisis. We have been able to refer to a series of *FRUS* materials from 1952 to 1960, which were published sequentially by the U.S. Department of State after 1985. Also, after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987, efforts have been underway to publish materials relating to the diplomacy of the Nationalist regime in the 1950s and to compile oral records of the people in government at that time.

At the beginning of the Taiwan Strait Crisis no consensus existed in the U.S. about whether the offshore islands were substantially related to the defense of Taiwan and the Pescadores which, after being informed of the ending of Taiwan's neutralization in 1953, the U.S. had consistently made clear it was going to protect.⁵ However, with the outbreak of the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954, the U.S. had to grapple with the problem of the offshore islands and their defense. Unlike its clearly expressed intentions to defend the main island of Taiwan and the Pescadores, the U.S. had remained "ambiguous" about the offshore islands and their defense.⁶

In December 1954 the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty was concluded between the U.S. and the Republic of China. This led to the second phase of the strait crisis, the so-called "January Crisis", and the Formosa Resolution was adopted in the U.S. Congress that same month. With these resolutions, the U.S. established the geographical range of its defense support to the R.O.C., which now came to include the offshore islands, and along with the main island and the Pescadores, it began to reinforce the defense capacities of the offshore islands.

Having briefly described the situation existing during the Taiwan Strait Crisis, I would like to focus on the following three questions for further examination: (1) What was the policy the U.S. took towards Taiwan, especially towards the offshore islands, to try to end the crisis? (2) What were the intentions of the U.S. government in trying to end the crisis? And (3), how should the policy that the U.S. took towards the R.O.C., and which led to solving the Taiwan Strait Crisis, be positioned in the history of Sino-American relations?

⁵ China Telegram, 2-8, 9-15 September 1954, Records, Office of Public Opinion Studies, 1943-75, Record Group 59, National Archives.

⁶ Haruka Matsumoto, "U.S. Policy Towards Offshore Islands During the Taiwan Strait Crisis,

U.S. policy towards the R.O.C. during the 1954-55 Taiwan Strait Crisis was separate from that which would provide unquestioned defense support to the R.O.C. in normal times.⁷ As Dulles put it, the U.S. faced a “horrible dilemma” over policy towards the crisis.⁸ This was because the U.S. government felt that there would be the outbreak of an U.S.-China war, much like the Korean War, if U.S. forces entered directly in the defense of Quemoy and the other offshore islands. On the other hand, the U.S. acknowledged that if it overlooked China’s use of force in the Taiwan Strait, Chinese military action would escalate which would destroy the morale of Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang government.⁹ There was also the fear that China would create a break in the so called “defense line of anti-Communist countries” — which ran from the Aleutians through the Japanese Islands, South Korea, the Ryukyus, Taiwan and the Pescadores, the Philippines, part of Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand — which would encourage the Soviet Union to be more aggressive.¹⁰

I will argue in the next section of this paper that the policy taken by the U.S. was based on two ideas: one was to prevent the Kuomintang from “recovering mainland China” and the other was to prevent China from “liberating Taiwan.” In facing the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the United States concentrated on measures to deter China’s use of force in the Taiwan Strait and to prevent the Kuomintang from attacking China in an attempt to return to the mainland. The U.S. felt

1954-55” (Japanese), *History and Future*, Vol.24, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1998.

⁷ *Documentary Collection on U.S. Aid to R.O.C., 1948-1965, Vol. I: Military Construction Projects* (Chinese), pp.1-69, Academia Historica Republic of China, 1995.

⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-54, Vol. XIV (1) (FRUS)*, p.619; Ralph N. Clough, *Island China*, Harvard University Press, 1978, pp.10-14.; Robert Accinelli, *Crisis and Commitment: United States Policy toward Taiwan, 1950-1955*, University of North Carolina, 1996, pp.157-183.

⁹ *FRUS, 1952-54, vol.XIV (1), op. cit.*, pp. 556-557.

¹⁰ *FRUS, 1952-54, vol.XIV (1), op. cit.*, pp. 613-624; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change 1953-1956*, Doubleday & Company, 1963, p. 469.

these would be the factors that would lead to an armed conflict with China. These points had been included in the consistent policy of the U.S. position after the declaration of Taiwan's neutralization in 1950.¹¹ However, following the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the U.S. enforced this position.

As I point out in this paper, the U.S. wove together into its policy both the deterring of China from liberating Taiwan and preventing the Kuomintang from recovering the mainland. Thus I argue that U.S. policy toward Taiwan at the time of the crisis needs to be viewed as one that integrated these two objectives. It can also be seen that while the U.S. was successful in deterring China and restraining the Kuomintang, its policy approach left the U.S. government with no choice other than accepting a de facto "two-China" situation.¹² The next section will examine these issues more thoroughly.

3. "Liberating Taiwan" and "Recovering the Mainland"

Before the outbreak of the September Crisis, provoked by China's shelling of Quemoy, and the onset of the 1954-55 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the People's Republic of China (P.R.C) had existed on the Chinese mainland and the Republic of China (R.O.C) on Taiwan. Moreover, both the P.R.C and the R.O.C held fast to the "one China" tenet, each declaring itself to be the country of China and both emphatically denying a "two-China" or "one-China/one-Taiwan" idea. The position of the U.S. towards the situation was: (1) recognition of the R.O.C and the

¹¹ H. W. Brands, Jr., *Cold Warriors: Eisenhower's Generation and American Foreign Policy*, Columbia University Press, 1988; Su-Ya Chang, "Unleashing Chiang Kai-shek?: Eisenhower and the Policy of Indecision toward Taiwan, 1953," Taiwan Central Study Academy, 1991.

¹² About "two China" concept, see Wang Jisi, "The Origin of America's 'Two China' Policy," Harding and Yuan, eds., *Sino-American Relations, 1945-1955: A Joint Reassessment of a*

establishment of diplomatic while not recognizing or having relations with the P.R.C; (2) approving the R.O.C as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council while excluding the P.R.C. from membership in the United Nations; (3) suspension of all discussion on Taiwan's legal status.¹³

When the Taiwan Strait Crisis broke out in 1954, the U.S. sought to quell the crisis through a series of policy initiatives to settle the situation in the Taiwan Strait. These included deterring China from liberating Taiwan and preventing the Kuomintang from attacking to recover the mainland. Also included was the assumption that there would be no changes to the three above-mentioned policies. In sum the U.S. approach to dealing with the Taiwan Strait Crisis was deterring China and restraining the Kuomintang. The U.S. had already succeeded in preventing Kuomintang military action against the mainland following the ending of Taiwan's neutralization in 1953.¹⁴ During the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the U.S. applied even more pressure to restrain the behavior of the Kuomintang.¹⁵

Following the outbreak of the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the U.S. adapted the following measures. First it concluded the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty in December 1954.¹⁶ This document basically formalized the dual U.S. approach of deterring China and restraining

Critical Decade, op. cit., pp. 198-212.

¹³ Peng, Ming-min and Ng, Yuzin Chiautong, *The Legal Status of Taiwan* (Japanese), the University of Tokyo Press, 1976.

¹⁴ Su-Ya Chang, *op.cit.*, p.382.; Harry Harding, "The Legacy of the Decade for later Years: An American perspective," in Harding and Yuan, eds., *Sino-American Relations, 1945-1955: A Joint Reassessment of a Critical Decade*, Scholarly Resources Inc, 1989, p.321.

¹⁵ *V. K. Wellington Koo Papers*, vol. 11(Chinese), Chinese Oral History Project, China Social Science Academy, 1990, p.182.

¹⁶ Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States of America and the Republic of China, *U.S. Department of States, United States Treaties and Other International Agreements, 1955, vol.6, part 1*, Government Printing Office, 1956, pp.450-454.

the Kuomintang. In the treaty the U.S. officially clarified its intention to defend “the island of Taiwan and the Pescadores”, and deter the “liberataion of Taiwan” by China. At the same time the treaty restrained Kuomintang offensive military action by specifying that the essence of the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty was defensive and not offensive. The fundamental stance of the U.S. was that it would not take part in the Kuomintang’s recovering the mainland, but at the same time, the U.S. concluded a security alliance with the Kuomintang and both parties prepared for a Chinese attack.

The scope of application of the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty was in essence limited to the island of Taiwan and Pescadores while the defense of the offshore islands was left open with a sentence added that the treaty would be applied to other areas as determined by a mutual agreement between the U.S. and Taiwan. The vague position of the treaty regarding the defense of the offshore islands, while not abandoned completely, reflected the U.S. government’s own vagueness on the issue. For the U.S. the primary intent of the treaty was to deter China, and by limiting its range of application to the island of Taiwan and the Pescadores, the U.S. was seeking to prevent any chance of the Kuomintang launching a counterattack against Chinese military action against the offshore islands.

When the Taiwan Strait Crisis reemerged, and Yijiang Island fell to Chinese forces in January 1955, the U.S. moved to strengthen its deterrence against Chinese military action in the strait with the U.S. Senate adoption at that time of the Formosa Resolution.¹⁷ With this

¹⁷ Robert Accinelli “Eisenhower, Congress and the 1954-55 Offshore Island Crisis,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. XX, No.1, winter,1990; Philip J. Briggss, “Congress and the Cold War: U.S.-China Policy, 1955,” *China Quarterly*, 85, March 1981; James M. Lindsay, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy*, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, pp.22-23.

resolution the U.S. was indicating officially the possibility that based on the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty, the U.S. could intervene militarily were Chinese military action extended to the island of Taiwan, the Pescadores, or the offshore islands. The resolution also declared that the authority for a decision to intervene was given to the President of the United States which permitted a quick respond to emergencies in the Taiwan Strait. There were further U.S. efforts to restrain Chinese military action against the offshore islands, but after the passage of the Formosa Resolution, China suspended its offensive against the offshore islands, and the Taiwan Strait Crisis quickly died down.¹⁸

It must also be understood that U.S. military support for the islands of Quemoy and Matsu during the crisis was decided by the top levels of the U.S. government responsible for the defense of the offshore islands, a matter which was not set forth clearly in the Formosa Resolution.¹⁹ The United States had, since the declaration of Taiwan's neutrality in 1950, taken the position to defend the island of Taiwan and the Pescadores from any Chinese military aggression, and up to the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954-55, defensive support for the offshore islands had been left "ambiguous". The crisis caused the U.S. to extend its military support to cover the defense of Quemoy and Matsu islands as well.

At the same time however, the U.S. avoided including the names of Quemoy and Matsu in the defensive support area set forth in the Formosa Resolution despite a request from the R.O.C. This aroused arguments in the R.O.C. about the U.S. commitment which had the consequential effect of deterring Kuomintang military action against China.

¹⁸ House Joint Resolution 159 (84th Congress, 1st Session), January 29, 1955, *U.S. Department of State, American Foreign Policy, 1950-1955 Basic Documents, vol.1/2*, Government Printing Office, 1957, pp.2486-2487.

4. The de facto “two-China” policy of the United States.

The approach that the U.S. took to end the Taiwan Strait Crisis, which prevented China from “liberating Taiwan” and the Kuomintang from “attacking the mainland,” was consistent with the policy stance the U.S. had taken since the neutralization of Taiwan in 1950. However, the U.S. further enforced the policy by undertaking a series of measures including the conclusion of the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty after the 1954-55 Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Meanwhile, deterring China’s liberation of Taiwan and preventing the Kuomintang from recovering the mainland were meant to fix the condition where the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China virtually existed as political entities respectively. This was symbolized by the way the Taiwan Strait Crisis was settled by the U.N. Security Council immediately after the crisis.²⁰ It can be seen that realization of the de facto “present maintenance” of the Taiwan Strait, which the Kuomintang had greatly feared, was enforced by the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty.

The conclusion of the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty brought about U.S. acceptance that a de facto “two-China” situation existed, a by-product that the U.S. government had not intended. However, the de facto acceptance of two Chinas meant that the U.S. accepted the fact that the P.R.C. existed in China and the R.O.C. in Taiwan; it did not mean that the U.S. accepted both governments.

At the Bandung Conference in April 1955, soon after the Taiwan Strait Crisis ended, Chou En-lai sounded out the U.S. on undertaking official dialogue between the two countries.

¹⁹ *FRUS, 1955-57, vol. II: China*, pp.99-104.

²⁰ Rosemary Foot, “The Search for the Modus Vivendi: Anglo-American Relations and China Policy in the Eisenhower Era,” in Warren I. Cohen and Akira Iriye, eds., *The Great*

The U.S. government accepted Chou's offer, and it was decided that ambassador-level talks between the U.S. and China would be held in July 1955.²¹ It could now be said that the U.S. had clearly accepted the existence of two Chinas. It had agreed to open a door to negotiations with the government of the P.R.C., but under the major premise that no change be brought about to the then existing condition of the Taiwan Strait.

The series of measures taken by the U.S. toward the 1954-55 Taiwan Strait Crisis laid down the fundamental premises of U.S. policy towards China and Taiwan which had remained unclarified since the Korean War. Two of those premises were firstly, preventing China's liberation of Taiwan by force, and secondly, giving military support to Taiwan to prevent any possibility of Kuomintang military action against China. These fundamental premises did not substantially change even after the recrudescence of the crisis in January 1955 and after the second Taiwan Strait Crisis in August 1958. Moreover, they have remained unaltered even though in 1979 the U.S. recognized the People's Republic of China as the legitimate China and the U.S.-R.O.C. Mutual Defense Treaty expired.

Power in East Asia, 1953-1960, Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 150-159.

²¹ Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data, *China: U.S. Policy since 1945*, Congressional Quarterly Inc, 1980, p. 106.