

Chairman Mao's Crisis, Superpowers' Nuclear Dance: The Nuclear Risk in 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis

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Abstract—A considerable amount of scholarly work on the theory of nuclear risk and the history of the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis exists in the field, yet no research was done to systemically examine the nuclear risk in the 1958 Crisis. This study aims to establish a theoretical framework of assessing nuclear risk and employ it to measure the risk of limited and total nuclear escalation during the 1958 Crisis.

This study operationalizes three theories of nuclear escalation risk, including direct escalation risk, inadvertent escalation risk, and accidental escalation risk, through specific causalities in the 1958 crisis. To assess the nuclear risk in the 1958 Crisis, this study uses archival documents and secondary sources from all participant countries including the US, USSR, and China. I find that Mao deliberately played with the nuclear risk because he had no stake throughout the crisis. The Eisenhower administration was unwilling to retaliate massively, while seriously committed and contemplated the nuclear use if China bombed and invaded Quemoy and Matsu. Khrushchev danced with Eisenhower amid serious fear of nuclear war. I conclude that the nuclear risk in all three kinds was relatively low. The findings are important since nuclear armament is always a matter of life and death for countries.

Index Terms—international relations history, nuclear crisis, Taiwan, Cold War, escalation theory

“The shelling of Taiwanese islands is a baton that keeps Eisenhower and Khrushchev dancing, scurrying this way and that. Don't you see how wonderful they are?”^[1]

—Mao Zedong, soon after the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis

I. INTRODUCTION

There is not yet a comprehensive evaluation of nuclear risk in the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis due to the limitation of material in the earlier period. This paper attempts to address that challenge in a concise but relatively multipartite way. The recent revelation of an unredacted top secret RAND study on the 1958 Crisis makes some scholars conclude that the nuclear risk in the 1958 Crisis was much higher than subject matters experts previously thought to be.^[2] However, drawing the philosophy of science, renowned historian Mark Trachtenberg argues that history must not just present facts as a “photographic reproduction” but rather “seeks to bring out what was really important,” namely the causal inference.^[3] Therefore, first, the author will anatomize theoretical determinants of nuclear risk. Then, the author will use historical accounts from the US, USSR, and PRC's respective perspectives to determine what kind of and how

much nuclear risk was involved in the crisis. This paper argues that Mao deliberately went to play with the nuclear risk in the manner inherently manageable to him. The Eisenhower administration put preventing strategic nuclear escalation as the priority while seriously committing and contemplating nuclear use if China bombs and invades Quemoy and Matsu. Khrushchev was unwilling but had to play with the nuclear risk in a posture opposite Mao's favor to deter the US from intervention and nuclear use to forestall nuclear war. However, the general nuclear risk is still low since Mao can quit the game and end the crisis (as he planned in advance and did in the end) anytime he feels necessary.

II. PATHS TO ARMAGEDDON

There are three paths to nuclear war. The first, deliberate escalation, is the most intuitive one. Deliberate escalation includes direct nuclear use and conventional military escalation as the initial step in the nuclear war plan of action.^[4] During the 1958 Taiwan strait crisis, the national command authority's acknowledgment of the high possibility of adversary's nuclear retaliation should also be found to prove the risk of deliberate escalation. For example, if 1) Eisenhower administration made the direct nuclear combat commitment or conventional combat commitment knowing of the further limited tactical nuclear use and even strategic nuclear use against PRC bombing and invasion of Quemoy and Matsu. Therefore, Eisenhower orchestrated operational nuclear contingency planning, prepositioning, alerting, even the pre-delegation of authority ^[5]. 2) The Eisenhower administration acknowledged the high possibility of Soviet nuclear retaliation against continental US or US allies. Thus, the risk of deliberate escalation would be present. On the other hand, if 1) Khrushchev planned tactical nuclear retaliation & the further strategic nuclear exchange, horizontal escalation retaliating American conventional combat engagement in Quemoy affairs, or direct strategic nuclear escalation retaliating American tactical strike as declared in advance. Therefore, operational nuclear contingency planning, prepositioning, alerting, even the pre-delegation of authority was orchestrated. 2) Khrushchev acknowledged the high possibility of American “massive retaliation” against the USSR. The risk of deliberate escalation would be present. Regarding the crisis initiator China, if Mao planned to use aircraft to bomb Quemoy and Matsu and invade Quemoy and Matsu acknowledging the high possibility of the American nuclear response, the risk of deliberate escalation would be present.

The second path to nuclear war is inadvertent escalation. Inadvertent escalation refers to nuclear escalation, ordered by national command authorities (NCAs). On one side,

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conventional actions of the adversary inadvertently provoked the nuclear exchange even though the other side has no intention of nuclear warfare [6]. The propensity of risk in inadvertent nuclear escalation is higher than deliberate escalation. Such a process is considered a slippery slope or "sleepwalking." For instance, if Mao used aircraft to bomb or/and invade Quemoy and Matsu while disbelieving the American nuclear response or damaged American military assets in Taiwan strait in military action short of invasion, the risk of inadvertent escalation was present. Also, if either Eisenhower administration or Khrushchev's plan for conventional engagement in the Pacific and the Far East including the attack on dual-use major military bases where they deployed nuclear weapons and other nuclear-related facilities for the cause of their allies in Quemoy and Matsu, the risk of inadvertent escalation was present. If the authority to use nuclear weapons was pre-delegated, the risk of inadvertent escalation would be even higher.

The third path to nuclear war is accidental escalation. Accidental escalation is also often taken to include nuclear escalation arising from flawed standard operation procedure (SOP) or rules of engagement, mechanical failure, insanity, and unauthorized use of weapons [7]. Greater awareness of that possibility from the national command authority can reduce the risk of accidental escalation and the magnitude of consequences.

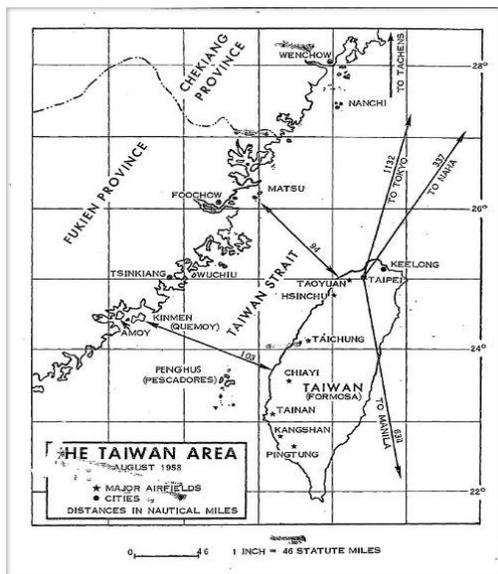


Fig. 1. Operational map of Taiwan Strait, 1958[8].

III. EISENHOWER'S NUCLEAR Playbook

President Eisenhower treated the American defense commitments to Taiwan and/or its offshore islands very seriously. Such commitment included the utility of the nuclear threat in extended deterrence and defense. A month before the crisis, the American intelligence apparatus which directly reports to the national command authority assessed the prospects and scenarios of nuclear war. It showed that if the US launches a nuclear attack on near-city military targets in mainland China, the possibility of Soviet nuclear retaliation against US military assets in the West Pacific and the Far East would be the highest. However, when the US nuclear attack is limited to Quemoy and Matsu, shown in Fig.

1, the possibility of Soviet nuclear responses against Taiwan and the Seventh Fleet cannot be excluded.

Acknowledging the risk of nuclear retaliation, the proposed initial US response to a Chinese invasion of Quemoy and Matsu seems still go along with (a slightly weakened) massive retaliation strategy.[9] In a high-level conference on August 12th, 1958, 11 days before the Chinese shelling of Quemoy, Eisenhower "suggested that Mr. Dulles consider stating in a press conference that the islands have now been so tightly integrated with Formosa that there is no possibility that an all-out attack could be conducted against them without bringing in the United States." [10] When the PRC military buildup and air superiority visibly accumulated in southeastern Chinese provinces, Eisenhower understood that those offshore islands have minimal material strategic importance. However, as implied by the whole idea of massive-retaliation-based national security strategy, the Eisenhower administration needed to commit or at least credibly signal the high possibility of American engagement, in order to deter Red China's opportunistic invasion of offshore islands and the Soviet backing.

On August 25th, two days after the spectacular initial shelling of Quemoy by Communist China, the Joint Chief of Staff recommended a potential US course of action for Eisenhower. For political reasons, the initial counterattack would be on mainland China with conventional ordinances. However, the JCS also mentioned that the allies can only fight for a few hours with conventional "iron bombs" and "we will require atomic weapons...to effectively and quickly stop Chinese Communist aggression [In Quemoy and Matsu]." Eisenhower then approved a telegraph to the CINCPAC and Taiwan Defense Command authorizing that "[in the nuclear phase] to use atomic weapons to extend deeper into Chinese Communist territory if necessary [11]" In a meeting with JCS on August 29th, the Eisenhower administration orchestrated three phases of action. In the third phase when Communist China attacks Taiwan Island and Pescadores, US armed forces would escalate and Eisenhower would decide the nuclear use [12].

The crisis escalated on September 4th with the PRC declaration of the 12 miles territorial sea jurisdiction at the time when the US only practiced and recognized the 3 miles territorial sea jurisdiction as the leading sea power in the world. The measure was used by the mainland to suffocate Quemoy and Matsu garrison forces. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was slightly more hardline on nuclear policy, directing attention again to the atomic weapons. He reminded the president and other high-level officials that "we have geared our defense to the use of these in case of hostilities of any size, and stating that, if we will not use them when the chips are down because of adverse world opinion, we must revise our defense setup [13]" The credibility of massive retaliation was increasingly questioned by allies, adversaries, and subordinate officials after the USSR obtained thermonuclear weapons and ICBMs in the course of the 1950s, American policy-makers have to frequently show the resolve and even use the nuclear weapon to restore and enhance credibility underpinning the nuclear deterrence regardless the grim consequences. As a more cautious leader, Eisenhower still cited the possibility of Soviet nuclear retaliation against Taiwan to pursue a more limited and

restrained nuclear strike and asked Joint Chiefs of Staff whether and how that would be technically possible [14].

The stalemate in Quemoy and Matsu after Eisenhower reject communist demand in television speech and China's backchannel efforts in the following week loosen the concern in Washington a little bit [15]. In another conference on September 12th, Dulles confirmed that "he did not think that the Communists intended to press the attack to the point of full-scale war. The worst feature of the situation at the present time was their success to prevent Nationalists resupplying the islands [16]" However, the intelligence estimates on September 17th show that Quemoy could hold on for at least two months amid Communist shelling [17]. Even had this conceived worst-case scenario happened, it would unlikely to force Eisenhower to commit further American direct engagement or deliberately escalate the conflict to the nuclear level.

A few days before the crisis started to fade away, on September 27th, backed by Dulles's State Department, the Secretary of the Air Force, James Douglass stated that the United States was ready to use nuclear weapons in defense of Quemoy (in the event of large-scale Communist bombing and invasion). This declared commitment was the continuation of the sophisticated consensus thinking on the planning of Quemoy's defense and the necessity of nuclear use formed on August 25th and reaffirmed in the high-level officials' debate on September 2nd [18]. Therefore, the risk of deliberate nuclear escalation by the US seems high throughout the crisis if Communist China was serious about invading Quemoy and Matsu.

The risk of accidental escalation was low in the crisis. Throughout the crisis, the Eisenhower administration restrained military commanders from moving force to the hair-trigger readiness. When the Chinese shelled KMT vessels inside the 3 miles territorial water on September 8th, the escorting US warships backed off [19]. The restraint also reflected Eisenhower's emphasis and disciplining of armed forces on caution and avoiding accidental escalations. Eisenhower also firmly rejected the US military's request for pre-delegation of authority to use any nuclear weapons [20]. Moreover, the risk of inadvertent escalation was low. During the crisis, the closest American nuclear weapon was stored over 1000 miles from Quemoy at bases in Okinawa and Guam [21]. Eisenhower administration was also aware of the probable nuclear retaliation as the consequence of nuclear use to sufficiently repel further escalation of PRC.

IV. KHRUSHCHEV'S NUCLEAR PLAYBOOK

Khrushchev was dragged into a crisis and had to seriously commit nuclear risk as he actually did. In a meeting between Khrushchev and Mao in Beijing from July 31st to August 3rd, Mao did not tell Khrushchev about his plan to shell Quemoy and Matsu. Khrushchev delightedly discussed other international problems (primarily events in the Middle East) with Mao and announced a communique that boasted Sino-Soviet socialist solidarity and allyship against the imperialist threat.[22] After PRC shelled Quemoy, Khrushchev was shocked and utterly confused. Only on August 31st, a week after the initiation of the shelling, Pravda published a party-sanctioned commentary accusing US-Taiwan provocation

and supporting China, warning "any threat against the Chinese communist regime would be interpreted in Moscow as a threat against the Soviet Union [23]" Soviet nuclear doctrine in the late 1950s called for the ICBM offensive against the continental US at any time, preferably preemptively, during a nuclear hostility [24].

Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko visited Beijing on September 7th to exchange information and negotiate coordination with their Chinese ally. Very dangerously, Gromyko told a different message than Mao's original word to Khrushchev on the nuclear retaliation. Gromyko insisted Mao said, if the US attacks China with or without nuclear weapons, China would lure the enemy to the deep rear. Then, the Soviet Union would strike them with any means necessary (including nuclear weapons). Gromyko's associate Mikhail Kapitsa recalls that Mao told them that China is not fearful of nuclear blackmailing. And if the US uses nuclear weapons, CCP will return to Yanan to continue the struggle through guerilla warfare and therefore no Soviet nuclear retaliation would be needed.[25] Zhou Enlai's conversation with Gromyko on the same day seems to confirm the former intention. He said that when Americans use tactical nuclear weapons to destroy cities in southern China, the USSR only needs to warn the Americans but not to participate in nuclear warfare. Only when Americans use large strategic nuclear weapons and expand the range of conflict, the USSR should conduct nuclear retaliation [26]. This misunderstanding and miscommunication could theoretically cause the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation. However, for Khrushchev, Mao's insight and energy on the operational level of nuclear warfare and the possibility of dragging the USSR into a nuclear war was horribly scary no matter how the message was delivered and interpreted.

Khrushchev therefore desperately tried to harden Soviet nuclear commitment on China and threaten the US to prevent the actual use of the nuclear weapon by any party from happening. He sent two letters to Eisenhower on September 7th and September 19th warning that "an attack on PRC is an attack on the Soviet Union and USSR will do whatever it can to protect the security of itself and China," and also emphasize the Soviet nuclear retaliatory power against the powerful US Pacific Fleet [27]. Khrushchev's nuclear card is unlikely to be a bluff. A Red Army press stated on September 25th: "our warriors are well-prepared can help to annihilate the invader as soon as needed [28]" Therefore, the risk of deliberate escalation seemingly remained high when the Khrushchev are obliged to use the nuclear weapon against the US military which has to use their nuclear weapons to repel potential PRC's invasion of offshore islands. However, being more fearful of nuclear war than Eisenhower and much more than Mao [29], Khrushchev also was careful to not overplay the nuclear brinkmanship against America which enjoyed far superior "correlation of force" in the utterly destructive nuclear sphere. Soviets did not put its force on alert or conduct maneuvers in the Far East to counter US naval force concentration in the Taiwan strait [30].

The risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation existed when Khrushchev suggested Mao accept the Soviet offer of an aviation division to offset US-Taiwan sea control and air superiority in the Taiwan strait on September 16th [31]. This offer was supported by Zhou Enlai and other high officials to

strengthen deterrence and send signals. Although this offer was declined by Mao, if this came true and enable USSR to attack wide ranges of US military installations storing nuclear weapons in the Pacific and concentrated naval presence in Taiwan strait as it planned to do, even a “restrained” conventional attack could set off real all-out massive retaliation by the Americans. The risk of accidental escalation from the Soviet perspective remained low in the crisis because of the highly centralized command and control structure of the Soviet military as well as the refrainment of foreign deployment of nuclear weapons which was still in effect in 1958 [32].

V. MAO’S NUCLEAR PLAYBOOK

With superpowers' nuclear dance, all you need for a thermonuclear war is Mao's order to invade or bomb Quemoy and Matsu. However, Mao didn't want to invade Quemoy and Matsu, not to mention Taiwan in the first place. Nor does he want a stalemated nuclear crisis, instead, He played with both Soviet ally and American-KMT adversaries and dragged them into a nuclear crisis because he didn't fear the nuclear war and was prepared to fight one if the crisis escalated to a large war in the appearance of "American aggression." Militarily, the military action against Quemoy was integrated into an entire campaign started in 1953. The shelling is used by PLA as a feint attack serving the main battle over the airspace with the KMT air force in China's southeastern coastal provinces. On July 18th, Mao originally decided that the shelling of offshore islands would start by July 25th and the two PLA air divisions would transit to coastal airports in Guangdong and Fujian provinces on July 27th [33]. However, Mao canceled the shelling plan on July 27th because he believed that the ongoing crisis in the Middle East would debilitate him to drag the US into a nuclear war in the Far East. In his letter to Defense Minister Peng Dehuai, Mao wrote that "wait for the enemy (the US) to attack (us) unreasonably (with nukes) and then we counterattack (with conventional weapons)...don't need to rush because the (crisis in) Middle East is still not resolved...if the enemy attacks Zhangzhou, Shantou, Fuzhou, and Hangzhou (China's coastal cities), it would be perfect [34]" Immediately after the early August meeting with Khrushchev, Mao said to his aide: "He wants to improve relations with the United States? Good, we'll congratulate him with our guns . . . Let's get the United States involved, too. Maybe we can get the United States to drop an atom bomb on Fujian . . . Let's see what Khrushchev says then [35]"

Politically, in this struggle with the US, Mao initially thought that it would be even better if the shelling can also force Chiang Kai Shek to give up the Quemoy without actual invasion and bombing. He resumed implementing the plan to shell Quemoy immediately after the Middle East crisis faded away and his meeting with Khrushchev in early August in which would give the US and its global allies an impression that shelling of Quemoy was in Khrushchev's consent. In late August, Mao still believed that Americans, fearful of nuclear war, will pressure Chiang Kai Shek to withdraw from the offshore islands. If Chiang withdraws, the mainland can promise that their force will not be attacked—this is also Zhou Enlai's offer to the US on September 10th's "Sino-

American Agreement Announcement (draft) [36] " However, following Dulles' declared commitment on Quemoy in clear cases of Communist invasion and the signal of negotiation possibilities on September 4th [37], Mao failed his goal of making the US the nuclear aggressor and he started to exercised restraint. Nor would the increasing involvement of the USSR in the Taiwan issue, as the result of the intensifying nuclear crisis, do any good to Mao's desired autonomy on the Taiwan issue [38]. Mao and Zhou assured Gromyko and the Soviet ambassador to China, S.F. Antonov, on two occasions, August 5th and October 5th, that China have no intention to bomb and invade Quemoy and Matsu, not to mention Taiwan, and the risk of war had been reduced [39]. Finally, seeing the stalemate of the nuclear crisis, Mao ordered Peng Dehuai to deliver the “Letter to Taiwanese Compatriots” and defused the crisis [40]. Since the condition to trigger the nuclear risk, namely the PRC invasion and bombing of the Quemoy and Matsu, did not exist throughout the crisis, risks of deliberate escalation for all sides were actually low.

The risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation is also low since Mao instructed avoiding attacking the American (conventional) military in the Taiwan strait throughout the crisis, and any actions targeting Americans must be authorized by Beijing [41]. However, the slight possibility of accidental nuclear escalation did exist in the 1958 crisis. After being briefed by his military commanders on August 21st, he asked one question over and over again: “will shelling kill the Americans and could that be avoided?” General Ye Fei, the commander of the Quemoy operation, told Mao that it is inevitable since the American military advisors are assigned to the battalion level in the KMT military organization [42]. Yet Mao finally approved the final execution after long hesitation and several reversals of order. Indeed, the accidental death of two American military advisors in the shelling might slightly increase the possibility of American conventional retaliation and the following course of action-reaction could lead to a nuclear war.

Conclusively, historical evidence shows that Mao deliberately played with the nuclear risk because he had a low stake from the beginning. The Eisenhower administration was unwilling to retaliate massively, as American nuclear doctrine suggested, while seriously committed and contemplated the nuclear use if China bombed and invaded Quemoy and Matsu. Khrushchev danced with Eisenhower amid serious fear of nuclear war. However, the nuclear risk in all three kinds was still relatively low since Mao can quit the game and end the crisis anytime he feels necessary, and the national command authorities in the three parties were capable of averting the cross of thresholds. Against the backdrop of technological determinism in security studies, the historical evidence from the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis affirms that the nuclear game, just as other parts of international security, is determined more by politics than by any technical or tactical features [43].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest since the author has conducted unfunded independent research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Deye Li is responsible for conducting the entire research and paper composition.

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The photo is taken on the balcony of Elliott School of International Affairs during the NATO-GWU Strategic Crisis Simulation “Collision Course” event.