

# The U.S. Factor in the 1958 and 1996 Taiwan Strait Crises\*

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*In 1958, the United States was directly involved in breaking a Chinese blockade of the Kinmen (Quemoy) islands. Taiwan cannot expect a similar response in the future because the status of the offshore islands is now a matter of great dispute. On the other hand, the Clinton administration's robust actions during the March 1996 cross-Strait missile crisis have proved that deeds rather than words are more effective in wielding preventive diplomacy. However, it is still too early to tell whether the recent dispatch of U.S. aircraft carriers will become the pattern for handling future Taiwan Strait crises. Nevertheless, one of the key lessons for the United States from the 1958 and 1996 Taiwan Strait crises has been that crisis prevention costs less and works more effectively than crisis management.*

**Keywords:** Taiwan Strait crisis; strategic ambiguity; preventive diplomacy; crisis management; Bill Clinton; Lee Teng-hui

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Beijing's accusation that the United States has been the major obstacle to its military intimidation of Taiwan is difficult to refute. Although Washington has tried hard to avoid involvement in Chinese internal affairs both in 1958 and 1996, it has been forced to intervene in military tensions between Taiwan and China. Both times, U.S. involvement helped defuse Taiwan Strait crises and clarify Washington's policy toward Taiwan and China. In 1958, the Eisenhower administration employed crisis management tactics in response to the Taiwan Strait crisis. In the 1996 crisis, the United States' previous derecognition of the Republic of China (ROC) did not prevent it from

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\*This article is a revised and updated version of a paper presented at the Conference on Taiwan-Mainland China Relations and the Asia-Pacific Region, Taipei, July 22-23, 1996.

quickly responding to Taiwan-China military tensions. The Clinton administration faced a People's Republic of China (PRC) which is one of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council with a limited second-strike nuclear capability, and opted for preventive diplomacy. Constructive engagement rather than containment has become official U.S. policy toward China, but Washington remains firm in its stance that the Taiwan issue must be resolved by peaceful means, and it does not intend to play a mediator role in cross-Strait relations. Although history seldom repeats itself, this paper will examine the role of the United States in the 1958 and 1996 Taiwan Strait crises and compare the similarities and differences of U.S. policies in this tripartite negotiation.

### **The United States and the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis**

In July 1958, the ROC began to anticipate a PRC move against its offshore islands. Urging the United States to commit itself publicly to defending these islands, the ROC also sought modern weapons for its armed forces, including the delivery of American Sidewinder missiles. Although the United States refused to issue a public statement that it would defend Kinmen (Quemoy), it did increase military assistance to the ROC and began intensive contingency planning for a Taiwan Strait crisis. Before the crisis erupted, many meetings and plans had already been undertaken by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department. One of the plans accepted by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on August 22, 1958 merits special observation. The plan recommended the following actions be taken in order to suggest to both Taipei and Beijing that the United States would intervene in the event of a major attack:

1. One carrier should be added to the Seventh Fleet and three carriers should be kept in the Taiwan Strait;
2. A Fleet exercise should be held, but not in the Strait;
3. Admiral Roland N. Smoot, the Commander of the U.S. Taiwan Defense Command, should make a trip to the offshore islands;
4. The United States should increase the number of fighter jets on Taiwan;
5. There should be an increase in the flow of supplies, and if possible, daylight supplies, to the offshore islands;
6. There should be a loan of three U.S. LST's to Taiwan and

- shipping of Sidewinder missiles to Taiwan;
7. There should be an increase in weapons shipments to Taiwan, including recoilless rifles, and other infantry equipment for delivery to the offshore island; and
  8. There should be a U.S.-ROC joint air defense exercise.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, the United States was not fast enough in sending these indirect warnings to Beijing. On August 23, 1958, the PRC launched the bombardment of the Quemoy islands. On August 25, a White House meeting directed by President Dwight Eisenhower was held to determine possible U.S. military responses to the crisis. First, in the event of a major attack which seriously endangered the offshore islands, it was probable that only conventional weapons would be authorized, but the option of using atomic weapons to extending into mainland China if necessary was retained. Second, it was also decided, at the suggestion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the American interest in the offshore islands would be limited to the holding of Big and Little Quemoy and the five larger Matsu islands.<sup>2</sup> The decision was specifically made in order to exclude the other, smaller ROC-held islands from U.S. interests.

At the second White House meeting, dated August 29, Eisenhower went further. First, despite ROC President Chiang Kai-shek's request for his air forces to strike the mainland in a counterattack, Eisenhower approved hot pursuit only in response to PRC bombing attacks on the principal offshore islands. Second, it was agreed that U.S. naval escorts for Taiwan vessels breaking the PRC's blockade of the offshore islands would be kept to within three nautical miles of Quemoy island to avoid Communist artillery. Eisenhower believed staying within the three mile limit would be sufficient to enable successful resupply and avoid the legal considerations of entering Quemoy's territorial waters and intervening in the Chinese civil war. From a military viewpoint, the United States deliberately tried to avoid any direct military confrontation with the PRC. Third, the shipment of twelve 8-inch howitzers to the ROC was expedited, including six with

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<sup>1</sup>Morton M. Halperin, *The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation Research Memorandum, 1966), 94; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960* [here after cited as *FRUS, 1958-60*], vol. 19, *China* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), 67.

<sup>2</sup>Halperin, *The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958*, 113-22; *FRUS, 1958-60*, vol. 19, *China*, 73-74.

conventional ammunition from Okinawa.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. effort reached a crescendo on September 4, when Dulles met Eisenhower at Newport, Rhode Island, and issued a formal statement. This action constituted the most important effort up to that point to clarify the U.S. determination to defend Quemoy. The Newport statement read as follows:

Any attempt on the part of the Chinese Communists now to seize these positions or any of them would be a crude violation of the principles upon which world order is based, namely, that no country should use armed force to seize new territory. . . . Any such naked use of force would pose an issue far transcending the offshore islands and even the security of Taiwan. . . . Acquiescence therein would threaten peace elsewhere. The U.S. has not, however, abandoned hope that Peiping [Beijing] will stop short of defying the will of mankind for peace.<sup>4</sup>

The statement implied that the United States wished to reopen diplomatic talks with the PRC. PRC Premier Zhou Enlai responded quickly, suggesting a talk in Warsaw. When the crisis began to decline, the United States became devoted to finding a peaceful means to end it. The U.S. proposal included demilitarizing the offshore islands, mutual renunciation of force, using the good offices of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold, and discussion of the Taiwan issue in the UN.

Secretary Dulles initiated the possibility of an agreement between Taiwan and China which aimed to demilitarize the offshore islands. This proposal received strong opposition from Walter S. Robertson, deputy secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, and some military leaders because they thought the idea could heighten acceptance of the two-China formula, leaving the PRC to seize the islands at any time after they were demilitarized.<sup>5</sup> Dulles's proposal was abandoned but it later was modified into the reality of troop reductions in Quemoy. In a blunt public statement, Dulles told the press, "If there were a cease-fire in the area which seemed to be reasonably dependable, I think it would be foolish to keep these forces on these islands. We thought that it was rather foolish to put them there."<sup>6</sup> Just after the crisis, Dulles finally achieved his goal of troop reduction.

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<sup>3</sup>*FRUS, 1958-60*, vol. 19, *China*, 96-99; Joseph F. Bouchard, *Command in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 75-77.

<sup>4</sup>Hungdah Chiu, ed., *China and the Taiwan Issue* (New York: Praeger, 1979), 236.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 409-12.

<sup>6</sup>*New York Times*, October 1, 1958.

The mutual renunciation of force between both sides of the Taiwan Strait was based on the concept that the PRC was not the only party to blame and that the ROC should also refrain from any provocative actions against mainland China. The mutual renunciation of force was the position the U.S. ambassador proposed in the Warsaw Talks. On September 18, 1958, at the second session of the talks, Dulles instructed Ambassador Jacob Beam to present a proposal to Chinese Ambassador Wang Bingnan which stated, "The United States renounces the use of force in the area of Quemoy islands and the Matsu islands except in individual and collective self-defense. The U.S. will seek that the Quemoy and Matsu islands will not be used for attack or other provocative actions directed against the mainland or other coastal islands."<sup>7</sup>

During the crisis, Dulles was interested in presenting the issue to the UN. The result of an American opinion poll, which indicated over 90 percent of Americans favored a UN settlement to the Quemoy crisis, strengthened Dulles's decision to use the UN as a means for a peaceful solution.<sup>8</sup> Dulles considered the Quemoy crisis not only to be an issue of civil war in China, but also a threat to international stability, and mentioned in press conferences on September 18 and 30 that he was determined to reserve the right to hand the issue to the UN if the Warsaw Talks proved a failure.<sup>9</sup> Dulles also urged UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld to apply the method of good offices to resolve the crisis, but Hammarskjöld rejected the proposal as one with little chance of success.<sup>10</sup>

In an effort to persuade Chiang Kai-shek to reduce the ROC's troops on the offshore islands, Secretary Dulles visited Taipei and developed the following communiqué, on October 23, with Chiang Kai-shek:

The two Governments reaffirm their dedication to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. They recall that the treaty under which they are acting is defensive in character. The Government of the Republic of China considers that restoration of freedom to its people on the mainland is its sacred mission. It believes that the foundation of this mission resides in the minds and the hearts of the Chinese people and that the principal means of successfully achieving its mission is the implementation

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<sup>7</sup>Halperin, *The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958*, 451.

<sup>8</sup>William P. Hansen and Fred L. Israel, eds., *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971*, vol. 2, 1949-1958 (New York: Random House, 1972), 1569.

<sup>9</sup>*New York Times*, September 19, 1958 and October 1, 1958.

<sup>10</sup>Halperin, *The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958*, 439.

of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Three People's Principles (nationalism, democracy, and social well-being) and not the use of force.<sup>11</sup>

On October 25, 1958, the PRC declared that it would not fire on even-numbered days against airfields, beaches, and wharves if there were no American escorts. Under this strange cease-fire pattern and the ROC's consent to withdraw 15,000 troops from the offshore islands, the crisis moved to a conclusion.<sup>12</sup> However, the outcome was far from definitive. The Taiwan issue had not been resolved for both mainland China and Taiwan; neither had there been any resolution in Sino-American relations.

### **The United States and the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis**

ROC President Lee Teng-hui's visit to Cornell University in June 1995 had a great impact on Beijing's policy toward Taiwan. Tang Shubei, vice chairman of the Chinese Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), was in Taipei at the end of May 1995 to make arrangements for the second round of Koo Chen-fu and Wang Daohan talks scheduled to be held on July 20 in Beijing. Nevertheless, in June 1995, Beijing called off the talks to protest President Lee's visit to the United States and Premier Lien Chan's visit to Central Europe that same month.

In July 1995, Beijing began to shift from its peaceful reunification policy to a strategy combining criticism campaigns in the media with coercive military pressure on Taiwan to guarantee Taiwan's reunification with China.<sup>13</sup> The PRC conducted several rounds of military exercises near Taiwan to intimidate Taiwan's voters as they chose a new legislature in December 1995 and a new president in March 1996. Shortly before Taiwan's presidential election, the PRC amassed at least 150,000 troops in Fujian and deployed 300 fighter aircraft at 11 bases within 400 kilometers of the coast. China also deployed 5 frigates, 4 advanced submarines, and an anti-missile vessel in waters around Taiwan.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Chiu, *China and the Taiwan Issue*, 239.

<sup>12</sup>Halperin, *The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958*, 542; *FRUS, 1958-60*, vol. 19, *China*, 485.

<sup>13</sup>Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Goals in the Taiwan Strait," *The China Journal*, no. 36 (July 1996): 89; Jia Qingguo, "Reflections on the Recent Tension in the Taiwan Strait," *ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>14</sup>"China Amasses 150,000 Troops in Province Facing Taiwan: Japanese Report," AFP, March 13, 1996.

In the latter half of 1995, the Clinton administration maintained a low profile in its reactions to the PRC's military exercises in the East China Sea. This was in accordance with the U.S. policy of "strategic ambiguity" concerning possible responses to cross-Strait military conflict. Former assistant secretaries of defense for international security affairs Chas Freeman and Joseph Nye have elaborated on this policy. Freeman has repeatedly stated that Taiwan cannot expect to fill a blank check with American blood, while Nye has pointed out that "Americans do not want to give Taiwan a 100 percent guarantee that no matter what Taiwan does, the Americans will come to their defense, because that would encourage Taiwan to take actions that would be risky."<sup>15</sup> In a December 1995 Asia Society speech, Nye further clarified:

We pointed out equally that we are committed to peaceful resolutions and the avoidance of the use of force. And when the question came about what would we do, one of the things that I said, which I will say today—it's no surprise—is: Nobody knows. If you go back to 1950 and you look at what the American government said, which is that Korea is outside our defense perimeter, and then realize that six months later, we were at war to defend South Korea, it shows that you cannot know the answer to these things. Therefore, actions which escalate risks in the Taiwan Strait are actions which pose an enormous risk of some larger thing, of which we don't know the answer.<sup>16</sup>

Under the initiative of Secretary of Defense William Perry, President Clinton decided to dispatch the aircraft carrier *Nimitz* to join the *Independence* near Taiwan to monitor the PRC's military activities. As a result, observers have wondered whether the U.S. reaction to the PRC's military coercion of Taiwan has encouraged Washington to shift from a position of "strategic ambiguity" to "strategic clarity."<sup>17</sup> According to the August 17, 1982 Communiqué, the United States declines to pursue a "one China, one Taiwan" policy, but this policy is based on Beijing's commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question. If Taiwan does not initiate a crisis by declaring the island independent from China and Beijing launches military actions, then the United States remains free to develop an

<sup>15</sup>"Military's Muscle-Flexing in a Chinese Political Game," *International Herald Tribune*, March 18, 1996, 4.

<sup>16</sup>"Nye: Relations with China a Critical Challenge for the U.S.," AIT, *EPF* 306 (December 13, 1995).

<sup>17</sup>James Shinn, "Clinton's Gunboat Diplomacy," *New York Times*, March 24, 1996, Section 4:15; Steven Erlanger, "'Ambiguity' on Taiwan?" *ibid.*, March 12, 1996, 1.

appropriate response to avoid another Taiwan Strait crisis. There is no doubt that Washington opposes any military solution to the Taiwan question, but it does not intend to enter into direct military confrontations with China in the Taiwan Strait. As James Shinn pointed out in a Council on Foreign Relations report:

Were Taiwan not to declare independence but provoke an invasion of PLA forces anyway, the United States should offer all assistance to it short of a direct military involvement of American forces. However, Taiwan could not win such a conflict; American intervention could prolong the conflict but not resolve it. The risks of escalation would be very high. No Asian states would be on Taiwan's side, the United Nations would have no jurisdiction—certainly not through the Security Council, where China possesses veto power—and the American public's support for intervention would be marginally higher.<sup>18</sup>

In February 1996, when the Pentagon established a Taiwan-China situation task force, CIA Director John Deutch mentioned that the United States had monitored China's military moves on "a minute-by-minute basis," because, he said, "the potential for hostility due to miscalculation or accident is great."<sup>19</sup> The Clinton administration estimated that China lacked the capability to support an attack across the Taiwan Strait; for example, General John M. Shalikashvili, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asserted he did not believe that the PRC had "the capability to conduct amphibious operations of the nature that would be necessary to invade Taiwan."<sup>20</sup> U.S. security analysts have deemed a naval blockade as the most dangerous and most likely action the PRC might take to bring Taiwan to its knees. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former U.S. national security adviser under the Carter administration, has pointed out:

From a practical military point of view, reunification by force is actually not possible.

China just lacks the means to execute an effective amphibious operation. An attempt at intimidation is perhaps more feasible, with reliance on the interdiction or disruption of Taiwan's foreign trade in order to break Taipei's will. But such use of force would be a double-edged sword.

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<sup>18</sup>James Shinn, ed., *Weaving the Net: Conditional Engagement with China* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1996), 75.

<sup>19</sup>John Diamond, "U.S. Monitoring China Minute-by-Minute for Sign of Trouble," AP, February 26, 1996; *Zhongyang ribao* (Central Daily News) (Taipei), February 6, 1996, 3.

<sup>20</sup>"China Lacks Capability to Take Taiwan, U.S. Asserts," *International Herald Tribune*, February 16, 1996, 2; Tony Emerson, "Mind Games," *Newsweek*, February 19, 1996, 8.



Taiwan alone, or perhaps with selective U.S. involvement if need be, could also mine access to China's principal ports, thereby inflicting comparable harm on China's economy.<sup>21</sup>

Even though Clinton administration officials did not believe that China would attack Taiwan, Secretary of State Warren Christopher characterized Beijing's missile tests near Keelung and Kaohsiung as "unnecessarily risky and reckless," and warned that any belligerent actions against Taiwan would have "grave consequences." In addition, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake said that if there were "accidents" in the military exercises, Beijing would "be held accountable."<sup>22</sup> Reinterpreting and clarifying the August 17, 1982 Communiqué, Christopher declared that the U.S. "one China policy is predicated on the PRC's pursuit of a peaceful resolution of issues between Taipei and Beijing."<sup>23</sup> House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich called Beijing's missile tests a "terrorist act," while other Republican leaders eying a presidential nomination such as Pat Buchanan, Steve Forbes, and Bob Dole pressed the Clinton administration for a tougher stance against China, coming close to suggesting that "the U.S. should go to war if Taiwan comes under direct attack."<sup>24</sup>

From the viewpoint of a Clinton administration official such as Winston Lord, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, the PRC's decision to launch missile tests was a poor choice because the action would ensure President Lee Teng-hui's reelection, alarm countries in the Asia-Pacific region with the so-called "China threat," cause U.S. congressional criticism of China, and complicate Washington's constructive engagement policy toward China.<sup>25</sup> Most U.S. newspapers also stood on the side of Taiwan and criticized Beijing's military intimidation of the island. Before Clinton

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<sup>21</sup>Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Time for Measured Response from U.S.," *The Straits Times*, March 20, 1996, 30.

<sup>22</sup>See "Second Carrier Group Headed Towards Strait," *China Post* (Taipei), March 12, 1996, 1; Brian Knowlton, "U.S. Moves Carrier Toward Taiwan as Warning to China," *International Herald Tribune*, March 11, 1996, 1; Patrick E. Tyler, "Chinese Assure U.S. They Will Not Attack Taiwan," *ibid.*, March 13, 1996, 1; and note 15 above.

<sup>23</sup>Warren Christopher, "American Interests and the U.S.-China Relationship," *Dispatch* (U.S. Department of State) 7, no. 22 (May 27, 1996): 265.

<sup>24</sup>Jurek Martin, "Taiwan Row Strains U.S. 'Ambiguity' Doctrine," *Financial Times*, March 13, 1996, 6; Jim Adams, "Gingrich Calls China Test Terrorist Act," Reuters, March 7, 1996.

<sup>25</sup>"Lord Congratulates Taiwan on Election," CNA, March 12, 1996.

decided to send two aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan region, *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* editorials even suggested that he dispatch the Seventh Fleet through the Taiwan Strait.<sup>26</sup> The U.S. actions quickly defused the crisis and allowed Taiwan's first direct presidential election to go smoothly. [For a chronology of U.S. involvement in the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, see appendix.] If the United States responds in the same robust manner in future crises, however, it could force Washington to become more involved in the Taiwan-China feud and jeopardize U.S.-PRC relations.<sup>27</sup>

Just before the August 17, 1982 Communiqué was issued, the Reagan administration sent assurances to Taiwan indicating the United States would not play the role of mediator and pressure Taipei to negotiate with Beijing.<sup>28</sup> However, to ease Taiwan-China tensions caused by President Lee Teng-hui's historic visit to the United States, the Clinton administration has encouraged "Beijing and Taipei to exercise restraint and resume the dialogue that would lead toward a peaceful resolution of the issues between them."<sup>29</sup> In the meantime, the United States has urged Asian governments to help calm tensions in the Taiwan Strait in order to benefit economic prosperity and prevent an arms race in the region.<sup>30</sup> Through preventive defense measures, Washington also hopes to defuse the tension between Taiwan and China and demonstrate U.S. leadership in the Asia-Pacific region.

Prior to the Clinton administration, the U.S. government emphasized that the Taiwan question must be resolved peacefully without

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<sup>26</sup>"Bring Back the Seventh Fleet," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 1996, 6; "The Bludgeoning of Taiwan," *New York Times*, March 8, 1996, A30.

<sup>27</sup>Steve Mufson, "Island Is Not a Protectorate of Washington," *International Herald Tribune*, March 12, 1996, 1; "White House Signals Anger at China with Two Snubs," *New York Times*, March 23, 1996, A5.

<sup>28</sup>Stephen P. Gilbert and William M. Carpenter, eds., *America and Island China: A Documentary History* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989), 326.

<sup>29</sup>"Testimony by Ambassador Winston Lord before House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific," *AIT Background Series*, BG-96-8 (March 15, 1996): 9; "Back to Cooperation," *International Herald Tribune*, March 25, 1996, 6; "U.S. Congratulates Teng-hui, Calls for Easing of Tension," *The Straits Times*, March 25, 1996, 22.

<sup>30</sup>"U.S. Wants Asian Governments to Help Calm Tensions," *The Straits Times*, February 7, 1996, 1; Michael Richardson, "Neutrality on Taiwan," *International Herald Tribune*, March 12, 1996, 6; Marcus W. Brauchli, "East Asian Nations Rattled by China-Taiwan Tensions," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 1996, 1; "Asians Laud U.S. Privately," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 4, 1996, 17.

giving its opinion on how the Taiwan issue should be solved. On the other hand, the Clinton administration seems to have taken steps to forestall Taiwan independence, as it has repeatedly conveyed the message to Beijing and Taipei that Washington opposes Taiwan independence and any actions that might imply Taiwan to be an independent country. For Washington, Taipei's endeavors to raise its international status should be consistent with a "one China" policy.<sup>31</sup> The Clinton administration has thus declined to support Taiwan's entry to the UN, because such an action, according to Kent Wiedemann, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, "would come at great cost to [U.S.] relations with China," and "contradict [U.S.] policy, since 1979, of recognizing the PRC as the sole legal government of China." Wiedemann further added:

Most importantly, U.S. support for Taiwan participation in the UN would jeopardize peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. [The United States] would put at risk the economic and political progress achieved by the people of Taiwan. We would also risk the growing peaceful exchanges that benefit people on both sides of the Strait.<sup>32</sup>

Washington's policymakers have carelessly equated "no intention of pursuing one China, one Taiwan" with "opposition to Taiwan independence," and thereby played into Beijing's hands by obstructing Taiwan's increasing efforts to upgrade its international status. The United States thus has only two options left: (1) promoting the peaceful reunification of China with the consent of Taiwan's people or (2) helping Taiwan maintain the status quo with the tolerance of Beijing's leaders. The U.S. government has apparently favored the second option for cross-Strait relations. It is debatable which tactics will deter future PRC military provocation against Taiwan: providing Taiwan with sufficient and advanced weaponry or intervening again by dispatching aircraft carriers to the region. Neither is an easy choice for Washington. Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole would prefer to provide Taiwan with "advanced defensive weapons such as AMRAAM air-to-air missiles, the shoulder-fired Stinger ground-to-air missiles and coastal submarines and other anti-ship

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<sup>31</sup>See note 23 above.

<sup>32</sup>Kent Wiedemann, "Taiwan and the United Nations," *Dispatch* 6, no. 34 (August 21, 1995): 655.

and anti-submarine weapons.” Dole has even gone further to propose a theater missile defense system named the Pacific Democracy Defense Program which would include Taiwan.<sup>33</sup> During the Taiwan Strait crisis, the Clinton administration declined to sell submarines to Taiwan and rejected the proposal to incorporate Taiwan into the Northeast Asia theater missile defense system, but approved the sale of Stinger surface-to-surface missiles, targeting and navigational systems for jets, and a package of electronic-warfare devices.<sup>34</sup>

### Taipei's and Beijing's Responses to U.S. Intervention in the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

President Lee Teng-hui skillfully used the PRC's military exercises to seek more electoral support by charging that Beijing disliked his reelection and Taiwan's democratic system. He urged the Taiwanese electorate to stay calm because the government had already prepared at least eighteen scripts (contingency plans) to counter various PRC attack scenarios.<sup>35</sup> Although Lee did not summon the National Security Council, he ordered a task force headed by Premier Lien Chan be set up to coordinate the government's response to the political, military, and economic crisis.<sup>36</sup> At least eight meetings of this task force were convened and defense conditions were upgraded to level 3 in the Quemoy, Matsu, and Pescadores islands.

Political reactions to such moves were mixed. The other three Taiwan presidential candidates attacked Lee for causing friction with Beijing. Both the Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) welcomed the presence of U.S. naval forces and denied such an action constituted an interference of internal affairs.<sup>37</sup> However, the New Party and its endorsed independent presidential candidate Lin Yang-kang and his running mate Hau Pei-tsun criticized the U.S. decision to dispatch the aircraft carriers *Independence* and

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<sup>33</sup>Nigel Holloway, "On the Offensive," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 23, 1996, 34-35; "U.S. 'Obligated' to Aid Taiwan: Dole," *China Post*, May 11, 1996, 4.

<sup>34</sup>"U.S. Stinger Missiles for Taiwan But No New Subs," *The Straits Times*, March 21, 1996, 14; Felix Soh, "U.S. Not Speeding Up Delivery of F-16s to Taipei," *ibid.*, March 20, 1996, 11.

<sup>35</sup>"We're Ready for Anything, Assures Lee," *China Post*, February 27, 1996, 1.

<sup>36</sup>"Government Sets Up Task Force," *ibid.*, February 13, 1996, 1.

<sup>37</sup>"Approaching U.S. Forces Welcomed," *ibid.*, March 12, 1996, 1.

Nimitz to waters near Taiwan, saying the move could cause Beijing to overreact and attack Taiwan.<sup>38</sup>

DPP presidential candidate Peng Ming-min criticized the KMT's "one China" policy as leading to a dead end, proposed the suspension of all exchanges with China, and urged the Taiwan military to conduct exercises near Shanghai and Guangzhou to demonstrate Taiwan's military strength.<sup>39</sup> He also urged that Taiwan declare de jure independence if the PRC attacked.<sup>40</sup> Independent presidential candidates Lin and Chen Li-an called for a more conciliatory policy toward Beijing and suggested Taipei slow down its bid to join the UN in order not to provoke China. For future cross-Strait political relations, Lin proposed a Chinese Commonwealth model, while Chen cited the formation of the European Union as a model for Taiwan and China to follow. Both of them opposed the internationalization of the Taiwan question and stressed the importance of not relying on the United States for protection.<sup>41</sup>

Better than Chiang Kai-shek, Lee knows the necessity of winning U.S. support in order for Taipei to counterbalance the PRC's military pressure.<sup>42</sup> In addition to thanking the United States for placing two aircraft carrier groups near Taiwan, Lee publicly called on Washington to provide Taiwan with more advanced weaponry and rebutted the claim that Taiwan is engaged in an arms race with China.<sup>43</sup> Lee designated Ting Mou-shih, secretary-general of the National Security Council, to meet Samuel Burger and Peter Tarnoff in New York during the crisis; it was the highest-level meeting between the two countries since 1979. U.S. pressure not to provoke China also influenced Taipei to delay a live-fire military exercise on Matsu Island in early April 1996.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>*Lianhe bao* (United Daily News) (Taipei), March 12, 1996, 2.

<sup>39</sup>*Zhongguo shibao* (China Times) (Taipei), March 6, 1996, 9.

<sup>40</sup>Christopher Bodeen, "Peng Urges Independence in the Event of PRC Attack," *China Post*, February 24, 1996, 16; Peng Ming-min, "Taiwan Belongs to No One," *New York Times*, March 14, 1996, A17.

<sup>41</sup>*Lianhe bao*, March 12, 1996, 2; *Ziyou shibao* (Liberty Times) (Taipei), February 9, 1996, 4.

<sup>42</sup>Marcus W. Brauchli, "Lee's Ambitions for Taiwan Rattle Both China and U.S.," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 1996, 1; Kenneth Jost, "Taiwan, China and the U.S.," *CQ Research* 6, no. 20 (May 24, 1996): 472-76.

<sup>43</sup>"President Lee Willing to Work Together with Jiang Zemin," *CNA*, May 11, 1996; "Building a 'New Culture'," *Newsweek*, May 20, 1996, 16.

<sup>44</sup>Patrick E. Tyler, "Live-Fire Drill in Strait Is Postponed by Taiwan," *International Herald Tribune*, April 3, 1996, 4.

The PRC, on the other hand, stated that the United States precipitated a deterioration of cross-Strait relations when they granted President Lee a visa to visit Cornell University. According to Kurt Campbell, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense, Beijing did not expect the United States would send two aircraft carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait area.<sup>45</sup> In response to some U.S. policymakers' calls for more direct involvement in the region, PRC Foreign Minister Qian Qichen thought it "preposterous for some people in the United States to call openly for interference on the Taiwan issue by the Seventh Fleet or even for protecting Taiwan."<sup>46</sup> PRC Premier Li Peng claimed that the PRC's military exercises were "aimed to enhance the troops' military quality and ability to fight modern wars, though they also demonstrated the PLA's resolution to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity." He thus warned the United States that "if someone makes a show of force in the Taiwan Strait, it will not only be a futile act, but also make the situation all the more complicated."<sup>47</sup> Pro-Beijing newspapers in Hong Kong cautioned the U.S. naval forces not to stray into zones where China was conducting exercises, and Chinese low-level officials even intimated that China had the ability to launch a nuclear attack on Los Angeles if the United States defended Taiwan against any future Chinese attacks.<sup>48</sup> However, Beijing sent a clear message through Liu Huaqui, director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the PRC State Council, to the Clinton administration which stated that the missile tests would not lead to an invasion of Taiwan.<sup>49</sup>

### Observations and Comparisons

The United States prepared military contingency plans for both

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<sup>45</sup>"U.S. Carriers Unexpected by Beijing," CNA, May 30, 1996.

<sup>46</sup>Patrick E. Tyler, "China Warns U.S. to Stay Out of Taiwan Feud," *New York Times*, March 12, 1996, A6; "Qian on World and Regional Issues," *Beijing Review* 39, no. 13 (March 25-31, 1996): 8.

<sup>47</sup>Patrick E. Tyler, "China Warns U.S. to Keep Away from Taiwan Strait," *New York Times*, March 18, 1996, A3; "Policy on Taiwan Hard and Fast," *Beijing Review* 39, no. 14 (April 1-7, 1996): 4.

<sup>48</sup>Jim Wolf, "Some China Aides Gave U.S. Nuclear Warning: Lord," Reuters, March 17, 1996; "If You Come In, You Will Not Get Out," *The Straits Times*, March 18, 1996, 18; "Lower-Level Chinese Officials Threatened to Nuk LA: Lord," *ibid.*, March 19, 1996, 12.

<sup>49</sup>Patrick E. Tyler, "China Signaling U.S. That It Will Not Invade Taiwan," *New York Times*, March 13, 1996, A3.

the 1958 and 1996 Taiwan Strait crises. For Washington, crisis communications were better in the 1996 crisis because Beijing's intentions were fully acknowledged. The Clinton administration not only conducted talks with Beijing in Washington (March 1996), the Hague (April 1996), Beijing (July 1996), and Jakarta (July 1996), but also urged both sides of the Taiwan Strait to resume dialogue. Its intention was clearly to avoid direct military confrontation with the PRC and any military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait, particularly during the crisis. As demonstrated by the crisis' resolution, Washington's ability to handle crises with Beijing has become increasingly sophisticated and American leaders have also improved their skills as crisis handlers.<sup>50</sup> President Clinton's definitive statements and preventive diplomacy regarding cross-Strait tensions were more successful than those of the Eisenhower administration. A *New York Times* editorial applauded Clinton's prevention tactics, stating, "Mr. Clinton's handling of China as tensions mounted over Taiwan was a skillful mix of diplomacy and strength, including the judicious use of the Seventh Fleet to signal America's commitment to maintaining the peace in the region."<sup>51</sup> Changes in Taiwan itself should also be taken into account. To protect indefensible Quemoy and an authoritative Chiang regime raised doubts among U.S. congressional members during the 1958 crisis; however, protecting a politically pluralized and economically prosperous Taiwan won almost unanimous support from Congress during the 1996 crisis.

Even though the PRC ignited military tensions in both cases, the United States has requested both Taipei and Beijing to exercise self-restraint. Beijing was asked to cease military provocation while Taipei was cautioned not to take any political actions that might deviate from the "one China" policy. In both cases, U.S. intervention did not resolve the Taiwan-China dispute but reaffirmed the principle that the issue must be resolved peacefully. Even without a mutual defense treaty, an application of the Taiwan Relations Act was effective in defusing the recent crisis, as the PRC's military maneuvers constituted "a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States,"

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<sup>50</sup>Cf. J. H. Kalicki, *The Pattern of Sino-American Crises: Political-Military Interactions in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 213-14.

<sup>51</sup>"The Next Decision on China," *New York Times*, March 28, 1996, A24.

thus forcing the United States to assemble the largest fleet in the region since the Vietnam War.<sup>52</sup>

A policy of constructive engagement rather than containing China has freed Washington from its China policy discrepancies with overseas allies. In the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, the Eisenhower administration was almost isolated in its offshore island crisis management policy, but President Clinton's deployment of aircraft carriers to the region and his reassurance of maintaining 100,000 U.S. troops in East Asia was publicly or privately welcomed by the United Kingdom, Australia, the Philippines, Japan, and many others.<sup>53</sup> John Foster Dulles was eager to put the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis before the UN, while Warren Christopher strived to keep the issue of Taiwan away from that forum, despite the dissenting views of those such as political columnist A. M. Rosenthal, who argues that "every day that Washington fails to bring the missile blackmail and blockade of Taiwan before the U.N. increases the chances it will happen again, or something worse, until the disaster does take place."<sup>54</sup> Like Dag Hammarskjold, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has stated his hopes that all concerned parties exercise restraint and avoid increasing regional tensions, choosing not to become involved in the Taiwan Strait crisis because it is an "internal matter."<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion

Beijing's military coercion has caused serious concerns in Taipei and Washington over the possibility of a de jure independent Taiwan that could lead to the use of PRC force. The PRC's actions have encouraged Taiwan residents to resist reunification with China, and

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<sup>52</sup>"Profile of Two U.S. Carrier Groups Near Taiwan," Reuters, March 15, 1996.

<sup>53</sup>"Britain Says No Excuse for Threats over Taiwan," Reuters, March 12, 1996; "Japanese Premier Very Worried by Growing China-Taiwan Tensions," AFP, March 12, 1996; "Australia Calls in Chinese Ambassador to Complain," AP, March 12, 1996; "Manila Summons Chinese Envoy, Calls for Restraint," AFP, March 11, 1996; Jusuf Wanandi, "Asia-Pacific Needs U.S. Presence," *Jakarta Post*, April 16, 1996, 4; Gerald Segal, "The Taiwanese Crisis: What Next?" *Jane's Intelligence Review* 8, no. 6 (June 1996): 269-70.

<sup>54</sup>A. M. Rosenthal, "Indicting China's Terrorism," *New York Times*, March 12, 1996, A21; see also "German Defense Minister Urges UN to Discuss Tension in Taiwan Strait," CNA, March 20, 1996.

<sup>55</sup>Robert H. Reid, "UN Takes Low Profile as Crisis Emerges in Asia," AP, March 17, 1996.



encouraged Taiwan's government to slow the pace of Lee Teng-hui's pragmatic diplomacy. In the near future, Taipei will be faced with the dilemma of seeking peaceful relations with the PRC while retaining a de facto independent status. For Taipei, a peace accord in which Beijing renounces the use of force must precede the opening of direct commercial and transportation links. It could be to Taiwan's advantage to have the United States playing a role guaranteeing the implementation of such a cross-Strait peace accord, but Taipei has hesitated to do so for fear of being accused by Beijing of inviting foreign intervention. At the very least, Taipei still needs Washington's reassurance that the PRC will not be allowed to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait by military means.

Through coercive diplomacy, Beijing has demonstrated its ability to damage Taiwan's economy, but only partially achieved its political goals. It has influenced Taiwan's agenda of political development, but there is still a long way to go in bringing Taipei to accept the "one country, two systems" formula. Like Mao Zedong, Jiang Zemin miscalculated when he thought the world would not be disturbed by a military resolution to the Taiwan-China question. The unexpectedly vigorous U.S. response might force PRC military leaders to accelerate the acquisitions of weapons (such as aircraft carriers) that would upgrade China's power projection capability. Washington has pledged not to support Taiwan independence, but Beijing, in order to strengthen justifications for the use of force, will continue to accuse the United States of obstructing Chinese reunification.

In 1958, the United States was directly involved in breaking a Chinese blockade of the offshore islands, but Taiwan cannot expect a similar response in the future; since the U.S. Congress repealed the Formosa Resolution in 1974 and diplomatically recognized the PRC in 1979, the status of the offshore islands is now a matter of great dispute. While we wait for a final resolution of the Taiwan question, the U.S. government has maintained a policy of providing Taiwan with sufficient defensive weapons. Washington has hesitated to offer Taiwan offensive weapons and political commitments to come to Taiwan's rescue, lest Taiwan seek the independence option. On the other hand, the Clinton administration's robust actions during the recent crisis have proved that deeds rather than words are more effective in wielding preventive diplomacy. However, it is still too early to tell whether the recent dispatch of U.S. aircraft carriers will become the pattern for handling future Taiwan Strait crises. If the PRC crosses the line of military intimidation, the actions the U.S.

Seventh Fleet might take are still tactically ambiguous. However, one of the key lessons for the United States from the 1958 and 1996 Taiwan Strait crises has been that crisis prevention costs less and works more effectively than crisis management.

## Appendix:

### Chronology of U.S. Involvement in the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

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- 2/7/1996 Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific conducted hearing on Taiwan's security<sup>1</sup>
- 3/5/1996 Beijing announced it would stage guided-missile tests off Taiwan from March 8-15<sup>2</sup>
- 3/8/1996 U.S. National Security Adviser Anthony Lake discussed tensions in the Taiwan Strait with Liu Huaqiu, the Foreign Affairs Director of China's State Council<sup>3</sup>
- 3/9/1996 Beijing announced it would hold live-fire naval and air force exercises at the south end of Taiwan Strait from March 12-20<sup>4</sup>
- 3/10/1996 Secretary of State Warren Christopher confirmed that aircraft carrier *Independence* task force would be close to Taiwan to monitor tensions<sup>5</sup>
- 3/11/1996 Secretary of Defense William Perry said the carrier *Nimitz* would move from the Persian Gulf to join the carrier *Independence* off Taiwan<sup>6</sup>
- 3/11/1996 U.S. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Peter Tarnoff and Deputy National Security Adviser Samuel R. Burger met Ting Mou-shih, Secretary-General of Taiwan's National Security Council, in New York to counsel Taiwan against taking any provocative actions<sup>7</sup>
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<sup>2</sup>"Missile Tests to Take Place in Sea Areas Near Taiwan," *China Daily* (Beijing), March 6, 1996, 1.

<sup>3</sup>Jim Wolf, "U.S., Chinese Security Aides to Meet," Reuters, March 8, 1996.

<sup>4</sup>Patrick E. Tyler, "War Games Off Taiwan to Expand, Beijing Says," *New York Times*, March 10, 1996, A12.

<sup>5</sup>"U.S., Warning China, Moves Carrier Force," *New York Times*, March 11, 1996, A4.

<sup>6</sup>Charles Aldinger, "U.S. Sends Second Carrier, Submarines Near Taiwan," Reuters, March 11, 1996.

<sup>7</sup>"U.S. Reveals Secret Taiwan Talks," *International Herald Tribune*, May 4-5, 1996, 4.

- 3/14/1996 House International Relations Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific conducted hearing on Taiwan's security<sup>8</sup>
- 3/15/1996 Beijing announced that it would begin another round of ground, naval, and air military exercises at the north end of the Taiwan Strait from March 18-25<sup>9</sup>
- 3/19/1996 House Concurrent Resolution 148, which was approved by a vote of 369 to 14, included "United States military forces should defend Taiwan in the event of invasion, missile attack, or blockade by the People's Republic of China"<sup>10</sup>
- 3/21/1996 A resolution was passed by the Senate calling on China to "cease its bellicose actions directed at Taiwan," and urging President Clinton to "reexamine the nature and quantity of defense articles and services that may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability in light of the heightened military threat"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>"Lord's Testimony," CNA, March 14, 1996.

<sup>9</sup>"China Ends Missile Tests But Unveils New Exercise," Reuters, March 15, 1996.

<sup>10</sup>"House Passes Taiwan Defense Resolution," AFP, March 19, 1996.

<sup>11</sup>"Senate Resolution on Taiwan," CNA, March 6, 1996.