

The Limits of Dulles's Nuclear Diplomacy in the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis

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When President Dwight Eisenhower adopted the “New Look,” his own version of containment policy, his administration shifted toward reliance on nuclear weapons and the threat of massive retaliation as a conservative strategy to reduce spending on conventional military forces. This style of policymaking quickly encountered the real crisis in the Taiwan Strait when the People’s Liberation Army bombarded Quemoy and Matsu, which were within the sphere of the Nationalist Taiwan in 1958. During the crisis, John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State of President Eisenhower, tried to tame Chiang and formed his proposal of “Two Chinas” policy. Although PRC did not occupy these islands ultimately, George Herring still argues that John Foster Dulles’s policy during the crisis over the Taiwan Strait was a long-term failure. Specifically, he argues that Mao Zedong chose not to try to take Quemoy and Matsu for his own reasons, but there was another factor to consider—Chiang Kai-shek and Mao formed a tacit understanding on “One China”. Herring regards Quemoy and Matsu as worthless land.¹ However, for both parties, Quemoy and Matsu were their important outposts for their commitment to the “One China” policy. For Chiang’s regime, these islands legitimized his connection with mainland China that he always wanted to preserve; for Mao’s regime, these islands offered a more direct connection to Taiwan which he wanted to liberate. It was more the result of a voluntary compromise between the two parties than of his own efforts. Underestimating the strategic significance of Quemoy and Matsu led to a misinterpretation of both Chiang’s and

¹ George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 693.

Mao's policies—and thus to an inadequate assessment of Dulles's foreign policy.

The worldview of John Foster Dulles was constructed by his family from an early age. His family members had a major impact on his internationalist worldview, as his religious upbringing taught him to see faith as a practical force for global peace, while his diplomatic family background immersed him in global politics and law from an early age. His father, Reverend Allen Macy Dulles, was a theological liberal who integrated religion into every aspect of daily family life.² His maternal grandfather, John Watson Foster, was Secretary of State under Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893); he cultivated young Dulles's diplomatic outlook and faith in American exceptionalism by frequently inviting him to his Washington mansion, where the boy was surrounded by senators and ambassadors who all shared the conviction that the United States possessed a unique mission to lead world affairs.³ The influence of the top diplomats, lawyers and senators provided him with the best resources for foreign relations and triggered his curiosity about global politics. In addition, the theological liberalism he inherited from his father—that of the Liberal Protestants—embraced a more progressive worldview, “It was out of this nineteenth-century theological liberalism that the twentieth-century social gospel tradition evolved that saw in the convictions of Christianity the antidote to national and international pathologies.”⁴ The combination of two divergent ideologies, idealism and pragmatism, was a peaceful

² Richard H. Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Scholarly Resources, 1999), 2.

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

coexistence in the thinking of young Dulles. Together, they instilled in him a sense of America's inevitable duty to build a more harmonious world.

His studies at Princeton further revealed his commitment to internationalism, which deepened when he began to work with Woodrow Wilson. During his college years, Dulles took a course taught by Wilson, and he enthusiastically noted that Wilson stimulated his interest in public affairs.⁵ His relationship with Wilson became closer when Dulles worked indirectly for him on drafting the reparations clause to German during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the close relationship built on shared thinking with Wilson—from Princeton University to the American delegation—continued to shape his internationalist outlook. His liberal thinking was reflected in his writing when he argued that German reparation should be at an affordable number.⁷ He proposed a soft and liberal way to deal with a defeated Germany, just like his internationalist teacher Wilson. Undoubtedly, the cooperation between them cultivated his thinking, especially when Wilson requested him to deal with unfinished affairs at the conference because of his talent.⁸

Even though he returned to the US with frustration after the failed Conference, John Foster Dulles still firmly remembered Wilsonian doctrine when he became a lawyer in Wall Street. Here, as an international financial lawyer, he tried to achieve

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid., 7-8.

⁷ Ronald W. Pruessen, "Woodrow Wilson to John Foster Dulles: A Legacy," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 34, no. 2 (Winter 1973): 112.

⁸ Ibid., 113.

his goals that he had failed to accomplish in the Paris Peace Conference by solving the economic crisis in Europe. He participated in drafting Dawes Plan in 1924 that offered loans to Germany and lowered the reparations; he cooperated with his friend, Jean Monne, to build Polish Stabilization Plan, and he assisted the Young Plan in 1929—the successor to the Dawes Plan.⁹ Dulles’s engagement in Europe overlapped almost every aspect of Wilsonian doctrine. They both opposed excessive punishment on Germany; they both agreed that a stable economy in Europe was important for the U.S., and they both believed the U.S. should lead world affairs voluntarily.

Meanwhile, his worldview also experienced a change: he showed more enthusiasm for religion. He received a “great enlightenment” during a Christian conference at Oxford, after which he came to believe that religious principles could create a sense of obligation for nations to move beyond their narrow self-interest and work toward universal harmony.¹⁰ It is still debatable whether this experience shaped his image as a Cold War crusader; still, it is evident that Dulles placed religion in a critical position in his thinking. This “great enlightenment” on religion further led him to draft the “Six Pillars of Peace” as a blueprint for postwar order during World War II, when he served as Chairman of the Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace—an agency of the Federal Council of Churches. This Six Pillars of Peace, unsurprisingly, was Dulles’s version of “*Fourteen*

⁹ Immerman, *John Foster Dulles*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

Points.”¹¹ Once again, religion and diplomacy intersected inside Dulles’s proposal of post-war order.

He returned to government service during the Cold War and participated in major decision-making. As foreign affairs adviser to Thomas Dewey, he took part in events that once again reflected Wilsonian principles. Specifically, he was involved with the Marshall Plan and NATO.¹² The collective security and economic interdependence that Wilson had pursued now echoed in Dulles’s agenda. This Wilsonian thinking quickly clashed with George Kennan’s containment, which Dulles opposed. Rather, he argued that “United States recapturing that dynamism [faith of free world] and renewing that mission [duty of the free world]. It had to launch a ‘spiritual offensive.”¹³ He emphasized the U.S. duty to the free world and therefore argued that the United States should be proactive in containing the USSR. His tenure as Secretary of State, however, would lay bare the full complexity of that position.

According to Herring, John Foster Dulles was both an ideological crusader and a cold pragmatist.¹⁴ His response to the Quemoy Crisis illustrates this complexity. On September 3 and 22, 1958, the People’s Liberation Army began to shell Quemoy in two separate operations, which, according to CPC official documents, were the Chinese people’s resistance against U.S. interference in China’s internal affairs.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 18.

¹² Pruessen, “Woodrow Wilson to John Foster Dulles,” 125.

¹³ Immerman, *John Foster Dulles*, 32.

¹⁴ Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 656.

¹⁵ No page number; The Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, *Mao Zedong Zhuan (Quan 4 Juan)* [Biography of Mao Zedong (4 vols.)] (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2012), chap 55,

Dulles had already noticed the CPC's preparations for the bombardment one day earlier, and he had received orders from the president that the United States should not protect those islands unless the CPC's ultimate target was Taiwan—which, according to intelligence, it was not.¹⁶ Astonishingly, Dulles's reaction to this bombardment was pragmatic when he reflected on U.S. policy toward China:

“I do not feel that we have a case which is altogether defensible. [...] We are, in effect, demanding that these islands be a ‘privileged sanctuary’ from which the Chinats (the Nationalists) can wage at least political and subversive warfare against the Chicomcs (the communists) but against which the Chicomcs cannot retaliate.”¹⁷

Instead of contributing to the crisis by portraying it simply as communist aggression like an "ideological crusader," Dulles acknowledged that the U.S. logic behind the crisis was self-contradictory—the bombardment of Quemoy was a predictable response. In other words, the indulgence of the nationalists was the reason for this bombardment.

Meanwhile, he also proposed that the United States should project a posture of welcoming a fight, or at least maintain an ambiguous attitude toward Quemoy, in order to deter the Chinese Communists. Dulles had made similar attempts to deter the Chinese Communists before 1957, stating that the United States would protect

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¹⁶ United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Volume XIX: China*, ed. Harriet Dashiell Schwarz, gen. ed. Glenn W. LaFantasie (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), 42–43, <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AICXSFFJ5EOUXD86>.

¹⁷ U.S. Dept. of State, *FRUS, 1958–1960*, 19:69.

Quemoy whenever it was vital to the defense of Taiwan.¹⁸ Shortly after the bombardment, on August 23, through the conference, he claimed that any limited action from the CPC was a dangerous move.¹⁹ Dulles did not define the “limited action”. This ambiguous rhetoric not only left room to avoid a potential war with mainland China but also demonstrated U.S. commitment to Taiwan. The U.S. strategic goals on these islands were clear and consistent: to protect Taiwan while avoiding a potential war with China. Nonetheless, his rhetoric was much more aggressive in private than in public when he proposed to President Eisenhower the use of nuclear weapons.²⁰ Here, he genuinely contemplated bombing the mainland with nuclear weapons, considering that private conversations with the president did not require political posturing.

Dulles changed his attitude slightly in public, when he noticed that ambiguous and aggressive attitude did not deter the CPC. Now, he claimed to have potential negotiations with the CPC. In September 1958, Assistant Secretary of State Francis O. Wilcox said that the United States would continue the Warsaw talks with the Chinese Communists;²¹ on September 30th, he said in the news conference that the US had no legal duty to protect Quemoy and Matsu.²² Dulles was trying to withdraw

¹⁸ Party Literature Research Office, *Mao Zedong Zhuan*, chap. 61.

¹⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 296.

²⁰ Immerman, *John Foster Dulles*, 183.

²¹ John Sibley, "U. S. May Present Issue Before U. N.; 'Another Week or So' Likely to Set Course on Taiwan Crisis, Dulles Aide Says," *New York Times*, September 22, 1958, <https://www.nytimes.com/1958/09/22/archives/u-s-may-present-issue-before-u-n-another-week-or-so-likely-to-set.html>.

²² Party Literature Research Office, *Mao Zedong Zhuan*, chap. 61.

the U.S. projection of power over islands it never really wanted to defend. This was a reasonable move, because Washington knew that the CPC's goal was not Taiwan.

During the crisis, Dulles also tried to tame Chiang Kai-shek, and he was largely successful initially. On October 23rd, Dulles visited Taiwan and persuaded Chiang to abandon his ambition to liberate the mainland—the core of the Nationalists was peace; though he hesitated, he still accepted this proposal by making the statement in the communiqué.²³ Dulles realized that Chiang wanted to drag the United States into a war with the mainland, a move that would directly undermine the U.S. “New Look” strategy in East Asia. Consequently, Dulles sought to restrain Chiang's behavior and, during their negotiation, directly emphasized to him the importance of peace.

Herring concludes that Mao eventually backed off for his own reasons—a conclusion that is too broad and overlooks key details, thereby neglecting the full landscape of Dulles's policy. In the reality, Mao chose to “shell on odd-numbered days, truce on even-numbered days.” This approach intentionally left flexibility for the Nationalists to resupply and defend Quemoy over the long term, but on one strict condition: the United States must not provide escorts in the strait.²⁴ By forbidding U.S. escorts while allowing Nationalist resupply, Mao aimed to push the U.S. out of the conflict and advance its “One China” policy, using the continued bombardment as a way to assert that the mainland and Taiwan remained inextricably linked through the issue of Quemoy: after all, Quemoy was much closer to the mainland compared with

²³ U.S. Dept. of State, *FRUS, 1958–1960*, 19:404–5.

²⁴ Party Literature Research Office, *Mao Zedong Zhuan*, chap. 61.

Taiwan. Furthermore, the bombardment provided Chiang with a justification for maintaining a military presence on Quemoy, even though Dulles's team had wanted him to withdraw. As Eisenhower later noted, the Nationalists reduced their forces on the offshore islands: "[the withdrawal of troops in Quemoy] but not to the extent I thought desirable."²⁵

Chiang recognized a paradoxical opportunity in Mao's bombardment of Quemoy. While the shelling was intended to punish and deter, Chiang interpreted it as a golden chance for 'counterattack and restoration of the nation' (反攻复国).²⁶ More importantly, the bombardment ironically gave him the political cover to resist U.S. pressure for withdrawal from Quemoy, allowing him to preserve a military presence on the islands. The two rivals, the Nationalists and the Communists, reached a kind of tacit understanding during the bombardment. This was the major obstacle to Dulles's solution for handling the crisis, which Herring overlooked.

Thus, the bombardment of Quemoy also exposed the inadequacy of Dulles's approach to Third World nationalism. As Herring observes, Dulles consistently underestimated nationalism's force.²⁷ The cross-strait struggle also reflected each side's ambition to "liberate" the territory it valued most—one seeking to recover the mainland, the other to unify Taiwan. Undoubtedly, nationalism was the primary

²⁵ Eisenhower, *The White House Years*, 304.

²⁶ Liu Dayu, "Chiang Kai-shek's Strategy to the Bombardment of Kinmen by PLA in 1958: Based on the Study of 'Chiang Kai-shek Diaries,'" *Contemporary China History Studies*, no. 1 (2012): 66.

²⁷ Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 700.

driving force here: each side claimed to be the sole legitimate representative of “China.” After all, both sides regarded the struggle as a civil war rather than an international conflict. When Dulles tried to separate the two sides to form a “two Chinas” policy, it inevitably led to problems.

In a broader perspective, Herring did not give Dulles sufficient credit for his handling of U.S. relations with China. Herring argues that Dulles became too tightly intertwined with Chiang’s regime, which made it impossible for the U.S. to repair its relations with the PRC.²⁸ However, even Dulles himself noted that the bombardment was a predictable reaction from the PRC, given the Nationalists’ previous attempts to harass the mainland from Quemoy. From this perspective, the bombardment could have been avoided if Dulles had tried to tame Chiang earlier.

It is also true that Dulles’s ambiguous attitude had little effect in deterring the Chinese Communists or ending the bombardment. On the contrary, it pushed the PRC further away from the U.S. sphere of influence—even as the Sino-Soviet split was already emerging and might have offered Washington an opportunity to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing, and sporadic shelling continued until 1979, long after the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué. In addition, Dulles’s negotiation with Chiang in Taiwan inevitably strained U.S. relations with its ally, especially because Dulles wavered in supporting Chiang’s ambition to recover the mainland.

The bombardment of Quemoy was initially provoked by U.S. overindulgence of

²⁸ Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 701.

its Nationalist ally. Mao's backing off was a voluntary accommodation with Chiang, not a result of Dulles's overbearing rhetoric. Although Quemoy was ultimately secured, the crisis also revealed to Chiang that the United States was an unreliable ally. Meanwhile, Washington lost a valuable opportunity to initiate a Sino-U.S. relationship—one that would prove far more important to U.S. strategic interests than Taiwan over the next two decades and would ultimately advance America's goal of containing the Soviet Union. Dulles's "Two Chinas" blueprint would begin to materialize when Lee Teng-hui came to power. Tellingly, this shift provoked renewed bombardment by the CPC in 1996. This time, the United States responded with another show of force, sending two carrier battle groups to the region. Whether the 1996 bombardment and the U.S. response can be traced back to the patterns established in the 1958 Quemoy crisis remains a question worth deeper analysis.