

China versus the United States

On November 25, 1950, military forces of the People's Republic of China (PRC)¹ launched a series of massive attacks against advancing American and South Korean troops. The assault was devastating, routing portions of US forces and compelling a lengthy retreat back down the Korean Peninsula. The Korean War, which had only recently seemed destined for a decisive American victory, settled into a bitter stalemate before negotiations ended the fighting in 1953. Barely a year later in 1954, and then again in 1958, the PRC shelled offshore islands controlled by the Nationalist Chinese exiled on Taiwan (Formosa) after their defeat in the Chinese Civil War. The assaults necessarily involved the United States, the main patron of the Nationalists. All three Chinese actions occurred in spite of the American atomic monopoly. Why did the PRC risk such a devastating assault just as the American nuclear capabilities were becoming more substantial in 1950? Why did the PRC then escalate tensions twice more in such a short period if it became more cognizant of the destructive power and danger of nuclear weapons?²

I argue that China pursued several strategies to minimize the likelihood of an American nuclear strike. In each confrontation the Chinese perceived a growing danger to what they considered vital interests. Nevertheless, China did not rush into war in 1950. Mao Zedong, leader of the PRC, took several steps, most notably pursuing Soviet support, to help reduce the risks of fighting the United States. Additionally, the fighting itself posed little danger to the United States outside the Korean Peninsula. Though publicly the Chinese sought to downplay the dangers of nuclear strikes to discourage American attempts at nuclear blackmail, in private they took the American nuclear arsenal very seriously. In both Taiwan Straits crises, the Chinese took several steps to avoid fighting the United States.

This chapter relies on several types of sources. To begin with, it incorporates secondary sources, many based on declassified Chinese documents, as well as memoirs and statements by participants. I note if there is widespread disagreement or multiple compelling interpretations for events. I also directly

incorporate Chinese and Soviet-bloc documents translated to English. Many of these are available at the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) and can be accessed online. These allow me to reconstruct, at times day by day, the events surrounding Chinese decision making as well as interrogate the role that nuclear weapons played. There are a number of cases where nuclear weapons can be shown to have had a direct influence on specific Chinese decisions during their confrontations with the United States. There remain limits to the conclusions that one can draw, and, as in the other cases, it is important to note that many factors beyond nuclear weapons influenced Chinese decision making. Finally, I supplement these sources with declassified American documents, particularly when assessing the military balance.

I expand on this argument in the rest of the chapter. I first outline the nuclear and conventional military balance. Next, I review the background for the three disputes investigated: the 1950 Korean War, the 1954 Taiwan Straits Crisis, and the 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis. The third section examines Chinese behavior and strategies to raise the costs and lower the benefits for the Americans to execute a nuclear strike.

The Military Balance

The United States fielded a more destructive nuclear force in 1950 than several nuclear-armed states possess in 2019. The PRC was a conventionally weak opponent relative to the United States. Its military and economic capabilities allowed it to do little more than pursue ground operations within mainland China or the immediate vicinity.

THE NUCLEAR BALANCE

Nuclear monopoly existed between the United States and the People's Republic from the official birth of the PRC on October 1, 1949, to China's first nuclear test on October 16, 1964. The Chinese were obviously aware of the American atomic capability given the US use of nuclear weapons against Japan and subsequent US policy. The American nuclear arsenal was small, however, with a limited delivery capability from 1945 to 1949.³

Beginning in 1950, the US nuclear arsenal grew rapidly. As table 4.1 shows, the number of US strategic nuclear warheads, not counting the introduction of tactical nuclear warheads, grew from approximately three hundred in 1950 to more than forty-six hundred by 1964. The introduction of thermonuclear weapons into the US arsenal in 1954 is apparent by the jump in total yield. In 1955 the first lightweight hydrogen bomb, the B15, entered service, with a yield of 3.4 megatons.⁴

US delivery capabilities were rapidly improving as well. The B-29 and B-50 (essentially a modified B-29) were phased out in the early 1950s, replaced by

Table 4.1 US nuclear weapons, 1949–1964

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total nuclear warheads</i>	<i>Strategic nuclear warheads</i>	<i>Total yield (megatons)</i>
1949	170	170	4.19
1950	299	299	9.53
1951	438	438	35.25
1952	841	660	49.95
1953	1,169	878	72.80
1954	1,703	1,418	339.01
1955	2,422	1,755	2,879.99
1956	3,692	2,123	9,188.65
1957	5,543	2,460	17,545.86
1958	7,345	2,610	17,303.54
1959	12,298	2,496	19,054.62
1960	18,638	3,127	20,491.17
1961	22,229	3,153	10,947.71
1962	25,540	3,451	12,825.02
1963	28,133	4,050	15,977.17
1964	29,463	4,654	16,943.97

Sources: Department of State, "Fact Sheet: Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile," April 29, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/225555.pdf>; "Estimated U.S. and Soviet/Russian Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945–94," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 50, no. 6 (1994): 58–59.

the B-36, B-47, and, beginning in 1955, the B-52.⁵ Increases in range and airborne refueling allowed American aircraft to strike targets throughout China's populated and industrial areas. American intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) began entering service in 1959 and 1960, respectively. Though range and deployment locations meant not all missiles could strike Chinese targets, the number of platforms threatening China nevertheless increased. Finally, on June 20, 1953, President Eisenhower began transferring operational nuclear weapons to direct military control. This reversed Truman-era policies that had kept nuclear weapons largely separated from the military.⁶

THE CONVENTIONAL BALANCE

The conventional balance was highly asymmetric in favor of the United States throughout the period of American atomic monopoly. Figure 4.1 shows that the United States always had at least a 10:1 advantage in per capita GDP. In most years the advantage was 15:1 or more. This allowed the United States to extract a great deal more from its society and field a larger

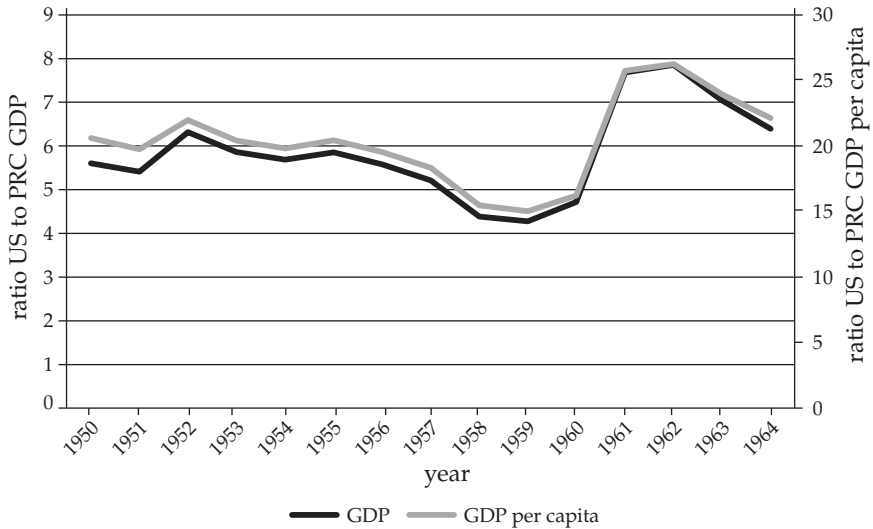


Figure 4.1 Economic ratios, 1950–1964

Source: Gleditsch Expanded GDP data version 6.0 (September 2014), <http://ksgleditsch.com/extradedgp.html>.

quantity and better quality of weapons, as well as sustain advanced forces in battle. The overall ratio of US to Chinese GDP was less extreme because of China's large population, but always greater than 4:1 and in most years 5:1 or more. In the early 1950s China was recovering from devastation wrought by years of warfare against Japan and its own civil war. Massive amounts of infrastructure were destroyed, agricultural land abandoned, and industrial centers shuttered. More than forty million people were unemployed in 1950, and famine was widespread.⁷

US officials were cognizant of the power imbalance. In 1948, the director of the policy planning staff at the State Department, George Kennan, wrote that the area that China occupied had such little power potential that "in any war in the foreseeable future China could at best be a weak ally or at worst an inconsequential enemy."⁸ After the Korean War, US observers concluded that China had made impressive gains, but numerous obstacles meant that it was "unlikely that they can soon achieve a modern economy or major economic capabilities."⁹ Similarly, one 1960 National Intelligence Estimate found that "Communist China has made impressive gains in industrial and military strength." Nevertheless, China would "continue to face major economic problems for many years to come."¹⁰

Rough indicators for the military balance also show an American advantage. This too was somewhat tempered by China's larger population, which in 1950 was 570 million people, compared to 150 million in the United States.

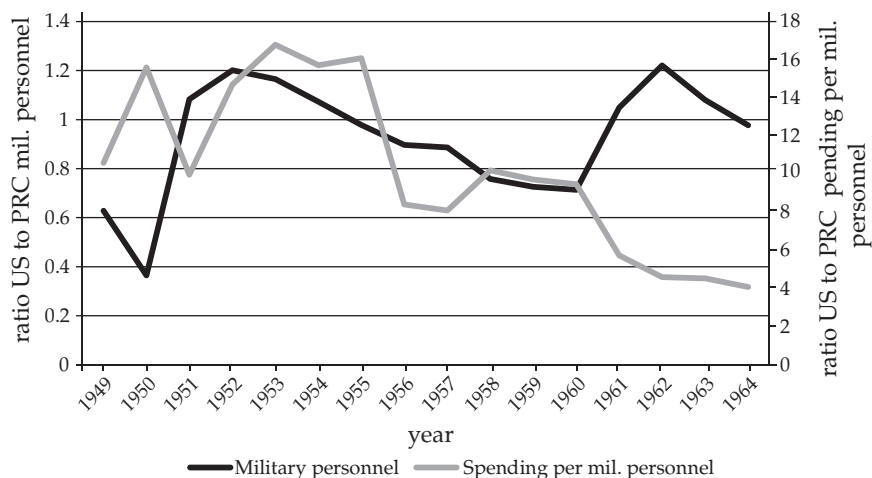


Figure 4.2 Military ratios, 1949–1964

Source: Correlates of War, National Material Capabilities, version 5.0, <http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/national-material-capabilities>.

This allowed China to field a larger military force than the United States, a point driven home to American leaders on the battlefields of Korea. Though even in this key area one notes that the Chinese advantage over Americans in raw numbers of soldiers, sailors, and airmen was never greater than 3:1, and in several years the United States actually fielded a larger military. The US advantage becomes more apparent when comparing levels of military spending per soldier. As figure 4.2 shows, that ratio often exceeded 10:1 in favor of the United States and was greater than 8:1 throughout the 1950s.

More detailed assessments of the military balance reinforce the picture created by the rough indicators on military size and spending. PRC manpower and terrain provided a major advantage against any attempts at invasion or major offensive actions against the PRC homeland. Yet the PRC had little power projection capability, no ability to strike the US homeland, and no ability to quickly conquer territory that would decisively alter the balance of power.¹¹ Finally, both sides had the ability to implement modern force employment techniques of differential concentration and defense in depth at the operational level, with cover, concealment, dispersion, and suppressive fire at the tactical level. This is not to say both sides did so in every engagement or always would have in potential conflicts, but that the PRC did not have an advantage in this regard. When both sides are capable of implementing this modern system of force employment, imbalances in material and technological capability prove decisive.¹²

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) units had limited firepower capabilities. For military equipment, the Chinese relied heavily on what they

could capture and Soviet support.¹³ In October 1950, Mao informed Stalin that China could field large numbers of ground troops “thanks to available reserves, but as to technological equipment of Chinese troops they totally count on the assistance of the Soviet Union.”¹⁴ Mao may have exaggerated somewhat to gain additional Soviet aid, but not by much.¹⁵ On the eve of the Korean War, Marshal Lin Biao argued that an American division possessed ten to twenty times the firepower of its Chinese counterpart.¹⁶ Despite initial surprise and manpower advantages, the PLA was consistently unable to annihilate American combat formations.¹⁷ As Zhang concludes, during the Korean War the Chinese military, “although a gigantic force of some 5 million men, lacked naval and air arms. Its soldiers were irregulars, its equipment was heterogeneous and largely obsolete . . . [and] its command and control structure was rudimentary.”¹⁸

Chinese capabilities increased after the Korean War but continued to decisively lag the Americans. In his detailed study of the PLA, Xiaobing Li notes that “after the Korean War, Chinese generals were convinced that the Chinese military was a regional force, not a global one.”¹⁹ For instance, Marshal Nie Rongzhen recalled that during the 1950s the “conventional weapons we could produce at the time were far behind, in capabilities and qualities, those of the technologically advanced countries.”²⁰ Throughout the 1950s, the Chinese sought to reverse what Mao called the “backward conditions” of the military, relying heavily on Soviet support.²¹

The Chinese had little ability to project power over water. Attempted amphibious assaults in 1949 against the Nationalist islands of Jinmen and Dengbu ended in disaster.²² The Chinese military subsequently increased its amphibious capabilities and overcame the Nationalists, taking several islands immediately off the mainland coast. China primarily fielded small gunboats and torpedo boats, frequently relying on commandeered civilian vessels for troop transport. These would be ineffective against American naval capabilities.²³ The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) had only formed in 1949 and so was extremely limited at the outset of the Korean War. Though its capabilities increased after the war, the PLAAF lacked effective bombing capabilities and had difficulty projecting power beyond the PRC’s shore.²⁴

American assessments were similar to those of the Chinese. The Central Intelligence Agency surmised in early November 1950 that “the Chinese Communists could probably make available as many as 350,000 troops . . . for sustained ground operations in Korea and could provide limited air support and some armor.” Chinese forces would thus be capable of “halting further UN advance northward” or “forcing UN withdrawal to defensive positions further south.”²⁵ At best, though, the Chinese could force a stalemate. There was no danger to the United States unless the conflict escalated to a general war involving the Soviet Union. After the war the United States viewed China as a capable but minor adversary with minimal power projection ability. The National Security Council noted in November 1953 that

on “the basis of the Korean experience, and of our intelligence as to the level and quality of Chinese Communist forces not committed in the Korean theater, it may be estimated that the Chinese Communists, with continued assistance from the USSR, have a considerable capability for defending mainland China against amphibious or ground assault; modest defensive and offensive air capabilities; limited amphibious capabilities; and negligible naval capabilities.”²⁶ Later National Intelligence Estimates noted Chinese military improvements but concluded that China remained “dependent on the USSR for most major items of military equipment.”²⁷

Dispute Overview

Mao declared the formation of the PRC on October 1, 1949. The first task, common to most states, was to minimize threats to PRC territory. This focus was reinforced by the Chinese memory of the hundred years (or century) of humiliation, from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries as foreign powers effectively negated Chinese sovereignty over large parts of the country.²⁸ Thus, in September 1949 Mao stressed to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference that “no imperialist will be allowed to invade our territory again.”²⁹

The second task centered on consolidating control of Han Chinese areas outside the PRC. These included Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. All three areas have been so significant that Chinese leadership terms disputes over their status “domestic affairs (*neizheng*), not interstate conflicts.”³⁰ For example, Zhou Enlai argued in April 1955 that the “relationship between China and the Jiang Jieshi [Chiang Kai-shek] clique [on Taiwan] is an internal issue. The relationship between China and the United States is an international issue.”³¹ Taiwan attracted the most attention. As Zhang Baijia and Jia Qingguo write, Chinese leaders have long regarded reunification with Taiwan as a “core national interest[;] it is highly unlikely that any Chinese leader has ever entertained the idea of sacrificing Taiwan for other interests.”³² Indeed, upon its formation the PRC set the “liberation of Taiwan” as one of its key strategic goals.³³ “The fact that Taiwan belongs to China can never be altered no matter what obstructionist tactics American imperialism may adopt,” Zhou stated on June 28, 1950.³⁴

The PRC initially sought to avoid a major confrontation with the United States. True, the Communists looked to complete their victory by conquering Taiwan. US leaders were willing to accept that outcome at that point, though.³⁵ Chinese suspicions of US intentions and ideological affinity led Mao to “lean” toward the Soviet Union, signing the Sino-Soviet Treaty in February 1950. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) nevertheless made several public and private overtures to engage the United States. “If the United States (and Great Britain) cut off relations with the GMD [Nationalists], we

could consider the issue of establishing diplomatic relations with them," argued Mao.³⁶ Though negotiations came to little, China was reluctant to risk a confrontation.³⁷ When North Korea raised the possibility of invading South Korea on May 13, 1950, Mao sought clarification that the Soviets had, in fact, assented. The new leader feared such a move would provoke the United States. Mao ultimately bowed to the wishes of his new ally, despite misgivings.³⁸

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) launched its assault on South Korea on June 25, 1950. President Harry Truman quickly decided to act, securing UN Security Council approval on June 27 to assist South Korea to repel the attack owing to the absence of the Soviet delegation. The United States also placed the Seventh Fleet between Taiwan and the mainland. Though the US argued this would neutralize the Nationalists, it blocked Chinese efforts to take the island and contributed to Chinese hostility.³⁹

The PRC leadership quickly considered the possibility of involvement and took steps to minimize the danger. As PLA commanders agreed during a July meeting, it was better "to repair the house before it rains."⁴⁰ The principal policy result was the movement of troops to the Korean border.⁴¹ Mao contemplated some form of military involvement as early as mid-July. Yet he did not push this policy aggressively, and the Chinese leadership continued to focus on the danger of a US victory when considering intervention.⁴² Throughout the summer, as Shen Zhihua points out, "with the [North] Korean People's Army still advancing south, and with no prospect of the U.S. military crossing the 38th parallel, the question of possibly deploying Chinese forces still seemed remote."⁴³ As late as August 19, Mao declared that "if the US continues its operations in South Korea with its current-level forces, soon the KPA [Korean People's Army] will drive them out of the Korean Peninsula."⁴⁴ The movement of forces would be a hedge against uncertainties and allow China to appear a loyal ally, all while taking on very little risk at that time.

The situation changed rapidly in September. American and UN forces routed DPRK troops following the amphibious landing at Inchon. The success provided a tantalizing opportunity to the Americans to roll back communism in Asia. On September 27, Truman authorized General Douglas MacArthur to cross the prewar border between North and South. South Korean (Republic of Korea, ROK) forces crossed on September 30, followed by MacArthur's October 1 ultimatum calling for North Korea's unconditional surrender. American troops crossed the border six days later on October 7 and steadily advanced northward.⁴⁵

As early as July, the PRC leadership had set an American advance into North Korea as an explicit condition for intervention. Zhou informed the Soviet ambassador Nikolai Roshchin that the Chinese army would engage the Americans in the guise of volunteers if the Americans moved north of the thirty-eighth parallel.⁴⁶ "If the U.S. imperialists won the war,

they would become more arrogant and would threaten us. We should not fail to assist the Koreans," Mao argued during an August 4 meeting with Central Committee members.⁴⁷ Similarly, the director of the political departments in the Chinese People's Volunteer Force, Du Ping, recalled that at a meeting of the Northeast Military Region commanders on August 13, "all attending commanders believed that if imperialist America occupied all of Korea, it would retrace imperialist Japan's old path to invade our Northeast and North China. . . . Where would we then have to resist?"⁴⁸

The American decision thus created a growing sense of danger to the Chinese homeland. If the United States occupied North Korea, the end result would almost certainly be US troops permanently deployed in a hostile country directly adjacent to China. Mao outlined the basic logic in a draft telegram for Stalin on October 2, arguing that if "we allow the United States to occupy all of Korea, the revolutionary strength of Korea will suffer a fundamental defeat, and the American invaders will run more rampant, with negative effects for the entire Far East."⁴⁹ Mao summarized the security concerns again on October 13, telling Roshchin that "if the U.S. troops advance up to the border of China, then Korea will become a dark spot for us [the Chinese] and the Northeast will be faced with constant menace."⁵⁰ Moreover, northeast China contained the main industrial strength of the country, as well as the main supply lines to the Soviet Union.⁵¹ As Paul Godwin concludes, "Should Beijing come to Pyongyang's aid, China would be confronting the most powerful state in the industrial world. Mao nevertheless feared more a unified Korea on China's borders under U.S. control."⁵²

Mao's view was widely shared. For example, after an agonizing night contemplating intervention, Marshal Peng Dehuai, who would command Chinese "volunteers" in Korea, argued during a Politburo meeting on October 5 that "sending the troops to aid Korea is necessary. . . . If the American military places itself along the Yalu River and in Taiwan, it could find an excuse anytime it wants to launch an invasion."⁵³ Peng's statement was unlikely to have been made simply to earn Mao's approval. "Given Peng's reputation for forthrightness and frankness," Andrew Scobell argues, "if the general had concluded that intervention was wrong, he would undoubtedly have stated his opinion, as he did on other occasions much to his detriment."⁵⁴ China could not "sit back with folded hands and let the Americans come up to their border," Marshal Nie informed Indian diplomat K. M. Panikkar over dinner on September 25. "We know what we are in for, but at all costs American aggression has to be stopped."⁵⁵ The Chinese concern was sufficiently clear that American intelligence accurately captured it. "The Chinese Communists probably genuinely fear an invasion of Manchuria despite the clear-cut definition of UN objectives," CIA director Walter Bedell Smith wrote to Truman on November 1.⁵⁶

On the night of October 19, Chinese forces began crossing the Yalu into North Korea.⁵⁷ As I discuss in more detail below, the PRC leadership was not eager for a fight. At a key Politburo meeting on October 2, many top officials were skeptical of intervention.⁵⁸ Ultimately, Mao's arguments were sufficient to sway hesitant officials.

Chinese forces again challenged the United States in 1954–1955 by shelling territory controlled by American-backed Taiwan (the Republic of China, or ROC). Chinese officials had watched nervously following the end of the Korean War as US-Taiwanese ties deepened. Particularly alarming was discussion of a US-ROC defense treaty. In the wake of divisions in Germany, Korea, and Vietnam, this seemed to portend a permanent division between Taiwan and the mainland.⁵⁹ “In order to *break up* the collaboration between the United States and Chiang Kai-shek, and keep them from joining together militarily and politically,” Mao told Zhou in July 1954, “we must announce to our country and to the world the slogan of liberating Taiwan.”⁶⁰ Earlier that month, Mao had argued in the Politburo that “we should destroy the chances of the United States to conclude the treaty with Taiwan. We should think of ways to achieve this objective, including enhancing our propaganda. . . . Our objective is to put pressure on the United States so that [it] will not conclude the treaty with Taiwan.”⁶¹ The PRC thus initially responded to the situation with public warnings against any attempts to alter Taiwan's status.⁶²

The failure to arrest the deteriorating situation led to more confrontational measures. The PRC accelerated preparations to seize several of the Dachen islands, some two hundred miles north of Taiwan and close to the mainland. Peng Dehuai, then defense minister, explicitly linked the military action to the threat from US-ROC treaty negotiations. The offensive would “attack the American-Chiang mutual defense plot,” he argued.⁶³ On September 3, 1954, PLA artillery began the first of seventy barrages over the next two months against Jinmen Island.

The situation nevertheless deteriorated further from the Chinese perspective. American and ROC officials continued negotiations, signing the defense agreement in December. Zhou labeled the move “open aggression” and warned the United States it would have to accept the consequences.⁶⁴ Mao concurred, stating that the treaty “is not by any means a defense treaty. . . . It is a treaty of total aggression.”⁶⁵ The bombardment of Dachen subsequently intensified to “make it clear that the Chinese Government and people firmly stand against the [US-Taiwan] treaty of aggression.”⁶⁶ In addition to signaling hostility, the CCP leadership sought to determine the precise physical territory that the treaty covered. Su Yu, the chief of the general staff, issued an operation order on November 30 stating that the “East China Military Region should attack and seize Yijiangshan Island on or around December 20 to force the scope of the so-called ‘defense treaty’ that America and Chiang are about to sign to exclude our coastal islands that

the enemy occupies."⁶⁷ The offensive was delayed for nearly a month, but on January 18, 1955, PRC forces seized Yijiangshan Island. The assault killed 567 ROC soldiers and captured another 519. The United States evacuated ROC forces from nearby islands, which the PRC then occupied. China continued its advance, so that by the end of February it controlled the Dachens, Beiji, Nanji, and a series of smaller islands.⁶⁸ With the scope of the American commitment now probed, the US-ROC treaty a reality, and American military threats increasing, the PRC sought to defuse tensions. The crisis effectively ended on April 23, 1955, when Zhou expressed a desire for negotiations with the US government during a meeting with Asian and African leaders in Bandung, Indonesia.⁶⁹

Two years of relative quiet followed until August 23, 1958, when Chinese forces began shelling Jinmen and Mazu. Artillery barrages continued for two months, killing and wounding nearly twenty-five hundred ROC personnel. The crisis subsided when Zhou resumed negotiations with the Americans in September. On October 25 the PRC announced that it would shell Jinmen only on odd-numbered days. By then it had abandoned plans to seize Jinmen and Mazu as part of the liberation of Taiwan. Shelling continued through 1961, when the Chinese stopped using live ammunition and instead switched to propaganda leaflets. The shelling stopped entirely in 1979.⁷⁰

Several factors pushed Mao to act. He may have been seeking to increase his stature in the international Communist movement by challenging the United States during the latter's intervention in Lebanon. Yet Chinese preparations for military action began well before the Lebanon issue came up, and China commenced shelling after the crisis was resolved.⁷¹ There is evidence that Mao believed a crisis against an external enemy could mobilize domestic support for his development programs.⁷² As he put it on September 5, "A tense situation can mobilize the population, can particularly mobilize the backward people, can mobilize the people in the middle, and can therefore promote the Great Leap Forward in economic construction."⁷³

A critical factor once again proved to be perceptions that Taiwan was sliding toward permanent separation from the mainland. As M. Taylor Fravel argues, "as the situation deteriorated across the Taiwan Strait in late 1957, China's leaders began to contemplate military action."⁷⁴ Sino-American negotiations had stalled in December 1957, US military deployments appeared to increase, including the deployment of nuclear weapons to Taiwan in 1958, and the ROC ramped up statements proclaiming an intention to take back the mainland.⁷⁵ US policy, Zhou warned in February 1958, threatened to make two Chinas a reality.⁷⁶

The Chinese goal centered on arresting the movement toward an independent Taiwan. PRC leaders understood their action would antagonize the United States. According to Wu Lengxi, then editor of the *People's Daily*

who would later become deputy director of the Central Committee's Propaganda Department, Mao's goal was "to punish the Americans" for their Taiwan policy.⁷⁷ Before the start of the bombardment, Mao wrote to Peng Dehuai to "prepare to shell Jinmen now, dealing with Jiang [Chiang Kai-shek] directly and the Americans indirectly."⁷⁸ After shelling began, Zhou and Mao made it clear to the Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko that, in Zhang's words, "China's bombardment was intended mainly to 'punish the KMT [ROC]' and 'pressure the United States not to pursue a 'two-Chinas' policy.'"⁷⁹ As Mao explained to the Politburo Standing Committee on August 23, "Our demand is that American armed forces withdraw from Taiwan, and Jiang's troops withdraw from Jinmen and Mazu. . . . We did not put the Americans in the wrong; they did it by themselves—they have stationed several thousand troops on Taiwan, plus two air force bases there."⁸⁰

The US response included the dispatch of additional forces to the region, clarification of its commitment to Jinmen and Mazu, and escorting ROC resupply efforts to the islands. The Eisenhower administration did not rule out nuclear use, but against a low-level challenge and a conventionally weak adversary the administration saw little benefit and numerous costs in the early use of nuclear weapons.⁸¹ Mao sought to assure his colleagues (as well as nervous Soviet officials) that the Americans would be hesitant to use force. But he refrained from escalation.

The PRC moved to defuse the crisis once the bombardment seemed to only further the prospects of a permanent division with Taiwan. When negotiations began on September 15, the PRC rejected an American cease-fire proposal. A cease-fire would only strengthen the ROC position, making separation more likely. PRC leaders countered again and again that they would reduce tensions if the Americans withdrew all forces from Taiwan and the Straits. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles then expanded the cease-fire option on September 30, hinting the Americans would be willing to remove ROC forces from Jinmen and Mazu. Though this seemed to meet part of the PRC objectives, Zhou warned that Dulles's proposal in reality would "seize this opportunity to create two Chinas. . . . In one word, Dulles' policy was designed to exchange Jinmen and Mazu for Taiwan and Penghu."⁸²

A firmer division was the very thing the PRC hoped to prevent. "Honestly, we do want to take over Jinmen and Mazu," Mao argued on September 30. "But this is not just about Jiang; this is especially about U.S. policy, which needs to be taken into consideration."⁸³ Mao now fell back on his "noose" concept. It was an acceptable outcome for Jinmen and Mazu to remain in America-backed ROC hands. "Whenever necessary, we may shell them," Mao explained a few days later. "Whenever we are in need of tension, we may tighten this noose, and whenever we want to relax the tension, we may loosen the noose."⁸⁴

The Role of Nuclear Weapons

The Chinese pursued several different avenues to minimize the risks of a nuclear strike. In every case Chinese military action was directed to an area that had a natural stopping point, and the PRC took various steps to hedge against a nuclear strike. In 1954 and 1958 they were careful to limit the scope of their actions. My argument predicts a conventionally weak NNWS may escalate to war if it believes it is in its interest. During the Korean War the Chinese posed no threat to the American homeland, to the US military outside the Korean peninsula, or to the US nuclear arsenal. At the same time, the Chinese sought to inflict serious losses on US forces operating in Korea. They therefore pursued additional means to raise the costs of any American escalation. Specifically, Mao was hesitant to intervene without assurances of Soviet support. In the first section I outline the general Chinese behavior, before turning in the second section to more explicitly link nuclear weapons to this behavior.

CHINESE BEHAVIOR

Despite their general belief that intervention in the Korean War was necessary for security reasons, the Chinese leadership agonized over the final decision to fight. In an effort to deter the Americans, the PRC issued several warnings that an advance to the Yalu risked war. Zhou explained to Soviet officials on September 18 that the Western countries were concerned about Chinese and Soviet intervention. "We should take advantage of the fear of the Western countries and take actions to demonstrate our intentions," he argued. "From this perspective, China's transfer of troops from the south to the northeast was enough to upset the British and American governments."⁸⁵ On October 2, Zhou asked the Indian ambassador to warn the Americans that China would enter the war if US forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel.⁸⁶ The Americans did not halt their advance.

Having accepted the necessity of war in Korea, China initially sought to avoid directly confronting US forces. Mao told Zhou on October 13 that the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) would "concentrate on fighting the [South Korean] puppet army" while avoiding American troops. "If we can eliminate several divisions of the puppet army in the first phase, the Korean situation will take a turn in our favor."⁸⁷ Indeed, there was some hope that no fighting at all would occur, and that the Chinese would simply present the Americans with a *fait accompli* that would deter any further American advance. As Mao explained, if the CPV intervened quickly north of American positions, then "the U.S. and its puppet troops, concerned [by the intervention of China], would stop their advance northward and thus we would be able to protect the areas north of the Pyongyang-Wonsan front . . . from being occupied by the enemy."⁸⁸ Mao and Peng's plans in late October

after the CPV crossed into North Korea continued to focus on avoiding combat with the United States, instead focusing on wiping out “three or even four [ROK] puppet divisions with a surprise attack.” If such an attack was successful, the thinking went, American forces would have to reconsider their advance.⁸⁹ The Chinese would then set up a defensive perimeter in the northern part of North Korea to build up their forces, gain greater Soviet air support, and launch a larger counteroffensive if necessary. The first campaign (October 25 to November 8) went largely to script. However, it did not halt the American advance, and there was no new diplomatic effort. The CPV then disengaged in an effort to lure the Americans farther north for a massive counterattack.⁹⁰

The second campaign (beginning November 25) planned to, and did, inflict a large number of casualties on US military forces. Despite its scope, the Chinese strategy would not threaten US forces outside Korea, the US homeland, its regime, or its nuclear arsenal. The strategy focused on defeating US forces currently operating in Korea, capturing South Korean territory, and then switching to a defensive posture. The United States would again be presented with a choice to escalate further or halt the fighting. The Central Military Commission highlighted the coercive nature of Mao’s strategy on December 4, stating that “we will mainly aim at eliminating the enemy [strength] and first of all wipe out the ROK forces. [With this action] we will be in a stronger position to compel [the] United States imperialists to withdraw from Korea.”⁹¹ Mao hoped the UN would allow elections for the Korean people to select a single government under UN and Chinese and Soviet supervision. This was not simply a rationalization brought on by stalemate; at that point CPV forces were still rapidly advancing, and US formations had yet to stabilize. The limited nature of the advance was credible because China had no way to project power beyond the continent to harm US interests elsewhere in the Pacific, to say nothing of the US homeland.

The Chinese also took steps to avoid making a broader declaration of war against the United States, further limiting the danger posed to the Americans. Mao accepted advice to term Chinese forces “volunteers” to highlight the “unofficial nature” of the PRC’s involvement.⁹² Peng explained to his subordinates prior to intervention that “at present [we] do not want to fight a major war. Nor do we intend to declare war on America, but only to assist the Koreans’ revolutionary war under the name of People’s Volunteers.”⁹³ The Chinese would not seek to escalate the war by confronting Americans or American allies elsewhere. Hostilities would be limited to the Korean Peninsula. After the conflict settled into a stalemate, the PRC took various steps to prevent further escalation. For example, the Chinese air force, in a reciprocal action to US forces not engaging north of the Yalu River, refused to allow air strikes south of the thirty-eighth parallel.⁹⁴

The Chinese would still be inflicting large casualties on the Americans, despite the limited overall danger to the United States. As such, the

Chinese also sought ways to increase the costs of escalation for the United States. In particular, the Chinese sought a Soviet commitment of air forces.

The problem was that the Soviets were hesitant to offer such support. As the situation in Korea deteriorated for the North Koreans, the Soviets increased pressure on China to intervene. Stalin cabled Mao on October 1 urging intervention. On October 7 he again reminded Mao that the Sino-Soviet alliance would likely deter any American expansion of the war. For added encouragement, Stalin suggested a windows logic, arguing that a war now would be better than in several years when Japan and South Korea would be stronger.⁹⁵ Yet the Soviets were unwilling to become directly involved. They initially offered air support and material resources to the PRC, but had begun backing away from those commitments as early as August. Then in early September Stalin withdrew the 151st Air Division, which, notes Donggil Kim, meant that, "in effect, Soviet air cover for North-east China was removed."⁹⁶

With Soviet support wavering, China balked at the prospect of fighting. On October 2, Mao seemed ready to enter the fight—he even drafted, but did not send, a telegram to Stalin to that effect—but faced intense opposition within his own government. "We originally planned to move several volunteer divisions to North Korea," Mao informed the Soviet ambassador. "However, having thought this over thoroughly, we now consider that such actions may entail extremely serious consequences."⁹⁷ After several days of debate, on October 5, the Chinese Politburo adopted a resolution to send troops to North Korea, conditional, as Kim highlights, "on Soviet assistance."⁹⁸ On October 7, the leader of the Soviet military mission in North Korea reported on Sino-Korean discussions, relaying that Mao told the North Koreans that "we [China] will do whatever we can, but we can't send troops. . . . Although the Chinese army is large, they don't have modern weapons, aviation, and a navy."⁹⁹ On October 8, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung briefly celebrated an apparent PRC decision to intervene.¹⁰⁰ The situation remained fluid, though. China was still uncommitted. In a fight with the Americans, Mao explained to Roshchin on October 6, China would "completely depend on Soviet assistance."¹⁰¹ That assistance appeared doubtful.

To clarify the Soviet position and secure support, Mao dispatched Zhou and Lin Biao to meet with Stalin. During their meetings, Stalin backed away from his commitment to provide Soviet air support. On October 11, Zhou and Stalin jointly signed a telegram to Mao that said Chinese forces "should not cross the Korean border, so as to avoid falling into a disadvantageous situation."¹⁰² While the meeting was taking place, Mao authorized his military commanders to execute plans to move all four armies into North Korea.¹⁰³ Upon hearing the news from Moscow, Mao abruptly reversed himself. On October 12, he informed Peng that the "order of 9 October will not be implemented for the time being; all units of the 13th Army [Group] are hereby required to stay where they are to undergo more training, not to

begin operations." He also ordered his top commanders back to Beijing for consultations.¹⁰⁴ Reflecting the view that Beijing would not intervene, on October 13 Stalin counseled a despondent Kim Il Sung to abandon the peninsula and set up a regime in exile.¹⁰⁵

China's leaders reversed themselves once again on October 13, deciding at the Politburo meeting that day that China would intervene after all. As noted, Mao reiterated the basic strategic necessity for intervention, warning that the Americans would pose a "constant menace" if they advanced to the Chinese border.¹⁰⁶ In addition, Mao convinced skeptics that even though the Soviets could not be counted on to supply air forces to fight over Korea, Stalin remained committed to providing air protection for China itself.¹⁰⁷ Mao then telegraphed Zhou and made clear, notes Shen, that the "Chinese troops would not attack American armies before the arrival of Soviet air volunteers and weaponry."¹⁰⁸ On October 14, Molotov and Stalin reiterated to Zhou that Soviet air forces would protect Chinese territory but not enter Korea for at least two months.¹⁰⁹ On October 17 Mao once more briefly held up intervention but, satisfied by Zhou that the Soviets would provide air defense, gave the final green light to go forward.¹¹⁰

The Soviets then increased their support. After initial CPV engagements, the Soviet chief military adviser in North Korea, M. V. Zakharov, told Zhou on October 29 that the Soviet Air Force would take "charge of air defense at Andong" next to the Yalu River, as well as engage in limited operations in North Korea. By November, Soviet pilots began operating over the Yalu.¹¹¹ At the end of October, Mao and his generals were no longer discussing just annihilating South Korean forces but also "the American 24th Division, [and a] unit of the First American Cavalry Division."¹¹² As the CPV pushed US troops back that winter, Chinese leaders remained in daily contact with Moscow.¹¹³

During and after the Korean War, the Chinese also undertook various hedging policies. On the battlefield, Mao and Zhou approved a February 1952 recommendation by Nie Rongzhen to dispatch nuclear specialists to Korea to help Chinese troops prepare "for possible nuclear strikes."¹¹⁴ In 1953 the CPV constructed fortifications including "in the frontline battlefield, Anti-Atom shelters . . . built deep in the middle of the mountains."¹¹⁵ Strategically, in late 1950 China shifted raw materials and industrial machinery away from coastal areas and into the interior.¹¹⁶ Zhang highlights that to "prepare for a general nuclear attack, Beijing stressed the importance of a national defence system. The Central Military Commission had already decided on the construction of national defence works in August 1952."¹¹⁷ Robert Pape notes that "U.S. intelligence reported air-raid drills and the building of air-raid shelters and anti-aircraft facilities in Shanghai, Beijing, Shenyang, Guangdong, Hubei, and other places. Also reported were evacuations of population, heavy industrial equipment, and other supplies from Shenyang, Guangzhou, Beijing, Shanghai, and cities along the Manchuria-Korea border."¹¹⁸ And in early 1955 China made the

decision to construct a nuclear capability of its own to deter nuclear strikes or attempts at atomic blackmail.¹¹⁹

In 1954 and 1958 China limited its behavior in a number of ways. First, in both cases the PRC targeted isolated areas—*islands*—that could clearly signal limited intentions. The islands were also located very near to the Chinese mainland. At its closest point, Jinmen is less than two miles off China's coast, but approximately 140 miles from Taiwan.¹²⁰ The initial targets in 1954–1955 were farthest from American forces, with the intent of keeping the conflict limited. The Chinese were able to fight several engagements with ROC forces in early 1954.¹²¹ “Chinese leaders also took diplomatic measures to demonstrate that the PLA's actions would be limited to islands very near the mainland coast,” notes Niu Jun.¹²² If the Americans forced the ROC to abandon the islands, it did not markedly worsen their position elsewhere. Indeed, US officials during both crises noted that the military utility of the islands was limited. The key concern was the psychological implications of withdrawal that might negatively affect the ROC.¹²³

In both cases the PRC sought to avoid directly attacking US military forces. “We shall never be the first to open fire on U.S. troops, and [we] will only maintain a defensive position there so that we should avoid direct conflict to the best of our ability,” Mao stated in June 1954 in support of decisions not to engage US forces.¹²⁴ “At present,” the Central Committee concluded on July 24, “the direct target of our military struggle is Chiang Kai-shek and his cohorts in Taiwan. The United States should not be treated as our direct target; we should confine the conflicts with the United States to the diplomatic arena only.”¹²⁵

The Chinese maintained this position as they began military operations. In December, Mao delayed an assault after the United States began a series of naval maneuvers in the area. The seizure of Yijiangshan the next month was done in part to probe US intentions. China continued to place emphasis on avoiding any direct engagement with US forces. General Nie Fengzhi, commander of Chinese air forces in the campaign, spoke personally with his pilots to make clear they were not to engage American aircraft. The PLAAF was prohibited from striking Dachen when American ships were in the area and not allowed to engage US forces, even when they violated PRC airspace, unless directly attacked. When Chinese leadership believed that US naval movements indicated a willingness to defend the Dachen Islands, Mao ordered the assault halted. As it became apparent that the United States was evacuating ROC forces from Dachen, the Central Military Commission refused requests to strike, for fear it would involve the Americans. Mao personally made clear on at least two occasions during their island campaigns that the PLA should “let the enemy evacuate safely.”¹²⁶

PRC caution was apparent during the 1958 crisis as well. The Chinese hoped that as long as they limited the means employed to compel the

Nationalists to evacuate Jinmen, they could minimize the risks involved. During the crisis, Zhou told the Soviet foreign minister that “the PRC has taken into consideration the possibility of the outbreak in this region of a local war of the United States against the PRC, and it [China] is now ready to take all the hard blows, including atomic bombs, and the destruction of [its] cities.”¹²⁷ Despite such boasts, the PRC once again sought to avoid major hostilities with the Americans. At a Central Military Commission combat operations meeting on July 17, Peng Dehuai ordered the PLA to avoid contact with American forces, though Chinese leaders realized they might inadvertently kill Americans in large-scale shelling.¹²⁸ Nervous about the operation, Mao endured a sleepless night before the initial scheduled assault and ordered the attack postponed. The shelling did not commence until August 23. American targets were to be avoided, and PLA aircraft were told not to go beyond Jinmen and Mazu, to minimize the chance of confronting American planes.¹²⁹ On August 25 Mao explained the need for caution. “The problem was not the 95,000 Nationalist troops stationed there—this was easy to handle. The problem was how to assess the attitude of the American government. Washington had signed a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan. The treaty, however, did not clearly indicate whether the U.S. defense perimeter included Jinmen and Mazu.”¹³⁰ After learning in early September that US ships were escorting ROC vessels, Mao’s instructions were clear: “attack the KMT [ROC] ships only. Don’t attack the U.S. ships. If the U.S. ships open fire, don’t return fire without an order.” The Chinese commander in the region, Ye Fei, asked for clarification three times. Mao remained firm.¹³¹ As discussed above, after the American cease-fire offer that threatened to deepen Taiwan’s division from the mainland, Mao decided against escalating the crisis. Instead, Jinmen remained in Chiang’s hands with a face-saving noose logic developed.

CHINESE NUCLEAR VIEWS

Chinese behavior was not only consistent with reducing the benefits and raising the costs of nuclear use for the United States. There was also a link between Chinese thinking on nuclear weapons and their actions. During the Korean War, Chinese leaders highlighted potential reasons to discount nuclear weapons that focused on the minimal benefits or high costs that nuclear use would entail for the United States. Chinese generals asserted in August 1950 that “an [American] atomic bomb used on the battlefield would inflict damage not only on the enemy’s side but also on friendly forces.”¹³² The generals then turned to a cost argument, highlighting that “the people of the world opposed the use of nuclear weapons; the United States would have to think twice before dropping them.”¹³³ In a public document, the PRC argued that another American use of nuclear weapons against Asia would offend morality. “The peoples of Asia and around the world will rise

against" America. The "prospect of losing moral grounds and consequently political support" might restrain US nuclear use.¹³⁴ Nie Rongzhen reported to Zhou in early 1952—after two years of fighting—that "the US might want to test its tactical atomic weapons in Korea . . . [but] the enemy won't use the weapon on a large scale." Military leaders in Beijing argued that "the United States is under great pressure of world opinion and is also deterred by possible Soviet nuclear retaliation from doing this in the Far East."¹³⁵

Even with these considerations, the PRC was concerned over the nuclear issue. As noted in the previous section, Nie Rongzhen suggested better preparing Chinese forces in Korea for possible nuclear strikes. In addition, the PRC leadership agonized over the initial decision to intervene. Nuclear weapons factored into that debate. For instance, during a Central Military Commission meeting on October 6, 1950, Shen and Li reported that Marshal Lin Biao cautioned against intervention because the United States might "attack China with atomic bombs and a large-scale air offensive."¹³⁶ And the Chinese took various steps to hedge against the possibility of American nuclear strikes.

Raising the costs for nuclear use by enlisting Soviet support also proved critical. To be sure, securing Soviet air support was done in part to satisfy conventional needs for CPV forces facing a superior American opponent. There was a strategic aspect at play as well, though. Evidence for this comes from two sources. First, Mao wrote to Zhou on October 13, during the height of the campaign to secure Soviet support, that only "if the Soviet Union is able within two to two-and-a-half months to provide air assistance to our Volunteers in Korea, and also to mobilize air cover over Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Ningbo, and Qingdao, can we then be free of the fear of comprehensive bombing."¹³⁷ Late on October 6 Mao made the point directly to the Soviet ambassador, stating that in his opinion Soviet air cover was necessary for the "largest industrial centers: Shanghai, Tianjin, Beijing, Mukden (Anshan, Fushun). [He] believes that the Americans can, first of all, destroy from the air the Chinese industrial base, disorganize economic life and mess up communications."¹³⁸

Second, as noted in the previous section, the PRC ultimately decided to intervene without Soviet air support in Korea but with Mao's assurances that the Soviets would provide air support for Chinese territory. This would make little sense if the Chinese leadership was solely interested in Soviet air support for its operational or tactical utility. It does, however, follow if a major Chinese concern was American nuclear strikes against Chinese cities. Thus, Soviet air power in the defense of the mainland could provide strategic defense if American air attacks commenced. Such support would hopefully deter the United States from initiating broad air-atomic attacks in the first place for fear of provoking a broader war with the Soviet Union. The assertion by a Chinese editorial in 1950, echoed by military leaders two years later, that it was "the United States who should be afraid of using

atomic bombs against us, because its densely concentrated industries are more vulnerable to serious damage by Soviet nuclear retaliation," was likely not just propaganda but reflected underlying thinking by the CCP.¹³⁹ Near the end of the war Zhou highlighted the role that the Soviet Union played in increasing the costs of nuclear escalation for the Americans. "Right after he took the presidency, Eisenhower fired empty cannons to scare people. He talked about . . . nuclear intimidation, and . . . invasion of China's mainland. . . . [The] two could not be accepted by America's allies lest these cause a world war."¹⁴⁰ Zhou was correct in noting that some American allies opposed nuclear use for fear it would lead to major hostilities with the Soviet Union. Particularly early in the conflict, Western leaders worried about their strength relative to the Soviets.¹⁴¹ The cost of widening the war would reduce the incentives for nuclear use.

US nuclear forbearance during the Korean War did not lead the Chinese leadership to dismiss the possibility of future nuclear strikes or nuclear blackmail. Chinese military leaders agreed after the war that they must prepare to "fight a general war on the assumption that it will break out any time soon and it will be on a grand scale and nuclear."¹⁴² In addition, despite severe resource constraints, China began pursuit of its own nuclear deterrent in 1955.

The Chinese directly addressed US nuclear capabilities during the 1954–1955 Taiwan crisis. Zhou noted in April 1955 that the Eisenhower administration was "openly boasting of nuclear missiles as conventional weapons and preparing for nuclear war." The Chinese press reported on stories highlighting that "the Seventh fleet was equipped with tactical nuclear bombs and any action to attack Taiwan would have to go through [the Americans] first."¹⁴³ President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles increased rhetoric regarding the possibility of nuclear use, including in the Taiwan Strait, if necessary. Shortly thereafter, the PRC sought to defuse the situation. The timing of events, while hardly definitive, is suggestive that the nuclear threat played a role in defusing the crisis.¹⁴⁴ As Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann point out, China did not abandon its determination to control Taiwan or accept a US presence in the area in response to such threats.¹⁴⁵ More broadly, though, the Chinese were aware of the American nuclear monopoly and engaged in only limited behavior they believed would not invite major retaliation. Thus any nuclear threats made in 1955 did not introduce the nuclear issue into the situation; the Chinese were already factoring nuclear weapons into their decision making. Examining the crisis, Shu Guang Zhang concludes that "Chinese forces would have tried to take Jinmen, Mazu, and the other offshore islands if Beijing leaders had not been concerned about the nuclear threat."¹⁴⁶

There is direct evidence the American nuclear monopoly influenced Chinese leaders in 1958. Wu Lengxi recalled that in late October "Chairman Mao said that we only had 'hand grenades' right now, but no atomic bombs. 'Hand grenades' could be successful for us to use in beating Jiang's troops

on Jin[men]-Ma[zu], but not a good idea to use in fighting against Americans, who had nuclear weapons. Later, when everybody had nuclear weapons, very likely nobody would use them."¹⁴⁷ Wu's recollection is likely authentic; his references to Mao's statements on other occasions track with available documents from the period.¹⁴⁸ Mark Ryan, David Finkelstein, and Michael McDevitt note that the noose policy Mao ultimately adopted seemed "a fig leaf designed to obscure the fact that any serious PLA attempt to retake the offshore islands of Jinmen and Mazu may well have triggered a sizable U.S. retaliation, including nuclear strikes."¹⁴⁹

Chinese leadership, and Mao in particular, frequently downplayed the utility of nuclear weapons. A skeptic could conclude that any nuclear discussions were minor ones and that the broader Chinese view toward nuclear weapons was dismissive. For example, during an interview with Anna Louis Strong, an American correspondent, Mao famously remarked that the "atomic bomb is a paper tiger which the US reactionaries use to scare people."¹⁵⁰ To sway reluctant members of the CCP prior to the Korean War, Mao asserted that the United States "may bomb [us] with the atomic bomb, but we will respond with our hand-grenades. We will then catch your [America's] weakness to tie you up and finally defeat you."¹⁵¹ In a 1955 meeting with the Finnish envoy to China, Mao argued that "the Chinese people are not to be cowed by U.S. atomic blackmail. . . . The United States cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atom bombs. Even if the US atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be a major event for the solar system."¹⁵² Chinese propaganda reinforced these points. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a document in December 1950 highlighting that "we should smash the myth of the atomic bomb" and listing the bomb's limited physical effects.¹⁵³ Press reports in the spring of 1955 reiterated that the Chinese people "are not afraid of atomic bombs but we don't want a nuclear war."¹⁵⁴

The evidence does not support the claim that the Chinese simply did not fear nuclear weapons. Chinese leadership understood the power of nuclear weapons. They worried that possession of a nuclear arsenal would embolden actors and be used to intimidate nonnuclear-armed states. In September 1953 Marshal Peng Dehui told the Central People's Government Council that the PRC must pay more attention to the "new weapon's 'omnipotence' which US imperialists have applied in bluffing, threatening, and scaring people."¹⁵⁵ The determination to avoid blackmail and deter nuclear strikes was an important factor motivating the Chinese atomic program, again highlighting the fear within the CCP leadership.¹⁵⁶ "Imperialists assess that we only have a few things and then they come to bully us," Mao argued in 1954. "They say, 'how many atomic bombs do you have?'"¹⁵⁷ During an enlarged Politburo meeting in 1956 Mao proclaimed that "in

today's world, if we don't want to be bullied by others, we should have atomic weapons by all means."¹⁵⁸ Foreign Minister Chen Yi expressed a similar sentiment, arguing that "I cannot be very firm at the negotiating tables without that bomb."¹⁵⁹

As long as China did not have nuclear weapons, though, it made sense to act as if the weapons did not convey much leverage. Chinese statements dismissing nuclear weapons were aimed at convincing the United States it could not gain from nuclear threats. George Quester outlined the basic logic, arguing that "to discourage nuclear attacks" NNWS leaders would "deny any military significance for atomic weapons," and to "discourage intimidation, the pain-inflicting or terroristic effects of nuclear weapons must also be minimized."¹⁶⁰ After the Cold War, John Lewis Gaddis highlighted that both "Stalin and Mao quickly sensed that the way to defuse this [nuclear] danger was to deprecate it, to treat it as a 'paper tiger' whose capacity to frighten people depended solely upon their willingness to be frightened."¹⁶¹ Similarly, Fravel and Medeiros argue that Mao disparaged nuclear weapons "to persuade the Chinese public not to be intimidated by the highly destructive weapons possessed by China's opponents."¹⁶² Minimizing the utility of nuclear weapons thus played an important role in bolstering public morale and deterring American confidence that the US could compel China to alter its behavior.

More generally, Mao counseled that it made little sense to become paralyzed in fear of American nuclear weapons. In September 1958 he argued to the Supreme State Council that if "the imperialists definitely want to fight a war and attack us first, using atomic bombs, it does not matter whether you fear fighting a war or not." Fear or no fear, the enemy might still attack with atomic bombs. "If that were the case," he asked, "what should be our attitude? Is it better to fear or not to fear? It is extremely dangerous [for us] to fear this and fear that every day."¹⁶³ Constant fear would lead to paralysis with no gain; it was necessary then to remain steadfast in the face of danger in order to move forward. The Chinese did not want a major war, Mao frequently stated. "Nevertheless," he argued the prior May, "there is also the possibility of war." There were "war maniacs" in the world, after all.¹⁶⁴ It made sense then to not engage in fatalist thinking; that would only facilitate American nuclear blackmail.

Mao also distinguished between short- and long-term events. In the long term, imperialists were "paper tigers" who would succumb to the forces of history. American nuclear weapons could not arrest that trend, even if China suffered greatly in a nuclear strike. Why fear nuclear weapons, or paper tigers more generally, at all then? As Mao asked rhetorically shortly after the 1958 Taiwan crisis, "Some people say that, since it is a paper tiger, why don't we attack Taiwan?"¹⁶⁵ The issue was that paper tigers had teeth; even if they were destined to fail in the long run, they could do great damage in the near term. Mao's argument that "we are afraid of atomic weapons and at the

same time we are not afraid of them" was therefore not a contradiction.¹⁶⁶ Or, as he put it more generally on another occasion, "The temporary appearance is real, but in the long run it is made of paper. We have always maintained that we must give it serious attention tactically but regard it with contempt strategically." In the long run, "strategically," nuclear weapons could not alter history. Yet "tactically," in the short term, they were very dangerous.¹⁶⁷ Thus Mao could argue that nuclear weapons were paper tigers but simultaneously that a "war of atomic and hydrogen bombs is of course terrible since many people will die. That is why we oppose a war." In other words, it made little sense to invite a devastating confrontation, particularly because long-term historical forces were on the side of the Communists. Better to be cautious. Though even then there could be no guarantee. "Everything in the world," he noted in September 1958, "needs a safety factor."¹⁶⁸ It was always prudent to hedge and prepare for the worst.

If nuclear monopoly was a constant throughout this period and a consistent influence on Chinese decision making, what explains variation in Chinese behavior? Specifically, why were the Chinese so much more cautious in 1954 and 1958 than in 1950? To begin with, other factors aside from nuclear weapons mattered. As I note in chapter 1, nuclear weapons are not the only factor that influences NNWS decision making. The PRC's ability to act clearly mattered. CPV ground forces could strike the exposed US divisions as they marched northward in Korea. By contrast, the Chinese had no real naval capability that could overcome the US Seventh Fleet. Nuclear monopoly in conventionally asymmetric relationships favoring the NWS permits aggressive actions by the NNWS, but it does not compel the NNWS to engage in a war in which it has no conventional strategy to attain its objective. Still, in 1954 and 1958 the PRC could have elected to target American forces more directly with artillery and aircraft in an attempt to compel US concessions. It chose not to. Thus conventional inability to act, while an important factor, cannot be the whole explanation for Chinese restraint in 1954 and 1958 relative to 1950.

Several factors likely influenced Chinese decision making. These include new credibility for the American nuclear arsenal, the immediacy of the American threat, and changes in outside support. My argument does not incorporate these factors systematically. The purpose of the framework developed in chapter 1 was to simplify by focusing on the costs and benefits of nuclear strikes given NNWS strategies and the conventional military balance. While these explanations do not confirm the theory, then, they are consistent with its general emphasis on specific strategic factors that influence the likelihood of nuclear use.

First, the capability of the US nuclear arsenal and statements hinting at nuclear use increased from 1950 to 1958. This may have made the US nuclear deterrent more credible over time and thus have a greater effect. Though as I showed above, the PRC was already factoring nuclear weapons into its decision making and engaging in behavior to minimize the risks of a nuclear

strike in 1950. Moreover, even if Mao was not fully cognizant of the destructive nature of nuclear weapons in 1950, other Chinese officials were. Mao's top lieutenants, including Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, and Nie Rongzhen, "kept pushing Mao to pay more attention to nuclear-weapon programmes."¹⁶⁹ Mao's views were primary, but there was debate on foreign policy issues.

Second, the PRC leadership may have perceived the danger as more immediate in 1950 than in 1954 or 1958. In 1950, American combat forces were actively advancing toward a key Chinese strategic and industrial region, and China feared US leaders had aggressive intentions.¹⁷⁰ In 1954 and 1958 there was no overt military action being taken by the United States. China was willing to live with a separate Taiwan as long as there was a possibility it would eventually be unified with the PRC. As Mao put it at the end of the 1958 crisis, "not taking Jinmen-Mazu would have little impact on our construction of a socialist country. Jiang's troops on Jinmen-Mazu alone could not cause too much damage."¹⁷¹ In Korea the issue was intervening in an existing war against an advancing military that could pose a large threat. With Taiwan, the issue was starting hostilities without any imminent military threat.

Finally, Chinese views on the value of Soviet support declined markedly during the 1950s. The Sino-Soviet treaty increased PRC confidence in the Soviet Union, although the CCP maintained misgivings.¹⁷² The Soviets were tough negotiators but generally fulfilled their initial promises. Despite tense negotiations and some Chinese disappointment, the Soviet Union did dispatch air forces at the outset of the Korean War. Thus the PRC leadership had reasons to view Soviet support as credible.

The Chinese became more skeptical of Soviet backing during and after the Korean War.¹⁷³ Decline in Soviet support, considered so critical when debating intervention, contributed to China's decision to end the fighting. Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, resulted in the new Soviet leadership pushing for an end to the Korean War. As Soviet support waned, the Chinese, many eager to end the costly fighting, began making concessions in negotiations with the Americans. The Soviets then withdrew their pilots in May 1953. When talks resumed in June the Chinese quickly accepted UN terms. As Pape notes, with "the withdrawal of Soviet pilots . . . China's capacity for defense against nuclear air strikes was substantially reduced."¹⁷⁴ There is little evidence to support Dulles's and Eisenhower's later claims that new nuclear threats compelled China to quit the war. That does not mean, though, that the American nuclear capability was absent from Chinese consideration as Soviet support dissipated. The US nuclear ability had been a constant; what changed was the nature of external support.

In some ways, 1954–1955 seemed the high point for the Sino-Soviet alliance. Soviet advisers and support poured into China. During the 1954 crisis, Mao telegraphed Nikita Khrushchev that "the great alliance between China and the Soviet Union increasingly reveals its extraordinarily

great role in promoting the common prosperity of the two countries' security and defending the peace in the Far East."¹⁷⁵ Yet as Xiaobing Li notes, during "the 1954–55 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Moscow complained about China's aggressive actions and expressed its unwillingness to use its atomic weapons if the United States retaliated over the PLA's invasion of Taiwan." Beijing worried about "decreasing protection from the Soviet Union's nuclear umbrella." The Soviets were hesitant to encourage action that risked a major confrontation over what to them was a minor issue.¹⁷⁶ Mao also undoubtedly remembered that the Soviet Union under Stalin had refused to support an attack on Taiwan in 1949.¹⁷⁷ Khrushchev turned down a Chinese request for Soviet support for China's nuclear research in 1954, telling China that "it is too expensive to develop your own nuclear weapons."¹⁷⁸ Though the Soviets would eventually agree to some support, Matthew Kroenig points out that in "the early 1950s, when Sino-Soviet ties were at their strongest, Moscow continually rebuffed Beijing's requests for nuclear assistance."¹⁷⁹ Alongside American nuclear threats, questions about the scope of the Soviet nuclear umbrella contributed to the Chinese decision in January 1955 to initiate their own nuclear weapons program.

Tensions steadily increased prior to the 1958 crisis. In January of that year, the Soviets proposed jointly constructing and operating a long-wave radio station on Chinese territory.¹⁸⁰ The Chinese replied that they would accept Soviet technology but would be solely responsible for paying for and operating the project. The PRC would share intelligence, but under no circumstances would they allow the Soviets to establish a military base in China. The Soviet leadership, somewhat tone deaf on Chinese sensitivities, continued to press for a truly joint enterprise. Then in July they upped the ante by proposing a joint submarine force in East Asia. Mao flatly rejected the proposal. On July 22 Mao berated the Soviet ambassador, highlighting a litany of past Soviet offensives. "You may accuse me of being a nationalist or another Tito, but my counterargument is that you have extended Russian nationalism to China's coast."¹⁸¹ Soviet policy heightened Mao's fear of Soviet domination and growing desire to no longer play 'little brother.' Inviting Soviet support for the Jinmen operation was out of the question. That might mean lower costs for US escalation, but it was a price that had to be paid, given the competing priorities. In any event, in January 1958 Mao reportedly argued that the Soviet nuclear umbrella was "unreliable."¹⁸²

China did not even bother to seek Soviet support prior to the 1958 shelling of Jinmen. The Chinese staff did inform the Soviet Ministry of Defense that they were undertaking some preparations regarding Taiwan. During a tense meeting in 1959, then, Mao reminded Khrushchev that they had "informed you about our intentions regarding Taiwan a month ahead, before we began shelling the off-shore islands." Khrushchev responded that the Chinese had "reported to us not about your policy on this issue, but about some separate measures."¹⁸³ Khrushchev had a right to be upset.

When he had visited Mao from July 31 to August 3, 1958, to alleviate the growing Sino-Soviet tensions, Mao did not mention the coming operation.¹⁸⁴ Had Mao seriously sought Soviet support, he surely would have raised the issue directly with the Soviet leader less than a month before the attack. If Mao had been considering asking for support, Khrushchev dashed any hopes during the meeting. The Soviet leader expressed concern that new tensions in the area could lead to a dangerous situation and suggested that China accept the status quo. The implication was that China would face the United States alone in the event of a conflict over Taiwan.¹⁸⁵

Subsequent Soviet support during the 1958 crisis was a bit of political theater. Alarmed by the American reaction to the shelling of the offshore islands, Khrushchev asked the Soviet ambassador to ascertain Chinese intentions and dispatched Gromyko to Beijing for consultations. Mao and Zhou assured the Soviets that the PRC was carefully managing the confrontation and had no intention of escalating the dispute. Only after receiving such assurances did the Soviets issue statements supporting the PRC. "Khrushchev's response," writes Gaddis, "was wholly in character. He waited until Zhou, with Mao's approval, had loosened the 'noose' by calling for a resumption of talks with the United States; then he issued a blunt warning to the Americans. . . . It was his [1956] Suez [Crisis] ploy all over again: an attempt to look tough by claiming credit for an outcome already determined."¹⁸⁶ Indeed, in October 1959 Khrushchev seemingly confirmed the Soviet hesitancy, telling Mao that "between us, in a confidential way, we say that we will not fight over Taiwan, but for outside consumption, so to say, we state the contrary, that in case of an aggravation of the situation because of Taiwan the USSR will defend the PRC."¹⁸⁷

Chinese behavior is consistent with my argument. In each case when China confronted the United States, the Chinese acted in a way that created limited dangers for the United States. While much of the limitations were due to their own low conventional military abilities, these would necessarily reduce the threat to the Americans and thus create low benefits for nuclear use. The PRC also took various steps to hedge in the event of nuclear use, such as preparing troops for nuclear strikes, relocating some industry, and exploring civil defense procedures. In the most forceful action, the attack in Korea in 1950, the Chinese leadership sought external support. This would raise the costs to the Americans for any nuclear escalation. There is also good process evidence that the Chinese leadership consistently took nuclear weapons into account when making these decisions. Given the stakes involved, the leaders believed they had no choice but to act. Even then, they pursued various means to raise the costs and lower the benefits of nuclear use for the Americans.