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Mao and China's Relations with the Superpowers in the 1950s

A New Look at the Taiwan Strait Crises and the Sino–Soviet Split

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This article reexamines the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954–55 and 1958, and the initial Sino–Soviet conflict, with particular attention to Mao's dominant role in the events. In contrast to previous scholarship, based on newly available sources it finds Mao to have been an erratic dictator who micromanaged China's military and political operations in the Taiwan Strait against the U.S.–Taiwan alliance with neither a long-term strategy nor a short-term plan. Mao's grandiose ambition to be the leader of the communist world led him into a conflict with Moscow, and the Sino–Soviet alliance began to unravel when China most needed allies. In the end, Mao's policy behavior was counterproductive and self-defeating; China's national interest, which Mao thought he was protecting and enhancing, suffered a great deal of damage.

Keywords: *Mao; Sino–Soviet–American relations; 1950s; Taiwan Strait crisis*

In late 1954 and early 1955, shortly after the Geneva conference ended the conflict in Indochina, the People's Republic of China (PRC) massed a huge military force along the Taiwan Strait, attacking the offshore islands held by the Republic of China (ROC), an American ally. Coupled with the largest military mobilization since the end of the Korean War and land-, sea-, and air-coordinated assaults on the offshore islands was a vigorous nationwide propaganda campaign of "liberating Taiwan." Washington came to believe that this marked the beginning of Beijing's attempt to invade the ROC territories; the offshore islands would be first, Taiwan and Penghu next. Consequently, the Eisenhower administration reluctantly signed a

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mutual defense treaty with Jiang Jieshi's government, hoping that would deter Beijing's aggression. The PRC under the leadership of Mao Zedong, however, was not deterred, and the crisis deepened while the People's Liberation Army's pressure on the offshore islands continued. In response, the United States assembled a huge air–naval force in the region. The Eisenhower administration, with the support of Congress, started to prepare the American people for the possible use of tactical atomic bombs. A nuclear war was on the brink. Facing a determined opponent and the formidable U.S. military presence, Mao agreed to resolve the conflict through negotiations; Sino–American ambassadorial talks ensued shortly afterward. The first Taiwan Strait Crisis simmered down only to flare up all over again in 1958, leading toward another brink of nuclear war. At the same time, the Beijing–Moscow alliance started to unravel.

What was Beijing's strategic objective in provoking the two crises? What were the consequences of Mao's policy for China? Some scholars emphasize the nationalistic nature of Beijing's policy, the main goal of which was to frustrate the alleged U.S. intention to detach Taiwan from China (Stolper, 1985: 3–11).[1] Others note the miscalculation and misperception on both sides, but they emphasize the supposed overreaction on the part of the Eisenhower–Dulles team, arguing that Beijing never really intended to capture Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu) (Chang and He, 1993).[2] Still other scholars stress domestic mobilization: Mao's chief intention, according to this view, was to exploit international tension in order to promote his political agenda at home—thus implying that by going to the brink, Washington overreacted (Christensen, 1996; Chen, 2001: 163–204).

In all scholarly works in the field, Mao has been portrayed as a strong, nationalistic leader. With a grand style and strategy, he was rational and calculating—rightly or wrongly—when it came to protecting China against powerful adversaries. Curiously, although it is a commonly accepted among scholars that in both cases Mao was central in the policy process, no study has focused on Mao's policy behavior: what made Mao tick? The existing theories of rational actor, ideological influence, misperception, and the like reveal certain aspects of Mao's decision-making process. However, the assumption that any world leader, including Mao, is always rational is dangerously erroneous. Personality matters in policy making, particularly in a dictatorship such as Mao's China where the policy process is in the hands of one man (Greenstein, 2000).[3] The difficult part of the personality approach is, first of all, to depict and analyze the subject's personality traits and formation—which need psychological insights—and then to link certain personality attributes to the particular historical event. This can be done

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more effectively in a book-length project that examines lifelong behavioral trends to show how certain personality traits of the subject—Mao in this case—affected his policy making. Therefore, this study will not proceed with a personality hypothesis. Instead it will simply show that newly available Chinese materials, including Mao's writings, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) documents, contemporaries' recollections, and interviews with those who were participants in the events reveal a Mao that is significantly different from the existing portrait of him as a grand strategist. It will demonstrate that Mao not only single-handedly dictated Beijing's provocative policy and micromanaged military and propaganda operations, but he also did so without a long-term strategy nor a short-term plan. He was dictatorial and impulsive, continually miscalculating the situation, leading toward a dangerous policy of confrontation. In the end, Mao's behavior was counterproductive and self-defeating; China's national interest, which Mao thought he was protecting and enhancing, suffered a great deal of damage.

There is, however, sufficient evidence to argue that the 1958 crisis was, in part, designed to promote Mao's domestic agenda of the Great Leap Forward (GLF). If this was a part of Mao's strategy, he succeeded in manipulating international tension to serve his goal of domestic mobilization. Nevertheless, Mao's success in this regard was not only costly but also catastrophically so, because the GLF turned out to be a fantastic disaster. The final portion of this article demonstrates that the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the GLF were closely related not just in terms of one serving the other's purpose; they were both derived from Mao's desire to challenge the Kremlin for leadership of the worldwide communist movement.

If a central argument in the existing scholarship is that Mao did not really want to capture the offshore islands of Jinmen and Mazu, this study will prove otherwise. Mao consistently desired and planned for the "liberation" of Jinmen and Mazu, but he was indecisive and hesitant about using a frontal landing assault to achieve his goal due to his shifting calculation/speculation on what the American reaction might be. When Washington stood firm, threatening with and preparing for possible use of nuclear weapons to defend the Guomindang (Nationalist Party; hereafter, GMD) territories in the strait, Mao backed down. However, this does not prove that the Eisenhower administration's decision to go to the nuclear brink was necessary; in fact, Mao was not prepared to engage the United States in a conventional war, let alone in a nuclear war. Did Washington's deterrence policy work in this case? How far should American policy makers have gone to maintain "credibility" in other parts of the world? I will leave those issues to my Americanist colleagues. Many scholars' criticism of Dulles's

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"brinksmanship" is well-founded and credible. What is under-studied is Mao's own version of "brinksmanship" exhibited in the crises, and its consequences for China and the Chinese people. This article is an attempt to fill the void.

The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954–55

The offshore conflict can be seen as a continuation of the CCP–GMD civil war. Although the Truman administration interjected the Seventh Fleet into the strait in 1950, Washington refused to commit itself to the defense of the offshore islands. Dean Acheson told Taibei explicitly in July 1950 that the United States would not defend those islands, nor would it support the GMD's offensive operations against the mainland from the offshore positions (Garver, 1997: 112–47).[4] Nevertheless, Mao overestimated Washington's aggressive intention, and he was fearful of the imminent danger of the United States seizing the offshore islands as a springboard for an invasion of the mainland. Early in 1951, China's initial campaigns in Korea prompted MacArthur to suggest that Jiang's ROC forces be used to harass the mainland to relieve PRC military pressure in Korea. Upon hearing the news, Mao fired a telegram to the field commanders in Fujian province on January 13, 1951, warning them of a large-scale ROC invasion in the coastal area and demanding a contingency plan immediately. The next day, Chen Yi, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) commander of the East China Military Region, sent Mao a defense plan to deploy four armies around the city of Xiamen (Amoy) alone. Mao accepted the plan. In addition, he ordered that the Twenty-fifth Army and the Third Artillery Division be moved from Korea and redeployed back to Fujian. Although the Truman administration quickly rejected MacArthur's suggestion, Mao's fear of an overly aggressive America ready to attack the mainland helped to realize MacArthur's strategic intention without any cost to the Americans.[5]

When President Truman recalled MacArthur, a clear signal of Washington's intention to keep the Korean conflict from spilling into China, Mao seemed oblivious to the obvious. Because of his unfounded fear, Mao made a plan in the summer of 1952 to seize the offshore islands while the Korean War was still raging (Nie, 1986: 26–38; Zhang, 1992: 195). Accordingly, between January and March 1953, the PLA shelled Jinmen several times, and in May and June of 1953, it seized several small islands outside Wenzhou Bay in Zhejiang province. After the ending of hostilities in Korea in July 1953, Mao approved Chen Yi's proposal to use five armies to take over Jinmen and to speed up the

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construction of airfields and railways in both Zhejiang and Fujian provinces. Mao, however, quickly changed his mind about focusing on Jinmen. Instead, by the end of 1953, he ordered the seizure of the Dachen and Yijiangshan islands first. This new plan made sense because these islands were along the coast of Zhejiang province, north of the Taiwan Strait. From here, ROC air raids could reach Shanghai easily. Mao's new plan preoccupied the PRC military establishment for the first half of 1954 (Xu, 1992: 157–73; Chen, 2001: 163–204). Up to this point, Mao's thinking and planning vis-à-vis the offshore islands seemed to be linked to the continuation of the long-standing CCP–GMD civil war. At the same time, the United States did nothing to prevent those small islands along Zhejiang's shoreline from being taken by the PRC, although some Washington officials were concerned with the political and psychological consequences of more victories by the "Reds" (Accinelli, 1996: 148).

Mao's offshore island policy up to this point seemed to be in line with Beijing's general foreign policy after the end of the Korean War. Following the post-Stalin Soviet leadership's peaceful coexistence initiative, the PRC emphasized the need for peace in order to gain time for China's economic reconstruction. The earlier effort to export revolution was thus abandoned (Yang, 2006: 3–4). On November 23, 1953, Mao sent Ho Chi Minh a telegraph to persuade him to accept a peaceful solution to the war in Indochina:

> It is necessary and timely for the government of the Vietnamese Democratic Republic to formally express its willingness to use peaceful negotiations to end the Vietnam War. Only in doing so can we take the banner of peace into our hands in order to facilitate the fervent struggle of the French people and all peace-loving people all over the world, and to expose the lie of the French reactionaries who blame Vietnam for not wanting peace, which is a plot to lay the blame for the war at the door of Vietnam. As well, only in so doing, can we take advantage of and further the contradiction between the French and the Americans. (Pang and Jin, 2003: 552–53)

This line of thinking seemed to be the norm in Beijing's foreign policy up to the end of the Geneva Conference. On March 2, 1954, Zhou Enlai drafted a policy document entitled "Preliminary Document on the Estimation of and Preparation for the Geneva Conference," which was discussed and passed by the CCP Central Secretariat chaired by Liu Shaoqi. The document followed the general policy of easing international tension and thwarting the American policy of isolation and embargo against China. On the Korean issue, it read, "We should recognize the north-south status quo, demand the withdrawal of all foreign troops, and restore transportation and trade between the north and south so as to establish the initial peace."

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On the Indochina issue, it called for an attempt to establish a truce around the sixteenth parallel. The next day, China officially responded positively to the Soviet invitation to participate in the Geneva Conference. Before Zhou's departure, Mao chaired several Politburo meetings to formally adopt this policy line (Pang and Jin, 2003: 554–58).

On July 7, 1954, Zhou flew back to Beijing before the final stage of the Geneva Conference to report to Mao, who still seemed to be intent on pursuing the general line of international relaxation. Mao declared:

> In Geneva, we grabbed the peace slogan, that is to say that we want peace. On the other hand, the Americans did not grab the peace slogan; they want to fight. Thus, they lost the argument; they cannot be persuasive. Currently, more people want peace, and we need to cooperate with all the people who want peace, so that we can isolate those warmongers, that is the current U.S. administration.... Looking at the general international situation, the U.S. is quite isolated. After this Southeast Asian issue, that is the Indochina issue, being resolved, I think the U.S. isolation will increase. (Mao, 1999: 6.332–35)

Seemingly confident, Mao went further to call for a change to the policy of self-imposed isolation from the West, which had been in place since 1949, in order to "clean the house before inviting guests." Now he thought it was time to engage in active diplomacy with the West in general. He thus went on to say:

> Right now, it has been impossible [for us] to shut the door tight; instead, the situation is very advantageous and we need to walk out the door....To relax international tension, countries of different systems can peacefully coexist. This slogan [was] originated by the Soviet Union, and it is our slogan as well. Now it becomes the catch word in [Anthony] Eden's mouth, in Nehru's too. They want to relax international tension as well. (Mao, 1999: 6.332–35)[6]

Toward that end, Mao even proposed that in order to prevent Washington from signing a mutual defense treaty with Taibei, Beijing should make more friendly diplomatic moves, such as negotiating with the United States in a more conciliatory manner on the issue of expatriates (Mao, 1999: 6.332–35). However, two weeks later, Mao would abandon this policy orientation abruptly with no explanation and no discussion in the CCP leadership whatsoever. In late July 1954, Zhou Enlai succeeded in impressing the world with his diplomatic skills in the Geneva Conference, which ended the Indochina conflict. Unfortunately, Mao suddenly decided to create an international crisis in the Taiwan Strait, and he did so by blaming Zhou Enlai.

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On his way home from Geneva, Zhou visited the Soviet Union and other Eastern European nations. On July 23, he received a telegram from the chairman:

> In order to break up the collaboration between the United States and Chiang Kai-shek and keep them from joining together militarily and politically, we must announce to our country and to the world the slogan of liberating Taiwan. It was improper of us not to raise this slogan in a timely manner after the cease-fire in Korea. If we were to continue dragging our heels now, we would be making a serious political mistake. (He, 1990: 225)[7]

People's Daily, the CCP's official organ, carried an editorial entitled "[We] Must Liberate Taiwan" the same day, which marked the beginning of a fierce nationwide propaganda campaign against the "U.S.–Jiang bandits." The next day Mao ordered a meeting to draw up a military plan, and a massive military build-up in the region ensued immediately. What Mao did next was to make continuous military action off the coast of Zhejiang the first step of a larger plan aimed at the entire Taiwan Strait. Now the assault on Jinmen was not merely a military diversion; instead, it seemed to be at the center of his path and the first step of his "liberating Taiwan" campaign. Washington had sufficient reason to be alarmed.

Mao's erratic policy behavior not only changed the nature of the ongoing fight along the Zhejiang coast, it also reversed Beijing's general foreign policy direction. There was no discernable strategic objective clearly laid out, nor was there a careful planning and policy deliberation process. Mao could not even wait for the arrival of Zhou Enlai, who was after all the premier and foreign minister. Fear may explain Mao's rash decision to attack Jinmen. He had a long-standing fear that a military confrontation with the United States was inevitable, and it could happen in three places: Korea, Indochina, and the Taiwan Strait. This perception of "inevitability" was a major factor in his decision to enter into the Korean War. When a settlement had been reached in Korea and then in Indochina, his fear of an overly aggressive America resurfaced regarding the strait. On July 27, 1954, Mao sent Zhou another telegram, of which the contents were to be conveyed to the Kremlin.

> After the wars ended in Korea and Indochina, the United States will not concede to its failure in the Geneva Conference; it will for sure continue to increase international tension, to grab more spheres of influence from the British and the French, to increase its military bases, and to prepare for war against our country.…Lately the U.S. and Jiang Jieshi are discussing a U.S.–Jiang mutual defense treaty…and possibly [the U.S.] will enlarge the

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> blockade area to include the Guangdong coast and Tokyo Bay....[Thus,] we still have a war in front of us, that is the war against the Jiang Jieshi bandits in Taiwan; we still have a task in front of us, that is to liberate Taiwan. (Li and Ma, 1997: 405)

Under Mao's direction, in addition to the ongoing military operation in the coastal area of Zhejiang province, hostilities against Jinmen and Mazu in the strait were intensified. On September 3, 1954, the artillery bombardment of Jinmen turned the continuation of the CCP–GMD civil war into a full-blown international crisis, pushing Washington to the brink of a nuclear confrontation. Mao's professed intention was to drive a wedge between Washington and Taibei, but his action completely defeated his purpose: he pushed Washington much closer to Taiwan. The Eisenhower administration continued the basic policy of the Truman administration and was very concerned that the United States might be dragged into a GMD-provoked war with the PRC. For this reason, Washington used military aid as a means to put a "new leash on Jiang," as historian Robert Accinelli puts it. The United States certainly did not want to sign a mutual defense treaty with Taibei (Accinelli, 1996: 117). This was soon to change.

In response to Mao's aggressive propaganda campaign, which was followed by a massive military mobilization, Eisenhower told reporters on August 17, 1954 that "any invasion of Formosa would have to run over the 7th Fleet." Two days later, four U.S. destroyers paid a visit to the Dachens. After the artillery shelling of Jinmen on September 3, Washington started to move toward a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan in order to deter the PRC from further aggression (Accinelli, 1996: 154–83). Nevertheless, Mao continued to think that his willingness to go to the brink would force Washington to back off from making a commitment to defend Taiwan and the offshore islands. In early November 1954, the PRC Air Force started heavy bombardment of Yijiangshan, followed by naval attacks on the ROC warships in the area. On November 30, 1954, Mao issued an order via the chief of staff that a landing on Yijiangshan be launched on December 20.

In the order, Mao clearly spelled out that the political aim of this military offensive was to force the United States not to include the offshore islands in the mutual defense treaty (Xu, 1992: 178–80). At this point, Mao sensed that he could not prevent the mutual defense treaty from being signed, but he still believed that continued hostility would scare Washington away from committing to the defense of the offshore islands. However, the U.S.–Taiwan mutual defense treaty was signed on December 2, 1954, and in it, the United States explicitly committed itself to the

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defense not only of Taiwan and the Penghus but also "such other territories as may be determined by mutual agreement." By being vague about the offshore islands, Dulles intended to keep the Communists guessing, thereby deterring Beijing from attacking them (Garver, 1997: 57). It was clear by now that Mao's aggressive policy had forced Washington's hand, and his original intention of preventing a U.S.–ROC treaty had backfired.

Mao, however, was self-congratulatory, and he insisted that his aggressive policy had forced Washington to exclude the offshore islands from the treaty. He was in fear of the aggressiveness of the United States, which he greatly exaggerated. He thought that the mutual defense treaty "is not by any means a defense treaty.…It is a treaty of total aggression" and war (Li and Ma, 1997: 430). At the same time, he thought the only way to deal with U.S. aggressiveness was to be more aggressive, and he unrealistically believed that he could have his way. In January 1955, he ordered that Yijiangshan be seized, regardless of the newly signed treaty. The PLA succeeded in taking the island on January 18, 1955, with an air–amphibious–land operation. Preparations were then undertaken to attack the Dachens, which were now within the range of the PLA's artillery (Xu, 1992: 181–85).

Mao's aggressive behavior fostered a sense in Washington that the PRC onslaught on the offshore islands could not be stopped unless more drastic steps were taken. The Eisenhower administration thus made a further commitment to the defense of the ROC-held territories for which the United States was prepared to use tactical atomic weapons if necessary. Dulles told Taibei that the United States would publicly announce its intention to defend Jinmen if Jiang withdrew from the Dachens. On January 28, 1955, the Formosa Resolution passed Congress, giving the president a blank check to use force to protect Taiwan, the Penghus, and "related positions and territories of that area now in friendly hands." Mao won the battle in the Zhejiang coastal area but lost the war in the strait. Mao reportedly admitted the political failure of his "liberating Taiwan" campaign (Chang and He, 1993: 1514),[8] but he did not acknowledge his miscalculation or his failure to quickly back off from his misadventure.

Before Mao's campaign in July 1954, the CCP had a strategic plan of "liberating" the offshore islands: from small to large, one island at a time, from north to south, from weak to strong. The PLA had been successful in taking over a few islands in the Zhejiang coastal area; Yijiangshan and the Dachens were the logical continuation of this strategy (Xu, 1992: 183). These islands were far closer to Shanghai than to Taiwan, and Washington did not intervene when they fell into the PRC's hands. That was until Mao waged his "liberating Taiwan" campaign and bombarded Jinmen. Had Mao

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chosen to follow the old strategy, Yijiangshan and the Dachens would have been taken by the PRC without triggering an international crisis and pushing Washington to commit to the defense of Taiwan and related offshore islands. Even after the obvious self-defeat, Mao continued to think it was his aggressiveness that had forced the enemy to evacuate the Dachens, and thus his continued and persistent aggressiveness against Jinmen and Mazu would yield the same result. In essence, Mao came to underestimate Washington's commitment and to doubt U.S. credibility.

In February 1955, Mao concluded that under pressure, Washington had temporarily given up the offensive position of using the offshore islands to attack the PRC, and it had reverted to a defensive position without committing itself to the defense of the islands. On February 21, Mao interpreted Washington's policy as a two-track one: calling for a cease-fire and threatening war. He believed that "if we give them an inch, they will take a mile and intensify their military expansion. Only by adopting an unyielding, resolute, and calm stance can we force the enemy to retreat. …Therefore, we must adopt an intransigent stance against the United States" (Chang and He, 1993: 1515–16).[9] Mao's intransigence increased the tension in the strait during March and April 1955. On March 15, 1955, Mao thought that under pressure, the ROC would evacuate Mazu. He instructed Peng Dehuai, the defense minister, that "when the enemy retreat[s] from Mazu and any other [offshore] island, we should allow them to evacuate without any attack to block them" (Mao, 1987: 5.51). He also thought that the American diplomatic efforts via Britain, Sweden, and India to reach a peaceful solution were indications of America's weakness—a retreat from its coercive/aggressive position. Mao's underestimation of U.S. credibility led him to push for his version of "brinksmanship" (Chang and He, 1993: 1515–16).[10]

Mao thus forced the United States to take further steps to prepare for the worst, including seriously considering the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the event of hostilities with the PRC. To prepare public opinion for this possibility in the near future, both Eisenhower and Dulles made public statements to that effect. Near the end of March, the "talking war" pitch in Washington reached an all-time high. Admiral Robert Carney inspired a rash of front-page stories on March 26, reporting that the administration expected a showdown over Jinmen and Mazu soon after April 15, and that the president had been urged to defend the islands even at the cost of war. Republican hard-liners on Capitol Hill were pushing the president to pledge a no-holds-barred defense of Jinmen and Mazu (Accinelli, 1990: 329–46).

Washington's seriousness and firm commitment finally caught up with Mao. On March 31, he warned his lieutenants to prepare for nuclear war

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(Zhang, 1992: 221). Ultimately, Mao was an opportunist, and at no time throughout the entire crisis was he prepared for a conventional war with the United States. Nor was he ready for a nuclear war, no matter how bold he appeared to be. After facilitating the U.S.–Taiwan mutual defense treaty and forcing Washington to commit to the defense of the offshore islands even at the cost of nuclear war, Mao finally got the message. Ironically, if Mao initiated the crisis by criticizing Zhou, he now needed Zhou to end the mess. At the Bandung Conference on April 23, 1955, Zhou announced that Beijing was willing to negotiate with the United States to reduce tension in the Far East in general and in the Taiwan Strait in particular. Sino–American ambassadorial talks began a few months later (Li and Ma, 1997: 470).

The first Taiwan crisis was now over, but Mao's unpredictable behavior would persist and resurface in 1958 to cause the second crisis. In fact, while he allowed Zhou to pursue peace in Bandung, he was preparing for war at the same time. On May 12, 1955, Su Yu, the PRC's chief of staff, informed Mao that the new airfield in Fujian would be completed by the end of June and suggested that air force units be deployed there immediately to "create conditions necessary for liberating Jinmen and Mazu." Mao approved Su's report on May 19 (Mao, 1987: 5.128). The trouble in the strait was far from over.

The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1958

Between the end of the first crisis and 1958, while the PRC was building up its military in the strait area, Washington was arming the ROC forces. To deter future aggression by the PRC, the United States conspicuously deployed tactical nuclear weapons and Matador surface-to-surface missiles in Taiwan. Beijing's experts on foreign affairs took note of the American resolve to use any means, including atomic weapons, to defend the ROC territories (Zhang, 1992: 225–27). Yet Mao was not deterred. In late 1957, Mao actually seemed to be optimistic. Probably encouraged by the Soviet *Sputnik* launch, Mao claimed in Moscow in November 1957, that the balance between the imperialist camp and the socialist camp had shifted: "The east wind is prevailing over the west wind." He went on to call the United States and nuclear bombs all but "paper tigers." If nuclear war should come, "to say the worst, half of the world's population would die, but the other half would live. Imperialism would be annihilated, and socialism would prevail all over the world" (Mao, 1987: 6.612–44).

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At the same time, Mao seemed to be haunted by an old fear that the enemy would invade the mainland from its offshore positions. On December 18, 1957, he received a report that ROC airplanes had snuck into the coastal area several times to drop propaganda materials, a routine occurrence. Mao, however, was disproportionately alarmed and he wrote Peng Dehuai immediately: “You must urge the air force to go all out, to annihilate [the] invading enemy. The air units should move into Fujian this year” (Mao, 1993a: 6.373). Later during the crisis, Mao voiced his fear again. On September 6, 1958, he commented that Jiang put one-third of his troops on the two islands, which were only three kilometers from the shore, and Jinmen made Xiamen a dead port. “They say they will withdraw, but they have not acted yet. Since you don’t withdraw, I then will attack. If you start to withdraw, we will stop attacking; if you withdraw entirely, I will not fire a single shell” (Pang and Jin, 2003: 865–66). For Mao, Jinmen and Mazu had become two “nails in the eyes” (*yanzhongding*), and he was determined to eliminate them. In April 1958, a plan to attack the islands was approved, but Mao did not set the timetable for its execution. He was waiting for an opportune time. It came three months later.

On November 2, 1957, at the Moscow airport, Mao stated, “Currently, U.S. imperialism is directing its spearhead of aggression and war toward Arab nations.…This kind of aggression will lead to the danger of another world war” (Mao, 1987: 6.612–44). When U.S. Marines landed in Beirut on July 15, 1958, Mao thought his prediction had come true, and he saw his chance coming to take action against the offshore islands. Two days later, he made the decision to attack Jinmen and called a meeting the next day. At the meeting, he politically rationalized his decision: “speaking of assisting the Arab people’s struggle against [the U.S.] invasion, [we] not only need to give moral support but also to provide substantive assistance with action” (Xu, 1992: 205–6). To attack the offshore islands, Mao said, could “pin down” U.S. military forces in East Asia, thereby providing relief for the people of the Middle East. He now saw the offshore islands conflict as part of a global struggle in which China would play a big role. He decided that the attack should be carried out first and foremost by artillery units on the ground, which would last two to three months; at the same time, two air force divisions would be mobilized. The first artillery assault was scheduled for July 25, 1958, and military mobilization in the region was immediately intensified (Xu, 1992: 205–6). The second strait crisis had begun.

Mao started with the pretext of supporting the Arab people, but the crisis in the Middle East quickly subsided. He then switched to emphasizing the need for domestic mass mobilization—among other reasons—to justify his militant

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action in the strait. Behind all these stated objectives and justifications, which kept changing over time, the only objective that was real and consistent was to force an evacuation from Jinmen and Mazu. He wanted to take the islands without a war with the United States, but the key to achieving this was to crack America's will and credibility. Mao knew that on April 2, 1957, Dulles had stated that the United States would consider the offshore islands as related to the defense of Taiwan, and one month later, Washington announced the deployment of nuclear-capable missiles in Taiwan (Pang and Jin, 2003: 849–50). Still, Mao doubted that Washington meant what it said, and he thought it possible that under military pressure the Americans would give up, and an ROC retreat from the offshore islands would thus be inevitable.

However, Mao's boldness and euphoria were often a façade; behind it lay a fearful and indecisive man. Looking back on the first strait crisis, having decided to attack Yijiangshan, Mao received a report that U.S. naval activities in the area had increased. Mao ordered on August 21, 1954, that if U.S. warships and aircraft were in the area, the planned attack should not go forward (Zhang, 1992: 198–99). In November, some U.S. warships left the area, and Mao thought the announced reason for the redeployment—an "incoming typhoon"—was only a pretext for a U.S. retreat. He thus ordered that the operation to seize Yijiangshan be launched on December 20, 1954. Mao put off this attack again a week before the planned date of action due to the uncertainties surrounding the signing of the U.S.–Taiwan defense treaty. Early in 1955, Mao approved another plan to attack Yijiangshan on January 18, but one day before the attack Mao wanted to postpone the operation again. The field commanders became impatient with Mao's hesitation and indecision, and they appealed to him to reconsider the postponement. They emphasized that the United States would not intervene to defend Yijiangshan. Only then did Mao finally let his lieutenants proceed as scheduled (Xu, 1992: 178–80). This fearful and indecisive Mao would reemerge in the second strait crisis.

Mao initially set the date of artillery assault against Jinmen for July 28, 1958, but one day before this date Mao changed his mind. In a sleepless morning, he wrote to Peng Dehuai:

> Thinking about it, I cannot sleep; it seems to be better if the attack on Jinmen is postponed for a few days.…[It will be better if we] wait for the unreasoning offensive by the enemy, and we then counterattack.…To let politics take command and to think it through thoroughly is most beneficial; to act quickly and upon impulse often results in a lack of considered planning. I have often acted like that, and sometimes it inevitably caused miscalculations. (Mao, 1993a: 377)

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This was not the only time when Mao acknowledged his tendency to be impulsive, but the acknowledgement did not change his policy behavior. It only provided a justification for his hesitation at the time. Peng should have been used to Mao's erratic style of decision making. After a few days passed, and there was no more word from Mao about the planned attack on Jinmen, Peng thought that the chairman had called off the operation entirely. On August 19, the PLA general staff formally ordered that the combat readiness status on the Fujian front be lifted (Chen, 2001: 179). Nevertheless, Mao made up his mind the very next day, taking his military lieutenants by surprise. On August 20, 1958, he ordered that the artillery assault on Jinmen be carried out as soon as possible. "After a period of shelling," he said, "the other side might withdraw its troops from Jinmen and Mazu." But he was not completely sure about that, so his plan was no plan: "We should take one step at a time, and then watch before taking the next step" (Chen, 2001: 180). Late in the day, Mao grew wary, and he ordered Ye Fei, the commander in the Fujian front, to come to see him immediately. Ye arrived the next day, and he reported to Mao in detail on the plan for the assault. When the report ended, Mao was silent for a long while, and then he suddenly uttered, "You are going to use so many big guns. Are you going to kill the Americans?" Ye replied that the American military advisers were everywhere in each battalion, and it was inevitable that some of them would be killed. Mao fell silent for more than ten minutes. He then questioned again: "Is it possible to avoid American casualties?" Ye's answer was negative. Mao did not utter a word, and the meeting ended abruptly (Pang and Jin, 2003: 857). What was happening in Mao's mind during those silent moments that made his lieutenants extremely uneasy? Was it worry or fear of a real fight with the United States? Mao did not want a war with the United States, but then why did he stir up the crisis in the first place?

Regardless what was going on inside of Mao, on August 22 he decided to attack Jinmen. Beginning at 5:30 a.m. on August 23, the PLA's big guns fired thirty-thousand rounds at the small island, killing more than six hundred ROC troops and two American advisers. The PLA navy joined the fight the next day, sinking two ROC ships in the area (Pang and Jin, 2003: 858). Mao seemed to be in high spirits after the battle had started. At a Politburo meeting late on August 23, he spelled out his objective clearly:

> Our demand is that the U.S. military withdraw from Taiwan and the GMD troops withdraw from Jinmen and Mazu. If you don't withdraw, we then will attack. Taiwan is too far away to be attacked; we thus will attack Jinmen and Mazu. This will certainly shock the world; not only will the Americans be in shock, so will the Asians and Europeans. (L. Wu, 1995: 74)

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At another Politburo meeting, on August 25, Mao made his point more explicit:

> From [Washington's] reaction in recent days, the Americans are very afraid that we are going not only to land on Jinmen and Mazu but also liberate Taiwan. In fact, we fired tens of thousands [of] shells on Jinmen, [but that] is only a probing action by guns. We won't say that we are going to land; we won't say we are not going to land either. We are acting in accordance with the opportunities of the time.…The U.S. signed a mutual defense treaty with the GMD, but it is not clear if the defense perimeter includes Jinmen and Mazu.…Our main purpose in shelling is not to gauge the GMD's defenses but to gauge the Americans' resolve, to test the Americans' determination. (L. Wu, 1995: 76)

Mao's intention to force the enemy to retreat was so apparent to his lieutenants that from August 27 on, the General Political Department of the PLA continuously broadcast a statement that "the landing campaign against Jinmen will begin soon," and the GMD troops there should prepare to surrender once the campaign started. Mao found this out from reading the foreign news excerpts on September 1, and he was furious. He thought that the broadcast unnecessarily alarmed Washington, and that it would thus toughen its determination to defend the offshore islands (Pang and Jin, 2003: 859).[11]

If Mao's intention in shelling Jinmen was to put pressure on his opponents to withdraw, why should not the PLA's propagandists issue boastful statements to enhance the effect of the bombardment? Besides, Mao realized on August 25 that Washington thought that the shelling of Jinmen was a prelude to a landing attack and an assault on Taiwan as well, and he did nothing to reassure the Americans. Why then was he so upset about the broadcast? The irrationality in Mao's behavior attests to the fact that he failed to articulate a strategic objective with a careful operational plan to achieve it. He was lost in a dangerous game of "stare down," helplessly hoping that his opponents would blink first.

The American policy in the strait had been consistent and clear since 1955, and there was no need for Mao to probe it. Mao knew that Dulles had stated on August 8 that "unlike the situation in late 1954, the offshore islands are now sufficiently integrated with Taiwan.…An attack on the offshore islands would now constitute an attack on Formosa itself." With such an understanding, the White House reacted swiftly and forcefully. After the attack on August 29, Eisenhower authorized the Seventh Fleet to escort and protect the ROC supply ships. At the same time, more naval forces were moving from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. Fifteen B-47s were placed

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on alert in Guam, in preparation for an atomic attack against the PRC targets. On September 4, 1958, Eisenhower and Dulles jointly issued the Newport Declaration, which made it clear that the United States would defend Taiwan and added that the offshore islands were essential to the defense of Taiwan (Zhang, 1992: 245–51). America's resolve and intentions could hardly be misunderstood; at the same time, Washington expressed willingness to resume ambassadorial talks with China. Meanwhile, the U.S. naval escorting action also clearly suggested that Washington was serious about defending the island.

If Mao's objective was to probe U.S. intentions, he should have gotten the answer loud and clear by now. If his objective was to take over the island by force, not just the threat of force, he should have stepped up the pressure, including propaganda vowing to land on Jinmen, just as his lieutenants did. But he did neither; the bombardment continued, and the situation drifted toward a dangerous stalemate. Mao's indecision reflected a mental block caused by his unwillingness to acknowledge the failure of his euphoric prediction that the Americans' resolve would crack under pressure. At the same time, he was afraid of a real fight with the United States. Beijing's own credibility was at stake, due to Mao's threat to use force without any intention or preparation to actually use it. Thus, the "probing" continued, and so did mixed messages from the chairman: On September 5, he said, "Americans are afraid of war," because "more people are on our side"; "They are more afraid of us; thus, war is not going to occur" (Mao, 1987: 7.378–95). On September 8, Mao expressed his high hope that the enemy would withdraw from the islands, commenting that "with so few soldiers scattered so widely, I don't know how the United States can fight a war." He wishfully concluded that Washington wanted escape from the trouble in the Taiwan Strait—the earlier, the better—because "it is more advantageous to the U.S." (Mao, 1987: 7.378–95). On the other hand, Mao was very afraid of a real fight with the United States. On September 7, 1958, Ye Fei told Mao that American warships were escorting ROC supply ships to Jinmen, and he asked for Mao's instructions. Mao ordered Ye to attack the ROC ships but not the American escorting warships. Ye then asked that if the Americans fired on the PRC forces, should they fire back? Mao said firmly that without his personal order, PRC forces should not fire back on the Americans, even if they were fired upon. Ye could not believe what he heard and asked three more times, but Mao was firm: "No return fire on the Americans!" (Pang and Jin, 2003: 860–61)

At the same time, Mao allowed Zhou to employ diplomacy to probe American intentions. He simply could not believe that under such pressure

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the Americans would not give up. On September 8, Zhou met with an intermediary to pass on a message to Jiang, emphasizing three choices for Taiwan: to live or die with Jinmen, to withdraw from the island, or to be forced to withdraw by the Americans (Li and Ma, 1997: 2.168). Mao knew the first "choice" was a bluff, because he was not prepared to land or even to threaten to land; and he doubted Jiang would withdraw voluntarily. Therefore, he hoped that Washington would have had enough and would thus force Jiang to withdraw. His chief objective in resuming the ambassadorial talks with the United States was to find out if Washington had "the intention of asking Jiang to withdraw from the offshore islands." On September 13, Mao wrote Zhou that they should wage a "probing battle" in the ambassadorial talks to find out the Americans' intentions within a week. Zhou predicted that the United States might demand a cease-fire and then propose a demilitarized zone around the offshore islands; Zhou thus explicitly instructed Wang Bingnan, China's chief negotiator, to reject any such proposal. Consequently, Beijing's premise for the talks was not a sincere and workable one; while Washington demanded an immediate cease-fire in the strait, the PRC demanded a total withdrawal of the U.S. military presence from the entire region. On September 17, Zhou reported to Mao that after the next three to four talks, the objective of probing the U.S. intentions could be accomplished (Li and Ma, 1997: 2.169–71).

It was not that U.S. intentions were unclear and warranted a probing by means of military bombardment and diplomatic talks; it was that Mao's stubborn refusal to acknowledge his failure in judging U.S. resolve and credibility misled him to hope that his bombardment would force a retreat from the offshore islands. The ambassadorial talks went nowhere, nor did the confrontation in the strait. The odd combination of Mao's brinksmanship and his lack of will to fight a real battle with the United States prolonged the dangerous tension in the region throughout September 1958. At the end of the month, Mao continued his fantasy of an enemy retreat, but he was not completely sure about that anymore. This was reflected in Zhou Enlai's conversation with the Soviet chargé d'affaires on September 27. Zhou listed three possible future developments: the United States might compromise and push Jiang to withdraw, the current stalemate might continue, or the United States might come into a direct confrontation with the PRC. Zhou said that the last possibility was unlikely, and he stated that if the ROC forces were to retreat, the PRC would not attack, but currently conditions for a withdrawal were not mature (Li and Ma, 1997: 2.175). It seemed that Mao was still indecisive, but he was at the end of his rope.

On September 30, Mao said, "Honestly, we do want to take over Jinmen and Mazu, but this is not just about Jiang; this is especially about U.S.

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policy, which needs to be taken into consideration" (Wu, 1995: 81–82). This was a mindless repetition of a fact that had been obvious for a long time, and Mao was clearly very frustrated. He now seemed to realize his predicament: the Americans were not about to back down, but he never intended to have a real fight over Jinmen and Mazu. He needed a face-saving way out. On the same day, Dulles commented at a news conference that the high concentration of ROC troops on Jinmen was "rather foolish" and that the United States would urge Taiwan to reduce its troop level if a cease-fire became "reasonably dependable" (Dulles, 1958: 8). There was nothing new in this statement, and reducing the number of troops did not go as far as the demilitarized zone proposal Beijing had determined to reject two weeks earlier. But when Mao was ready to step down from his high horse, Dulles's statement provided a pretext, which Mao eagerly used.

After learning of Dulles's statement, Mao held meetings with the Politburo every day from October 3 to 13. Zhou Enlai expressed the view that Washington's policy was to "exchange Jinmen-Mazu for Taiwan-Penghu": to have the PRC renounce the use of force to "liberate Taiwan" and in exchange, to force Taiwan to renounce the use of force to "recover the mainland" and to withdraw from Jinmen and Mazu. This was to create "two Chinas," Zhou asserted. This seemed to enlighten Mao, and he announced that "the task of probing [U.S. intentions] has been accomplished, and the question is what to do next." In regard to Dulles's policy, Mao added, "We share something in common with Jiang Jieshi: both of us are opposed to the two-China policy" (Wu, 1995: 83–86). Only in this late stage of the crisis, when Mao had realized that military pressure would not result in a retreat from the offshore islands, did he switch his emphasis to a political scheme: to prevent Washington from creating the two-China scenario now became his justification for creating the tension in the strait. On October 5, Mao ordered the shelling of Jinmen be stopped for two days to see whether the situation would change (Xu, 1992: 268–69). On October 6, Mao broadcast a statement "To Taiwan Compatriots" announcing a seven-day cease-fire if the United States would stop escorting Taiwanese vessels. The second Taiwan Strait Crisis was on the wane.

Mao of course had to make a victory out of a defeat. Early in September, even when Dulles's statement and U.S. Navy escorting activities made it clear that Washington would defend Jinmen and Mazu, Mao continued to hope that the enemy would withdraw. To justify his drifting "wait-and-see" policy, he created a new term, the "noose strategy." This new strategy aimed to turn the offshore islands into a noose with which to hang the Americans. In reality—as we have seen—Mao was eager to see the U.S. presence in the strait disappear entirely. In

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early October, when he decided to leave Jinmen in Jiang's hands, he reiterated his "noose strategy," which was in truth Mao's "sour grapes." The fact was that the Taiwan Strait remained fairly quiet thereafter, and Mao never tried to "tighten the noose." Mao's propagandistic gimmick could not even hide the basic fact that he did not have a strategy at all. Plus, leaving Jinmen in the hands of Taibei did not affect the politics of "one China" versus "two Chinas" one way or the other. Ironically, the end of the second strait crisis signified the beginning of the intensification of the Sino–Soviet conflict; the alliance between the two communist giants was unraveling at a time when China most needed a powerful ally.

The Sino–Soviet Conflict in the 1950s

The critical link between the strait crisis in 1958 and the beginning of the end of the Sino–Soviet alliance can also be found in Mao's dictatorial leadership style and erratic decision-making behavior. As the following narrative unfolds, one will see that Mao's ambition to be the leader of international communist movement led him and his party onto a collision course with the Kremlin leadership. In a way, the 1958 strait crisis was as much a result of Mao's rivalry with Moscow as his enmity toward Washington.

One of the reasons Mao postponed the attack on Jinmen in July 1958 was a sudden visit to Beijing by Khrushchev. In April 1958, Rodion Malinovsky, the Soviet defense minister, proposed to Beijing that thanks to new Soviet technology, a long-wave radio station could be constructed on the Chinese coast to serve both countries' military intelligence purposes; both sides would contribute funds to the project. Mao agreed to the proposal in principle, but he insisted that the station be funded and owned by the Chinese solely. The Soviets insisted for a while that the project be a joint venture but then gave up in the face of Mao's insistence. China would have sole ownership and control over the facility (Mao, 1993b: 316–17).

On June 28, 1958, the Chinese requested that the Soviets help them build nuclear submarines. Moscow promptly proposed on July 21, 1958, the establishment of a Sino–Soviet joint nuclear submarine flotilla. Moscow reasoned that a joint flotilla would combine Soviet nuclear technology and Chinese ice-free naval bases to make its military power even more formidable vis-à-vis that of the West. Mao, nonetheless, was instantly furious and provoked; he called in Ambassador Yudin the next day and launched a tirade against the Soviets, from Stalin to Mikoyan and the rest of the current Kremlin leadership (Mao, 1993b: 322–33).

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A matter involving two nations' nuclear technology and military collaboration naturally warrants a process of diplomatic negotiations in which proposals and counterproposals are expected. Why then did Mao reject the proposal out of hand, and with so much emotion? Did not the Soviets yield to Mao's terms on the long-wave radio station project? In reading his incoherent and angry talk with Yudin, what transpires is his overwhelming feeling of being rejected and slighted; his aggressiveness toward the Soviets reflected his inferiority complex. He said to the Soviet ambassador sarcastically:

> Nuclear submarines are of cutting-edge science, very mysterious; and the Chinese are clumsy-handed and clumsy-footed, and there may be problems if you give [the submarines] to us.... You [Russians] simply don't trust (*bu-xiangxin*) us Chinese, you only trust the Russians. The Russians are upper-class people, the Chinese lower-class people, clumsy-handed and clumsy-footed. That's why you raise the question of joint operation. (Mao, 1993b: 323–24)

Mao's utterly undiplomatic comments conveyed a sense of inferiority and insecurity, which led him to fear unwarrantedly that the Soviets sought to control China. He alleged that

> [You Soviets] want joint operations in everything; in the army and the navy, in industries and agriculture, in culture and education, you want joint operations in all, don't you? Why don't you take the entire [Chinese] coastline of some 10,000 kilometers for yourselves, leaving us with only a few guerrilla teams? You only made a bit of nuclear stuff, and then, you want to control [us], and want the right to lease [our bases]. Besides that, what else gives you reason [to control us]? (Mao, 1993b: 323–24)

Having learned of Mao's fury, Khrushchev rushed to China on July 31, 1958, and attempted to explain Soviet intentions in person to appease Mao. This Sino–Soviet summit would prove to be an emotionally charged and fateful one. Khrushchev tried very hard to explain the rationale behind the Soviet proposal, emphasizing the common need of the two nations in the Pacific region vis-à-vis the American naval presence, particularly its Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait. Mao did not want to hear any of this. He lifted his hand to stop Khrushchev: "You have been talking too long, but you still have not touched the main issue. Please tell me what does a joint flotilla mean?"

"Well, what 'joint' means is [first] to discuss jointly," the Soviet leader tried desperately to maintain his composure and to stress the tentative nature of the proposal and the need for further discussion. Mao was becoming more

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and more irritated and angry. He suddenly stood up, pointed his finger at Khrushchev's nose, and shouted at him in a fit of rage: "You have piled up so much nonsense; I am asking you: what is a joint fleet?" Khrushchev's face turned red, still wanting to explain: "We've come here just to have a mutual discussion with…"

"What 'mutual discussion?!' Do we still have sovereignty? You want to take over our coastal area, don't you?" Mao was angry, but "not lacking self-confident sarcasm," the interpreter, Li Yueran, observed (Y. Li, 1994: 148–59).[12]

What was clear from Mao's outrage was not his concern with protecting China's independence and territorial integrity against the alleged Soviet intrusion, as he would have the world believe. It was his deep-seated frustration caused by the gap between his ambition to lead the international communist movement and the reality of his inferior position with his country still so poor and weak. To "beg" for Soviet assistance was humiliating enough for him; it became unbearable to feel rejected and slighted by China's "big brother." He felt that the Soviets were "big power chauvinists," looking down upon him and the Chinese he represented. He convinced himself that the Soviets harbored the ulterior motive of taking control of China's military establishment. In letting his emotions hold sway, China's national interest was hijacked by his personal feelings.

In reality, the Kremlin had become quite humble before Beijing since Stalin's death. In 1954, having consolidated his position over Georgi Malenkov as Stalin's successor, Khrushchev came to Beijing to see Mao, and handed over the Lushun naval base and the Soviet shares in the joint companies in Manchuria and Xinjiang. Much more substantial Soviet economic and military aid followed. In some cases, the Soviets furnished the Chinese with their most advanced military technology, enabling Chinese plants to start producing improved weapons even before Soviet plants could do so. Khrushchev was so enthusiastic about helping Mao build nuclear bombs and missiles that some Russian historians are still wondering about the soundness of the Kremlin's reasoning. Khrushchev himself would later regret that he had bent over backwards to please Mao in those days (Goncharenko, 1998). Had Mao continued to take advantage of what the Soviets could offer and his relative political strength in the post-Stalin communist world, China's national interest and security could have been much better served. But Mao's grandiose leadership struggle took China the wrong way. Mao did more than anyone else to ruin the seemingly formidable world communist movement in the 1950s.

The Khrushchev visit took place after Mao had decided to stir up the second strait crisis, and yet Mao did not say a word to the Soviet leader

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about his planned military adventure against the United States. After the Chinese shelling of Jinmen had started and Washington had made its nuclear threat against China, Gromyko rushed to Beijing on September 7, 1958, bringing with him the draft of a letter from Khrushchev to President Eisenhower. In the letter, Khrushchev warned that "if the PRC is attacked by such [nuclear or hydrogen] weapons, the aggressor will instantly be repulsed by similar means" (Goncharenko, 1998: 150). In the margin of the draft, Mao instructed Zhou Enlai to gather several people to study Khrushchev's draft, and to write a letter of opinion. He set a cocky tone for evaluating Khrushchev's draft: ninety percent of it was positive, the rest could be further discussed (Mao, 1987: 7.404–5).

Speaking on behalf of Mao, Zhou Enlai told Gromyko: "Inflicting blows on the offshore islands, 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." The USSR, Zhou continued, should not take part in the conflict in this stage, even if the United States used tactical nuclear bombs. Only when the United States used larger nuclear weapons and risked broadening the war should the Soviet Union respond with a nuclear counter-strike (Zubok and Pleshakov, 1996: 225).

By keeping Moscow in the dark, Beijing violated the letter and spirit of the Sino–Soviet 1950 alliance treaty, which bound the Soviets to provide a nuclear umbrella to China. In addition to the violation, the junior partner of the military alliance, which was on the receiving end of Soviet assistance, was now dictating the terms and timing of the use of Soviet nuclear power. More irresponsible was the fact that if Mao did not want to have a few Americans in Jinmen killed, he was certainly not prepared for a nuclear confrontation at all. Thus, when he told the Soviets that he was ready to take all the hard blows, including atomic bombs, he was obviously lying.

In spite of Mao's inexplicable behavior, Khrushchev continued to offer additional assistance to China, which was facing powerful U.S. military forces in the strait. On September 27, 1958, one week after the publication of Khrushchev's letter to Eisenhower, the Kremlin sent a letter to Beijing, confirming that "attacking China means attacking the Soviet Union." At the same time, Khrushchev called in Liu Xiao, the Chinese ambassador, telling him that since the United States enjoyed naval and air superiority in the strait, the Soviet Union would provide further assistance to increase China's air and naval strength. Liu transmitted the message back to Beijing immediately, but Mao delayed his reply for about ten days; he eventually declined the Soviet offer. The Soviets were dumbfounded by Mao's handling of the

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strait crisis, and they started questioning his mental stability, instructing Ambassador Yudin to provide more information on Mao's private life (Goncharenko, 1998: 151–52; Liu, 1998: 74–78).[13]

In retrospect, Moscow's second-guessing about Mao's mental stability was not unreasonable. The emotional and irrational nature of Mao's policy conduct during the second strait crisis became quite clear in his talk with his personal physician right after his confrontational meeting with Khrushchev. Mao rhetorically asked, Khrushchev "wants to improve relations with the United States? Good, we'll congratulate him with our guns.…Let's get the United States involved, too.…Chiang Kai-shek wants the United States to use the [atomic] bomb against us. Let them use it. Let's see what Khrushchev says then" (Z. Li, 1994: 262). It seems that Mao's decision was prompted in part by his dark spirit of rivalry with the Kremlin's foreign policy of détente, and his deliberate provocation in the strait was a challenge to Soviet leadership in the diplomatic arena. It was not that Mao was so radical and doctrinaire that he could not understand or accept the concept of détente; he had two "united front" experiences with the GMD, and he followed Moscow's peaceful coexistence line in the early 1950s. It was, rather, that Mao had now come to believe that he was the rightful leader of the communist world, and he wanted to have a diplomatic posture different from, and in contrast to, that of the Kremlin.

Mao's ambition to claim the leadership of the communist world started right after the death of Stalin. Mao seemed to be elated when Khrushchev stumbled in Poland and Hungary in late 1956. Mao acted as the boss, criticizing the Kremlin's handling of both the Polish and Hungarian crises (L. Wu, 1995: 10–19).[14] At a meeting on January 27, 1957, Mao accused the Soviet leadership of being *li ling zhi hun* (muddle-headed due to the pursuit for profit), and "the best way to deal with them is to give them a tongue-lashing" (Mao, 1993b: 280–83). While Mao was "tongue-lashing" the Kremlin, a Chinese delegation arrived in Belgrade. This mission was so secret that Beijing did not want an interpreter to be at the meeting; instead, the Chinese ambassador to Yugoslavia was to be the interpreter. The essential message was Mao's suggestion that due to the "very bad reputation of the Soviet Communist Party, not many [communist] parties will listen to them anymore." Therefore, "it will be better for the CCP, together with the Yugoslavian Party, to call for an international conference of communist parties to discuss and co-ordinate activities worldwide." Tito politely rejected Mao's proposal. This must have offended Mao very much: not long after, and before Beijing started a fierce ideological polemic against Moscow, Mao ordered an attack on "Titoist revisionism" (X. Wu, 1991: 310–19).

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Tito's refusal to promote Mao's worldwide leadership role did not dissuade Mao. During his trip to Moscow later in 1957, Mao behaved like the leader anyway, with an imperial air and a sense of superiority, according to his personal physician and interpreter, who accompanied him (Z. Li, 1994: 125–32). Before his departure, he sent a request to the Kremlin that there should not be a formal ceremony when he arrived at Moscow's airport. Khrushchev, together with the entire Soviet politburo, nonetheless went to the airport to greet Mao and put on a grand ceremony for him. While Khrushchev was escorting Mao to the Kremlin, Mao said: "Didn't I request not to have a ceremony for me? How come you still put up such a grand show?" Khrushchev explained that he and his colleagues did receive the message and discussed it; but they concluded that for as important a state guest as Mao, the welcoming ceremony could not be downgraded. Mao then said, "Well, in my view, when communism is finally achieved, none of these vanities will matter any more" (Y. Li, 1994: 148–59). He seemed to be in a dream world where he stood at the pinnacle of power. If Khrushchev had followed Mao's request and had not had a ceremony to greet Mao, would Mao have been happier? Or would have he been furious, feeling slighted and humiliated? Khrushchev was damned whatever he did or did not do.

While in Moscow, Mao was preoccupied with the issue of leadership. In his speech at the Moscow conference, Mao started by saying, "I want to talk about the question of 'taking the Soviet Union as the head [of the socialist camp].'" He argued that facing the danger of war, possibly a nuclear war, with the imperialist camp, the socialist camp needed a head to "call for a meeting at any time. To be the head is to call a meeting; the two are identical. The question is: Who should be the head?" He came down to two possible choices: China or the Soviet Union. He concluded:

> We, China, cannot be the head, because we don't have the credentials; we have less experience. We have the experience of making revolution, but not of economic reconstruction. We are a big nation population-wise; economically speaking, we are a small nation. We haven't got half of a satellite up there yet. As such, it will be difficult for us to be the head; people wouldn't listen when we call for a meeting. The Soviet Communist Party has the experience of forty years; her experiences are most complete, which includes two parts: the major part is correct, the other incorrect. (Mao, 1987: 6.625–26)

Although Mao in theory endorsed the Soviet leadership, by raising the question itself he revealed his intention to challenge the Kremlin's leadership role. He had tried and failed secretly to "call the meeting"; therefore,

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he narrowly defined the Kremlin's leadership role as "calling meetings," and nothing more. This left him to take charge of setting the agenda and the tone of the meeting that was taking place. The Soviets sent Mao the draft declaration of the conference prior to his departure from Beijing. After reading the draft, Mao was dissatisfied, and decided to go to Moscow three days earlier than originally planned so that he could take the lead in the drafting process (L. Wu, 1999: 92–155).

Acting like the legitimate heir to Marx and Lenin, Mao talked at length about the theory of "dialectic materialism" with other participants such as Maurice Thorez of France. He then asked his political secretary to sum up his thesis in a large paragraph to be included in the Joint Declaration of the Moscow Conference. When Mikhail Suslov came to ask Mao with "extreme caution" whether it was necessary to write this paragraph into the declaration since it was a "familiar subject," Mao waved his hand lightly and stated, "[You] say it's familiar to everyone, but I don't think so. If [you] say some people have known it, then, there must be others who don't. Would you believe me on this point?" The Soviets gave up, and Mao had his way (Y. Li, 1994: 125–32). At the end of the conference, Mao claimed, "In 1848, Marx and Engels issued the *Communist Manifesto* and launched a worldwide communist movement. Now, more than one hundred years later, the Moscow Declaration has summarized the experience of that movement and charted our future" (Z. Li, 1994: 224). Mao seemed exuberant in his self-styled role as leader of the communist world.

More substantively, Mao seemed to have the urge to exercise the real leadership role of guiding the policy of the socialist camp vis-à-vis the imperialist West. With the current Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence as his target, Mao called for bolder action by reassessing the balance of power between the two camps. On November 18, 1957, Mao addressed the Moscow conference: "I feel that the current international situation has come to a new turning point. . . . I believe that the characteristic of the current situation is 'the East wind overwhelms the West wind,' that is to say, the socialist [camp] enjoys overwhelming superiority over the imperialist [camp]" (Mao, 1987: 6.630–31). With this bold assessment, Mao urged the world's communists to act more aggressively by ridding themselves of the fear of war, even a nuclear war, which might kill half of the entire human race. Khrushchev would later recall how horrified he was when he heard Mao's remark.

At Moscow, Mao also set the goals for the Communist world: in fifteen years the Soviet Union and China would surpass the United States and Britain, respectively. Had Mao been boastful for propaganda purposes only, China might have been saved from a deadly disaster. But Mao was deadly

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serious. Coming back from Moscow, he started to push China's domestic policy toward what became the GLF. He wanted to create his own model of socialist economic construction in competition with the Soviet model. All he conceded in Moscow was that the Soviet's experience was superior to that of China, and because of that he recognized the leadership role of the Soviets, at least in theory. In November 1958, he was to vehemently attack the Soviet model of economic development, while asking questions such as, "Between China and the Soviet Union, which one will be transformed into a communist society first?" (Mao, 1987: 7.553).[15] Apparently, Mao's leadership ambition in competition with the Soviet Union was the decisive factor that drove him down this disastrous utopian path.

In this context, Mao's military adventure in the strait was yet another competitive move against the Soviet leadership. On July 16, 1958, one day after U.S. Marines landed in Lebanon, Moscow not only condemned the U.S. action but also announced that Soviet military maneuvers would take place near the Black Sea, as would a Soviet–Bulgarian joint military exercise. Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt at the same time went to Moscow asking for Soviet support for the Arab people's struggle (Xu, 1992: 202–3).[16] Khrushchev seemed to dominate the international spotlight, and Mao wanted to do something drastic to attract world attention and seize the initiative in foreign policy. This also explains why Mao kept Moscow in the dark and refused Khrushchev's offer of more Soviet assistance against the U.S. military presence in the strait. The Soviets soon came to realize that "1958–1959 was the period of a peculiar 'quest' of the Chinese leadership in the area of foreign policy" (Zubok and Pleshakov, 1996: 233–34).

This became even more evident in 1959, when Khrushchev came to Beijing again to debrief Mao on his recent Camp David summit with Eisenhower. Before Khrushchev's arrival on September 30, 1959, the Chinese interpreters were told that there would be a "big debate," and they should be "mentally prepared" for it (Y. Li, 1994: 159).[17] During the meeting Mao and his Politburo members orchestrated a fierce attack on the Soviet "three-no world" concept of détente and Soviet policy toward third world countries such as India (Y. Li, 1994: 160–64).[18] The meeting became so ugly that Khrushchev did not participate in the celebration of the PRC's tenth anniversary that night. The next day, he informed Mao that the USSR would rethink its promise to help the Chinese build a nuclear bomb (Y. Li, 1994: 160–64).[19]

Two months later, Suslov delivered a report on the Khrushchev visit at a Politburo meeting, in which the Soviets concluded that "the crux of the matter is that the Leadership of the CCP has recently developed tendencies to exaggerate the degree of maturity of socialist relations in China. . . . There

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are elements of conceit and haughtiness.…[These shortcomings] are largely explained by the atmosphere of the cult of personality of com. Mao Zedong…who, by all accounts, himself has come to believe in his own infallibility" (Bulletin, 1996–1997: 244–48). Retrospectively, Suslov's remarks were not far off the mark.

When the Geneva Conference of 1954 ended, China seemed to be hopeful: having withstood the ravages of the Korean War, peace finally dawned in the region, and a long-term realistic economic reconstruction strategy was also in place. Mao, however, would change all this suddenly and single-handedly. After stirring up the Taiwan Strait crises twice, Mao had, in part because of his rivalry with the post-Stalin Kremlin leadership, begun to unravel China's alliance with the Soviet Union. Mao's policy behavior in dealing with the two superpowers appeared irrational; personality and emotions played a major role in Beijing's foreign policy process. Mao was often compulsive and erratic, changing policy orientation suddenly and inexplicably without due policy deliberation and careful planning. If his intention was to protect and enhance China's national interest, his policy behavior did much damage to China and Chinese people. At the end of the 1950s, China was internationally isolated and internally devastated, thanks to Mao's ruinous utopian pursuit of the Great Leap Forward at home, which was also inspired by his rivalry with Moscow. In the absence of emotional intelligence, all else turned to ashes.[20]

Notes

1. Most literature on the Taiwan Strait crises focuses on the American policy process and assumes that Beijing's actions were aggressive in that it sought territorial expansion. Stolper's argument is similar to that of scholars on mainland China. See Chen Xiaolu (1989) and Wang Jisi (1989).

2. Authors who take this position acknowledge the misperception and miscalculation on Mao's part, but they also portray Mao as a dynamic decision maker with a "grand style." They are correct in pointing out the continuity of conflict in the offshore area since 1949; but this changed when Mao's "liberating Taiwan" campaign started. It is misleading to emphasize that Beijing did not have a plan to launch an assault on Jinmen, thereby implying that Mao's campaign was political, not military in nature, and that Washington overresponded. Beijing in fact intended to use force to take over Jinmen short of a war with the United States, just as He Di's 1990 article indicates. Such authors may be right that had Washington consistently demonstrated its determination to defend the Dachens, Mao would not have been likely to approve the assault on the islands. One can also argue that had Washington not demonstrated its determination to defend Jinmen and Mazu, they would have been taken by the PRC.

3. Fred Greenstein (2000), a leading presidential scholar and an authority on personality and politics, illuminates the importance of personality and leadership style in the policy process. He identifies six personality qualities as being critical to presidential performance.

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Using the examples of Johnson, Nixon, and Clinton, Greenstein convincingly demonstrates that "emotional intelligence"—that is, the ability of self-restraint and self-regulation of emotions—is most important of all (Greenstein, 2000). "In its absence all else may turn to ashes." Also see Goleman (1997).

4. There are many secondary sources on Washington's policy management during the crises, such as Chang (1988), Zhang (1992: 189–224), Brands (1988), Accinelli (1990), and Gordon (1985).

5. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that Mao's exaggerated fear of an aggressive America was long-standing. He, for instance, thought in 1948–49 that the United States would rearm Japan, interfere militarily in China to defeat the CCP, and then invade the USSR. The result would likely be World War III. One of the reasons he decided to send military forces to Korea in 1950 was that he thought the United States would invade China from Korea, and thus a U.S.–China military showdown was inevitable. See Sheng (1997, 2004).

6. For more on Mao's self-imposed isolationist policy in 1949, see Sheng (1997).

7. In this study, He Di stresses that, until the last stage of the second crisis in 1958, Mao's consistent objective was to take over Jinmen and Mazu. This fact of Mao's territorial desire is downplayed in the AHR article that He coauthored with Gordon Chang (Chang and He, 1993).

8. The authors are, however, wrong to assert that Mao decided to reduce tension after the ROC evacuation from Dachen and that the subsequent U.S. overresponse was responsible for the escalation of tensions.

9. The authors, however, do not attempt to explain the gap between the CCP's intransigence indicated in this document and its position of reconciliation on which they insist.

10. The authors are right to term Mao's policy "brinksmanship." They are less persuasive that Mao's "go-to-the-brink" action was primarily political/psychological, not military/territorial, and that Washington needlessly overreacted by preparing for nuclear war. Mao's intention seemed to be both, and he wanted other offshore islands. And there was a military build-up and military planning to take over Jinmen and Mazu, as evidence in the following paragraphs will attest.

11. According to Chen Jian, the message was broadcast on August 24 and again on August 27, "without Beijing's authorization." Chen (2001: 184) thus believes that this broadcast triggered the State Department to announce on August 27 that Jinmen and Mazu were vital to the defense of Taiwan itself. Chen may overestimate the importance of this small incident in changing the big picture.

12. This is further confirmed in a taped interview by the author on September 4, 1998. Li Yueran was Mao's Russian interpreter, acting in the Peng delegation to Belgrade in 1957 as well as in various Mao–Khrushchev meetings.

13. Many dates in Liu's memoirs are questionable; its use warrants caution. Westad (1998: 22–77) confirms the Soviet offer of further assistance and Mao's rejection as well.

14. Although the Soviets have a different account, which insists that Khrushchev dealt with the Polish and Hungarian situations without significant Chinese input, the Chinese clearly believe they were correct and the Soviets were wrong. Wu describes the meeting of November 2, 1956, as "filled with an elated atmosphere throughout" when Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping reported to Mao on their mission to the USSR.

15. In the CCP's draft resolution on the people's communes, it was stated that with the increase of communist elements in China's economic system, China was making progress toward the transition to a communist society. "Thus, ignoring or blocking such an increase,

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and pushing back the realization of communism to an indefinite future, are undoubtedly incorrect." In revising the text, Mao changed "incorrect" into "unsuited"; while writing in the margin: "it is to take into consideration the [face] of the Soviet Union" (Mao, 1987; 568–77).

16. Xu Yan keenly observes that there was a deeper layer to Mao's strait policy: to demonstrate to the Soviets the Chinese attitude of independence and self-reliance.

17. In Khrushchev's memoirs, his visits in 1958 and 1959 were mistakenly mixed up: he did not go to Beijing in 1959 to discuss the radio station and submarine fleet issues (Khrushchev, 1970: 472–73).

18. The "three-no world" refers to the concept of a world without aggression, war, and nuclear weapons.

19. According to the Soviet document cited in the next paragraph, the serious quarrel took place on October 2, 1958.

20. Elsewhere, I have applied psychoanalytical insights to explain Mao's behavior and its consequences for modern Chinese history (Sheng, 2001, 2005).

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