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When the Kennedy administration came to office, the president and his advisers confronted immediate and critical issues such as the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis, renewed antagonisms with the Soviet Union over the status of Berlin, and negotiations for a nuclear disarmament treaty; still, they could not ignore China policy. Domestic and international circles burgeoned with speculation. John F. Kennedy and his cabinet projected images of “new frontiersmen” who promised to offer fresh and innovative solutions to problems around the world. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., special assistant to the president, described Kennedy as “the first representative in the White House of a distinctive generation, the generation which was born during the First World War, came of age during the depression, fought in the Second World War and began its public career in the atomic age.”¹ But the course of Sino-American relations would be determined not by New Frontier intentions but by interactions with, and resulting perceptions of, the government of the Republic of China (GRC) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Despite the new administration’s proposed departure from past policies, Kennedy and his advisers could not easily dismiss the events and the established images of the preceding decade. The Chinese Communists established control on the mainland and the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan but aspired to return. The Korean War, two offshore islands crisis of 1954–55 and 1958, and activities in Southeast Asia demonstrated Beijing’s militancy and highlighted the Communist threat to stability in East Asia. The respected British scholar Rosemary Foot argues that as the PRC demonstrated rapid development during the 1950s, Washington wanted a policy “that did not further empower but instead diminished and held back that ‘awakening giant.’”² In addition to the “loss” of China in 1949 and the threat of international communism, the hysteria of McCarthyism proved to be an all-consuming force. Any move

toward a rapprochement with the Chinese Communists was ravaged as “a treasonable betrayal of the national interest” and ultimately resulted in “the almost total paralysis of American policy in the Orient.” Over the course of the decade, the United States arrived at an announced policy to contain the spread of communism manifested by the People’s Republic, known as “Red China,” and take responsibility for the defense of the Nationalists on Taiwan, known as “Free China.”

**Chinese Nationalist Perspective**

After the Chinese Communist takeover of the mainland in 1949, the desire to “return to the mainland” constituted the national objective for the Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan. However, with each passing year, the prospects for a successful recovery by the GRC became increasingly remote. While the United States continued to support the GRC as the sole Chinese government amid growing international criticism, it was clear that the PRC had established its rule on the mainland and was not the “passing phase” referred to by Secretary of State Foster Rhea Dulles in 1957. Meanwhile, President Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) and his government remained committed to recovering the mainland and insisted that a counteroffensive could be successful with proper planning and preparation. Realistically, however, a GRC attempt to recapture the mainland could not be executed independently, and the Chinese Nationalists realized that vast U.S. military assistance would be required in order for success to be viable.

In 1962, the GRC focused on mobilizing efforts to regain the mainland with repeated requests to the Kennedy administration to provide military support. However, the United States had firmly discouraged the use of force in the Taiwan Strait area, and Kennedy and his advisers were not willing to change U.S. posture in that regard without clear evidence that a military operation could be successful in its objectives. In ambassadorial talks with the Chinese Communists, which had begun in Geneva in 1954, the United States consistently advocated the renunciation of force in PRC dealings with the Chinese Nationalists; and concurrently, Washington required GRC adherence to the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty which stipulated prior consultation with the United States before the Nationalists engaged in military activity. In addition, the possibility of Soviet intervention in a U.S.-assisted Nationalist attack on the mainland posed a major deterrent to active U.S. participation in the GRC’s mainland recovery efforts.