"Who's Daddy" in the Taiwan Strait?
The Offshore Islands Crisis of 1958

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The offshore islands crisis of 1958 found the United States caught in a trap. The military buildup by the People's Republic of China (PRC) on its Fujian coast (opposite Taiwan) and its shelling of Quemoy on 23 August seemed to many in the United States to herald an invasion of the offshore islands. With one-third of the army of the Republic of China (ROC) deployed in Quemoy and Matsu, the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower decided that it could not back down before a Communist threat and committed itself to the defense of these islands. American plans for the defense of the offshore islands called for the use of nuclear weapons against targets in mainland China. But domestic and international opinion strongly opposed a nuclear war in defense of the tiny islands and forced a change in the U.S. policy. For a time, however, the United States found itself in a crisis that was the closest that it came to using nuclear weapons after Nagasaki.

Some scholars have treated this crisis as a case of successful American deterrence of a Chinese attempt to invade the offshore islands.1 A recent account of this episode that is also an in-depth study of the Chinese side of the crisis treats it as a case of mutual Sino-American deterrence.2 The only study of this crisis based on newly available American documents concentrates on the role of public opinion in moderating U.S. policy in the crisis.3

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This essay agrees with the conclusion that public opinion succeeded in bringing about a major shift in the American policy in the crisis. However, it argues, the crisis has far greater significance than has been hitherto understood for U.S. China policy as well as strategic policy. The initial American force dispositions and war plans, and the very real possibility that a Chinese escalation of the crisis would have left the United States no choice but to use atomic weapons, made the risk of a nuclear war very high. By exposing the disadvantages of U.S. reliance on nuclear deterrence and emphasizing the need for conventional forces to deal with situations short of total war, this paper argues, this episode highlighted the flaws of the New Look national security policy of the Eisenhower administration. The evidence available so far suggests that China did not plan an invasion of the offshore islands and that the Chinese decision to deescalate was not in response to U.S. deterrence signals. This episode, therefore, cannot be treated as a case of American deterrence of a Chinese invasion. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles played the key role in the administration's handling of the crisis. Above all, the crisis highlighted the folly of letting the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek determine U.S. policy on the basis of Nationalist priorities. As a consequence, U.S. policy toward East Asia underwent a major change. The United States began to distance itself publicly from Chiang's ambitions for a return to the Chinese mainland. Washington also prevailed on Chiang to formally renounce the use of force in his plans for returning to the mainland. The threat to the PRC from its southern flank thus ended for the first time since its birth. By transforming the U.S.-ROC equation, this crisis ultimately worked to China's advantage.

The trap in which the United States found itself in the fall of 1958 was largely of its own making. By the time the first crisis in this area ended in April 1955, the views underpinning U.S. policy in the crisis,