

Diplomatic Coercion: Eisenhower, Chiang Kai-shek, and the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement

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When President Dwight D. Eisenhower entered office on January 20, 1953, he inherited a directionless military commitment to East Asia that was generating an increasingly negative public perception. American progress on the Korean Peninsula had stagnated, and repeated attempts to reach an armistice with the communist belligerents had proven unsuccessful. Eager to expedite progress towards a conclusion to the Korean War, the Eisenhower Administration sought to apply pressure on Communist China by developing Taiwan into an American satellite. Though unwilling to establish a formal military commitment to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, the removal of the U.S. Naval quarantine of Taiwan and the provision of American military support reaffirmed Washington's commitment to the defense of Nationalist China. Through the lens of documented communication between the United States and the Chinese Nationalist government, this paper will analyze the Eisenhower Administration's use of increasingly assertive language and behavior to both support and constrain Nationalist China during the final months of the Korean War. While the Eisenhower Administration publicly promoted the Republic of China as a sovereign partner, it did so only to the extent that it satisfied American objectives. The United States repeatedly used its military aid and support to Taiwan as leverage to privately coerce Chiang and his government into aligning themselves with American interests.¹

Having been elected on a commitment to bring an honorable end to the Korean War, President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower dedicated the months preceding his inauguration to the development of an effective military approach towards East Asia. Eisenhower's visit to the Korean Peninsula in December of 1952 validated his concern that the United States was being drawn into an endless war of attrition with Communist China. Eisenhower wrote that his visit to Korea had persuaded him that American forces "could not stand forever on a static front and continue to accept casualties without any visible results...the United States would have to prepare to break the stalemate."² The result of the President-elect's observations was the creation of an American military strategy emphasizing deterrence as opposed to conventional warfare. By projecting a seeming willingness to expand the conflict beyond Korea, the United States could effectively apply pressure to Communist China and hasten the war's conclusion.³

Eisenhower's pre-inaugural tour of the Korean warfront was in itself a statement of commitment to American success on the peninsula. The President's actions, statements, and behaviors were all components of an elaborate projection of what would be his Administration's approach towards the Korean War. In an interview with reporters following his return from Korea, Eisenhower publicly communicated the United States' military readiness, saying, "We face an enemy...whom we cannot hope to impress by words, however eloquent, but only by deeds—executed under circumstances of our own choosing."⁴ The President-elect's comment was not a political talking point; it was a premeditated statement of his intentions to the government of Communist China. Eisenhower's verbal military threats soon translated into actions with his inauguration on January 20, 1953. Reversing the policies of the previous administration, President Eisenhower lifted the neutralization of the Taiwan Strait, threatening the creation of a second warfront for Communist China. The Eisenhower Administration utilized Taiwan as a mechanism to expand the Sino-American confrontation and induce pressure upon Communist China to agree to an armistice.⁵

While the deneutralization of the Taiwan Strait was a means to threaten Communist China, it facilitated the creation of a military relationship between the United States and the nationalist government of Taiwan. President Eisenhower's State of the Union address on February 2, 1953 publicly endorsed Chiang Kai-shek's government and permitted the Republic of China to re-enter the international community. Speaking before the American Congress, Eisenhower rescinded neutralization saying, "In June of 1950, the United States Seventh Fleet was instructed both to prevent attack upon Formosa and also to insure that Formosa should not be used as a base of operations against the Chinese Communist mainland...I am, therefore, issuing instructions that the Seventh Fleet no longer be employed to shield Communist China."⁶ While the President's speech certainly condemned Communist China's involvement in Korea, it also underscored the United States Navy's existing charge to protect the island of Taiwan. The Eisenhower Administration's partial revision of the Seventh Fleet's mission in the Taiwan Strait was intentionally ambiguous.

¹ Edward H. Judge and John W. Langdon, *The Cold War: A Global History With Documents*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2011), 95-99.

² Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956: The White House Years* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1963), 91-95.

³ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 148-180.

⁴ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956*, 96-108.

⁵ Hugh Deane, *The Korean War* (San Francisco: China Books & Periodicals, Inc., 1999), 132-151.

⁶ Message from the President to the Congress, Feb. 2, 1953, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-54* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), 14:140-141.

While it asserted no direct military threat towards the Communist mainland, it did remove a preexisting assurance of security along the Strait.

The deneutralization of the Taiwan Strait publicly reaffirmed the United States' military commitment to the defense of Taiwan. While President Eisenhower's address failed to include any formal military commitment to Chiang Kai-shek's government, the removal of a U.S. Naval quarantine of Formosa did provide Nationalist China with a new degree of state autonomy. Having been largely ignored by the United States during the Truman Administration, Chiang welcomed President Eisenhower's decision calling it, "a judicious step of great moral significance" and further expressed his hope that deneutralization would be followed by closer "organized cooperation" between the governments of Nationalist China and the United States.⁷ Though Eisenhower and Chiang were in agreement that suffocating Communist China was beneficial to global interests, they each desired distinctly different outcomes. The United States sought to apply pressure to Communist China as a means to generate peace, while Nationalist China saw it as an invitation to initiate its long-planned re-conquest of the mainland. Deneutralization of the Taiwan Strait and the establishment of military coordination with the Chinese Nationalist government were events central to the broader American objective of exerting pressure upon the Communist mainland.

While Chiang Kai-shek and his government interpreted the deneutralization of the Taiwan Strait as the creation of a diplomatic partnership with the United States, the Eisenhower Administration understood it as a political transaction that purchased Chinese cooperation. Washington acted quickly to assert its involvement in Chinese affairs under the guise of military coordination. In what began as a congratulatory letter to Chiang's military leadership regarding Washington's newfound relationship with Taiwan, General William Chase asserted American interests and expectations requesting that Nationalist China "make no significant attacks on Communist-held territory" without first consulting the United States. General Chase's letter concluded with an urgent request that "plans be made at once to increase the frequency of raids...to obtain prisoners and worry and confuse the Communist coastal defenses."⁸ The United States' interaction with Chiang's government following deneutralization was not that of a mutual partnership between two allied nations. The American requests of Nationalist China displayed an expectation of fealty rather than of mutual cooperation. While deneutralization had returned sovereignty to Nationalist China, it awarded far more control of Taiwan to Washington than it did to Chiang Kai-shek or his government.

Though the Eisenhower Administration positioned its involvement with Taiwan as a weapon against Communist China, it resisted the establishment of a formal military commitment with Chiang or his government. The Eisenhower Administration had been very careful to avoid any binding pledges to American intervention in the Taiwan Strait and it intended to maintain the political flexibility granted by an ambiguous military commitment. At an ambassadorial meeting with the Republic of China on March 19, 1953, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles fielded Nationalist China's request for the creation of a mutual security pact with the United States. Communicating the Eisenhower Administration's hesitation, Secretary Dulles stated that "the United States would not want to make a treaty which would result in a commitment for the United States to go to war on the mainland."⁹ The maintenance of an ambiguous commitment satisfied President Eisenhower's objectives while a formal agreement would threaten the Administration's ability to detach itself from a situation that was potentially unproductive to American interests. A formal military commitment would have undermined the Eisenhower Administration's exploitation of the strategic advantage granted them by militarizing Taiwan.

Seeking to maintain diplomatic flexibility in its relationship with Taiwan, it was essential that the Eisenhower Administration manage the allocation of military aid to Nationalist China in a manner conducive to American objectives. The same distrust that prevented the Eisenhower Administration from committing to a formal military agreement with Chiang Kai-shek also influenced the United States' policy of militarizing Taiwan. At a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on March 27, 1953, the American military leadership discussed the diplomatic risks associated with providing military equipment to Nationalist China. With a delivery of long range bombers en route to Taiwan, the United States was directly providing Chiang with what General James Collins called "offensive capability in the form of jet aircraft."¹⁰ The question now before the Joint Chiefs was whether the United States was "prepared to defend Formosa against Chinese Communist attack if the attack was in response to Chinese Nationalist action."¹¹ The consensus of the meeting was that the solution to the problem lay in the provision of the aid itself. Because Nationalist China was dependent on American military assistance, the United States could maintain "control over Chiang Kai-shek by

⁷ Rankin to Dulles, Feb. 1, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:135-136.

⁸ Chase to Chow, Feb. 5, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:136-137.

⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, Dulles to Koo, Mar. 19, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:157-160.

¹⁰ Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion, Collins to Department of State – Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, Mar. 27, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:164-169.

¹¹ Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion, Vandenberg to DOS – JCS Meeting, in *Ibid.*

reason of the paucity of his capabilities.”¹² The United States used its military aid and support to Taiwan as leverage to coerce Chiang and his government into aligning themselves with American interests.

While militarizing Chiang’s Nationalist government was necessary to the Eisenhower Administration’s application of pressure to Communist China, maintaining control over the equipment’s use was essential. Given that both the United States and the Republic of China pursued different outcomes, the Eisenhower Administration was justifiably concerned with how Chiang would allocate American military aid. This concern was communicated to Secretary Dulles in a letter from the Joint Chiefs on March 31, 1953 stating, “Chiang Kai-shek will be very unhappy if an armistice is achieved in Korea: he wants to broaden the conflict, not end it. He may well be tempted to undertake some adventures with his F-84’s either with or without a deliberate intention of involving the US in a broader war with Communist China.”¹³ Chiang’s unpredictability now posed a diplomatic challenge to the Eisenhower Administration. While the success of American interests required the United States to support Nationalist China militarily, it also necessitated a private constraint of Chiang’s aggressive behavior. The result was the creation of a diplomatic policy that utilized American military aid as a form of diplomatic currency. While the Eisenhower Administration had publicly promoted the Republic of China as an independent partner, it simultaneously restrained the Nationalist government from engaging in aggressive and potentially compromising military ventures by repeatedly threatening to withhold military assistance.

Recognizing the risks associated with providing offensive capability to Nationalist China, the Eisenhower Administration used its military aid and support to Taiwan as leverage to coerce Chiang and his government into aligning themselves with American interests. At a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on April 8, 1953, President Eisenhower ordered the delivery of all shipments of American jet aircraft to be halted until Chiang agreed to what the President called, “a commitment to play ball with the United States.”¹⁴ The Eisenhower Administration issued Chiang a formal ultimatum on April 17, 1953 stating, “Chinese Nationalist forces will not engage in offensive operations considered by the United States to be inimical to the best interests of the United States...Jet aircraft now scheduled early delivery Formosa cannot be delivered until commitment obtained.”¹⁵ The Eisenhower Administration’s experiment in diplomatic extortion proved successful. On April 23, 1953, the United States received a formal commitment from Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist government agreeing to American terms. With the receipt of Chiang’s agreement in hand, the United States resumed delivery of military aid to Taiwan, and so continued its application of pressure upon the Communist mainland. The United States’ restraint of Chiang Kai-shek was an overt demonstration of the Eisenhower Administration’s turn to “heavy-handed” diplomacy. The mutual partnership forged from deneutralization was exposed as nothing more than a façade.¹⁶

As diplomatic talks between the United States and Communist China had resumed by June of 1953, the creation of an armistice in Korea appeared to be increasingly probable. The Eisenhower Administration tactfully employed Nationalist China as a threat to the Communist mainland and was successful in preserving American interests. At a meeting to determine the nature of Sino-American cooperation post-Korean War, Chiang Kai-shek expressed his frustration to American military personnel saying, “The strategic and political importance of China in the Free World struggle against Communism was still being overlooked in the United States.” He further expressed his hope that the United States “would recognize this principle in developing a positive policy towards the Far East.”¹⁷ When the Korean War ended with the Panmunjom Armistice on July 27, 1953, the United States had established a sustainable presence throughout East Asia. While the Republic of China had been a beneficiary of American military aid, the Eisenhower Administration prioritized American objectives at the expense of Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist government.

The Eisenhower Administration’s implementation of an increasingly assertive posture towards East Asia signaled a dramatic shift in the direction of American foreign policy. The deneutralization of the Taiwan Strait and the establishment of military coordination with the Chinese Nationalist government were essential investments towards achieving the broader American objective of applying pressure on the Communist mainland. Though the Eisenhower Administration publicly promoted the Republic of China as a sovereign partner, it simultaneously restrained Chiang’s military capabilities within the confines of diplomatic negotiations. The United States repeatedly used its military aid and support to Taiwan as leverage to privately coerce Chiang and his government into aligning themselves with American interests. President Eisenhower’s effective use of public hostility and private restraint in the final months of the Korean War introduced what would eventually become American Cold War strategy, with emphasis being placed on military deterrence as opposed to conventional warfare.

¹² Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion, Fechteler to DOS – JCS Meeting, in *Ibid.*

¹³ Matthews to Dulles, Mar. 31, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:169-170.

¹⁴ Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion, Eisenhower to National Security Council, Apr. 8, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:180-183.

¹⁵ Dulles to Rankin, Apr. 17, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:191-192.

¹⁶ Jones to the Department of State, Apr. 23, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:193-194.

¹⁷ Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion, Chiang to Radford, Jun. 18, 1953, in *FRUS 1952-54*, 14:205-210.