

US planned nuclear attack on Chinese cities in 1958 Taiwan crisis

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Daniel Ellsberg, the US nuclear strategist who leaked the Pentagon papers, has published classified documents making clear that US generals were aggressively pushing for a nuclear attack on Chinese cities in 1958.

In order to maintain control over two tiny islets, Quemoy and Matsu, just kilometres off the coast of China, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff were prepared to carry out nuclear attacks against major Chinese cities, including Shanghai, and to accept the consequences of nuclear retaliation by the Soviet Union against Taiwan, Japan and the United States, leading to the deaths of millions.

These documents are so explosive that the United States government sought to keep them from public view for six decades. They have been revealed only because Ellsberg—who copied them alongside the Pentagon Papers, which exposed the motives behind the US war in Vietnam—is risking prosecution under the Espionage act to make them known.

During the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958, Pentagon war planners believed that the islets of Quemoy and Matsu, a few kilometres from China's coast, were indefensible with conventional weapons. "The entire military establishment assumed more and more that nuclear weapons would be used in the event of hostilities," noted the documents released by Ellsberg.

"Atomic weapons would be employed by the United States and probably by the enemy," Pentagon planners noted, and "authority to attack targets on the Chinese mainland would be granted."

There would be "atomic weapons strikes by both sides" based on the premise that the "use of atomic weapons was inevitable."

The US high command pushed aggressively for the immediate use of nuclear weapons against a Chinese offensive against the islands, while asserting that US war aims would include the "destruction of Chinese Communist war-making capability."

The United States "would have no alternative but to conduct nuclear strikes deep into China as far north as Shanghai," military planners declared. This would "almost certainly involve nuclear retaliation against Taiwan and possibly against Okinawa" in Japan, as well as potentially the US mainland.

The 1958 fighting between Taiwan and China was a continuation of the Chinese Civil War that brought the Chinese Communist Party to power in 1949 and forced the Kuomintang, under Chiang Kai-shek, to flee to Taiwan.

The United States never reconciled itself to the "loss" of China as a result of the Chinese Revolution, which was seen as a devastating blow to US global domination.

With US backing, the Nationalists established a military dictatorship on Taiwan, planned to invade the mainland and continued to claim

sovereignty over all of China. Taipei's territorial claims received recognition as such from Washington, and the Taiwan regime even kept China's seat in the UN Security Council, complete with its veto power.

The First and Second Taiwanese Strait crises took place only one and five years respectively after the end of the Korean War, which was launched by the US and its puppet state in South Korea in an effort to overthrow the Soviet-aligned government in Pyongyang while threatening Beijing. Once Chinese troops came to the aid of North Korea, General Douglas MacArthur argued for atomic bombs to be dropped on China, which was averted only when he was removed as US commander in chief in Korea.

Ultimately, the US plans for nuclear war against China in 1958 were never tested because China broke off attempts to regain the islets controlled by the US-backed Kuomintang dictatorship on Taiwan.

Commenting on what is contained in the documents, Ellsberg observed,

"Christian Herter, who succeeded John Foster Dulles as Secretary of State, was reported to have said later, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis is often described as the first serious nuclear crisis; those of us who lived through the Quemoy crisis definitely regarded that as the first serious nuclear crisis.'"

Despite the explosive and highly significant nature of the documents, they have not been reported in the US press, with the exception of the *New York Times* article in which Ellsberg explained why he published them.

Ellsberg has published these 63-year-old documents as a warning. As the United States moves to strengthen ties with Taiwan and de facto recognize Taiwanese independence—the geopolitical setup that created the second Taiwan straits crisis—it must inevitably follow that the United States is once again preparing to fight a nuclear war with China.

Noting the "shallow" and "reckless" character of the 1958 discussions over the use of nuclear weapons over Quemoy and Matsu, Ellsberg warned, "I do not believe the participants were more stupid or thoughtless than those in between or in the current cabinet."

In other words, the same murderous mindset that led the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1958 to demand that President Dwight D. Eisenhower authorize immediate nuclear retaliation against a conventional assault by China on tiny islets off its coast exists today within the top brass, whose trigger fingers are even more itchy to test out new "tactical"

nuclear weapons at their disposal.

In March, Navy Admiral Philip Davidson, head of the Indo-Pacific Command, said the timetable for a US conflict with China over the Taiwan strait “is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years.”

“We absolutely must be prepared to fight and win should competition turn to conflict,” Davidson said.

In the months since the inauguration of Joe Biden, the United States has carried out the most sweeping change to its relationship with Taiwan since the adoption of the One China policy in 1978.

Biden is the first American president since 1978 to host Taiwan’s ambassador at his inauguration. Then, last month, the White House announced it was ending limitations on official US government contacts with the Taiwanese government, in what commentators argued was the effective end of the One China policy.

In February, Biden convened a panel of defence officials to reevaluate US policy toward China, which has until next month to issue its findings. Speculation is rife that the Biden administration will formally abandon the decades-long US policy known as “strategic ambiguity” in relation to Taiwan—the position that has underpinned the One China policy.

In establishing diplomatic relations with China in 1979, Washington de facto accepted Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan, while suggesting that it could come to Taiwan’s aid in the event of a war with China. If “strategic ambiguity” is replaced by an explicit pledge to defend Taiwan in a conflict with China, it will only encourage Taiwan to declare formal independence from China—a move that Beijing has declared it would oppose with military action.

In other words, by undermining the One China policy and encouraging Taiwanese separatism, Washington is creating the conditions for a war between the United States and China, the two largest global economic powers.

The United States has abandoned the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and is in active discussions with the governments of Taiwan and Japan on stationing offensive weapons capable of striking the Chinese mainland.

In order to fund its “Pacific Deterrence Initiative,” the Pentagon has requested the doubling of its budget for the Indo-Pacific region, while the Biden administration has proposed the largest military budget in US history.

But wars are not fought through weapons alone. There must be a *casus belli*—a justification to sell a predatory war to the public. The United States media and political establishment is busy manufacturing a *casus belli*, centered at present on the claim that COVID-19 is a biological weapon manufactured by China.

Last year, the Trump administration’s trade adviser Peter Navarro, author of a 2006 book titled *The Coming China Wars*, charged that COVID-19 is a “weaponized virus” that was “spawned” by the Chinese Communist Party.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time,

These allegations have a definite logic. If the Chinese government deliberately allowed and encouraged the coronavirus to infect the United States and Europe, this would be an act of biological warfare that goes far beyond the terrorist attacks of September 11. It would mean that China had carried out an act of war against the United States.

With unbridled recklessness, in order to justify its own criminal indifference to the lives of millions of people, the Trump administration is setting up a situation that can make military confrontation with China unavoidable.

At the time, this conspiracy theory, with no scientific basis whatsoever, was rejected by significant sections of the Democratic Party and major news outlets. But over the past week, the Wuhan Lab conspiracy theory has been openly embraced by all of the broadcast news networks, the White House, and even Dr. Anthony Fauci, who previously condemned it. On Monday, Fauci declared, “I am not convinced” about a natural origin of the disease.

Under the Trump administration, US imperialism carried out a strategic reorientation of its military policy. The Pentagon declared that “Great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security.” The Trump White House left the Intermediate Range Nuclear forces treaty, and began to “decouple” the US economy from China.

Biden has intensified this build-up toward conflict with China, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken declaring that “China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to challenge the United States.”

Washington’s war plans against China are rooted in the decades-long crisis of US imperialism. With its share of global economic output declining year after year, the United States sees military force and intimidation as the only means of ensuring its continued global supremacy. The use of military force against China—including the use of nuclear weapons—is embedded in the logic of capitalist geopolitics.

But this does not mean war is inevitable. In 1917, after four years of slaughter that led to the deaths of over 20 million people, the working class of Russia intervened to stop World War I by overthrowing the Tsarist autocracy and the capitalist order that it defended.

This once again is the only alternative to a new and far more catastrophic world war. If war is to be avoided, the working class must intervene on the basis of a socialist program aimed at uniting its forces across the globe in a struggle to put an end to capitalism.



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