

Morton Halperin Looks Back on His Taiwan Strait Crisis Study

Q&A with the National Security Archive on Halperin's January 1966 RAND paper

National Security Archive: Does this study remain relevant to the current tensions over Taiwan?

MH: The study is relevant to the current tensions over Taiwan since the ambiguity in the American commitment to the security of Taiwan continues to this day. In 1958 the United States felt it had a choice as to whether to help Taiwan defend Quemoy. Eisenhower made the decision to do so without consulting Congress or the public and appeared to be ready to use nuclear weapons. The offshore islands all remain under the control of Taiwan and the PRC might well begin its offensive by seizing the islands.

National Security Archive: When you wrote this study, what were your impressions of U.S. nuclear war plans for conflicts with China? How dangerous did you think they were?

MH: It is worth noting that the Air Force historian arranged for me to be treated as if I was an Air Force researcher and not a contractor, which gave me unusual access to internal Air Force and JCS documents both in the Pentagon and at CINCPAC in Hawaii. I also visited Quemoy and got to see for myself how close it is to the mainland.

In my view, the most illuminating part of the unredacted study is its description of the role that nuclear weapons played in the Eisenhower Administration's military posture. As the documents I cite and quote make clear, the Administration labeled nuclear weapons as "conventional" weapons, and what we know as "conventional" weapons were called "obsolete iron bombs." U.S. military forces including those engaged in the Taiwan Straits were equipped and trained only to fight a nuclear war and had nuclear weapons on board and ready. As the Joint Chiefs kept reminding the President, they could only fight for a few hours without using nuclear weapons.

The JCS told the President that if the PRC launched an invasion of Quemoy, the US needed to intervene immediately or the island, very close to the mainland, would fall. Eisenhower authorized the military to resist an invasion but not to use nuclear weapons without his permission. They reminded him again that once they started fighting they would quickly run out of "obsolete iron bombs" and need to use nuclear weapons.

Only the decision of the PRC to curtail the bombardment of the islands and not to invade prevented a nuclear war. We still are not certain why Mao made that decision.

Thus, our nuclear doctrine and war plans were for early mandatory first use. The posture in my view was extraordinarily dangerous. It is critical to understand that these war plans had been fundamentally changed by the time I did the research.

President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had completely altered the policy starting with the labels. Nuclear weapons were once again called "nuclear weapons." Non-nuclear weapons were again called "conventional" weapons. The armed forces were again equipped to fight extended conventional wars. While not ruling out first use, the doctrine called for confronting military threats with the least force necessary to prevail.

National Security Archive: Is there any valid reason for keeping your study classified so many decades later? Or is this an abuse of secrecy?

MH: There was no valid reason to keep any of the study classified when I wrote it and certainly not decades later. RAND as a government contractor has no obligation to produce unclassified versions of the classified studies it does for the government. At my request it did ask the government to do a declassification review which led to the release of all of the study save for the portions dealing with nuclear weapons. RAND was in no position to challenge the decision to keep the nuclear portions secret.

(Interview conducted by William Burr, The National Security Archive, May 26, 2021)