

US military considered using nuclear weapons against China in 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, leaked documents show

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Nationalist Chinese soldiers on Quemoy Island, which became the focus of an artillery bombardment from mainland China in 1958.

Hong Kong (CNN) Military planners in Washington pushed for the White House to prepare plans to use nuclear weapons against mainland China during the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1958, newly leaked documents appear to confirm.

The documents, first reported on by the New York Times Saturday, [reveal](#) the extent of Washington's discussions about using nuclear weapons to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, including the acceptance by some US military leaders of possible retaliatory nuclear strikes on US bases.

The new information was provided to the Times by Daniel Ellsberg, the whistleblower who in 1971 leaked the Pentagon Papers that detailed the [US government's duplicity](#) in its handling of the Vietnam War.

- "US first use of nuclear weapons should not be contemplated, prepared, or threatened anywhere, under any circumstances, including the defense of Taiwan," Ellsberg said in [a post to his Twitter on Sunday](#).

- The Taiwan leak comes from previously classified sections of [a 1966 report by think tank Rand Corporation](#) on the 1958 Taiwan Straits crisis, written by M. H. Halperin for the Office of the then-Assistant Secretary of Defense.

After the Communist Party took power in mainland China in 1949, following a brutal civil war, the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan. But Beijing viewed the island as part of its territory, and the two sides clashed intermittently over the following decades.

The closest the US and China came to armed conflict was during the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1958, when the People's Republic of China fired artillery at Taipei's outlying islands. Washington worried the shelling could be a precursor to [a full invasion](#).



Soldiers stack artillery shells at the seaport on Quemoy Island in 1958 around the time of the Taiwan Strait crisis.

The shelling focused on [the Quemoy and Matsu](#) island groups, which lie between Taiwan and mainland China and are described by Rand Corporation as "the first line of defense" for Taipei.

Although it is [already public knowledge](#) that the Eisenhower administration debated whether to use nuclear weapons to deter China from attacking Taiwan, the documents appear to reveal the extent of the planning for the first time.

According to the leaked documents, some US Defense and State department officials were concerned the loss of the outlying islands in 1958 could lead to a full "Chinese Communist takeover of Taiwan."

In the event of an air and sea attack on the islands, US Air Force Gen. Nathan Twining said the US would have to use nuclear weapons against Chinese air force bases "to prevent a successful air interdiction campaign," beginning with "low-yield ten to fifteen kiloton nuclear weapons."

If this didn't lead to a break in the assault from mainland China, "the United States ... would have no alternative but to conduct nuclear strikes deep into China as far north as Shanghai."

According to the documents, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs acknowledged this would "almost certainly" lead to nuclear retaliation against Taiwan and the US military base at Okinawa in Japan. "But he stressed that if national policy is to defend the offshore islands then the consequences had to be accepted," the document said.

Given China had yet to develop its own nuclear capabilities, any nuclear retaliation would have come from the Soviet Union, possibly sparking an even more devastating global conflict. The report said it isn't clear where the nuclear retaliation would have originated.

The document said the US Joint Chiefs, and Twining in particular, saw the use of atomic weapons as "inevitable." In one section, Gen.

Laurence S. Kuter, the top Air Force commander for the Pacific, "flatly" states that any US air action against a Chinese attack on the outlying islands "had no chance of success unless atomic weapons were used from the outset."

In the end, Eisenhower was hesitant to use nuclear weapons and pushed for the US troops to stick to conventional arms. Joshua Pollack, editor of the Nonproliferation Review, said on Twitter Sunday that the idea the US would have risked a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union over islands with "no military value" was "jarring."

"It's no surprise the White House said no," he said.

A ceasefire was reached in the Taiwan Strait on October 6, 1958, although there have been ongoing tensions between Beijing and Taipei. In January 2019 speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned he would take "all means necessary" and not "renounce the use of force" to rejoin Taiwan to the Chinese mainland.

Beijing claims full sovereignty over Taiwan, a democracy of almost 24 million people located off the southeastern coast of mainland China, even though the two sides have been governed separately for more than seven decades.

With military tensions rising again between the US and China, whistleblower Ellsberg said in his interview with the Times that he had supplied the documents due to his concerns over the possibility of a new war over Taiwan.

- On Sunday, Ellsberg took to Twitter to call for [both sides to exercise restraint](#).

"Note to @JoeBiden: learn from this secret history, and don't repeat this insanity," he said.