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On October 16, 1964 the People's Republic of China (PRC) detonated its first nuclear bomb making China the fifth country in the world to possess nuclear arms. Coming only 14 years after its political birth and less than ten years after officially beginning the endeavor, the PRC's meteoric ascension to nuclear prominence begs the question, "How did they do it?"¹ To begin answering this, one must examine the critical role played by the Soviet Union and their willingness to provide China with the technological means to build a bomb. This paper will focus on this willingness and ask the question, "Why did the Soviets help China build the bomb?"

To best understand how Mao Tse Tung and the PRC were able to coerce nuclear secrets out of the Soviet Union it is important to comprehend why China so desired the bomb. Contrary to Mao's 1946 assertion that the atom bomb was no more than a "paper tiger", he in fact had machinations of obtaining one almost immediately following the atomic strike on Hiroshima in 1945.² These machinations would soon evolve into a full fledged nuclear program inaugurated on 15 January, 1955 under the moniker "Project 02".³ The creation of Project 02 was, in large part, a response to strained U.S.-Sino relations present during the early 1950's.

Approaching the end of 1952, the Korean War had all the makings of a stalemate. As the Eisenhower administration prepared to enter the White House, pressure to end the unpopular war had reached a fever pitch. To this end, President-elect Eisenhower began to implement a nuclear-centric defense policy later known as the "New Look" policy which "called for a strong military posture based on nuclear striking power."⁴ * Although top secret at the time, the Chinese were almost certainly able to ascertain the basics of this policy via both Western media and their own intelligence gathering.⁵ If any doubt remained, it was quickly erased when following Eisenhower's December visit to Korea, word leaked that the "new strategic plan for the conduct

* This policy reflected guidance set forth in NSC 162/12 (*Basic National Security Policy* dated 30 January, 1953)

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of the Korean War [would] exert so much pressure on the Communist forces that the Soviet Union will agree to an armistice.”⁶ Shortly thereafter, Eisenhower himself voiced a similar sentiment during his January 1953 inaugural address.⁷ Most importantly, however, was the reaction of the official Chinese media which reported the intention of the U.S. to “resort to the use of atomic weapons” in order to end the Korean War.⁸ A second and more direct threat of nuclear attack occurred in March 1955 in the midst of the Taiwan Strait Crisis. It is this threat that would ultimately galvanize the PRC in its quest for a nuclear bomb.

The Taiwan Strait Crisis officially began with the shelling of the Nationalist (Taiwan) held island of Quemoy by the People’s Liberation Army on 3 September 1954. The crisis was, in large part, a response to talks between the U.S. and Taiwan regarding a mutual defense treaty. Although not signed until December, the impending treaty was highly publicized and featured visits to Taiwan by multiple high level U.S. officials to include the Secretary of Defense.⁹ In addition to the looming pact, the U.S. had also deployed the Seventh Fleet to the East China Sea along with military advisors to be stationed on multiple offshore islands held by the Nationalists.¹⁰ Many historians assert that the weight of these events and their perceived threat to Chinese security ultimately resulted in the shelling of Quemoy.¹¹ However, this belief was not shared by President Eisenhower who was confident the attacks were simply a precursor to a direct attack on Taiwan.¹²† His confidence would ultimately manifest itself in March 1955 as a direct threat of nuclear attack on China. While the reasoning behind China’s decision to shell the islands is debatable; the results are clear and were immediately seized upon by Mao during Nikita Khrushchev’s first visit to Beijing.

† Eisenhower’s perspective on Chinese intentions was largely disputed by both high ranking U.S. military officials and two separate intelligence reports cited by Lewis and Xue. Lewis and Xue p. 29-31. Further, the Chinese themselves have revealed they had neither the ability nor intention of striking Taiwan directly. Lewis and Xue, p. 29. Chang and Halliday, p. 396.

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The arrival of Khrushchev in Beijing on 29 September, 1954 signaled the official rise of China within the communist sphere of influence.¹³ This ascension was driven in large part by the death of Joseph Stalin; after which, men and ideas began to emerge that were strongly critical of the fallen leader and his policies. Central to some of these ideas was the notion that Stalin had foolishly neglected relations with China. For instance, Khrushchev's Foreign Policy Assistant felt Stalin's conduct of foreign policy was "appalling" adding, "The international situation had become so tense that another turn of the screw might have led to disaster."¹⁴ In an effort to mend these relations, the Kremlin endeavored to treat China as an equal, rather than "junior partner".¹⁵ Demonstrating this, the Soviets secured the Chinese an invitation to the Geneva Conference on Indochina, at which Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov "treated [them] with pointed respect" seeking "to return China to the club of great powers."¹⁶ To this end, Khrushchev's visit to Beijing was largely symbolic of his intent to offer Mao a seat at the table. Mao certainly understood this as he made what appears to be his first request of Khrushchev for assistance with Chinese "nuclear research programs."¹⁷

Although much of the precise language of Mao's request and the negotiations surrounding it is unavailable, it is not difficult to surmise what Mao may have used as leverage. First, as illustrated above, Mao knew that Khrushchev desired to endear both himself and the Soviet Union to China.¹⁸ As stated in his memoirs, Khrushchev felt that "in order to ensure our defenses we had to help develop [their] economy further, especially [their] industry."¹⁹ Next, and perhaps most beneficial to Mao, was the arrival of "three carriers, a cruiser division and three destroyer divisions in the Taiwan Straits" only days after the first bombs fell on Quemoy.²⁰ This show of force by the U.S., in combination with recent nuclear threats in response to the Korean War, certainly gave Mao enough evidence to suggest an impending nuclear attack on

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China.²¹ However, rather than state this directly, Mao conveyed to Khrushchev the impossible notion[‡] that “in the event that the United States used tactical nuclear weapons against the PRC, the Soviet Union should not declare war on America.”²² Shocked by this comment and Mao’s subsequent request for nuclear assistance, Khrushchev immediately refused. However, he must have been aware that Mao’s statement conveyed the fact that if China could not defend itself against America the Soviets would have to, and further, that Mao would use this to his advantage. Confirming this, Mao later proclaimed to his inner circle, “The islands are two batons that keep Khrushchev and Eisenhower dancing.”²³ Next, in response to Khrushchev’s refusal and further suggestion that China did not have the economic resources to build a bomb, Mao reacted “as though his national pride was offended.”²⁴ This negotiation tactic of intimidation through guilt worked flawlessly by placing Khrushchev “on the defensive so that [he was] dealing with the issue of trust” rather than the negotiations at hand.²⁵ Taking the bait, Khrushchev ultimately offered to “assist in building a small atomic reactor” for research and training.²⁶ Unsatisfied with this proposal, Mao resorted to a negotiator’s game of “chicken”[§] by feigning hesitancy towards Khrushchev’s offer with the loaded response, “Let us think it over before making any decisions.”²⁷ In reality, Mao was actually threatening to think over *everything*; thus undermining Khrushchev’s goals. In no uncertain terms, Mao had quite convincingly shifted the Soviet’s BATNA^{**} in his favor. Throughout his talks with Khrushchev, Mao had masterfully conveyed his capabilities and their possible impact on the Soviet Union. At

[‡] The 1950 Sino-Soviet “Treaty of Friendship” pledged Soviet military protection to China in the event of “aggression on the part of Japan or any other state that may collaborate in any way with Japan in acts of aggression” thus fundamentally assuring China protection from the United States. Westad, p. 11.

[§] “Chicken” is a negotiation tactic defined as “A large bluff with a threatened action to force the other party to chicken out.” Lewicki, Barry, Saunders, p. 52.

^{**} Best Alternative To A Negotiated Agreement (BATNA)

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the forefront of these capabilities was China's ability and willingness to pull the Soviet Union into a nuclear confrontation with the U.S.

Following Khrushchev's visit to Beijing, and with no firm nuclear commitment from the Soviet's, the Taiwan Strait Crisis continued to escalate. On 2 December 1954 the long anticipated U.S-Taiwan defense pact was signed, followed shortly thereafter by the Chinese attack and seizure of the island of Ichiang in January. Whether this and other attacks were a reaction to the signing of the defense pact or designed "to nudge America into threatening to use nuclear weapons" is somewhat inconsequential, for the result was the same.²⁸ At a March press conference in regards to the crisis, President Eisenhower commented that he saw no difference in using nuclear weapons "just exactly as you would a bullet or anything else."²⁹ Eisenhower had now handed Mao the leverage he would need to *fully* convince Khrushchev that his "new" BATNA was almost certainly nuclear war with America unless the Soviets began in earnest helping China acquire the bomb.^{††} Perhaps not coincidentally, on 27 April, 1955 a Sino-Soviet accord was signed stating "an agreement on Soviet assistance to China for research on nuclear physics...including the supply of a nuclear reactor and a cyclotron."³⁰

In conclusion, I believe there was never a true willingness on the part of the Soviet Union to assist China in building the bomb. However, by capitalizing on the nationalistic goals of the Soviets while at the same time understanding and anticipating the actions of the United States, Mao Tse-Tung was able to manipulate his communist master. Mao's greatest negotiation leverage came not from his own arsenal but from that of the U.S. The Eisenhower administration contributed nearly as much to the Chinese nuclear program in the form of threatening rhetoric as the Soviet's did in material. The administration's "New Look" defense

^{††} Reports of some Soviet assistance in the nuclear field are confirmed to have begun as far back as January 1955. On 17 January, 1955, the Soviet Union announced it would "help [China] promote research into peaceful uses of atomic energy." Lewis and Xue, p. 41.

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policies, largely in response to a war-weary public hesitant to sacrifice any more blood and treasure, unknowingly undermined the efforts of our then greatest enemy to limit the spread of nuclear weapons.

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- ¹ Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army*, 151.
- ² Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 265 n. 91. Chang 374
- ³ Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army*, 151.
- ⁴ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 17.
- ⁵ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 17, n. 26.
- ⁶ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 13.
- ⁷ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 14.
- ⁸ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 14.
- ⁹ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 21.
- ¹⁰ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 25.
- ¹¹ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 25.
- ¹² Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 29.
- ¹³ Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 396.
- ¹⁴ Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, 243.
- ¹⁵ Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, 110.
- ¹⁶ Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, 111.
- ¹⁷ Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance 1945-1963*, 16.
- ¹⁸ Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 396.
- ¹⁹ Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Statesman, 1953-1964*, 421.
- ²⁰ Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army*, 150.
- ²¹ Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army*, 150. Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 396.
- ²² Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, 137.
- ²³ Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, 137.
- ²⁴ Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 397.
- ²⁵ Lewicki, Barry, Saunders, 53.
- ²⁶ Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance 1945-1963*, 206.
- ²⁷ Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance 1945-1963*, 206.
- ²⁸ Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 397.
- ²⁹ Chang, *To the Nuclear Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis*, 108.
- ³⁰ Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, n. 41.

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