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The Taiwan nuclear powder keg: A new Cuban Missile Crisis?

October 12, 2021 Dr. [Peter Vincent Pry](#)



—“As Somebody who is cognizant of the evidence at all classification levels, cognizant of what’s going on in our exercises...I believe the light is blinking red.” Lt. Gen. S. Clinton Hinote

—“Now the international situation has changed dramatically...In order to protect the peaceful rise of our country, it is necessary to make limited adjustments to our nuclear policy.” Unofficial People’s Liberation Army Website

As the 59th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis approaches on October 16th, it may be useful to reflect and consider some strategic similarities, and dissimilarities, between the U.S.-USSR nuclear confrontation over Cuba in 1962,

and the present China-U.S. confrontation over Taiwan, that many fear could escalate into a nuclear World War III.

Cuba and Taiwan: Superpower Confrontation

Ideologically, the takeover of Cuba by communist revolutionary Fidel Castro in 1959 was perceived in Washington to be a serious blow to the credibility of the U.S. and the Free World in their Cold War struggle against Soviet communism. Cuba, a free enterprise “wild west” for U.S. corporations, and in America’s own backyard, had thrown off “the shackles of capitalism” to go communist.

Today, Taiwan is literally and figuratively an island of political and economic freedom, a prosperous rebuke to communist totalitarianism, in China’s own backyard.

Far worse from Beijing’s perspective, the government of Taiwan is descended from anti-communists who lost the civil war to control mainland China in 1949. Taiwan’s government calls itself the “Republic of China” because they still consider themselves the legitimate rulers of the mainland, in exile.

The “People’s Republic of China,” as communist China calls itself, regards Taiwan’s “Republic of China” as illegitimate, an unconquered pocket of rebellion, in illegal occupation of communist China’s island territory of Taiwan.

Worst of all from Beijing’s perspective, Taiwan’s government poses an existential threat to communist China. Taiwan could foment revolution, or someday return from exile with the backing of the U.S. and allies to take over control of the mainland, or so a paranoid Beijing fears.

Consequently, China’s ideological and political interests in conquering Taiwan are far greater than U.S. interests were or are in ousting communism from Cuba.

Yet the U.S. did covertly invade Cuba, in the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs operation, run by the CIA using an army of Cuban exiles, unsupported by the U.S. military, so Washington could avoid looking like an “imperialist” power.

Communist China has no qualms about breaking international law or making overt military threats to conquer Taiwan. China has been constrained from

doing so for decades only because of their insufficient military capabilities and fear of U.S. intervention.

Cuba and Taiwan: Nuclear Flashpoints

Geostrategically, Cuba and Taiwan are in analogous situations, island nations next door to military superpowers, indefensible without a superpower friend.

In 1962, Cuba's superpower friend was the USSR. But even the USSR could not project enough naval strength across the Atlantic to defend Cuba from the United States.

So Moscow protected Cuba with extended nuclear deterrence, including by basing nuclear missiles in Cuba—which also greatly increased the USSR's capability to launch a surprise nuclear attack against the U.S.

So began the Cuban missile crisis (16 October – 20 November 1962), resolved by the USSR's humiliating withdrawal of nuclear missiles from Cuba—compelled by the U.S. having a 5-to-1 advantage in ICBMs and vast superiority in strategic nuclear bombers.

President Kennedy also secretly agreed to withdraw U.S. obsolete Jupiter missiles from Turkey. That the Soviets accepted international humiliation and kept this part of the deal secret testifies to the bargaining leverage afforded by superior U.S. nuclear firepower in 1962.

Consequences of U.S. Military and Nuclear Decline

Today, if China attempts to conquer Taiwan, it will be the U.S., like the USSR in 1962, that will be militarily disadvantaged.

The Pentagon's own wargames show the U.S. losing to China in a conflict over Taiwan.

The Defense Department's Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategy, Integration, and Requirements, Lt. General Sam Hinote, warned recently: "As Somebody who is cognizant of the evidence at all classification levels, cognizant of what's going on in our exercises...I believe the light is blinking red...Why? Because it used to be that when we did future war games, we were having trouble when we set the war game 5, 10, 15 years out into the future...But what has changed since the last

time we sat in this building two years ago, is that it's not a future problem...It is a current problem...We are out of time."

Like the U.S. in 1962, China may soon, if not already, dominate the nuclear balance.

U.S. STRATCOM Commander, Admiral Charles Richard, as reported by Bill Gertz in the Washington Times (12 August 2021), warns China is building silos for "350-400 new long-range missiles" like the DF-41 ICBM, that carries 10 warheads. Consequently: "If 10 warheads are deployed on the DF-41s, China's warhead level will increase to 4,000 warheads on the DF-41 alone."

4,000 DF-41 ICBM warheads alone would give China a 10-to-1 advantage over the United States' 400 ICBM warheads, and nearly a 3-to-1 advantage over the 1,400 operationally deployed U.S. strategic nuclear weapons on all ICBMs, SLBMs, and bombers.

China already has a nuclear first-strike capability against the U.S. 400 ICBM silos, 3 bomber bases, 2 SSBN ports, and C3I targets comprising the U.S. nuclear deterrent. China's existing DF-41 ICBMs have enough warheads with yield/accuracy combinations capable of achieving 90% single-shot-kill-probability against the hardest U.S. targets.

Dr. Mark Schneider, a former senior Defense Department official and prominent nuclear strategist, in his excellent article "The Chinese Nuclear Breakout and the Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review" (Real Clear Defense 28 August 2021), makes a compelling case that U.S. ICBMs and SLBMs lack yield/accuracy sufficient to destroy China's hardest targets, including ICBM silos that may be hardened to 30,000 psi (U.S. ICBM silos are hardened to 2,000 psi).

Moreover, U.S. retaliatory capabilities against counterforce targets in China—including ICBM silos, missile tunnels, mobile missiles, bomber and SSBN bases, C3I bunkers, and the 5,000 kilometers long "Underground Great Wall"—are grossly inadequate.

China, Russia, North Korea: Nuclear Triad

China's race toward nuclear domination of the U.S. probably accounts for why Beijing appears to have retracted its nuclear "No First Use" pledge.

Recently, China threatened a nuclear first strike against Australia for buying U.S. nuclear-powered (not nuclear-armed) submarines.

In July, an “unofficial” website (Xigua Video) affiliated with the People’s Liberation Army threatened:

—*“Now the international situation has changed dramatically...In order to protect the peaceful rise of our country, it is necessary to make limited adjustments to our nuclear policy.”*

—*“When we liberate Taiwan, if Japan dares to intervene by force, even if it deploys only one soldier, one plane and one ship..we will use nuclear bombs first. We will use nuclear bombs continuously until Japan declares unconditional surrender for the second time.”*

—*“We’ll join force with Russia and North Korea [to] shoot together to hit the Japanese mainland thoroughly and in full depth.”*

—*“After defeating Japan, we must take more severe measures than in World War II to partition Japan...by dividing the four Japanese islands into four independent states...China and Russia should each formulate its own Peace Constitution, and each of the four countries should be placed under the administration of China and Russia, with China and Russia stationing troops.”*

Victorious in a nuclear war over Taiwan, would China be more merciful to its chief opponent, the United States, than to Japan? In the above, substitute “Japan” with the “United States” for the “unofficial” PLA vision of the post-war.

Russia and North Korea have made no official denial that they would join with China in a nuclear war against the United States. Indeed, China, Russia, and North Korea are strategic partners. China and Russia have conducted major military exercises together, including at least one strategic forces exercise postulating a nuclear war with the U.S. over Taiwan.

In 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy did not face a coalition of three nuclear powers.

China’s most compelling reason for conquering Taiwan is for ownership of the future—and this probably makes war inevitable. China needs Taiwan as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” to defend itself and to dominate the South China Sea

and the Pacific. No empire aspiring to world dominance will tolerate a rival in their own backyard.

What Is To Be Done?

Given rapidly growing nuclear threats from China, Russia, North Korea and the proximity of nuclear confrontation over Taiwan, the Biden Administration's failure to publicly spurn Democrats calling for unilaterally banning U.S. ICBMs, banning SLCMs, deep reductions in nuclear weapons, Minimum Deterrence, a U.S. "No First Use Pledge" etc., is suicidal.

Not only are these anti-nuclear policies irrational, but their vociferous proposal risks "sending the wrong message" to China, Russia, and North Korea at a perilous time. Their message of weakness, combined with the Afghanistan debacle, is far worse than Secretary of State Dean Acheson's "wrong message" in 1950 that helped start the Korean War.

What is needed is another President John F. Kennedy or President Ronald Reagan, who invested in "Peace Through Strength" by building a nuclear deterrent "second to none," and who understood weakness is an invitation to World War III. President Biden has an opportunity to follow their good example in the Nuclear Posture Review and by greatly accelerating and expanding U.S. nuclear deterrent modernization.

Nuclear strength enabled President Kennedy to win the Cuban missile crisis without war. Nuclear strength enabled President Reagan to win the Cold War peacefully.

U.S. nuclear inferiority will be tantamount to surrender in the New Cold War.

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