



522 FIFTH AVENUE

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## TENSION OFF THE CHINA COAST

A Letter from A. Doak Barnett

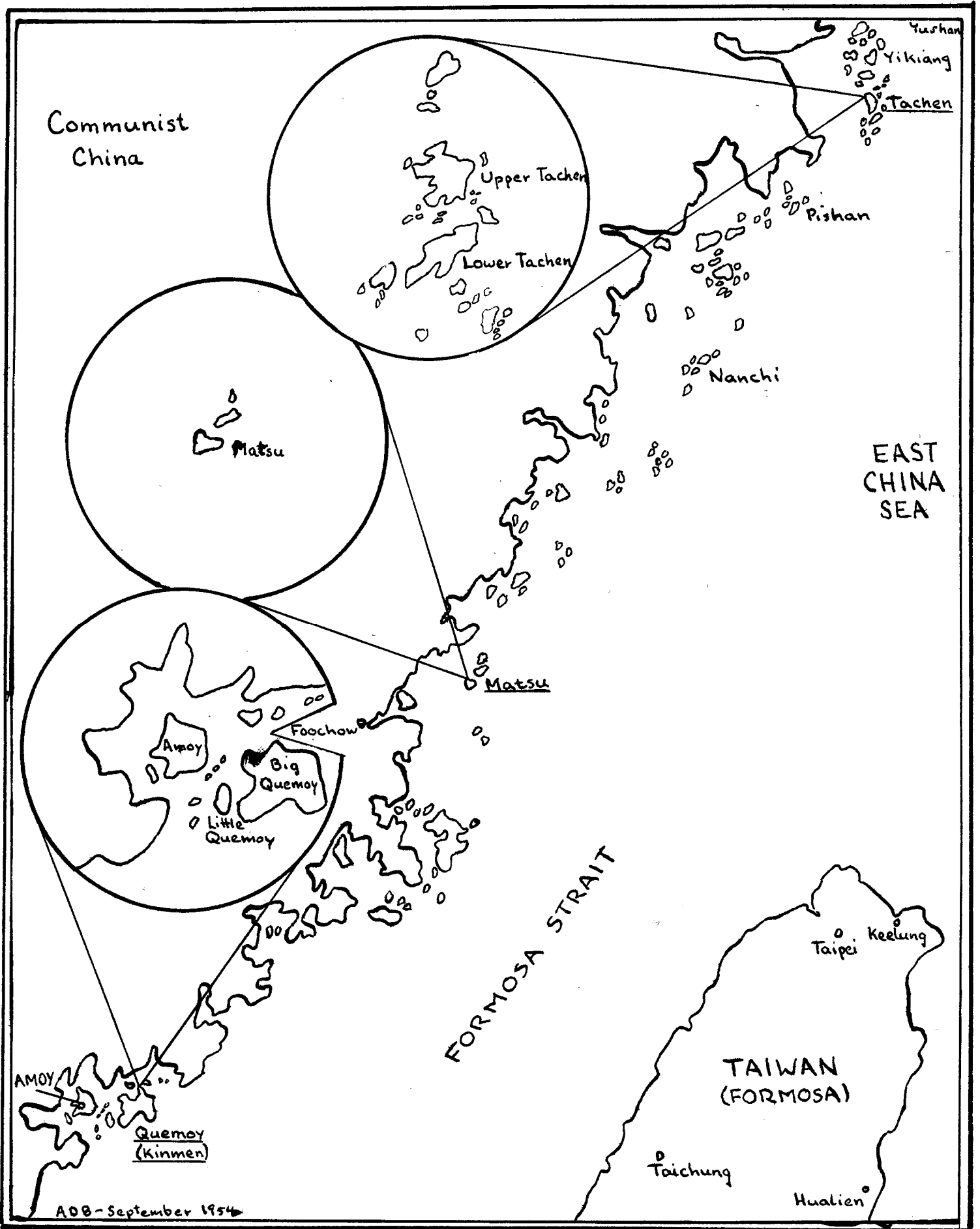
Taipei, Taiwan  
October 1, 1954

The cold war is being fought with live ammunition off the China coast., From Chekiang to Kwangtung, a distance of over 500 miles, there is an atmosphere of 'wartime tension which periodically flares into open conflict. This is the region of the Formosa Strait, which separates two protagonists dedicated to mutual destruction. On one side of the Strait is Communist China, the strongest power in Asia, which since September has been reiterating its long-standing threat to "liberate" Formosa (Taiwan). On the other is Nationalist China, bolstered in its Formosa refuge by U.S. aid and strong commitments of American help in its defense, which continues to talk of return to the mainland.

The focus of tension between these combatants at present is a scattered chain of rocky little islands off the mainland coast. About 35 of the islands are held and garrisoned by Nationalist troops. The Nationalists regard these islands as important outposts of their defense; the Communists regard them as thorns in the side of mainland China and high priority targets in any plan of attack.

About a month ago, one of the islands catapulted from obscurity to the front pages of newspapers and the agenda of government councils all over the world. On September 3rd Chinese Communist artillery at Amoy and nearby mainland posts laid down a heavy barrage on Nationalist-held Quemoy Island. It was the first big barrage since 1949, and the Nationalists countered with air and sea attacks on Communist positions. For about ten days it looked as if the clash might explode into a conflict of major international importance. Then it began to simmer down.

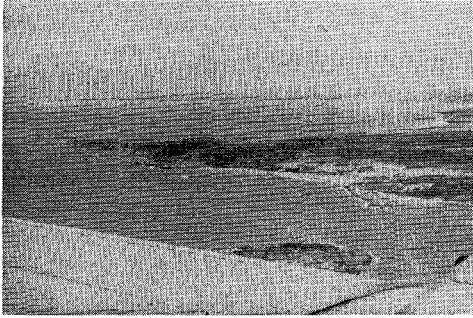
On September 10th I flew to Quemoy with a small group of correspondents. The sky was almost cloudless as our Nationalist air force transport flew westward across the Formosa Strait and came within sight of the Communist-held coast; silently, we wondered what would happen if a Communist jet fighter suddenly appeared. We passed over two former U.S. destroyers, now manned by Nationalists, which were steaming away from the coast after bombarding Communist positions. Then, suddenly, Quemoy was below us, almost surrounded by hostile territory. We made a fast



CHINESE NATIONALIST OFFSHORE ISLANDS  
(Rough Sketch Map of Major Island Groups)

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landing, jumped out of the plane and had our first good look at the island. At a glance there was not much to see except rocks and barren hills.

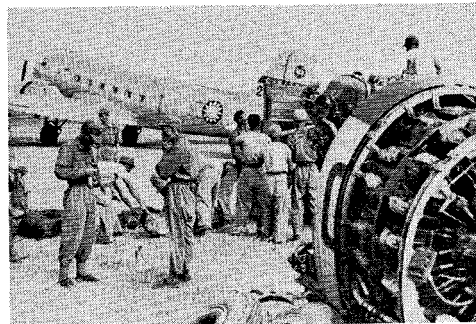


QUEMOY ISLAND

There is little doubt, if Quemoy is attacked, that there will be a major battle, because the Nationalist garrison is alert and apparently ready to fight. Both officers and men are constantly reminded that Nationalist troops on the island defeated a major Communist invasion attempt in 1949, and elaborate monuments commemorate that victory.

Soon after arriving at Quemoy we met the island commander and received a thorough briefing from him and his staff. General Liu Yu-chang is a ruddy, stocky, bull-necked officer who appears to be full of self-confidence. He stood talking in front of a captured Communist flag, and his remarks were punctuated by the crunch of incoming shells as Communist and Nationalist artillery engaged in sporadic duels. But the sound of occasional shells was the only real evidence of battle which we encountered during our 24-hour stay on Quemoy, and there were very few signs of destruction from the week-old action already labelled by some as the "vest pocket war."

The military situation at Quemoy, when viewed on the spot, took on a quite different perspective from that which it had in Taipei (Formosa's capital city), only a little more than 230 miles away. Nationalist communiqués issued in Taipei created a picture of a large-scale battle, imminent Communist invasion and "massive retaliation" by Nationalist forces, and the Quemoy clash was viewed by most of the world through the magnifying glass of propagandists eager to claim an important victory and newspapermen enthusiastic about a "big story." The resulting distortions helped to increase

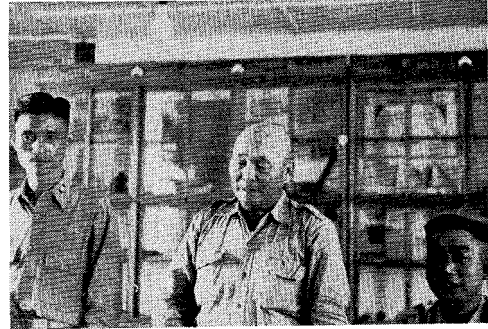


QUEMOY AIRFIELD

During the next 24 hours we toured-most of Quemoy, watched 155-mm. guns fire at the coast, and peered through field glasses at Communist positions a few miles away. Quemoy is a desolate little island. The majority of its 42,000 civilian inhabitants are fishermen, but during the past few years it has been built up into a strong military outpost. Wide roads crisscross the island, and they are busy with military traffic. Defense emplacements are well prepared, and the troops look good.

the already serious tensions.

What happened in the Quemoy area from September 3rd onward was really not a major military action, but it was an indication of the tensions, uncertainties, conflicts of interests, and explosive potentialities of the Nationalist-held offshore islands and the entire situation along the China coast. Both the Chinese Communists and the Chinese Nationalists consider themselves to be at war in this region, and the U.S. is deeply involved in the conflict between them.



GARRISON COMMANDER LIU

On September 3rd there were 2 Communist armies and other units totaling about 110,000 men concentrated on Amoy and nearby mainland areas. Part of these troops were Korean War veterans belonging to a Communist army which moved down to reinforce coastal forces during the last half of August. Facing them, on Big and Little Quemoy, was a strong Nationalist garrison which was reinforced to 5 divisions totaling between 40,000 and 50,000 men.

Although both sides had long been on the alert, the narrow stretch of water separating Amoy and Quemoy had been quiet for some time before 3:00 P.M. on September 3rd. Then, suddenly, the Communists opened up with a big artillery barrage. In the space of a few hours, about 6,000 shells were pumped at Quemoy; they destroyed the island's docking facilities but caused only a handful of casualties. (Two American military advisory-group officers were killed by a fluke direct hit.)

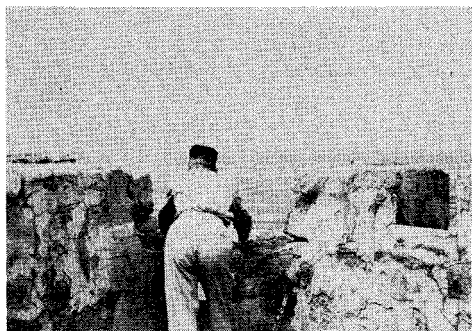


ARTILLERY FIRING  
AT COMMUNISTS

No invasion was made, however, and there was no definite indication that the Communists had prepared for a landing attempt. Shipping was still relatively scarce, no troops had been concentrated in invasion take-off positions, and the Communists' air force was kept out of sight. It now seems likely that the September 3rd barrage was never intended as a prelude to immediate invasion.

The Communists probably had a number of political and other motives for

shelling Quemoy, however. They may have been trying to create a diversion at the time of the Manila SEATO conference--then drawing up a security pact for Southeast Asia--and to intimidate some



OUTPOST IN SIGHT  
OF MAINLAND

nervous Asian countries. They undoubtedly wanted to probe the defenses of the Nationalists' offshore islands and to test the reactions of both the Nationalists and the U.S. There were other possible motives also, including the desire to prevent Formosa's inclusion in any Asian pact, to complicate the relations of the U.S. with its allies (few of whom back up American policy toward Formosa, and some of whom fear U.S. support of the Nationalists could lead to war), to create a further basis for propaganda about U.S. intervention blocking "liberation" of Formosa, and perhaps to direct attention within

Communist China from serious floods and other domestic problems,

Whatever the Communists' motives, they did not follow up their first-day barrage. From the second day on, the Nationalists, after consultation with American military advisors, took the initiative, using air and naval forces. Nationalist destroyers and jets went into action against Communist positions around Quemoy, and almost two weeks passed before they began to slacken in their bombardment,

The vigorous and almost unopposed air-sea retaliation conducted by the Nationalists boosted morale on Formosa. The Nationalists took full advantage of a situation in which limited military success was possible to put on a show of force. The incident was their first opportunity for a large-scale combat testing of their navy and air force in joint operations, and it was a chance to impress both the Communists and the United States with the fact that the Nationalists' military forces now are far superior to the beaten troops which fled across the Formosa Strait from the mainland in 1949.

By mid-September the clashes between Communists and Nationalists along the coast cooled off to somewhere below the boiling point, but minor action has continued, and the situation is still tense. If the Communist barrage on Quemoy was designed to test possible resistance to invasion of the Nationalists' offshore islands, the reaction



HEADQUARTERS ON QUEMOY

encountered may have made the Communists hesitate to embark on any major military adventure, but Peking continues to talk of plans to "liberate Formosa."

In any case, the Quemoy incident highlights the uncertainties of the situation along the China coast and raises several important questions regarding U.S. policy. Perhaps the most ticklish question concerns the Nationalist-held offshore islands. What will the U.S. do if the Communists decide to attempt an invasion on Quemoy or one of the other islands?

The 35-odd offshore islands now in Nationalist hands are widely dispersed, but most of them are included in three island groups: Quemoy, which dominates the approaches to Amoy; Matsu, which lies near the sea entrance to Foochow; and Tachen, which is located off the Chekiang coast. All of these islands are of considerable military value to the Nationalists. They block the two nearest mainland ports from which the Communists might try to launch an invasion of Taiwan; they provide radar outposts for warning against possible air attack; and they are bases for small-scale raids, guerrilla activities, and intelligence forays on the mainland. But the Nationalists' position on these islands is in many respects a dangerous one. At present seven divisions of the Nationalists' best troops--over one-fourth of their combat infantry units--are committed to the defense of the islands. Although fairly well "defended, the islands are vulnerable because they are so close to the coast, and undoubtedly the communists could capture one or all of them if they were willing to concentrate large enough forces and take heavy casualties to accomplish the task. If the Communists did successfully invade the offshore islands, the Nationalists would suffer a tremendous loss, psychologically as well as militarily, because they have staked so much on their defense.

U.S. policymakers are attempting to tread a sharp razor's edge in approaching this situation. At the height of the tension over the Quemoy Island clash, Secretary of State Dulles made a flying visit to Formosa and strongly reiterated the American pledge to aid in the defense of Formosa itself and the nearby Pescadores, but he carefully avoided any specific mention of the offshore islands. Top American military officials on Formosa have recommended that the islands be considered part of the defense of Formosa, but the U.S. has not publicly taken such a stand. Instead the U.S. has been purposely vague. Policymakers have feared that a promise to help defend the offshore islands would tie the U.S. down with involvement in too-vulnerable positions, and yet it is also felt that public denial of any commitment would invite Communist invasion. Apparently, the responsibility for deciding what to do if one of the offshore islands is attacked has been placed upon American military officials in the area, and it is believed that the U.S. would 'help the' Nationalists but would try to limit assistance to logistic support. This is an expedient which side steps an important issue, however. An invasion of one of the offshore islands could draw

the U.S. into a major clash with Communist China, and such a clash would have broad political implications as well as local military ones. As the situation now stands, the risk of U.S. involvement cannot be ignored. There are indications, in fact, that some American navy and army officers in the area feel that it might be a very good thing if they had a chance to take a crack at the Chinese Communists.

The offshore islands form only one part of a broader picture, of course, in which the Chinese Communists and Nationalists are both promising to "liberate" the territory of the other. What are the intentions, preparations, and military capabilities of these two adversaries, and how does the U.S. fit into the picture?

The Chinese Communists, on one side of the Formosa Strait, have built up the strongest military power in Asia. During the past three years, their People's Liberation Army has been reorganized and built into a powerful force. Heavy equipment has been provided by the Russians, and production of light weapons and ammunition has been expanded within China. Experts estimate that Communist China's regular army now totals at least 2½ million men, of whom about one-third belong to modern units with per-man firepower comparable to U.S. ground forces. These regulars are backed by probably well over a half-million internal Public Security troops and several million local militia. Communist China has also built up, with Soviet aid, an air force which is by far the largest in Asia. This air force may total almost 2,000 planes of all types; close to half of them are jets, and they include significant numbers of light bombers. Military supply services have been modernized with thousands of trucks. These military forces are supported by a strong organizational structure, and a disciplined totalitarian state under which manpower and resources are mobilized on a wartime basis. They are also backed by Communist China's alliance with the Soviet Union,

The military power and war potential of Communist China far overshadows the strength of the Nationalists on Formosa. It was the difficulty of crossing the 100 miles of Formosa Strait waters which stalled the Communists and prevented complete destruction of Nationalist forces in 1949. Then, in 1950, the U.S. decision to neutralize the Strait and to interpose the American Seventh Fleet between Formosa and the mainland radically altered the balance of military power by throwing the weight of U.S. naval power into the situation. Since 1950, furthermore, the Chinese Communists have directed their attention elsewhere, first to Korea, and then to Indo-China. This has now changed, with the consolidation of pro-Peking buffer regimes in both North Korea and North Vietnam, and the Chinese Communists are now for the first time since 1949 turning their primary attention toward their seaward flank. Formosa is regarded by Peking as one of China's provinces and the major item of "unfinished business" on the agenda of the Chinese Communist regime.

To date, however, the Chinese Communists apparently

have not--as far as it is known by Nationalist and U.S. intelligence agencies--started any definite invasion preparations. Along the entire China coast, from Chekiang to Swatow in Kwangtung, there are only about 220,000 Communist troops--of whom roughly 160,000 are in four infantry armies--and top Nationalist officers estimate that the Communists would have to concentrate at least 350,000 to 400,000 infantrymen to attempt an invasion on the main island of Formosa. The Communists also lack strong naval forces, and the U.S. Seventh Fleet, patrolling the Formosa Strait, presents a formidable obstacle.

There are other reasons, furthermore, which may make the Chinese Communists hesitate to try a full-scale invasion. The year 1954 has been one of serious economic problems and political readjustments on the China mainland, and Peking's leaders probably are reluctant to start a major military operation, involving risks of direct conflict with the U.S., when they face an unusual number of domestic problems.

The possibility that the Chinese Communists might decide to build up for an invasion of Formosa cannot be ignored, however. At any time they could bring down to the coast the troops required. They could use junks for transport, if they were willing to take high casualties. And within a short period of time they could prepare seven to nine airfields in Fukien for combat operations--as well as their major bases at Ningpo, Nanchang, and Canton--and could throw their air force into action. Undoubtedly, the most important single factor in the situation forestalling this possibility is the American military support to the Nationalists.

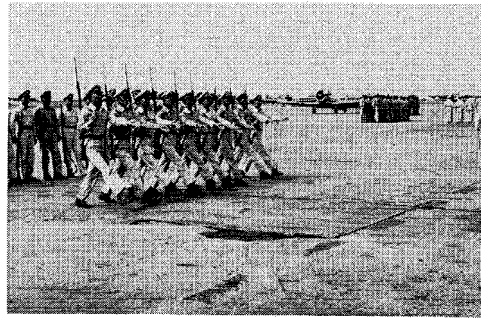
Since the establishment of a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group on Formosa in May 1951, U.S. military aid has been flowing to the island at the rate of over U.S.\$200 million a year, and American military personnel--now a staff of over 800--has been advising on the reorganization and training of Nationalist soldiers. During the past three years, the Nationalists' troops have been transformed from a beaten, demoralized force into a respectable military establishment. While on Formosa I made a tour of army, navy, and air force training bases, saw troops in the field on maneuvers, talked with Chinese and American officers, and observed the behavior of garrison troops in many parts of the island. What I saw and heard indicated that the Nationalists have greatly improved their fighting capabilities since I previously saw them, in 1949 and in 1952.

There are now about 600,000 men in uniform on Formosa, about half of whom are combat troops. The Nationalists have 28 infantry divisions--21 on Formosa and the Pescadores, and the rest on the offshore islands--but they are still somewhat under-strength, and there is talk of reducing the number to 24. In addition, they have two armored divisions. Organization (except for the controversial system of political officers) and training modeled after American practices, and the infantry units are maintained at a fairly high level of readiness by field training

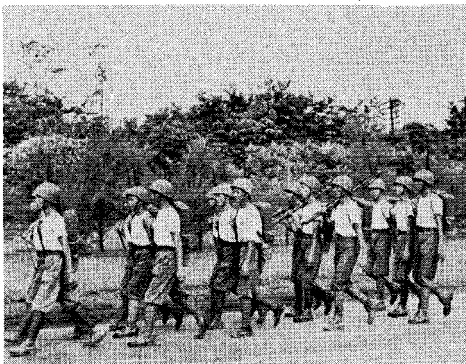


operations about every three months. The supply system has been somewhat improved. Equipment is still less than the optimum targets established, but it is far better than it was two or three years ago. Clothing is good, and the food ration has been bettered. Most of the troops are now quartered in barracks and regular military installations rather than in villages and private homes, so that relations with the civil population are more friendly than they formerly were.

The air force and the navy have both been given a shot in the arm. Three destroyers (two former American ones which arrived this summer, and one ex-Japanese ship) and six destroyer escorts are the prize ships in the navy. In addition the navy has about 25 operational patrol craft and about 20 large landing craft; ten more American patrol craft are expected soon, and a hundred more small landing craft have been ordered built on Taiwan. The navy is still small--about 7,000 officers and 20,000 men--but its efficiency has improved. The Nationalists' marine corps, currently composed of 14,000 officers and men capable of functioning as a division, is being expanded to 30,000 men. The marines are tough and capable; over 90 per cent of them have seen some sort of small combat action against the Communists in coastal areas during the past three years.



AIR-FORCE CADETS



THE MARINES

The air force, with 60,000 to 70,000 officers and men, is not a known quantity, but it has undoubtedly improved considerably also. Of the thirteen airfields on Formosa and the Pescadores, seven have been made into important operational bases, and six--now being linked to major ports by a vital fuel line--are in the process of expansion and resurfacing. At present, P-47's plus a few B-25's and navy-type B-24's are the air force's main operational planes, but some F-84 jets have been received and F-86's are scheduled to come.

Coordination between the various military forces has greatly improved; the Quemoy clash was an opportunity to test joint operations on a small scale. The problems of over-age

troops and replacements does not now seem to be an insuperable problem in the eyes of American advisors on the island. About 100,000 young men are being trained annually in a four-month reservist course (although there is no doubt that boys with homes in Formosa do not have the same desire to return to the mainland as refugee troops), and all college graduates on the island receive a rigorous one-year training course as reserve officers.

In short, the Nationalists' military forces have improved greatly during the past three years, and with U.S. aid and advice they have become a significant factor in the military situation in Asia.

But what is the aim of the Nationalist military build-up? What is the real potentiality of the Nationalists' forces? And how does the U.S. fit into the picture?

The U.S. at present defines the military assistance program to Formosa in terms of building up the defensive capabilities of the Nationalists. Small harassing raids and attacks have been made against Communist positions by the Nationalists, obviously with the blessings of American military advisors, but the aid funneling to Formosa is not conceived in terms of enabling the Nationalists to attempt a full-scale, sustained invasion of the mainland.

Yet the Nationalists consider themselves to be in a state of war (civil war) with the Communists, and the desire to return to the mainland provides their entire motivation at present. In every important speech, government leaders repeat their pledge ultimately to attack the mainland. The slogan "return to the mainland" is still painted on walls and buildings all over the island. Many political and economic policies on Formosa which would not be sound for a settled regime are justified in terms of plans to return to the mainland.

It is difficult to know what Nationalist leaders really think about the future, however. They talk of return to the mainland, but there is not much evidence of detailed planning preparatory to such a return, and discussion of defensive measures belies talk of offensive action. There have been planning bodies under both the Executive Yuan (cabinet) of the government and the Central Committee of the Kuomintang, as well as a party research institute engaged in planning, but they have not yet accomplished a great deal; one member of the Kuomintang's Standing Committee told me that effective centralized planning for return to the mainland has yet to be carried out, but he claimed that a group under the new National Defense Council will soon undertake the task. Recent moves to start dispersion of the urban population on Formosa are an indication of defensive rather than offensive thinking,

In military terms, the Nationalists, although capable of making raids upon the mainland, would need at least U.S.

naval and air support and probably (although they say they would not want to involve American troops) full-scale U.S. support, including troops to try to reinvade China. Undoubtedly what the Nationalists really hope for is a major war, in which the U.S. would do battle with Communist China, for otherwise their chances of returning to the mainland, are very slim.

Bluntly speaking, although American and Nationalist interests coincide in many respects at present, as long as the Nationalists hope to fight back to the mainland with U.S. support and as long as the U.S. hopes to avoid all-out war with Communist China there is a basic conflict in aims.

In the existing situation, where so many tensions and uncertainties exist, a minor clash might lead to U.S. involvement in a major struggle along the China coast. Does the U.S. have real control over this situation? Possibly not. The U.S. cannot control what the Communists do, and American officers merely have an advisory rather than a decision-making relationship with the Nationalists. The Nationalists at present obtain U.S. advice on all important operational decisions; but the American officers giving the advice are not in a position to evaluate all the broad strategic and political implications of military action undertaken, nor are they really in a position to veto action which might be taken, even if such action could lead to U.S. involvement.

The greatest uncertainty now centers on the Nationalist-held offshore islands. A full-scale Communist attack on Quemoy or one of the other islands could be a spark leading to a large conflagration involving the U.S. Are the islands important enough to risk going to war for them? Are they essential to the defense of Formosa? How do these small islands fit into broader U.S. strategy and plans? What are American long-term aims in the tense region off the China coast? These are questions which deserve careful thought by Americans and especially by U.S. policymakers!

*A. Doak Barnett*