

January 11, 1967

**Intelligence Note 13 from Thomas L. Hughes to the
Secretary, 'The Chinese Nuclear Threat to
Non-Communist Asia'**

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Summary:

Prepared by Edward Hurwitz, a Foreign Service officer and future ambassador then on assignment to INR, this report treated ICBMs as China's main weapons goal, an eventual means for a "credible threat" to Beijing's U.S. and Soviet "arch enemies."

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To : The Secretary
Through: S/S
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes

Subject: The Chinese Nuclear Threat to Non-Communist Asia

It has been estimated that the Chinese advanced weapons program is progressing at a pace that will permit Peking to deploy a few medium-range missiles (MRBM's) with fission warheads in 1967. These weapons would supplement China's probable ability at present to drop nuclear bombs from medium bombers. This assessment raises the question of the degree to which Peking's nuclear capabilities will threaten non-Communist areas around China's periphery in the near future.

Ultimate Aim May Be ICBM. There is some doubt that the Chinese are keenly interested in creating an extensive arsenal of nuclear weapons for delivery at medium range. Peking's basic objective in nuclear and missile development appears to be a weapons system that will create a credible threat to its arch-enemies, the United States and the USSR, which are accused of plotting jointly to "encircle" China. At the same time, the Chinese evidently feel that their claim to status as a great world power should be backed by possession of nuclear arms which at least bear some resemblance to those held by the US and the USSR. This would require a workable ICBM. Thus, Peking may well consider its medium range delivery capacity as chiefly a way station on the path to the development of ICBM's capable of reaching US territory.

Efforts to Avoid Alarm in Asia. Chinese propaganda does not indicate any readiness to use nuclear weapons, particularly in Asia. Throughout the

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course of Chinese nuclear testing, Peking has taken pains to stress the defensive nature of the weapons being developed and has repeatedly sworn never to be the first to use such weapons. Moreover, it has tried to put its neighbors at ease by emphasizing that China's nuclear weapons are meant to challenge the nuclear "monopoly" being exercised by the United States and the Soviet Union. Although these propaganda claims cannot be taken automatically at face value, they do suggest that China is at least aware that nuclear weapons are a breed apart. It appears to know that they can lead to enormous consequences and therefore cannot be rattled lightly. They also suggest that Peking may see some political disadvantage in overly alarming its Asian neighbors with the prospect of nuclear destruction. This type of threat may be all right when directed at American "imperialists" or Soviet "revisionists" -- just as similar threats may be expected from those quarters -- but it is not suited to a China which is supposed to be the champion of oppressed peoples.

Perhaps reinforcing this tendency to play down nuclear weapons, particularly in Asia, is the Maoist doctrine elevating men and ideology over weapons. The concept of people's war eventually liberating Asia, actually may be sufficiently ingrained in Chinese strategic thinking to inhibit consideration of a Chinese nuclear threat as an element needed to speed the process.

Deployment of Some Missiles Expected. Although we are inclined to discount a large-scale deployment of nuclear weapons along China's periphery or any great military reliance on them, we think it is probable, nevertheless,

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that Peking will produce some MRBM's and emplace them on its borders. It may accompany such moves with some low-key propaganda reminders that its nuclear capabilities in the area do exist. For all their apparent reluctance to alarm their neighbors, the Chinese are obviously aware that a credible show of nuclear power would increase their prestige and would be a useful psychological and political adjunct to other aspects of Chinese influence in the area. More pointedly, Peking may also calculate that in the absence of a workable ICBM, shorter range missiles aimed at or near US bases in Asia will be the fastest way to bring its nuclear capabilities to bear against American power and interests. While such deployment might not constitute a deterrent in the full sense of the word, Peking would probably conclude that the spectre of potential nuclear retaliation would make the US hesitate before resorting to the use of nuclear weapons against China. This in turn, Peking might reason, would raise by a notch the ceiling on its freedom of action, permitting it to engage in acts of increased militancy in Asia.

The Chinese may also feel that some credible nuclear potential in the area would serve as an additional defense against a possible invasion. Peking evidently has been genuinely concerned over what it believes is encirclement by powers allied with the United States, and in the past has evinced alarm over the prospect of invasion, particularly from Taiwan.

In light of the foregoing, we think it likely that the Chinese might be considering deploying a few MRBM's capable of delivering a nuclear warhead to or near various US installations ranged along their periphery. These could include bases in Thailand, South Vietnam, the Philippines, Okinawa,

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Japan, and South Korea. Such preparations might also take in non-US targets in Taiwan, for, although Peking would perhaps be reluctant to threaten a nuclear strike against fellow Chinese, past fears of invasion may convince the Communist regime that a nuclear offensive capability would be a worthwhile additional safeguard against the prospect of a Nationalist adventure.

Aside from these areas, the Chinese may also be prepared to deploy a few weapons along their border with India. Presumably, these would be chiefly for the psychological and political purpose of reminding the Indians of the overwhelming power of their neighbor to the north and of stressing to the Pakistanis the value of their good relations with Peking.

Continuing Reliance on Conventional Means. Whether Peking would be inclined to make actual use of such weapons in offensive operations is another question. We have conjectured that Peking's advanced weapons program is probably primarily geared to ICBM development and that the Chinese are less interested in nuclear preparations that menace her neighbors in Asia. We believe that any deployment China does make along its non-Communist periphery will be dictated by a desire to improve its prestige, its defense potential, and its ability to confront US military strength in Asia with some degree (at least in Chinese terms) of nuclear power. There does not appear to be any great likelihood that China will abandon its reliance on the "people's war" concept or that it will lose its healthy respect for American ability to answer a nuclear attack from Peking with an overwhelming assault on Chinese targets.

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