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Intelligence Note 418 from George C. Denney, Jr., to the Secretary, 'Probable Effects of Chinese Possession of MRBMs on Vietnam War'

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Summary:

A prospective Chinese MRBM force led INR to consider whether Beijing would believe that it had more freedom of action to step up its involvement in the Vietnam War: it "might feel freer in extending aid to Hanoi and becoming more involved in the war if US pressure on the North Vietnamese seemed to require it."

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*Intelligence
Note* - 418U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

May 30, 1967

To : The Secretary
Through: S/S
From : INR - George C. Denney, Jr. *h.c.d.*

Subject: Probable Effects of Chinese Possession of MRBMs on the Vietnam War

The likelihood that Peking soon will be able to deploy medium range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) raises the question of how this development might affect the nature of Peking's involvement in the Vietnam war.

Already Prepared to Augment Aid. We have estimated that Peking might respond to a stepping-up of the program of bombing North Vietnam by increasing its aid to the North, by augmenting Chinese involvement in the war effort, and by publicizing or otherwise making obvious its commitments to Hanoi. This response would be designed to contribute physically to North Vietnam's ability to continue the struggle and to deter the US from further pressures on Hanoi by magnifying the specter of full-scale Chinese intervention. In making such a response, we have assumed that the Chinese would still be extremely chary of engaging in a direct confrontation with the US but would probably conclude that Washington would also be reluctant to take any steps which would turn the war into a Sino-American conflict. Under these circumstances, the current stalemate in Vietnam might be likely to continue, although at a higher level of violence, and with a greater degree of Chinese assistance to, and influence on, Hanoi. There would also be a greater risk of an inadvertent Sino-US confrontation due simply to the increase in the Chinese military presence and role in North Vietnam.

MRBMs May Be Available in 1968. If such a situation were to continue into early 1968, Chinese progress in advanced weapons programs might begin to have some

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effect on Peking's thinking and on its attitude toward the risks involved in attempting to counter US pressures on Hanoi. According to most estimates, by the end of 1967, the Chinese may be able to deploy some medium range ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead to any of a number of US bases in Asia. If these estimates prove correct, the Chinese in early 1968 may believe themselves to be in possession of weapons that would help deter the US from making any retaliatory nuclear strikes against Chinese territory as a result of stepped-up Chinese actions in North Vietnam.

Threat to Peripheral Areas. If the Chinese are able to deploy missiles with a range of 1,000 miles, they would, depending on the number of weapons available, be able to aim them at such cities as Saigon, Bangkok, Tokyo, Manila, Naha, Seoul, and Taipei. By making known its intention to answer a US nuclear attack on China with a missile assault on one or a number of US bases (and, virtually unavoidably, on the surrounding local zones) in any of these areas, Peking might calculate that, to a great extent, it would inhibit the exercise of US nuclear power, which constitutes the basis for a large degree of its fear of a Sino-American war.

Peking might thus feel freer in extending aid to Hanoi and becoming more involved in the war if US pressure on the North Vietnamese seemed to require it. Some steps Peking could envisage might include allowing the North Vietnamese the use of Chinese airfields for attacks on US aircraft over North Vietnam, lending missile patrol boats to Hanoi, permitting use of Chinese ports in case Haiphong is closed, and sending some ground forces into North Vietnam and "advisers" into South Vietnam. In general, Peking's strategy and objectives would probably not change radically, but the Chinese might feel able to employ bolder tactics, once

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they were in possession of operational MRBMs. In addition, Peking might calculate that its Asian neighbors, feeling themselves threatened by the prospect of nuclear attack, would begin to bring pressure on the US to make some sort of settlement in order to stop the hostilities.

Chinese Would View MRBM as Deterrent. An important factor in China's risk-taking calculus would probably be the assumption that it could still launch a nuclear strike against US bases on its periphery even after a US nuclear attack on the mainland had occurred. Another element would be the belief that the United States would itself be thoroughly conscious of the deleterious effect of a Chinese nuclear assault against its bases or surrounding areas in Asia, which, in terms of the region's immediate power relationships, might be no less significant than the enormous consequences of American nuclear blows at China. In the Chinese view, therefore, even a modest nuclear capability would be of significant deterrent value vis-a-vis the US. Moreover, the Chinese might calculate that the Americans would be particularly reluctant to risk nuclear exchanges in the context of the Vietnam war, which Peking appears to be convinced is unpopular with large and influential segments of the US population and with US friends and allies abroad.

Extreme Risk-Taking Unlikely. We doubt that an MRBM deployment would spur the Chinese into full-scale involvement in the Vietnam fighting or would lead it to take otherwise drastic steps to make the US pull out of the war. Peking would still retain its fear of US power, and, in the final analysis, would probably try to avoid a situation in which it was clearly laying itself open to the risk of nuclear assaults. It would also be careful not to generate too much alarm over its nuclear capabilities and intentions for fear of stimulating a preemptive US strike at its nuclear installations or increasing the chances of US-USSR coalition against China.

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Moreover, Peking might calculate that the United States would avoid the dilemma of a direct nuclear confrontation by using conventional air strikes against Chinese installations to inflict punishment for or impede various kinds of Chinese involvement in the Vietnam war. China's own threat to respond with nuclear weapons in this instance would be far less credible than if US nuclear arms had been involved and would place on China the onus of having used nuclear weapons first. Thus, an MRBM arsenal may be viewed in Peking as not significantly reducing the problem of conventional US retaliation for acts connected with Vietnam.

Nevertheless, we feel on balance that Peking will be convinced that, by raising the specter of its own nuclear power, it would be freer to pursue its basic policy of providing aid to North Vietnam in order to shore up Hanoi's efforts to hold the US at bay while the inexorable passage of time and piling up of casualties finally wear out American determination to keep up the fighting.

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