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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

August 6, 1968

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

Subject: Current Developments in Chinese Nuclear Capabilities\*

Despite delays in the deployment of a medium range ballistic missile (MRBM) system, Communist China appears capable of making substantial progress in advanced weapons during the next few years. Peking could begin deploying a few MRBMs in 1968, and, as early as 1971-72, ICBMs with thermonuclear warheads having a range of 5,000 miles. Such a development raises questions about a possible Chinese miscalculation or the chances of increased Chinese aggressiveness or even adventurism in foreign affairs, but thus far Peking has given no sign that the acquisition of sophisticated advanced weapons systems will basically alter either the regime's previous adherence to the strategy of "people's wars" or its apparent respect for US nuclear capabilities.

Present Chinese Nuclear Capabilities. At present, Peking may have a few low-yield atomic weapons that could be delivered by existing Chinese medium bombers. However, the Chinese are also believed to have developed an MRBM system in the 600-1,000 nm range. Although initial deployment of this system appears to have been delayed, it could take place within a year or so. When this system is operational, all Asian nations with the exception of parts of India and Indonesia would be within range of such MRBMs if they were deployed

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\* This IN amplifies and updates IN-13, "The Chinese Nuclear Threat to Non-Communist Asia," January 11, 1967 (SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM).

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close to China's borders. The warheads initially deployed would probably be below 100 KT.

The Chinese have also demonstrated a capability to produce a thermonuclear device with a yield of several megatons. During its most recent -- and unannounced -- test in December 1967, Peking apparently made an unsuccessful attempt to achieve a thermonuclear design which could be missile-delivered by an ICBM, medium bombers, or possibly an MRBM.

In addition to conventional bombers and MRBMs, Peking has constructed one Soviet-type diesel-powered "G-class" submarine which is designed to fire three ballistic missiles. However, there is no evidence that the Chinese have developed a missile system suitable for this submarine.

Possible Developments During the 1970's. Although projections of Communist China's nuclear capabilities necessarily must be imprecise, most authorities are agreed that Peking has the ability to make substantial progress in this field during the 1970's. In 1969, enough fissionable material should become available to allow the Chinese to deploy a limited number of MRBMs. By the mid-1970's Peking may be able to deploy as many as 100 MRBMs with thermonuclear warheads in soft fixed sites.

China is working on an ICBM and is capable of deploying their weapon with a thermonuclear warhead and having a range of 5,000 miles by the early or mid-1970's. This deployment could conceivably take place as early as 1971-1972, if the Chinese program encountered no major setbacks. However, because of technical limitations, the Chinese may not deploy their first ICBM system extensively.

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Therefore, we would not expect the number of operational ICBM launchers to exceed 10 to 25 by about the mid-1970's. Large-scale Chinese ICBM deployment may await the availability of improved ICBMs in terms of launcher survival, reliability, and accuracy.

Although current evidence indicates that Peking is now stressing the development of MRBMs and particularly ICBMs, the Chinese could also construct other types of delivery systems, such as medium jet bombers or missile-launching submarines. Although submarines might appear to be an attractive delivery system to the Chinese, there is no evidence that Peking is presently constructing any additional ballistic missile submarines. The Chinese have shown an interest in nuclear-powered submarines, but, even if the regime has started research and development of such a vessel, it is unlikely that the first unit could be operational until the late 1970's at the earliest.

Both technical and political problems make it difficult to assess with precision the future progress of Peking's nuclear weapons program. While we have evidence that disruptions associated with the Cultural Revolution have involved government agencies in the weapons field, it is unclear whether the delays that have apparently occurred in MRBM deployment have resulted from such disruptions or from technical factors. In the long-run, of course, the pace of Peking's advanced weapons program is likely to be retarded somewhat by the educational disruptions of the Cultural Revolution. In addition, China's progress in strategic weapons could be adversely affected if the regime attempts to do too much too soon.

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Emphasis on Conventional Strategy Unchanged. Despite the possibility of substantial Chinese progress in advanced weapons systems in the next few years, Peking has shown no sign that it will alter its reliance on "people's war" or that it will lose its well-concealed but nevertheless real respect for American ability to answer a nuclear attack with an overwhelming assault on Chinese targets.

We continue to 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. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Chinese could use even a few ICBMs as a threat over American cities while at the same time using their MRBMs to threaten Asian nations or US forces in Asia. The existence of such a two-fisted threat could undercut the credibility of US commitments to those nations under the MRBM shadow.

With or without the ability to make some kind of threat against the US, Peking's acquisition of advanced weapons systems is bound to have important psychological effects on its relations with many countries, and especially Asian nations in which Peking has already called for revolution. Among certain smaller Asian states, Chinese possession of sophisticated nuclear weapons systems will provide one more reason for dealing cautiously with so powerful a neighbor. Among larger nations which have a potential for producing nuclear weapons, such as Japan and India, Peking's nuclear accomplishments will likely stimulate fears of possible miscalculation and some degree of support for development of their own nuclear systems.

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Aside from the question of miscalculation and the psychological impact of Peking's increasing power in the nuclear field, questions remain as to whether Peking's acquisition of sophisticated weapons systems will cause Chinese leaders to overestimate their freedom of action and embolden them to give increased covert support to Asian revolutionary groups such as the Burmese or Thai Communists. Such a possibility cannot be ruled out, although previous patterns in Peking's behavior lead us to believe that other factors -- especially Peking's assessment of the revolutionary situation in a particular country -- will continue to exert greater influence over Chinese actions in fostering "people's wars."

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