

# SECTION 35

NIE 13-3-72

China's Military Policy and  
General Purpose Forces

20 July 1972



APPROVED FOR RELEASE (b) (1)  
DATE: MAY 2004 (b) (3)

*Archives*



~~TOP SECRET~~

# NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

## China's Military Policy and General Purpose Forces

Handle via

Control Systems Jointly

~~TOP SECRET~~  
NIE 13-3-72  
20 July 1972

Nº 200

Handle via ~~TOP SECRET~~ Control Systems Jointly

1

## CHINA'S MILITARY POLICY AND GENERAL PURPOSE FORCES

### NOTE

This is the first estimate on Chinese theater forces to appear in the enlarged format for military estimates.

Optimism regarding our knowledge of Chinese military affairs, however, is tempered by the fact that the circumstances surrounding the 1971 purge of the top military leadership and many of its implications remain obscure. The purge has obviously altered the prospects for the succession to Mao Tse-tung and it has produced at least a temporary return to the pre-Cultural Revolution norm of the Party "controlling the gun". It may have important consequences for military morale, for military priorities, and for military policy.

~~TOP SECRET~~

2

Handle via

~~TOP SECRET~~

Control Systems Jointly

## THE PROBLEM

To assess Communist China's general military policy and to estimate the strength and capabilities of the Chinese Communist general purpose and air defense forces through 1977.

## CONCLUSIONS

### POLICY AND STRATEGY

A. Chinese military policy has been strongly influenced by Peking's aspirations to reclaim a leading role in Asia and to gain recognition as a major world power, and by acute concern to deter attack or invasion by the great powers. Taken together, these considerations have caused China to maintain a substantial military establishment and to bear the heavy costs of modernizing its general purpose forces and of developing an independent strategic nuclear capability. Nonetheless, Mao's insistence on a basic policy of self-reliance and China's limited technical and industrial base have insured that the process of modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would be a protracted one.

B. Mao's primary concerns have been with the progress of the revolution in China, and the long-term development of modern military forces has taken place within the context of this overriding goal. Mao's willingness to subordinate defense and purely military considerations to the higher priority goals of politics and the continuing revolution—as in the Cultural Revolution—has had an impact on military professionalism, on combat readiness and morale, and even on military production programs. The PLA, in playing a "vanguard role" in the revolution, has been drawn deeply into politics and has been exposed to the inevitable rewards and penalties. The purge of Lin Biao and the top military leadership in 1971 is only the latest, if most dramatic, manifestation of the PLA's continuing involvement in vital issues of national policy.

C. The policy of the People's Republic of China with respect to the use of force has been generally cautious. It has limited the use of combat forces beyond China's borders to circumstances where Peking has seen real and imminent threats to Chinese territory or to vital Chinese interests. In the 1960s, the increasingly hostile nature of Sino-

~~TOP SECRET~~

Handle via

~~TOP SECRET~~

Control systems Jointly

3

Soviet relations radically altered China's strategic problems. Although the Chinese were careful not to show any sign of weakness, they were at pains behind this brave front to control the risks of direct military confrontation with either of the two superpowers, and, as might be expected, their military stance remained essentially defensive.

D. China's strategy for defense against a possible Soviet invasion follows Mao's principles of "luring deep" and "people's war". In the face of the much superior firepower, air support, and mechanized mobility of the Soviet Union, the Chinese have chosen not to position large forces close to the border where they might easily be cut off. The Chinese strategy seems to be to hold back their key main force units until the invading forces are overextended and weakened by the resistance of local defense forces and guerrilla harassment. In contrast to the northern border regions, the coastal areas of China have important concentrations of population and industry, and in these areas the Chinese are prepared for a forward defense employing air and naval forces. If an enemy force landed, it would be met at once by both local defense and main force army units.

E. Another example of Peking's defense-mindedness and awareness of China's vulnerability to attack from the air is the immense effort that has gone into passive defense. The Chinese are building a large portion of their new factories—especially those for military-related industries—in interior regions and have dispersed some of them in out-of-the-way valleys and canyons. Perhaps to a degree unmatched elsewhere in the world, the Chinese are building civil defense facilities, ranging from simple shelter trenches and bunkers to large tunnels with sophisticated life-support equipment in some large cities. Large tunnels now in existence or under construction at 75 or so of China's airfields will be able to shelter most of China's fighter force, and other underground facilities built or under construction will be able to shelter all of the navy's existing submarines and missile boats.

F. While the main focus of China's strategy is defensive, this is not to say that Peking has given no thought to contingencies involving offensive operations. In any case, a military force which has been developed to defend against the superpowers inevitably has a considerable offensive capability against lesser foes. China could, for example, conquer all of Southeast Asia if opposed only by indigenous

~~TOP SECRET~~

4

~~TOP SECRET~~

Handle via

Control Systems Jointly

forces. If Peking decided to take Taiwan, a considerable redeployment of its forces would be required, as well as extensive amphibious and airborne training. Once these preparations were made, China could almost certainly take Taiwan in the absence of US military intervention. If the Chinese were to participate in a major attack against South Korea, which we think unlikely, they could effectively commit as many as 35 divisions in the narrow peninsula. In the case of South Asia, the Himalayas and the vast reaches of the Tibetan Plateau would severely limit China's offensive capabilities; long and difficult supply lines would prevent the Chinese from sustaining any offensive into India beyond the Himalayan foothills. But in any of these contingencies, Peking would be constrained by the necessity of providing for defense needs elsewhere, particularly vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and by the requirements of internal security.

#### THE FORCES

G. The greatest relative weakness of the Chinese vis-à-vis the US and the USSR is in the field of strategic weapons, and Peking has assigned first priority to ambitious and costly programs aimed at providing China with a credible deterrent against nuclear attack. After strategic programs, air and naval modernization has had the higher claim on resources; modernization of the army seems to have received a somewhat lower priority.

H. Even so, the ground forces remain the dominant element. The size of the force (at 3.0 million men, the Chinese Army is the largest ground force in the world), the toughness and discipline of the Chinese soldier and the quality of small arms with which he is equipped are impressive. The Chinese Army for its size and by US and Soviet standards, however, has relatively little armor, and is only moderately well equipped with artillery. Tactical air support for ground troops is limited, and shortages of vehicles and transport aircraft restrict mobility and logistic support. In a non-nuclear war on its own ground against any invader the Chinese Army would be a most formidable force. In these circumstances it would be able to capitalize upon its vast manpower reserves, its ability to mount a large-scale guerrilla effort, and its ability to use China's terrain and territory to advantage in fighting a prolonged war. In contrast, the Chinese Army would experience

~~TOP SECRET~~

Handle via

~~TOP SECRET~~

Control Systems Jointly

5

great difficulty in trying to push very far beyond China's borders against the opposition of a modern force. Here the weakness in transport, logistics, firepower, and air support could become critical.

I. While its inventory of some 4,000 combat aircraft is the third largest in the world, China's equipment is far below the standards of US or Soviet aircraft. Air defense is the primary mission of this force, with 37 of the 53 Chinese air divisions assigned to this role. The air defense system suffers from serious weaknesses because of its reliance on relatively outmoded aircraft, a very modest level of surface-to-air missile (SAM) deployment, limited air surveillance capabilities, and the lack of automatic data-handling equipment.

J. China's ground attack fighter force consists of Mig-15/17 jet fighters and a growing number (currently about 185) of F-9 fighter-bombers (a Chinese-designed aircraft somewhat larger than but resembling the Mig-19). About three-quarters of China's 540 or so bombers are obsolescent Il-28s. The Chinese also have deployed about 43 Tu-16 jet medium bombers, but we believe Peking intends to use the Tu-16s mainly as part of China's force for peripheral nuclear attack.

K. The Chinese have invested heavily in naval programs, and this effort is beginning to pay off. The fleet now includes about 53 attack submarines, 16 destroyer escorts (including 8 that are equipped with cruise missiles), about 55 missile patrol boats, and several hundred motor gunboats and torpedo boats. The coastal patrol type vessels are prepared to play a significant defensive role; the larger ships and submarines further enhance Chinese defensive capabilities but have not yet ventured any extended operations into deep waters. The Chinese Navy has only a limited air defense capability, and its antisubmarine warfare capability is rudimentary. The Chinese have only a limited sealift potential, have no amphibious shipbuilding program and have conducted no large-scale amphibious training.

#### PROSPECTS

L. Peking's cautious attitude respecting the use of force seems likely to continue for some time, partly because the Chinese see no advantage in risking a military confrontation with the vastly stronger superpowers, and partly because Maoist doctrine continues to hold that

~~TOP SECRET~~

6

Handle via ~~TOP SECRET~~

Control systems Jointly

revolution cannot be sustained by external forces. We do not rule out a shift in this generally defensive and cautious policy on the use of force as China's conventional and strategic power grows and in circumstances in which nationalist sentiments may have gained ground at the expense of Maoism. But there is little in the current situation to suggest that such a shift would be likely in the next few years.

M. We cannot foresee any weakening in the basic drive to develop China as a major military power. As in the past, however, progress in modernization and in developing military professionalism is likely to come into conflict with Maoist political and ideological goals. Moreover, because of China's limited technical base, the modernization of the PLA will necessarily be protracted, and the process will undoubtedly require numerous compromises concerning the balance of effort between strategic and conventional forces, and between near-term results and longer-term progress. While the Chinese could probably step up their efforts at military modernization somewhat, they are much nearer the margin of their capabilities than either the US or USSR.

N. Thus the outlook for the next five years is one of continuing improvement along current lines based on programs now underway. A continuation of this persistent effort to build a formidable military establishment is unlikely to produce any spectacular breakthroughs or developments in the PLA. It will, however, permit Peking gradually to operate in the international arena with somewhat less concern for China's military weaknesses and shortcomings.

O. The Chinese Army is receiving newer and better equipment—including improved light and medium artillery, light amphibious and medium tanks, armored personnel carriers, more modern communications equipment, and increasing numbers of trucks—that will gradually upgrade its firepower and mobility. Training is being conducted on a larger and more elaborate scale, and there may be other changes in process—e.g., more attention to arming and training paramilitary forces—that will enhance the military usefulness of China's virtually unlimited manpower. While these improvements will not be sufficient to enable Peking to project its forces much beyond China's borders against first class opposition, the PLA should be able increasingly to

~~TOP SECRET~~

Handle via

~~TOP SECRET~~

Control Systems Jointly

7

contest an invasion more effectively and in somewhat more forward positions than is now the case, especially on the northern and north-western frontiers. In short, the already formidable defensive capabilities of the Chinese Army will increase, and the prospect of engaging this force will become a more and more unattractive proposition for any potential adversary.

P. The outlook for air and air defense forces is one of substantial increases in size with qualitative improvement proceeding at a more modest pace. Peking may decide to phase out production of Mig-19 fighters in favor of Mig-21s. Chinese-produced Mig-21s evidently have not yet entered the force, but we expect this to occur in the near future. The availability of this aircraft would mark the beginning of major improvements in intercept capability, particularly as the Mig-21s would probably be armed with air-to-air missiles and be equipped for all-weather operations. The Hsian-A interceptor, a native-designed follow-on to the Mig-21 currently being tested, may be available for deployment in the mid-1970s.

Q. SAM deployment will probably proceed at a faster rate than in years past, and deployment of the Chinese version of the SA-2 may be supplemented by a low-altitude weapon during the period of this Estimate. Radar coverage will improve and expand, and new communications equipment now becoming available will improve the command and control of China's air defense system. Despite this growth and improvement, however, China will continue to be vulnerable to a large-scale attack by planes employing the latest equipment and technology.

R. The new F-9 fighter-bomber represents a significant improvement in China's ground attack capability and is likely to be deployed in fairly substantial numbers. Peking may soon conclude that the cost of building and deploying the outmoded Il-28 jet light bomber is not warranted and that production should cease. Although the Chinese will probably use the Tu-16 bomber primarily as a strategic weapon carrier, some will probably be assigned to reconnaissance and other non-strategic roles.

S. China's naval programs clearly attest to an ambition to become an important naval power. Production of attack submarines, destroyers,

~~TOP SECRET~~

Handle via

~~TOP SECRET~~

Control Systems Jointly

destroyer escorts and guided-missile patrol boats is likely to continue to be substantial. The evidence suggests that China now has one nuclear-powered attack submarine; if so, several more will probably enter the fleet during the period of this Estimate. At this point, however, the Chinese Navy's level of operational experience has not kept pace with additions of new units and advances in technology. Given the complexity of learning to operate as a deepwater navy, this situation is likely to persist throughout the period of this Estimate. Although there is a good chance that the Chinese will begin to "show the flag" in foreign waters with some of their newer units, there is little likelihood of their establishing a major naval presence in waters distant from China for some years.

T. China's nuclear program has given first priority to the development of high-yield thermonuclear weapons for strategic attack. But the Chinese have an obvious requirement for tactical nuclear weapons, and Chic-13, which was tested in January 1972, could have been a step in filling this requirement.

Thus we feel that it is too early to conclude that China has developed a nuclear weapon for delivery by fighter aircraft. Nevertheless, we think it likely that the Chinese will acquire a tactical nuclear capability during the period of this Estimate. A bomb is the best candidate for an early capability. Somewhat later, toward the end of the period of this Estimate, the Chinese will probably be capable of deploying tactical nuclear missiles or rockets.

~~TOP SECRET~~