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NIE 13-8-67
4 April 1968

MEMORANDUM TO HOLDERS

NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

NUMBER 13-8-67

Communist China's Strategic Weapons Program

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Submitted by

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the

UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf

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COMMUNIST CHINA'S STRATEGIC WEAPONS PROGRAM

SCOPE NOTE

This memorandum discusses certain developments that bear on some of the important judgments in NIE 13-8-67, "Communist China's Strategic Weapons Program," dated 3 August 1967, TOP SECRET, ALL SOURCE. It is too early, however, to assess fully the significance of these developments. There is a fairly good chance that enough information will come to hand during the next several months to permit a comprehensive review of China's strategic weapons program, at which time NIE 13-8-68 will be produced.

THE ESTIMATE

CHINA'S INTERNAL SITUATION

1. In our last estimate we expressed doubt that the regime would be able to insulate China's nuclear and missile program from the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution. There is now good evidence that confusion and turmoil have spread to key organizations responsible for directing and implementing China's weapon development. Top officials in the National Defense Scientific and Technological Commission and the Academy of Sciences have come under political attack, and there have been cases of suicide by heads of scientific institutes.

2. In a January 1968 speech to representatives of national defense industries, research institutes, and schools, Premier Chou En-lai deplored the damage factional strife was causing military programs. Chou said that industrial elements were exceptionally faction-ridden and had "fought for a year and a half." He named and upbraided two Red Guard groups that have been identified as contending factions in the Seventh Ministry of Machine Building (missiles) and said that their Ministry had been particularly chaotic.

3. We have had difficulty in establishing how serious these disruptions may have been. On the one hand, construction work, missile firings, and nuclear testing have continued throughout the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, there is evidence of production delays in certain other high priority military programs. Though we lack evidence on the missile and nuclear programs, there seems little reason to doubt that they too have suffered to some degree from the general erosion of economic efficiency and managerial control.

4. At this point we cannot go much beyond this very general judgment, except to point out that the confused political situation adds considerably to the uncertainties involved in estimating the status and prospects of China's strategic weapons program.

THE ICBM PROGRAM

5. By the early part of 1967, it appeared that the Chinese had completed a large launch facility (Launch Complex B at the Shuang-ch'eng-tzu Missile Test Range) capable of accommodating a missile in the ICBM or space booster category. The apparent readiness of this complex to support flight testing was the principal basis for our estimate that the Chinese could have an ICBM ready for deployment in the early 1970's, and conceivably as early as 1970-1971. We noted that this would be a tight schedule, and should the Chinese encounter major problems, the IOC would be later. A number of subsequent developments indicate either that major problems were indeed encountered or that there have been major changes in the basic program.

6. Since July 1967, the Chinese have been engaged in major additional construction around Launch Complex B. This includes construction of new buildings and structures and the excavation of a large pit cutting the rail line that had originally served the gantry at Complex B. Although it still would have been possible to bring a missile to the gantry or launch pad by road, seemed to indicate that the Chinese were not concerned with having easy access to the launch complex. indicates that some modification of the pad is under way.

7. There are several possible explanations for these developments. The least likely is that some booster stages were successfully fired from Launch Complex B before the new construction began, and, the Chinese having accomplished what they wanted in that phase, are moving on to the next stage, possibly the construction of a prototype field site. We tend to rule out this explanation because there was scarcely enough time (six months at the most) for the Chinese to have carried out such an important step in the development of their first large booster system. Furthermore, we believe there is a good chance that we would have detected some signs of such testing.

8. A more likely interpretation is that the Chinese have changed the plans for their ICBM program. Here again there are several possible explanations. There could have been overhasty and faulty planning of the launch complex itself, or the Chinese may have decided that the entire missile system was unsatisfactory and are now building a different launch facility for a new or modified ICBM system.

9. These hypotheses are only speculations at this point, however. It will probably be several months before the construction at Launch Complex B is far enough along to give a reasonably firm indication of what the Chinese have in mind and what it means for their ICBM program. All that can be said with much confidence at this point is that if the Chinese have not already flight tested boosters from Launch Complex B and have, in fact, altered their plans, then there has been slippage in the program. The original pad might be ready for use by mid-summer. We estimate, therefore, that China's ICBM program has been delayed by at least six months. Particularly in view of the major construction elsewhere within the Launch complex, we believe that a more reasonable estimate is that the delay will amount to a year or more. It was estimated in NIE 13-8-67 that the earliest conceivable date for the IOC of a Chinese ICBM was 1970. We now believe that the earliest possible date should be set at 1971.

THE MRBM PROGRAM

10. In NIE 13-8-67 we estimated that, although the evidence respecting troop training was inconclusive and evidence of other preparations for deployment was lacking, the deployment of MRBM's was likely to begin "in the next six months or so." The Chinese had been working on an MRBM system for several years, and in late 1965 we began to see signs of accelerated activity at the range. In October 1966 the Chinese tested what was apparently a missile-delivered nuclear device. Though the device had a low yield and was apparently quite inefficient, we concluded that the Chinese could, if they wished, use the design for MRBM warheads. Then in May and June of 1967, [redacted] appeared to be a concentration of firings, and photography [redacted] indicated a high level of activity at the range. This suggested that the MRBM program might have reached the troop training stage. These were the principal factors on which we based our estimate of the possible timing of MRBM deployment.

11. Since then the intensive search [redacted] has continued; although there are a number of unidentified construction projects that bear watching, we have been unable to identify any of these as MRBM field sites under preparation. The apparent failure to begin deployment could indicate continuing problems with the first system, or, alternatively, it could reflect a decision to proceed with the development of a new and improved system. It is even possible that their deployment schedule may be influenced by their desire for an improved warhead. We still believe the Chinese intend an early deployment of an MRBM system; but in view of all the uncertainties, including the possible disruptions

of the Cultural Revolution, the time frame estimated for such deployment should be extended anywhere from 6 to 18 months.

CHINA'S NUCLEAR TESTING

12. China's seventh nuclear test, which was conducted on 24 December 1967, probably was aimed at reducing the size and weight of a thermonuclear weapon. The device used the same nuclear materials (U-235, U-238, and lithium deuteride) as were used in China's three previous thermonuclear tests, Peking's official silence concerning the test and the indications of the Lop Nor test area that also point toward failure. The Chinese had been making rapid progress since their first thermonuclear experiment in May 1966, and, though the recent failure has delayed the program, the setback may be only a minor one.

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