



8 March 1966

APPROVED FOR RELEASE  
DATE: APR 2005

No. 0789/66

Copy No. 1

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

PEKING'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE THREAT OF US ATTACK

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
8 March 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Peking's Attitude Toward the Threat of US Attack

SUMMARY

Peking appears to be engaged in a deterrent psychological warfare campaign. This is expressed in its recent propaganda concerning Chinese readiness to repel a US assault, in private statements of concern over the possibility of imminent US attack, and to some extent also in current fulminations about "imperialist encirclement." By portraying themselves as "encircled," fearful of attack, but ready to fight a bitter-end war in self-defense, the Chinese probably hope to stimulate additional political pressure--within the US as well as among American allies and neutrals--against "rash" US escalation which might cause a miscalculation by apprehensive men in Peking. In emphasizing that China will respond militarily only if directly attacked by the US the Chinese may be attempting to establish ground rules which if the US adhered to them would, over the longer term, prevent a war with the US.

The evidence available at this time does not support a conclusion that genuine Chinese anxiety concerning a US attack has increased significantly during the past few months. In fact, examination of domestic propaganda and the pace of civil defense preparations in China suggests that Peking was equally or more concerned over this possibility last spring and during the summer than at present. Thus far no re-deployment of Chinese military strength has been detected of the kind which might

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be expected if Peking actually regarded an invasion-- which recent Chinese statements imply is threatened-- as likely in the near future.

While their actions belie their protestations that they expect an early attack by the US, the Chinese leaders, as orthodox Marxist-Leninists, probably do believe that a war with the US is "inevitable," in the long historical sense. We do not believe, however, that this will make them fatalistic and will lead them, any more than it did Lenin or Stalin, into provocative acts or even lead them in the present circumstances to take actions more risky than those they would have taken without this belief.

There has not been, for example, any indication of a change in Chinese policy regarding support for the Communist war effort in Vietnam--toward either a more cautious line or a more adventurous course. Peking continues to provide military assistance and political backing for North Vietnam, aimed at keeping Communist forces steadfast and in the field against the US in South Vietnam. The Chinese military presence in North Vietnam, made up of service troops and air defense units--first detected last June--continues to grow at a moderate rate. It seems probable that if the Chinese actually expected a US attack soon, some pronounced change in Peking's Vietnamese policy would be observed.

1. From the outset, Peking probably recognized and accepted the risk that Chinese support for North Vietnam's effort to subvert the South might lead to a conflict with the US. In January a year ago Chen Yi told the French ambassador that the Chinese saw US "fireworks" as a possibility before the eventual Communist victory he claimed was certain. It seems likely that rapid escalation of the US war effort during the winter and early spring of 1965 increased apprehensions in Peking. The Chinese press as early as 26 March began to take note of "rabid threats of war against China" by the US and a People's Daily editorial three days later declared that the Chinese could see that after US "occupation" of South Vietnam and "aggression" against North Vietnam the "next step will be aggression against China."

2. By May 1965, the increasing weight of US airstrikes against the DRV as well as their steady progress northward toward the Sino-Vietnamese border had apparently further increased Chinese concern. On 10 May Peking broadcast the full text of a long Red Flag article by Vice Minister of National Defense and Chief of Staff Lo Jui-ching in which the possibility of war with the US--including nuclear attack against China--was raised.

3. Lo charged that the US had "spread the flames of war over North Vietnam and was preparing to spread them further to China." He called for readiness, stressing that political and ideological work to this end must be given first priority. The article closed with a defiant statement that China would go on helping the Vietnamese Communists no matter what the US did to enlarge the war, adding to this the qualification--now a central theme in Peking's propaganda--that "we will not attack unless we are attacked; if we are attacked we will certainly counterattack."

4. Peking's outcry against alleged US plans for spreading the war to China was in part deterrent propaganda but it probably reflected genuine fear that the probability of US air attacks on China was growing. The war in South Vietnam was going very badly for Saigon forces, and the Chinese, perhaps taken in to some degree by their own propaganda about "imperialist" aggressiveness, may have felt that the US might lash out in desperation.

5. They were, moreover, in the process of implementing contingency plans involving the deployment of Chinese service forces in North Vietnam to assist the Vietnamese with the task of keeping logistical channels to China open despite US air attacks against lines of communication. The presence of Chinese military personnel in the northern part of North Vietnam began to be detected after mid-June. These movements were secret, but the Chinese must have taken into consideration the possibility that their presence might be discovered and provoke a violent US response.

6. On 31 May, Peking sent private warnings to the US, doubtless intended to support deterrent

propaganda, via the British and the Finns. During a conversation with the UK chargé, Chen Yi stated that although China did not desire a war with the US, it was ready for one if the US exceeded the "limits" set by Peking. In this connection Chen referred specifically to airstrikes against targets in China.

7. There was, however, no apparent speedup in Peking's efforts to increase its air defense capability in either the border region or elsewhere in China. Peking had begun a program to build up air defense capabilities in South China shortly after the Tonkin Gulf crisis in August 1964. This has gone forward at a steady pace ever since, with the peak effort to improve these air defenses coming in the period from the fall of 1964 to the winter of 1965.

8. Starting in May, Peking also launched a heavy domestic propaganda campaign on the theme that it had become the nation's foremost task to prepare against the possibility that the US might attack "at any time." The subject of "war preparations" was a frequent topic for neighborhood indoctrination meetings. One heavily publicized type of "preparation" has been militia training, which was intensified last summer.

9. This deliberate fanning of popular war fears was probably intended, in part, to stimulate compliance with the fairly extensive, but rudimentary, civil defense measures which began to be undertaken late last spring. Such programs were in evidence on a small scale in the fall of 1964. Letters from inside China indicated that early last summer local governments--probably all over China--started to draw up contingency evacuation plans.

10. These plans have apparently not been implemented on any significant scale, however, although there have been some actual movements of schools, a hospital, and small factories from Canton, and of some scientific institutes out of Peking. Government employees have been urged, but not forced, to send dependents to live with relatives in the countryside. This policy has not been popular, and recent reports

indicate that some dependents are quietly returning home.

11. By last fall, the regime began to slack off on domestic propaganda concerning the imminence of a possible conflict with the US, perhaps because Peking believed it was necessary to calm down people who had been made jittery by the campaign during the spring and summer. There is evidence that Peking has been using the war preparation theme internally to justify long-standing domestic programs--e.g., the dispersal to the countryside of redundant urban laborers--and to increase the effectiveness of its home propaganda by playing on the Chinese people's patriotism. While the necessity for "war preparations" continues as an important theme, refugees and clandestine sources report that it is now being presented in terms of a contingency that is still a year or two in the future.

12. According to reports from refugees, a drive was launched in September, pushed with special vigor in South China, against rumor mongers--people who "exaggerate" the effect of a nuclear attack. In December, the acting governor of Kwangtung, speaking at the annual meeting of the CPPCC--a propaganda forum for united front organizations--said that a US attack was expected "by 1969." Twice during January 1966, People's Daily underscored the long-run nature of the US threat by noting that the contingency of a US attack was an important factor in long-term economic planning.

13. 



14. Meanwhile, Chinese propaganda directed at external as well as domestic audiences throughout the summer and fall continued to accuse the US of planning to attack China, and to trumpet that the Chinese were "standing in battle array" ready to repel any adventurous thrusts and to "utterly

destroy" the aggressors. There was, however, no special emphasis on the immediacy of the US threat. The emphasis throughout was that the US was moving "step by step" to impose war on China but as regards timing declared only that the US wanted a trial of strength "sooner or later."

15. Chen Yi's remarks during his press conference on 29 September put war in the standard conditional framework--if the US took the initiative--and projected the possibility into the indefinite future. He declared in an angry outburst that China was ready for an assault by the US--aided by the Indians, British, Japanese, and "modern revisionists"--which might come "as early as tomorrow." Chen went on to say, however, that the Chinese had been waiting for a US invasion for 16 years--while his hair had turned gray--and added that if by chance he did not live long enough to see an invasion, his children would "resolutely carry on the fight."

16. From time to time during October and November Chinese propaganda reiterated the charge that the "spearhead of US aggression" was pointing not only at Vietnam and Korea but also at China. The context, however, was generally on the need for long-range strengthening of defenses. The report of a PLA Political Work Conference broadcast on 18 January noted, for example, that the US has "always wanted to impose war on the Chinese people" and "for this reason, to strengthen combat readiness is by no means just a temporary measure, but is a long-term strategic task."

17. Peking's recent propaganda statements regarding "encirclement" of China are used to bolster charges of US aggressive intent, but it is clear that they are also a key element in the Chinese struggle with the Soviet Union--which received new impetus as a result of Shelepin's trip to Hanoi in early January. Charges that the Soviets were aiding the US in building a "cordon" around China carry no sense of urgency, however. The perfidious US and Soviet scheme is presented as in process but not near completion.

18. Only in a small number of private communications during January and February did the Chinese

indicate that they regarded a US attack as coming soon. These "messages" appeared intended not directly for the US, but for US friends and others who might be persuaded to bring pressure on Washington.

19. The Chinese leaders probably do feel isolated and encircled by enemies--with good reason and largely as the consequence of their own actions. They are likewise convinced of US hostility and recognize that Peking's course in Vietnam carries some risk of an expansion of the war into China. Their apprehensions probably increased somewhat when the US military buildup began to gather speed last spring and was carried forward during the summer. Peking's fears of an attack, however, appear to have leveled off at a point far short of any "certainty" that the US would strike at China soon--or that such action was "inevitable" in the foreseeable future.

20. Current Chinese propaganda charges of US aggression intent and recent private statements implying that Peking regards an "invasion" as either possible or likely in the next five or six months appear, therefore, to be part of a psychological warfare campaign. When Peking was apparently genuinely alarmed over possible US-supported Chinese Nationalist landings in June 1962, the Communists moved quickly to bring in heavy reinforcements--as many as seven or eight divisions--for coastal defense opposite Taiwan. There have thus far been no indications that such a move is now contemplated or under way.