



Chinese Nuclear Strategic Policies, 1958-1972: The Impact of External Threats, International Politics, and Technology

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Chinese Nuclear Strategic
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The Impact of External
Threats, Internal Politics,
and Technology (U)

W. W. Whitson

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China's nuclear weapons arsenal have long played an important role in its military calculus towards perceived external and internal threats to the state. In May 1958, China's leaders deliberated and decided to pursue course towards a nuclear weapons program in order to attain self-sufficiency in its security. Prior to, and after 1958, conflicts within China's leadership exposed political and ideological fissures between Party factions, lead by Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi, who respectively viewed military modernization and its nuclear program in terms of ideological values versus quantifiable, cost-benefit economic viewpoints. More recently, with China's military expenditures increasing along with its profile as a contender to U.S. hegemony in the Pacific, emphasis towards a smaller and more modern military have supplanted its nuclear arsenal as the main instrument to confronting perceived threats within the region.

W.W. Whitson's 1973 report analyzes Chinese nuclear policy and weapons options by examining internal political and ideological conflicts between Communist Party factions, alternative stratagems for responding to external versus internal threats, China's nuclear technological capabilities from 1958 to 1972, as well as address the impact such factors had on China's evolving nuclear policy in response to shifts in perceived threats from 1956 to 1972.

Whitson writes:

"In such a context of controversy over economic and social goals and relevant economic, political, and military means, the decision to embark on a nuclear weapons program may mean the death, not only of a preferred set of means for achieving certain goals, but also of political groups that have believed in those means and opposed nuclear weapons at the given stage in the nation's economic development." [page 1]

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org