1972 CINCPAC China Assessment

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Chinese-U.S. relations entered a new phase with the visit by President Nixon to China in February 1972. As a result of the so-called Shanghai Communique, which acknowledged the Chinese claim that Taiwan remained a part of China and envisioned the ultimate withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Taiwan, caused Taiwan to question -- and the Nixon administration to reassure -- the future status of the Mutual Defense Treaty between the two countries.

CINCPAC assessed that the intend of China was to attain the status of a major nuclear power. Consequently, China's profile in the threat assessment was increased to a level comparable to that of the Soviet Union. CINCPAC intelligence concluded that China was becoming "a major producer of nuclear weapons," and that it may have the capability of acumulating 50 to 250 thermonuclear and 250-300 fission weapons by mid-1973. (Note: This estimate of 300-550 warheads is two to four times higher than unofficial authoritative estimates from 1996.)

China's surface-to-surface missile force consisted of 56 weapons, including the first three ICBMs. Approximately 60 surface-to-surface missile launch positions had been detected, including those used for research and development and for training. This compared with only five such sites the previous year.

Despite the increase in number of missiles, however, their full operational nuclear capability seemed far from certain. CINCPAC intelligence could only conclude that, "the possiblity existed at the end of 1972" that China "already possessed a thermonuclear weapon which could be delivered by missile."

China's strategic bomber force increated its inventory of Tu-16 (H-6) aircraft from 40 in 1971 to 55 at the end of 1972. CINCPAC stated that the plane was "capable of carrying a thermonuclear weapon to a radius of 1,650 nautical miles." With this range, China "could strike most targets in the eastern USSR, South Asia, Japan, and the Philippines."

During the year, China set off two nuclear explosions, including the first-ever use of the Q-5 (A-5) supersonic attack aircraft. Conducted on January 7, the Q-5 test involved the so-called loft bombing technique and produced a yield of about 8 Kiloton. The second test was conducted on March 18 and involved a 170 Kiloton bomb dropped from an H-6 bomber.

CINCPAC estimated that China had sufficient ground and air forces deployed opposite Southeast Asia

and the Korean peninsula to permit it to enter into combat operations with little prior buildup and strategic warning. A major Chinese offensive against the Soviet Union, India, or Taiwan, however, would provide advance warning by requiring a major redeployment of forces. Build-up along the Sino-Soviet border continued during the year.

These plans and operations are described in more detail in the selected pages from the 1972 CINCPAC history provided below:

Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, "CINCPAC Command History 1972," August 31, 1973, Volume 1. Only selected pages. Partially declassified and released under FOIA. (0.48 MB)

Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, "CINCPAC Command History 1972," August 31, 1973, Volume 2. Only selected pages. Partially declassified and released under FOIA. (0.17 MB)

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