

# 1980 CINCPAC China Assessment

---

## Recommended Citation

"1980 CINCPAC China Assessment", Nuclear Strategy, January 31, 2000,  
<https://nautilus.org/projects/nuclear-strategy/1980-cinpac-china-assessment/>

---

China did not feature prominently in the U.S. threat assessment for 1980. Focus was on the Soviet build-up, the crisis in Iran, and efforts to bring political stability to the Korean peninsula following the assassination of South Korea's president in 1979. Instead, the normalization of U.S.-China relations in January 1979, "greatly influenced the strategic situation in the Pacific," according to CINCPAC, who also predicted that a period of "increased dialogue" with China had arrived which would enhance U.S. interests.

The new relationship was symbolized by the visit of Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Wenjin to CINCPAC headquarters in Hawaii in March enroute to visits in Washington, D.C. Chinese Vice Premier Geng Biao also visited CINCPAC in June. Both U.S. and Chinese officials expected military relations to increase.

As for the "strategic convergence" between China and the U.S., CINCPAC stated that the defense relationship should focus on "conveying our concern to the Soviets that the world must remain free from hegemony" and that a global balance must be maintained. Yet a China relationship should not only be viewed a card to be played against the Soviet Union, CINCPAC warned. "Caution should be the watchword," he added.

Chinese development of nuclear forces continued at its normal moderate pace. Only a single nuclear test explosion was conducted during the year, and the previous year's ICBM estimated was scaled back from 10 sites to 8. Moreover, the estimate of Chinese ICBM launchers was reduced from 10 to 2-6. CINCPAC explained that only 2 ICBM launchers had been confirmed with the additional 6 being roll-out launch sites. The number of IRBM/MRBM/SRBM sites remained at 61 like the previous year but with a slight increase in the number of launchers. China's efforts to develop a sea-based nuclear force had not materialized with only a single diesel-powered ballistic missile submarine confirmed operational.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 heightened Chinese concern of being encircled by the Soviet Union and its client states. As a result, Beijing made a concerted effort to improve relations with India. The move was undercut, however, by China's military assistance to Pakistan.

The Afghanistan situation also reaffirmed China's concerns over Soviet intentions on its northern border. For the United States, this Sino-Soviet crisis served a useful strategic role by tying down

almost half a million Soviet troops along China's northern border that could otherwise have been assigned to Europe or Japan contingencies. The Soviet regarded the U.S. as their major competitor in the world, CINCPAC concluded, but "they looked on China as their most intractable opponent. China, in turn, considered Moscow as its major threat and deployed 1.8 million man along the northern border. Despite the worrisome force build-up, however, CINCPAC intelligence concluded that there was little likelihood of a Sino-Soviet rapprochement in the near term.

On the Taiwan issue, China's strategy appeared to be "patience" while continuing to promoting the "one China" concept. Nonetheless, CINCPAC believed that it was "essential" to continue to supply Taiwan with weapons and spare parts on a "selective basis." A moratorium on arms sale to Taiwan was lifted in January, except for advanced weapons such as high-performance aircraft. A list of Taiwan arms requests is included in item two below.

CINCPAC also did not consider that China was a threat to Japan. Indeed, it noted that Beijing even encouraged a U.S. military presence there as a counter to the Soviet Union.

On the Korean peninsula, however, CINCPAC intelligence concluded that there was "continuing evidence" that North Korea was improving its military readiness and ability "to take advantage of any opportunity to go on the offensive." No Chinese support, however, was likely in such an endeavor, and the U.S. administration was more urgently involved in trying to prevent the emergence of a military dictatorship following the assassination of South Korean President Park Chung-hee in October 1979.

In a letter to South Korean President Choi in January, U.S. President Carter said that he was "particularly disquieted" by the breach of the chain of command in the South Korean Army and that further disregard for the command relationship would have "serious consequences for our close cooperation." Attempts by the South Korean authorities to regain political control spurred civilian unrest and declaration of Martial Law in all of South Korea. In a subtle warning to North Korea, the U.S. State Department reiterated that the United States would "react strongly in accordance with its treaty obligations to any external attempt to exploit the situation" in South Korea. CINCPAC's account of these tumultuous events and the reorganization of the U.S.-South Korean command relationships is included in the documents provided below.

Despite the unrest, however, the Defense Condition (DEFCON) of U.S. forces in South Korea did not change during the year. The presence of nuclear weapons in exercises, however, did. The Joint Chiefs of Staff considered the inclusion of nuclear weapons in a CINCPAC regional contingency exercise in the fall of 1981, but Secretary of Defense Harold Brown decided that while planning to exercise nuclear capability should be included in *unilateral* exercises, "nuclear play in combined US/ROK exercises should be deferred for the present."

CINCPAC was also concerned that the reductions in forward deployed theater nuclear forces (tactical nuclear weapons) over the past decade "have seriously degraded the capability to support national nuclear objectives." An overall study of the non-strategic nuclear posture was required, CINCPAC felt, which could result in developing a more effective nuclear deterrent "and consequently enhance the effectiveness of combined forces in Korea." JCS responded that they were considering doing such a study.

Selected pages from the 1980 CINCPAC history are provided below:

Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, "CINCPAC Command History 1980," September 18, 1981, Volume 1. Only selected pages. Partially declassified and released under FOIA. (2.21 MB)

Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, "CINCPAC Command History 1980," September 18, 1981, Volume 2. Only selected pages. Partially declassified and released under FOIA. (0.15 MB)

---

Funding for this project was provided by the [The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#) and [Ploughshares Fund](#). For information about the Nuclear Strategy Project contact [Hans M. Kristensen](#).

---

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/projects/nuclear-strategy/1980-cincpac-china-assessment/>

Nautilus Institute

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

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)