

Defense Nuclear Agency: US Nuclear Weapons Policy Toward China 1985-1995

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In February 1981, the Defense Nuclear Agency (DNA) completed a study of US nuclear weapons policy toward China in the period 1985 through 1995. The study, which was completed about eight months before President Reagan signed National Security Defense Document (NSDD)-13 which led to China being removed from SIOP planning, found that the concepts used in targeting of China were "almost exclusively the product of the U.S.-Soviet relationship," and that the United States did not appear to have a specific concept for targeting China. In an attempt to develop recommendations for targeting China to better influence that country in case of war, the study identified three different hypothetical scenarios for U.S.-Chinese nuclear confrontation and generated a set of target categories that would be better suited to impact China. Although the three scenarios were not portrayed as being official and the ones actually used by U.S. nuclear targeters, they nonetheless provide some insight into the philosophy and assumptions that guided U.S. nuclear planning at the time. The three scenarios -- none of which envisioned a crisis over Taiwan or a direct U.S.-Chinese continent-to-continent confrontation -- were

- 1st scenario: Korean War Re-visited: Involves a possible replay of the Chinese decision to intervene in the 1950-53 Korean War. The fact that Korea remains divided and that the long-range prospects for reunification do not appear particularly high, according to the study, "suggests the possibility of U.S. Chinese conflict in the future patterned after events which took place 30 years ago, including the possible use of U.S. nuclear weapons against installation on mainland China."
- 2nd scenario: Proxi-State Crisis: Concerns the possible development of a client or proxy state of China in the third world or perhaps even in a more developed region analogous to the client/proxy status of Albania with respect to China after the Sino-Soviet rupture in the early 1960s. Proxy wars are not an unusual feature of contemporary international relations and there is no reason to believe they will not continue to be a prominent aspect of world politics in the next 20 years.
- 3rd scenario: Catalytic War: The premise here is that, under certain circumstances the Chinese may be convinced that their single best option in a deteriorating political or military situation would be to incur the risks attendant to trying to precipitate a U.S./Soviet nuclear exchange. This scenario

assumes a deteriorating Chinese relationship with either the Soviet Union or the United States, one in which the Chinese were expecting intervention or armed conflict.

From each of these hypothetical scenarios, the study examined seven overall nuclear missions and associated target categories. It concluded that a nuclear strategy of assured destruction doctrine – with its policy of deterrence and retaliation – "may not be suitable with regard to China because of its large population and the dispersion of industrial and agricultural capacity at least through the mid 1990s."

At the same time, the study observed that China is changing and that the Chinese leadership's drive to attain superpower status might make China more "vulnerable" to strategic attack by doing away with the inefficient and decentralized economic planning mode and replacing it with more high-value and centralized facilities that were easier to destroy. This development, coupled with China's "doctrinal and pragmatic inability to engage in sophisticated 'limited strategic' warfare planning," should dictate what the "most threatening targeting option" for the United States should be, the study concluded.

To that end, the DNA study predicted that it should "not be difficult to meet" the hard-target kill requirements for U.S. nuclear war planning against China in the period 1981-1995. Existing weapons should be capable of meeting the requirements of the particular Chinese target categories, although there could be "more than a few score targets" which may require weapons with very high accuracy and, in some cases, earth penetrating capability.

Any U.S. nuclear operation against China, the DNA report stated, would take place against the background of latent or overt Soviet hostility toward the Chinese. To that end, it added, it may be advisable under most circumstances not to target those Chinese weapons that are thought to be dedicated to the destruction or engagement of Soviet forces. Doing otherwise would assist the Soviet Union in a conflict with the United States (this essentially became U.S. policy during the 1980s).

The items below provide links to PDF-versions of the DNA report, which was released under the Freedom of Information Act. Due to its size, the report has been split into four sections listed in chronological order.

- Jack Kangas, et al, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy Toward China 1985-1995," DNA-5895F, February 10, 1981, [pages 1-21](#). Partially declassified and released under FOIA. (0.65 MB).
- continued, [pages 22-53](#) (0.94 MB).
- continued, [pages 54-76](#) (0.58 MB).
- continued, [pages 77-95](#) (0.45 MB).

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