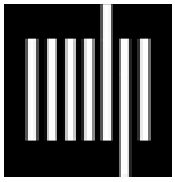

The MIT Press Journals

http://mitpress.mit.edu/journals

This article is provided courtesy of The MIT Press.

To join an e-mail alert list and receive the latest news on our publications, please visit:

http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-mail

Whether to "Strangle the Baby in the Cradle"

The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64

William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson

Less than a year after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) Director William Foster told a historian that Kennedy had been willing to "consider politically dangerous moves" to coerce the People's Republic of China (PRC) into complying with the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty. Foster, whose comments remained classified until 1994, asserted that Kennedy was even willing to sacrifice the proposed U.S.-European multilateral force (MLF) to secure Soviet cooperation "in taking action, if necessary physically, against China." Foster told his interviewer that the president would "think out loud," saying, "You know, it wouldn't be too hard if we could somehow get kind of an anonymous airplane to go over there, take out the Chinese facilities—they've only got a couple—and maybe we could do it, or maybe the Soviet Union could do it, rather than face the threat of a China with nuclear weapons."[1]

That Kennedy and his advisers considered using force against China's nuclear facilities was first documented publicly by historian Gordon Chang in 1988.[2] In that same year, however, the man who had been Kennedy's national security assistant, McGeorge Bundy, downplayed Chang's revelations, claiming that White House discussions of preventive action against China had been simply "talk, not serious planning or real intent." Nonetheless, historians have remained curious about the extent to which President Kennedy spurred the

The authors are senior analysts at the National Security Archive, George Washington University.

Earlier versions of this article appeared in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* as "The China Puzzle," Vol. 53, No. 4 (July/August 1997), and were presented at the 1999 annual meeting of the Society for the Historians of American Foreign Relations. The authors thank Barton Bernstein, William Bundy, Gordon Chang, Lynn Eden, Raymond Garthoff, Robert Johnson, Robert Norris, David Painter, John Prados, David Rosenberg, Walt Rostow, Gen. William Smith (ret'd), J. Samuel Walker, and Paul Wolman for comments, and the W. Alton Jones Foundation for financial support to the National Security Archive, George Washington University.

1. Oral history interview with William C. Foster by Charles T. Morrissey, August 5, 1964, declassified September 1994, copy at John F. Kennedy Library (hereinafter JFKL). The multilateral force was a proposal to meet Western European, especially West German, concern about exclusive U.S. control of nuclear weapons deployed in Europe by establishing a NATO-controlled sea-based missile force.
2. Gordon Chang, "JFK, China, and the Bomb," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (March 1988), pp. 1289–1310.

International Security, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/01), pp. 54–99
© 2000 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

national security bureaucracy to explore means of disrupting China's nuclear efforts.[3]

Now, newly declassified documents show that Kennedy and his advisers did much more than talk. They reveal that the Kennedy administration initiated a massive intelligence effort, including U-2 flights and satellite reconnaissance programs, to break through the secrecy that surrounded the Chinese nuclear program, which had begun in the mid-1950s. The documents show that after Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev rebuffed U.S. overtures for joint moves against the Chinese program, U.S. officials explored military action without the Soviets.

Newly declassified documents make it possible to trace, far more extensively than before, the massive U.S. intelligence effort deployed against China's nuclear program and the interrelationship between that effort and the analysis of China's nuclear progress. Even more significant, the new documentation makes it possible to explore in greater detail than ever the policy debates, discussion, and planning within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations on how to deal with Beijing's nuclear effort.

By the onset of the Kennedy administration, if not earlier, senior U.S. officials saw a Chinese nuclear capability as a serious threat to national security. Supporting this assessment were intelligence analysts, who emphasized the consequences of a nuclear China for the prospect of nuclear "proliferation" and for the stability of East Asia. U.S. intelligence sources also assumed that the Chinese were pursuing the construction of a plutonium-based bomb, which turned out not to be the case.

The new documentation corroborates Gordon Chang's portrait of Kennedy's militancy and shows that Bundy was in fact the point man in countering the Chinese nuclear effort, passing Kennedy's instructions to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), holding secret discussions with Nationalist Chinese officials, and seeking to enlist Soviet diplomats in joint efforts against China's nuclear program. Declassified material discloses that high-level U.S. officials initiated contingency plans for air attacks on Beijing's nuclear facilities and that the president offered support for "action" by the CIA. In particular, after discussing Beijing's nuclear program with Chinese Nationalist Gen. Chiang Ching-kuo in 1963, CIA and Pentagon officials began to shift their thinking to-

3. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 532; and David Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–60," in Steven E. Miller, ed., *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence: An* International Security *Reader* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 127, 143–144.

ward covert and paramilitary options, including the possibility of a raid by Republic of China (ROC) commandos.

The Kennedy administration explored the use of force in the absence of complete information on the Chinese nuclear plan and without a thorough analysis of the likely impact of China's nuclear progress. By late 1963, however, a State Department official, Robert Johnson, concluded that a Chinese nuclear capability would not pose a major threat to U.S. interests, much less change the balance of power in East Asia. Johnson's analysis undercut the alarmist thinking that had motivated the administration's search for coercive options and illustrated the heavy political costs the United States would suffer if Washington acted without Moscow as a partner. Nonetheless, Bundy, now President Lyndon B. Johnson's national security assistant, remained attracted to the use of force.

By late summer 1964, U.S. intelligence had concluded that the Chinese were about to conduct an atomic test. By this time, however, with an election campaign to conduct, the Johnson administration wanted to avoid a direct confrontation. Moreover, the Soviets remained unresponsive to proposals for a joint effort. Thus the Chinese conducted their nuclear test unimpeded on October 16. Their use of highly enriched uranium rather than plutonium startled U.S. intelligence and underlined its lack of solid intelligence on the Chinese effort. In the months that followed, Johnson administration officials continued to consider the use of force, but officials at the top no longer saw such a strategy as viable unless Beijing first launched a major aggressive act against its neighbors. Johnson and his advisers would monitor China's nuclear progress closely and search for ways to delay it through trade controls, but it was clear that the president had tacitly decided to learn to live with the Chinese bomb.

Now, nearly forty years later, the Chinese nuclear weapons program and its potential have been generating intense debate in the national security bureaucracy and the halls of Congress. As in the 1960s, some officials are treating China's nuclear capabilities as a dire threat, while others are pointing to Beijing's emphasis on deterrence. Whether today's policymakers will also avoid overreactions remains to be seen.

We begin by reviewing Chairman Mao Zedong's initial decisions during the 1950s to undertake a nuclear weapons program and the strict secrecy that enveloped it. We then turn to U.S. intelligence's initially unsuccessful effort to pierce Beijing's nuclear secrecy, a problem that intelligence analysts compounded by making faulty assumptions about the direction of Chinese nuclear progress. In the next section, we look at the Kennedy administration's concerns

about a Chinese nuclear capability and its early thinking about ways to offset adverse international reactions to a nuclear China. We next explore the CIA's accelerated effort during 1962 and 1963 to glean intelligence on China, especially the role of U-2 photography in helping analysts delineate the physical scope of China's nuclear program. The estimate that China could test a device within a few years raised alarm at the White House, and President Kennedy encouraged the CIA and other agencies to explore possibilities for preventive action against Chinese nuclear facilities.

After examining U.S. attempts to recruit Moscow for joint action against the Chinese program, we turn to the Kennedy administration's exploration with the Nationalist Chinese government of possible means of preventing China's acquisition of nuclear weapons. We then focus on internal U.S. assessments of the strategic implications of a nuclear China and the pros and cons of military or covert action. A key special national intelligence estimate on a possible Chinese nuclear test is the central element of the subsequent section. That leads to our discussion of two interrelated topics—final policy considerations in the weeks prior to China's October 16, 1964, and the reexamination by intelligence analysts of some of their crucial judgments relating to the likely timing of the Chinese test. We then examine U.S. and international reaction to the test as well as the continued intelligence activities that allowed a better assessment of the Chinese program. In our conclusion we appraise why the United States chose not to act against China's emerging nuclear program and consider the significance of the episode for today's decisionmakers.

China's Emerging Nuclear Program

It was during the 1954–55 confrontation between Beijing and Washington over the offshore islands of Quemoy (Jinmen) and Matsu (Matzu) in the Taiwan Strait that Mao made his initial decisions to develop at least a modest nuclear capability. Recognizing the difficulty of neutralizing U.S. nuclear strength, Mao nevertheless believed that even a few weapons would raise the international prestige of the PRC and its leadership. In January 1955, in the midst of the crisis, he authorized a full-scale effort to make China a nuclear power.[4]

4. John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 11–46. See also Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: U.S. Relations with China since 1949* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 168–174; and Tian-Yu Cao, "Two Critical Moments in China's Strategic Weapons Program," presentation at the National Air and Space Museum, August 23, 2000.

Developing a nuclear arsenal requires scientific and technical expertise, significant industrial effort, and production or acquisition of fissile material. By the mid-1950s, no great mystery remained about the two major means by which such resources could be employed to create nuclear weapons: One process ended with warheads of enriched uranium (made up of 90 percent or more of U-235), the other with plutonium warheads. Which process China would pursue remained unclear to Western sources, however.

Following Mao's decision, research facilities apparently aimed at atomic weapons development began to spring up across China. A second Taiwan Strait crisis in 1958 and U.S. nuclear weapons deployments on Taiwan reinforced, in Mao's view, the wisdom of his earlier decision, and the Chinese government established the Beijing Nuclear Weapons Research Institute in 1958 (it was replaced in 1962 by the Northwest Nuclear Weapons Research and Design Academy—later known as the Ninth Academy—China's version of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, in Qinghai). The government also established the Tongxian Uranium Mining and Hydrometallurgy Institute in 1958.[5]

Also in 1958, construction began on the Baotou Nuclear Fuel Component Plant and the Lanzhou Gaseous Diffusion Plant, which would produce, respectively, uranium tetrafluoride (used in producing enriched uranium) and enriched uranium. In February 1960, ground was broken for construction of a plutonium production reactor at the Jiuquan Atomic Energy Complex, which also contained key facilities involved in the final stages of producing China's atomic weapons. By 1960, construction work on a nuclear test site was also under way in western China, at Lop Nur.[6]

At first, the Soviet Union assisted the Chinese with plans to construct a plutonium production complex. But the Sino-Soviet aid agreement began to fall apart in June 1959, and at the time the Soviets ended their assistance, they had delivered none of the key components for the facility, much less a promised "sample" atomic bomb.[7] The Chinese were now on their own. For their part,

---

5. Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb,* pp. 90, 140–141; and Robert S. Norris, Andrew S. Burrows, and Richard W. Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook,* Vol. 5, *British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), pp. 338, 340.

6. Norris, Burrows, and Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook,* pp. 338, 345; and Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb,* pp. 177–178.

7. Central Intelligence Agency, "China: Plutonium Production Reactor Problems," January 1988; and Odd Arne Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–63* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 157–159, 206–207. See also Victor Gobarev, "Soviet Policy toward China: Developing Nuclear Weapons, 1949–1969," *Journal of Slavic Military History,* Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 1999), pp. 17–31.

U.S. intelligence sources knew that China was pursuing a nuclear development strategy but had little specific knowledge of its extent and capability.

Piercing the Veil

By the early 1960s, Washington had become greatly concerned about China's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. The United States acquired aerial photography of Lanzhou in September 1959, although human as well as communications intelligence efforts appear to have produced only a small amount of specific information.[8]

Thus when the Kennedy administration came to power, the United States' knowledge about Beijing's nuclear progress remained heavily conjectural, and the strict secrecy that cloaked the Chinese program posed formidable obstacles. The Chinese had made no public announcement of the establishment of their nuclear research institutes, had conducted no ribbon-cutting ceremonies at Baotou or Lanzhou, and issued no press releases of the search for a test site in western China. Even within the Chinese program, facilities were generally described by code names or by uninformative titles, such as Plant 404 for Jiuquan.[9]

U.S. intelligence collection capabilities, particularly with respect to China, were limited. Satellite imagery of China became available only in August 1960, and, at first, on an intermittent basis. Meanwhile, the location deep in China's interior of critical nuclear facilities such as Lop Nur and Lanzhou made it difficult to cover such targets with U-2 spy planes, given the bases from which they were flying.

A December 6, 1960, national intelligence estimate (NIE) reflected these limitations. Its authors noted that "our evidence with respect to Communist China's nuclear program is fragmentary as is our information about the nature and extent of Soviet aid."[10] What the United States did know was evident in an NIE issued a week later. The NIE contained brief discussions of the organization of the Chinese program, technical capabilities, uranium ore production,

---

8. Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 13–2–63, "Communist China's Advanced Weapons Program," July 24, 1963. Images of significant primary sources cited in this article, such as this document, may be found at the National Security Archive's web site, http://www.nsarchive.org.
9. Norris, Burrows, and Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook,* pp. 338–341; and Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb,* pp. 121, 318.
10. DCI, NIE 13–60, "Communist China," December 6, 1960, p. 13, copy at National Security Archive.

and fissionable materials. The analysts observed that "Chinese development of uranium resources and their probable construction of ore concentration and uranium metal plants certainly would imply an intended use for the uranium in plutonium production." The NIE also noted that although uranium metal is not required for U-235 production, the initial stages of the process could also supply fuel for U-235 separation.[11]

CIA analysts thus guessed that a first Chinese production reactor could go critical in late 1961, with the first plutonium possibly becoming available in 1962 (with the most probable date for a first detonation being sometime in 1963).[12] The NIE reflected the strong presumption that plutonium, not uranium, would be the key ingredient in producing China's first bomb, as it had been for the other nuclear powers. The process of enriching uranium to a level suitable for use in weapons is laborious, and considerably less plutonium is needed to make a first-generation atomic weapon.[13]

Despite its limitations, the NIE had a significant impact. One State Department official saw it as "one of the most significant among recent intelligence products" because it confirmed the existence of a Chinese nuclear program, and it "advanced the earliest date by which Beijing might be able to explode a nuclear device."[14]

Assessing the Threat and Exploring the Options

The interest that the analysts had in Chinese nuclear developments was matched by the Kennedy administration's concerns about China. Although the Chinese nuclear program was not at the top of the administration's agenda—Cuba, Laos, and Berlin all ranked higher—Kennedy was hostile to Mao's regime and found the prospect of a nuclear China disquieting. The president was unaware of Mao's limited objectives and, one adviser recalled, saw a Chinese

11. DCI, NIE 13–2–60, "The Chinese Communist Atomic Energy Program: Summary and Conclusions," December 13, 1960, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960,* Vol. 19 (hereinafter *FRUS,* with appropriate year, volume, and page numbers) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [U.S. GPO], 1996), pp. 744–747.
12. Ibid.
13. Joel Ullom, "Enriched Uranium versus Plutonium: Proliferant Preferences in the Choice of Fissile Material," *Nonproliferation Review,* Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 1994), pp. 1–5.
14. John M. Steeves, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs (State Department) to Director of State Department Intelligence and Research (INR) Roger Hilsman, "National Intelligence Estimate on Implications of Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability," April 12, 1961, Department of State Records (hereinafter RG 59), Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs Subject, Personnel, and Country File, 1960–1962, box 4, Communist China, January–June 1961.

nuclear test "as likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s."[15]

Kennedy worried enough about China's nuclear ambitions that by June 1961 he wondered whether the increasingly rancorous Sino-Soviet split made it possible for Washington and Moscow to work together to restrain Beijing's nuclear ambitions. As Soviet Premier Khrushchev showed at the June 1961 Vienna summit, he was far from reconciled to the idea of a permanent split and showed no interest when Kennedy brought up the problem of a nuclear China.[16]

During Kennedy's first two years in office, no one in government had prepared a comprehensive analysis of the problem of a nuclear China. Several studies did appear, however. A Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) report in June 1961 concluded, without spelling out the political or military implications, that Beijing's "attainment of a nuclear capability will have a marked impact on the security posture of the United States and the Free World, particularly in Asia." A few months later, a State Department report suggested that a Chinese nuclear capability would pose more political and psychological problems than military ones. According to the latter study, a nuclear China could reap politically significant "psychological dividends" by helping to create feelings that "communism is the wave of the future." Further, for many Asians, a nuclear test would add to the credibility of the Chinese model of economic development. They would raise their estimates of Chinese "mililitary power relative to that of their own countries and the [United States'] capabilities in the area." The implication was that a heightened sense of China's power would create a bandwagon effect, with greater political pressures on states in the region to accommodate Beijing and loosen ties with Washington. Thus a nuclear China could only weaken Washington's influence in the region and its capabilities to intervene on behalf of allies there.[17]

---

15. For Kennedy's China policy, see James Fetzer, "Clinging to Containment: China Policy," in Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–63* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 178–197; Walt Rostow is quoted at p. 182.
16. Gordon Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948–72* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 230–232. See also Chang, "JFK, China, and the Bomb"; and Foot, *The Practice of Power,* pp. 179–180.
17. Memorandum from Joint Chiefs of Staff, "A Strategic Analysis of the Impact of the Acquisition by Communist China of a Nuclear Capability," June 26, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–63*, Vol. 22, pp. 84–85; Policy Planning Council (PPC) Director George McGhee to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "Anticipatory Action Pending Chinese Demonstration of a Nuclear Capability," September 13, 1961, National Archives, RG 59, Records of Policy Planning Staff, 1957–61.

U.S. government officials also saw developments in China as adding to the problems of nuclear proliferation. In early 1961, CIA analysts mused that when China or Israel went nuclear, "other nations might enter the field if only to counter the power and prestige which their rivals or their enemies might gain." Global instability could result because "even a small increase in the number of nations possessing nuclear weapons will add to the dangers inherent in critical situations when they arise." In addition, an increase in the number of states with nuclear-threat capabilities would "increase the chances for irrational and desperate action."[18]

Their limited knowledge notwithstanding, U.S. government officials were anxious to consider ways to mitigate the effects of China's impending nuclear status. For example, in September 1961 the State Department's Policy Planning Council (PPC) director, George McGhee, proposed to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that one way to reduce the psychological impact of a Chinese bomb was to encourage, and perhaps even assist, India, whose own nuclear efforts were already "sufficiently advanced" to test a device first. Showing little interest in the potential impact of a nuclear India for regional stability, McGhee wanted a noncommunist Asian state to "beat Communist China to the punch."[19]

McGhee's scheme found uneven support at the State Department, and it was diluted to a proposal for a quiet, exploratory effort by White House Science Adviser Jerome Weisner during his upcoming trip to South Asia. Weisner could meet with the chairman of India's Atomic Energy Commission and ask what effect a Chinese nuclear weapons capability might have on India's nuclear program. The question might lead to an Indian request for assistance. The proposal was approved by Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles but vetoed by Secretary of State Rusk, who was unconvinced that "we should depart from our stated policy that we are opposed to the further extension of nuclear weapons capability." If the United States abetted nuclear proliferation, Rusk argued, it "would start us down a jungle path from which I see no exit."[20]

---

18. "Estimate of the World Situation," January 17, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 8, p. 8. For background on U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy, see Shane J. Maddock, "The Nth Country Conundrum: The American and Soviet Quest for Nuclear Nonproliferation, 1945–1970," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1997.
19. McGhee to Dean Rusk, "Anticipatory Action Pending Chinese Demonstration of a Nuclear Capability." For an air force proposal to arm U.S. allies with nuclear weapons to counter a Chinese capability, see memorandum to air force chief of staff, "Long-Range Threat of Communist China," February 8, 1961, Library of Congress, Thomas D. White Papers, box 44, Air Staff Actions, 1961.
20. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, memorandum for Executive Secretary Lucius Battle, October 7, 1961, Records of Policy Planning Staff, 1957–61, box 129, China.

Rusk did approve another McGhee proposal. In September 1962, he sanctioned a coordinated overt-covert propaganda campaign to heighten Asian awareness of "U.S. and Free World strength" and to neutralize "awe and unreasoned fear" of China. Besides emphasizing the United States' strategic nuclear superiority, the campaign suggested that China's nuclear program was behind schedule, in hopes of producing a "What took you so long?" reaction to any Chinese detonation.[21]

Concurrent with the efforts to shape world opinion, Robert Johnson, a PPC East Asian specialist, began a series of major studies on the implications and consequences of a Chinese nuclear test and a "regionally significant" nuclear capability. Johnson's mandate was not only to determine the impact of a Chinese nuclear capability but also to consider the policy changes that might be needed to counter its political and diplomatic effects.[22]

New Intelligence

While Johnson worked on the first of his studies, U.S. intelligence was improving its ability to monitor Chinese advanced weapons programs. One source of high-resolution imagery were CIA U-2s flown from Taiwan by Chinese Nationalist pilots. Although the missions were infrequent given the risks involved, beginning in 1961 they covered a number of mainland targets.[23]

Further, the primary U.S. satellite reconnaissance program, code-named CORONA, produced a quantum leap in the ability of the U.S. intelligence community to monitor activities in "denied areas" such as the Soviet Union and China. There had been only two successful CORONA missions prior to the December 1960 NIE, whereas there were twenty-four such missions between January 1961 and June 1963. Moreover, improved resolution of the CORONA cameras and larger film supplies carried by successive camera systems meant more and better photography. Thus a December CORONA 1961 mission provided the first coverage of Lop Nur, although no one in Washington then recognized it as a prospective nuclear test site. In addition, the satellites could

---

21. PPC Director George McGhee to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "Program to Influence World Opinion with Respect to a Chinese Nuclear Detonation," September 24, 1962, RG 59, Central Decimal Files, 1960–63, 793.5611/9-2462.
22. "Nuclear Proliferation," October 15, 1962, RG 59, Records of Policy Planning Council, 1962, box 236, RH Johnson Chron File, 1962, Bulky Report.
23. For the U-2 and the Nationalists, see Chris Pocock, *Dragon Lady: The History of the U-2 Spyplane* (Shrewsbury, England: Airlife, 1989), pp. 90–106, 143–163.

overfly targets that U-2s could not reach or reach only with great difficulty from the available bases.[24]

An April 1962 NIE, whose increased length (twelve pages) reflected the access to new information, also demonstrated continuing intelligence gaps. Moreover, it reflected the continued assumption that plutonium would fuel China's first bomb, even though there was no evidence of construction of a plutonium production facility. The estimators argued that if one assumed "an accelerated and highly successful program for the production of plutonium (specifically the production of 30,000 tons of uranium metal a month) since 1960, the Chinese Communists could detonate an all-plutonium device in early 1963." They considered it unlikely, however, that the Chinese would meet such a schedule and predicted that the "first Chinese test would probably be delayed beyond 1963, perhaps by as much as several years." But whenever China first detonated a device, it appeared highly likely to the analysts that it would be plutonium fired.[25]

In early 1963, the CIA felt White House pressure for more information on Beijing's nuclear efforts. On January 10, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) John McCone met with National Security Assistant Bundy, who told him that Cuba and the Chinese nuclear program were the "two issues foremost in the minds of the highest authority and therefore should be treated accordingly by CIA." McCone had to acknowledge, however, that the agency knew very little for certain about China's progress—hence the need for an expanded effort.[26]

During the months that followed, Taiwanese U-2 flights provided more information. A March 1963 flight detected the nuclear complex at Baotou, although U.S. intelligence mistakenly believed that it harbored a plutonium reactor. State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) official George Denny told Rusk that this showed a capability to produce enough "radioactive material for a few nuclear weapons annually" and that Baotou's discovery confirmed that the Chinese would be "capable of detonating a small nuclear explosion by the end of 1963."[27]

---

24. Robert A. McDonald, "CORONA: Success for Space Reconnaissance, A Look into the Cold War and a Revolution for Intelligence," *Photogrammetric Engineering and Remote Sensing*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (June 1995), pp. 689–720. For lack of knowledge about Lop Nur, see "U.S. and Soviet Knowledge about CHICOM Advanced Weapons Programs," July 9, 1963, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Country Files, 1963–66, box 2, Communist China.
25. DCI, NIE 13–2–62, "Chinese Communist Advanced Weapons Capabilities," April 25, 1962, pp. 3, 11, *FRUS, 1961–63*, Vols. 7–9, microfiche supplement, doc. 266.
26. Editorial note, *FRUS, 1961–63*, Vol. 22, p. 339.
27. ACDA, "Summary and Appraisal of Latest Evidence on Chinese Communist Advanced Weapon Capabilities," July 10, 1963, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Country Files, 1963–66, box 2,

The additional imagery was crucial in producing a July 1963 Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), "Communist China's Advanced Weapons Program." The analysts reported that since the 1962 estimate, "we have received a considerable amount of information, mainly from photography." Yet they also noted that "the gaps in our information remain substantial and we are therefore not able to judge the present state or to project the future development of the Chinese program as a whole with any very high degree of confidence."[28]

The SNIE reflected the new information and the continued gaps. The analysts noted that recent photographic coverage of Baotou showed its "elaborate security arrangements," and that they believed the installation included a small air-cooled plutonium production reactor, with associated facilities for chemical separation and metal fabrication. That the installation resembled a French plutonium reactor apparently led analysts to conclude that it too was a plutonium plant. The Chinese were building a reactor for plutonium weapons at Jiuquan, but it was years away from operation, although U-2 or satellite photography discovered it sometime in 1964.[29]

March and June 1963 U-2 photography of the Lanzhou gaseous diffusion plant showed progress being made on a nearby hydroelectric installation, which intelligence experts believed was designed to supply the plant, as well as transmission lines between the diffusion plant and a thermal electric plant. According to ACDA officials, the gaseous diffusion plant was large enough to contain about 1,800 compressor stages, substantially less than the 4,000 stages required to produce weapons-grade material. But their data were extraordinarily flawed; the Lanzhou facility was only months away from producing enough highly enriched uranium for a weapon. Interestingly, Chiang Kai-shek's intelligence services believed that the Lanzhou reactor was active during 1963, but no one in Washington appears to have given any credence to that report.[30]

Communist China; Pocock, *Dragon Lady,* pp. 92–95; author's interview with Albert Wheelon, Washington, D.C., April 9, 1997; and "The Secretary's Staff Meeting," May 1, 1963, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Briefing Books, box 1, Secretary's Large Staff Meetings, 1963.

28. DCI, SNIE 13–2–63, "Communist China's Advanced Weapons Program," July 24, 1963, p. 1, copy at National Security Archive.

29. Ibid., pp. 2, 4, 5; and Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson to the Secretary of State, "Plutonium Plant in Communist China," May 29, 1963, RG 59, Records of Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson (hereinafter cited as RAALLT), box 23, Secretary—Memos from Ambassador T.; Lewis and Litai, *China Builds the Bomb,* p. 97; and DCI, NIE 13–3–65, "Communist China's Military Establishment," March 10, 1965, copy at National Security Archive.

30. ACDA, "Summary and Appraisal of Latest Evidence on Chinese Communist Advanced Weapon Capabilities"; Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb,* pp. 134–135; and memorandum of

Besides Baotou, U.S. intelligence identified several facilities of the Institute of Atomic Energy, which was responsible for nuclear research and development. One of them, located southwest of Beijing and secretly known to the Chinese as Code 601, housed a Soviet-supplied research reactor as well as a cyclotron. Although the CIA did not know it at the time, Code 601 was playing an important function: It produced ten tons of hexaflouride, an essential product for uranium enrichment at the Lanzhou gaseous diffusion facility.[31]

Information gaps about China's fissile materials capability made it difficult to answer a fundamental question: When was China going to detonate its first atomic bomb? Based on the faulty identification of Baotou as a plutonium production facility and the assumption that plutonium would fuel China's first atomic explosion, the analysts' best guess was as soon as early 1964 but, if "normal difficulties" unfolded, later in 1964 or in 1965. But they also noted that the possible existence of another, undiscovered, plutonium reactor could mean that "the Chinese could achieve a first detonation at any time."[32]

The estimate looked beyond questions of how and when China might first detonate a nuclear device and examined the policy impact of a Chinese bomb, which is what ultimately concerned U.S. decisionmakers. On the one hand, the estimators "did not believe that the explosion of a first device, or even the acquisition of a limited nuclear weapons capability, would produce major changes in Chinese foreign policy in the sense that the Chinese would adopt a general policy of military aggression or even be willing to take significantly greater military risks." Chinese leaders, it was expected, would realize just how limited their capabilities were. Yet the SNIE suggested that "the Chinese would feel very much stronger and this mood would doubtless be reflected in their approach to conflicts on their periphery. They would probably feel that the U.S. would be more reluctant to intervene on the Asian mainland and thus the tone of Chinese policy would probably become more assertive." In a footnote, INR's acting director noted that the two conclusions appeared contradictory.[33]

---

conversation (memcon), "Chinese Communist Atomic Capability," October 28, 1963, W. Averell Harriman Papers, box 588, Memcons "W."

31. ACDA, "Summary and Appraisal of Latest Evidence on Chinese Communist Advanced Weapon Capabilities"; and Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb,* pp. 99–100.

32. DCI, SNIE 13–2–63, "Communist China's Advanced Weapons Program." See Willis C. Armstrong, William Leonhart, William J. McCaffrey, and Herbert C. Rothenberg, "The Hazards of Single-Outcome Forecasting," in H. Bradford Westerfield, ed., *Inside CIA's Private World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995) for a discussion of the estimate of when the first detonation would occur.

33. DCI, NIE 13–2–63, "Communist China's Advanced Weapons Program," p. 10.

Mission to Moscow

While intelligence officers worked on improving their understanding of China's nuclear program, senior policy officials, led by President Kennedy, were considering how to rein in, even "take out," China's nuclear program. With Sino-Soviet hostility increasing, Kennedy hoped that he could enlist Khrushchev's support. During his January 10, 1963, conversation with DCI McCone, Bundy described the president's fear that a nuclear China "would so upset the world political scene [that] it would be intolerable." Thus Kennedy believed that "we should be prepared to take some form of action unless they agreed to desist from further efforts in this field." If McCone initiated any follow-up planning in response to Kennedy's instructions, it remains classified.[34]

Kennedy soon expressed his thinking more directly and to a somewhat broader official audience. At a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) on January 22, 1963, he explained that "our primary purpose [in the treaty negotiations with the Soviets] is to halt or delay the development of an atomic capability by the Chinese Communists." Suggesting that a treaty without Chinese involvement would "not be very meaningful," Kennedy believed that the Russians were as interested as he was in using an agreement as "pressure" against China's quest for a nuclear capability. For Kennedy, this was critically important because the Chinese would be "our major antagonists of the late 60's and beyond," and a nuclear China would endanger the U.S. position in Asia.[35]

Implicit in Kennedy's thinking was the view, shared by area specialists at the CIA and State Department, that the position of the Soviet leadership on peaceful coexistence and the dangers of nuclear escalation was substantially more responsible and less dangerous than Beijing's. Other Kennedy advisers agreed. After the NSC meeting, Ambassador-at-Large W. Averell Harriman wrote to Kennedy; noting Soviet aversion to the possibility of a nuclear-armed Germany, a prospect Harriman also found daunting, he recommended a U.S.-Soviet "understanding" on Germany and China. The components would be nonproliferation and test ban agreements, which were then under discussion

---

34. Editorial note, *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 22, p. 339.
35. "Remarks of President Kennedy to the National Security Council Meeting of January 22, 1963," January 22, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 8, p. 462. See Kendrick Oliver, *Kennedy, Macmillan, and the Nuclear Test-Ban Debate, 1961–63* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), for an account of the relationship between the Chinese nuclear program and the test ban discussions. A few weeks earlier, Secretary of State Rusk had told Japan's Foreign Minister Masayoshi Ohira that a Chinese nuclear test would "destroy" a test ban treaty. Memcon, December 4, 1962, RG 59, 793.5611/12-462.

with the Soviets and the British. Alluding to his own conversations with Soviet diplomats, Harriman seemed to think that they believed that a test ban agreement could be turned against China. If Moscow and Washington reached an agreement, "together we could compel China to stop nuclear development, threatening to take out the facilities if necessary."[36]

Even though the Soviets were vainly seeking to repair the schism with the Chinese and were unlikely to agree to joint military or political action, Kennedy's and Harriman's perceptions of mutual U.S.-Soviet concern over the Chinese nuclear problem had a solid basis. They must have known from CIA reporting that the Soviets had cut off assistance to the Chinese nuclear program. More significant, the implications of Moscow's support for test ban and nuclear nonproliferation agreements were not lost on Beijing. Beginning in August 1962, the Soviets responded positively to U.S. proposals for an international nuclear nonproliferation agreement. Secretary of State Rusk saw China as a target of such an agreement, and its anti-Chinese aspect was evident to Beijing, which bitterly protested Moscow's participation in the talks.[37]

The possibility of a U.S.-Soviet coalition against the Chinese nuclear program shaped a February 1963 request from Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Nitze to the JCS asking for a study of the possibility of using "persuasion, pressure, or coercion" to induce China to sign a test ban treaty. A few months later, on April 29, 1963, the chiefs responded with a lengthy report listing the indirect measures, such as diplomatic and propaganda campaigns, and the direct measures that might coerce Beijing. Measures could be taken unilaterally or by allies, or with the active or tacit support of the Soviet Union. The direct ones included infiltration, sabotage, or invasion by Chinese Nationalists; maritime blockades; a South Korean invasion of North Korea (to put pressure on China's borders); conventional air attacks on nuclear facilities; and the use of a tactical nuclear weapon on a "selected CHICOM [Chinese Communist] target."[38]

---

36. Deputy Assistant Director for National Estimates (CIA) Chester Cooper to Mose Harvey, PPC, "Discussion of the Implications of the Sino-Soviet Dispute for U.S. Policy," March 16, 1962, RG 59, Office of Soviet Union Affairs, Subject File 1957–63, box 6, 22.1 Soviet-Chicom Relations; and Harriman to Kennedy, January 23, 1963, Library of Congress, W. Averell Harriman Papers, John Kennedy General, 1963.

37. DCI, NIE 13–2–62, "Chinese Communist Advanced Weapons Capabilities," p. 9; memcons, August 8 and 23, 1962, *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 7, pp. 541–547, 557; and INR, "Soviet Attitude toward Chinese Communist Acquisition of a Nuclear-Weapons Capability," September 11, 1963, RG 59, Records of Policy Planning Council, 1963–64 (hereinafter cited as PPCR), box 250, China.

38. Gen. Curtis LeMay, acting chairman, JCS, to Secretary of Defense, April 29, 1963, "Study of Chinese Communist Vulnerability," with 31-page appendix attached, RG 59, Office of the Country

If civilian policymakers hoped for unambiguous advice on the prospects and possibilities of coercion, the JCS could not provide it. Acting Chairman Curtis LeMay's cover memo to the longer report concluded that it was "unrealistic to use overt military force" against China because even if Beijing was coerced into signing a test ban agreement, there was no guarantee that it would adhere to one. Moreover, if the United States took unilateral action, whether initiating a blockade or military action, policymakers had to consider the strong prospects for retaliation and escalation, not to mention the difficulty of justifying such an action to international opinion. If the United States acted jointly with the Soviet Union, however, or at least had Moscow's approval, blockades or conventional military measures would be "more effective" in assuring Chinese compliance. Thus if the United States undertook air strikes against PRC nuclear facilities, Soviet cooperation could "well be the difference between escalation and quick acquiescence by the Chicoms."[39]

The JCS were skeptical that Moscow would be interested in cooperating with Washington against Beijing, but the possibility continued to entice civilian officials. Indeed, National Security Assistant Bundy may have been the first senior U.S. official to broach the issue directly with the Soviets. In mid-May, during a meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, Bundy suggested a "private and serious exchange of views" on the Chinese nuclear problem. Dobrynin, however, was not interested. He took issue with U.S. plans for a multilateral force (MLF), the proposed NATO-controlled medium-range ballistic missile force designed to give West Germany and other nonnuclear allies a role in decisions on nuclear weapons use. The MLF had been a sticking point in U.S.-Soviet talks on nuclear nonproliferation and, Dobrynin argued, "did not make it easier for the Soviet Government to deal with the question of Chinese nuclear ambitions." Although Bundy argued that the MLF was in Moscow's interest because it would bind West Germany closer to NATO, thus checking nationalist tendencies and any "adventurous notions" in the Federal Republic, Dobrynin refused to discuss China.[40]

Dobrynin's rebuff did not halt discussion of a joint U.S.-Soviet approach, however. Interest grew after President Kennedy publicly announced on June

---

Director for the Republic of China, 1954–65, box 4, Nuclear Capability. The JCS did not limit options to coercion, but also discussed possible incentives, such as increased trade, food aid, and membership in international organizations.

39. Ibid., p. 26.

40. National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy, "Memcon with Ambassador Dobrynin, at lunch, May 17, 1963," RG 59, RAALLT, box 10, White House, 1962.

10, 1963, that Premier Khrushchev had agreed to receive a high-level U.S. envoy to discuss a test ban treaty. Kennedy chose Ambassador-at-Large Harriman as his representative, but the agenda for the talks with Khrushchev was the subject of some controversy. In part because the JCS—if not Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara—were opposed to a test ban, Arthur Barber, one of Nitze's assistants, argued that Harriman should also broach with Khrushchev the possibility of an agreement on nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. Treating China as a central problem, Barber emphasized the possibility of joint U.S.-Soviet cooperation and prepared a detailed paper, "Aborting the CHICOM Nuclear Capability," that posited U.S.-Soviet cooperation in a series of moves, beginning with "political persuasion" (with Moscow taking the lead) and concluding with "jointly conducted U.S.-Soviet air strikes" against a "minimum complex of [Chinese] installations." Recognizing that the MLF was a stumbling block to Soviet interest in a nuclear nonproliferation agreement, Barber believed that Moscow would never support joint measures against China's nuclear facilities unless Washington changed its nuclear policy toward Europe by dropping or substantially modifying the MLF.[41]

Barber assumed that gaining Soviet cooperation on China by sacrificing the MLF was a strategy worth exploring, as did President Kennedy. Thus during a cabinet meeting held a few weeks before Harriman's mission to Moscow, when ACDA Director Foster mentioned the possibility of U.S.-Soviet cooperation against the Chinese nuclear program, Kennedy raised the possibility of "giving up the MLF concept" as part of a nonproliferation agreement. National Security Assistant Bundy saw the MLF as a "bargaining point," but Secretary of State Rusk promptly objected. The MLF "involved the Allies so deeply" that giving it up was not "a possible position at this time."[42]

Kennedy did not press the MLF point, but he remained interested in the possibility of joint U.S.-Soviet action against the Chinese nuclear program. When he met with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in late June, both men grappled with the problem of how to bind Beijing to a nuclear test ban agreement, even discussing "methods" for preventing nuclear proliferation (the minutes do not specify any details). Macmillan, however, raised the possibility

41. William Y. Smith, NSC staff, "Events Leading Up to the Harriman Moscow Mission," August 21, 1963, *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vols. 7–9, microfiche supplement; and "Briefing Book on U.S.-Soviet Non-Diffusion Agreement for Discussion at the Moscow Meeting," c. June 12, 1963, JFKL, National Security Files, Carl Kaysen Papers, box 276, Nuclear Energy Matters. For internal Pentagon divisions on a test ban, see *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 7, pp. 719–722.
42. William C. Foster oral history; and editorial note, *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 7, p. 735.

of a "joint note with the Russians to the Chinese," and Kennedy agreed that ways had to be found to restrain the Chinese to make a test ban effective. Once the Chinese tested, Kennedy declared, the United States would have to resume testing, suggesting that a test ban agreement could lapse under such circumstances. Discussions with the Russians were essential.[43]

Soon after arriving in Moscow on July 14, Harriman received a message from Kennedy instructing him to emphasize to Khrushchev that a nuclear China, even with small forces, "could be very dangerous to us all." The president wanted Harriman to explore Khrushchev's thinking on "limiting or preventing Chinese nuclear development and his willingness either to take Soviet action or to accept U.S. action aimed in this direction."[44] Although Harriman successfully finalized agreement on a Limited Test Ban Treaty, he failed to catch Khrushchev's interest in any discussion of political or other steps against China. As long as France was going to hold out against the test ban, Khrushchev could not agree to isolate Beijing. Moreover, the premier played down the Sino-Soviet split and rejected Harriman's view that a nuclear China could threaten Moscow. Khrushchev also played down the dangers of China's nuclear ambitions, observing that a nuclear-armed Beijing would become "more restrained." "Whenever someone lacked [nuclear] means he was the one who shouted the loudest."[45]

Khrushchev had to be loath to discuss with U.S. envoys the possibility of applying pressure on China. A PRC delegation led by Deng Xiaoping had just broken off a round of bitter ideological debates, possibly because Harriman and his party were in Moscow negotiating the test ban. Some of the Soviet leadership were dismayed by the polemics with Beijing, and Khrushchev would have found it politically untenable to discuss action against a fraternal socialist country, no matter how wayward.[46]

Continued Sino-Soviet tensions led U.S. policymakers to speculate about a possible opening against the Chinese nuclear effort. Certainly Kennedy's apprehension did not lessen, and he may have instructed senior defense officials to look closely at the possibilities of military action. During a press

---

43. Memcons, June 29 and 30, 1963, in *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 7, pp. 753–754, 758.
44. Telegram to Moscow embassy, July 15, 1963; and Moscow embassy telegram to State Department, July 27, 1963, both in *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 7, pp. 801, 860.
45. U.S. embassy, Moscow, telegram to State Department, July 27, 1963, in *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 7, p. 860; Oliver, *Kennedy, Macmillan, and the Nuclear Test-Ban Debate,* pp. 205–206; and Vladislav Zubok, "Look What Chaos in the Beautiful Socialist Camp: Deng Xiaoping and the Russians, 1956–1963," *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project,* Vol. 10 (Winter 1987/98), pp. 152–162.
46. Zubok "Look What Chaos in the Beautiful Socialist Camp."

conference on August 1, he spoke of a "menacing situation"; acknowledging that it would take some years before China could "become a full-fledged nuclear power. . . . We would like to take some steps now which would lessen that prospect." Only the day before, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs William Bundy had secretly tasked the JCS to prepare a contingency plan for a conventional attack designed to cause the "severest impact and delay to the Chinese nuclear program." Presumably this request had the approval of Secretary of Defense McNamara, but the latter's role in discussions of China remains, so far, obscure.[47]

Exploring Options with the Chinese Nationalists

A visit to Washington in September 1963 by Chiang Kai-shek's son, Gen. Chiang Ching-kuo—Taiwan's feared "security czar"—occasioned talk of possible "steps" against Beijing's nuclear program, but this time with an old ally, the Nationalist Chinese, instead of a Cold War adversary. DCI McCone had invited Chiang for discussions, which centered on long-standing differences between Washington and Taipei over military operations against the PRC. The dialogue easily shifted to the possibility of action against the Chinese nuclear program.[48]

No doubt concerned that a nuclear-armed China would end any hopes for a return to the mainland, Chiang Ching-kuo raised the issue of attacking China's nuclear facilities on several occasions. A day before his meeting with Kennedy, Chiang visited CIA headquarters, where he took part in discussions on the possibility of airborne raids against the facilities. Later, in the company of the CIA's deputy director of intelligence and former chief of station in Taiwan, Ray Cline, and his successor, William Nelson, Chiang met National Security Assistant Bundy, to discuss strikes against the mainland, including antinuclear operations. Although Bundy favored measures to "weaken" the PRC, he doubted that plans to seize territory would work and counseled against action that could realign Beijing with Moscow or "trigger a major conflict." Chiang brought up possible action against Beijing's nuclear installations, suggesting that the United States provide "transportation and technical assistance" for a commando operation. Bundy responded that the "United States is very inter-

47. "The President's News Conference of August 1, 1963," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1964), p. 616; and *FRUS, 1964–68*, Vol. 30, p. 24, n. 7.

48. Memorandum for McGeorge Bundy, "Meeting of General Chiang Ching-kuo with the President," September 10, 1963, JFKL, National Security Files, Countries, box 24, China General, September–October 1963. The public cover story was that the State Department had invited Chiang.

ested in whether something could be planned" that could have a "delaying and preventive effect on the nuclear growth of China." He believed, however, that those measures needed "most careful study."[49]

On September 11, an extended discussion between Kennedy and Chiang prompted the president to question the proposal to send commandos against Chinese nuclear installations. He asked "whether it would be possible to send 300 to 500 men by air to such distant . . . atomic installations as that at Baotou, and whether it was not likely that the planes involved would be shot down." According to the record, Chiang replied that the commando raid proposal "had been discussed by CIA officials yesterday and that they had indicated that such an operation was feasible." Kennedy's query suggested some doubts about the proposal's feasibility, and other comments emphasized the importance of "realistic" plans to "weaken the Chinese Communist regime." To avoid another Bay of Pigs operation "based more on hope than on realistic appraisals," Washington and Taipei needed better intelligence about conditions on the mainland. In that way, Kennedy argued, "whatever action is undertaken would fit the actual situation."[50]

A few days later, Chiang met with McCone to formalize the understandings that the general had reached with Kennedy and his advisers. With respect to action against PRC nuclear installations, McCone and Chiang agreed to establish a planning group to study the feasibility of attacks by Nationalist teams against nuclear sites. Any operations would require joint approval by top authorities. Unfortunately, details about the activities of the U.S.-ROC planning group on Chinese nuclear targets are unavailable.[51]

Possibilities and Pitfalls of Direct Action

In the fall of 1963 and beyond, the issue of what, if anything, to do about the Chinese nuclear program occupied not only meetings of high U.S. government

---

49. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Edward Rice to Ambassador Ting-Fu Tsiang, October 14, 1963, enclosing record of Chiang-Kennedy meeting, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1963, POL Chicom-AK; and CIA Far East Division Chief William E. Colby to McGeorge Bundy, "Visit of General Chiang Ching-kuo," September 19, 1963, enclosing record of conversation, *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vols. 12, 14, microfiche supplement, doc. 67.
50. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Rice to Ambassador Ting-Fu Tsiang, October 14, 1963.
51. Background Paper, "U.S.-G.R.C. Consultations Concerning Possible Action against the Mainland," and memorandum for the record, September 1963, on Understandings Reached during Chiang Ching-kuo's Visit," n.d., both enclosed in State Department Executive Secretary Benjamin Read to National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy, "The President's Meeting with Chinese Minister of Defense Chiang Ching-kuo on September 23 at 11:30 A.M.," September 18, 1965, RG 59. Formerly Top Secret Foreign Policy Files, 1964–66, box 11, POL Chinat-U.S.

officials but leading journalists as well—none more so than the well-connected and influential columnist Stewart Alsop. In *Saturday Evening Post* columns published in September and October, Alsop wrote about the "madness of Mao Tse-tung" and the necessity and feasibility of military action against Beijing's nuclear program. He asserted that the "president and his inner circle . . . have agreed in principle that China must be prevented, by whatever means, from becoming a nuclear power." "Nuclear sterilization" would require force, which Alsop characterized as a "technically easy problem" that could be accomplished with a "few rather small bangs."[52]

Behind locked doors, in the weeks after Chiang Ching-kuo's visit, the Kennedy administration continued to review options that would create a few small bangs. Apparently, the possibility of air dropping Taiwanese sabotage teams and other covert options got a close look at the CIA at least through the beginning of 1964.[53] Moreover, the Pentagon studied paramilitary options. On November 18, 1963, JCS Chairman Maxwell Taylor presented his colleagues with a paper on "how we can prevent or delay the Chinese from succeeding in their nuclear development program" slated for discussion at their next meeting. The listing of the agenda item—"Unconventional Warfare Program BRAVO"—indicates the paramilitary nature of the contemplated action. It may have been this paper or some variant that Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric sent to McCone a month later, noting that the JCS had recommended an interagency group to "consider ways and means for impeding the Chinese Communist nuclear program." That such action had been under serious consideration is indicated by an unsuccessful U.S.-directed Chinese Nationalist attempt in the fall of 1963 to fly a U-2 equipped with an infrared camera

52. Stewart Alsop, "The Real Meaning of the Test Ban," and "The Madness of Mao Tse-tung," *Saturday Evening Post,* September 28 and October 26, 1963, respectively. Stewart was not as close to Kennedy as was his brother, Joseph, but had access to the president and his advisers. See Robert W. Merry, *Taking on the World: Joseph and Stewart Alsop—Guardians of the American Century* (New York: Viking, 1996), pp. xviii, 374, 398.

53. Several documents mention that covert options, including a commando raid, had been under tudy. See George Rathjens, ACDA, "Destruction of Chinese Nuclear Weapons Capabilities," December 14, 1964, copy available on the National Security Archive's web page; Robert H. Johnson, PPC, to PPC Director Walt Rostow, "Direct Action against Chicom Nuclear Facilities," February 12, 1964, PPCR, box 265, Chron File, R. Johnson, January–June 1964; and memorandum for the president, "The Implications of a Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability," April 17, 1964, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1964–66 (hereinafter SN 64–66), DEF 12–1 Chicom. An excised version of the Rathjens paper, with commentary, was first published by Shane Maddock, "LBJ, China, and the Bomb," *SHAFR Newsletter,* Vol. 27, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 1–5.

over the suspected plutonium reactor at Baotou, to determine whether it was hot—and thus off limits to military attack.[54]

In addition, the JCS responded to Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy's earlier request for a contingency plan for a conventional attack to retard Chinese nuclear development. In mid-December, they completed a plan for a multiple-sortie attack designed to cause severe damage and delays. Nevertheless, the large number of sorties required by the plan probably encouraged the JCS to propose looking into a possible nuclear attack on the same facilities, a proposal that was undoubtedly disregarded.[55]

Sometime in the fall of 1963, additional pressure came from Chester Bowles, who had become U.S. ambassador to India. No doubt, Bowles worried that unless Washington acted, Indian fear of a Chinese nuclear capability, especially in light of the 1962 border war with Pakistan, could stimulate nuclear proliferation in South Asia. Bowles's militant stance on China stood in interesting contrast to his opposition to the Bay of Pigs operation in 1961.[56]

Kennedy did not think exclusively in terms of military options; the president and his advisers also worked to elicit Soviet cooperation on a nuclear nonproliferation agreement partly aimed at China. Secretary of State Rusk discussed nonproliferation with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at the United Nations in the fall of 1963. When Gromyko raised the MLF problem, Rusk needled him by observing that Moscow "had lost its virginity" when it aided China's nuclear program. The Soviets were nonetheless interested in a nonproliferation agreement, and Gromyko discussed one with Kennedy on October 10. Showing some willingness to exert indirect pressure on the PRC, Gromyko acknowledged than an agreement would make China's "political situation more difficult and delicate," presumably by increasing the PRC's isolation and raising pressures on it to follow nonproliferation standards.[57]

---

54. JCS Chairman Maxwell Taylor, memorandum for Gen. LeMay, Gen. Wheeler, Adm. McConald, and Gen. Shoup, "Chinese Nuclear Development," November 18, 1963, National Archives, RG 218, Taylor Papers, box 1; and Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric to DCI McCone, December 13, 1963, summarized in *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 22, p. 405, n. 3; and Wheelon interview.
55. *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, p. 24, n. 7; and Johnson to Rostow, "Direct Action against Chicom Nuclear Facilities."
56. Information from a retired CIA officer who read Bowles's message to the State Department.
57. Memcon, "World Reaction to Test Ban Treaty," September 28, 1963, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Conferences Files, 1949–63, box 327, CF 2318; memcon, "Non-Dissemination and the MLF," October 10, 1963, JFKL, National Security Files, Countries, box 187, Gromyko—Talks. A few days after the late-September Gromyko-Rusk meeting, the latter alluded to Soviet objections to the MLF

Kennedy asked when China would have the bomb, but Gromyko said he did not know and added, rather defensively, that "the USSR did not give anything to the Chinese." Whether Kennedy took Gromyko aside to see if the Soviets were interested in cooperative action against the Chinese nuclear program is unknown.[58]

While Kennedy considered moves against China, State Department policy planners had begun to step back and look skeptically at claims that Beijing's nuclear program would have an "intolerable" impact. For example, in early July 1963, only a few weeks before Harriman tried to open discussion with Khrushchev about the possibility of cooperation against the Chinese nuclear program, PPC Director Walt Rostow informed him that the minimal nuclear capability that Beijing could develop was unlikely to "convince . . . anyone" that it could be "used as an umbrella for aggression." Not only would "U.S. overwhelming nuclear superiority" deter Beijing, its "desire to preserve its nuclear force as a credible deterrent might tend to make China even more cautious than it is today in its encounters with American power."[59]

Rostow's argument about a Chinese nuclear capability was brief and impressionistic because one of his staffers, Robert Johnson, had already completed the first draft, more than 200 pages long, of a major study entitled "A Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation and Nuclear Capability." By October 1963, Johnson had prepared a shorter (100-page) version for wider distribution. He had worked closely with a group of officials from the Departments of State and Defense, ACDA, the CIA, and the U.S. Information Agency, and the shorter version had "[their] broad agreement." Some of President Kennedy's advisers considered making the report available to him, but he probably never saw it.[60]

Eschewing language about a "menacing situation," Robert Johnson's studies were decidedly nonalarmist. Their conclusion about the implications of a Chinese nuclear capability—that it would not require Washington to make any

---

when he told Gromyko that "the Soviet Union had slept with China and therefore could not protest that we were holding the hand of Miss Germany." Memcon, "Bombs in Orbit," October 3, 1963, Executive Secretariat Conference Files, box 327, CF 2320.

58. Memcon, "Non-Dissemination and the MLF.

59. PPC Director Walt Rostow to Governor W. Averell Harriman, "Non-Proliferation," July 2, 1963, Harriman Papers.

60. "A Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation and Nuclear Capability," June 17, 1963, RG 59, PPCR, box 276, S/P Papers June–July 1963; "Policy Planning Statement on a Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation and Nuclear Capability," October 15, 1963, PPCR, box 275, S/P Papers; Henry Owen, PPC, to Secretary of State, "A Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation and Nuclear Capability," October 7, 1963, PPCR, box 271, Chron File October–December 1963; and *FRUS 1961–63,* Vol. 22, p. 405, n. 4.

significant policy changes—flowed from Johnson's assumption that a Chinese capability "will not, for the indefinite future, alter the real relations of power among the major states or the balance of military power in Asia." For Johnson, the "great asymmetry in Chinese Communist and U.S. capabilities and vulnerabilities" minimized the Chinese nuclear threat. A nuclear China would be within range of American striking power but not vice versa, forcing it to "take account of the danger of a U.S. nuclear or non-nuclear counterforce attack as a possible response to major . . . aggression." This made it "exceedingly unlikely" that the Chinese would use nuclear weapons first, unless the mainland was under "serious attack." In Johnson's view, the Chinese wanted a nuclear force to deter an attack on their territory and were unlikely to change their essentially prudent, risk-adverse military policy.[61]

Although he minimized the military risks, Robert Johnson was not sanguine about the political implications of a Chinese nuclear test. He believed that Chinese leaders were unlikely to make "gross public threats," but they were apt to believe that a nuclear capability could "weaken the will" of U.S.-allied neighbors and induce them to accommodate China, thereby eroding the U.S. presence in East Asia. Although Beijing might be more willing to take risks in military probing operations because of an overoptimistic assessment of its psychological advantage, Johnson nonetheless argued that the Chinese would avoid measures that could have "seriously adverse counter-effects."

In emphasizing Chinese caution, Johnson showed the influence of the State Department's INR, which had prepared special studies designed to assist his work. Its most comprehensive report held that a nuclear-armed China would "eschew rash military actions" or even "nuclear blackmail"; instead it would use its new capability as a "political weapon . . . to earn respect, to promote neutralism, to encourage revolutionaries."[62]

Robert Johnson argued that to neutralize any political benefits that a small nuclear capability would provide Beijing, the United States need not do much more than it was already doing. On the political-military front, once Beijing had tested a weapon, the United States had to be ready to provide "reassurance" to friendly countries that it would help them in a confrontation with China. Reassurances could counter "the effectiveness of Chinese . . . pressures and the possibility of the development of independent nuclear capabilities by

61. Quotations in this paragraph and the next are from the October 15, 1963, study, pp. 6–12.
62. Author's interview with Robert H. Johnson, March 3, 1999; and George C. Denney, INR, to the Secretary, "Probable Consequences of a Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation," May 6, 1963, RG 59, PPCR, box 250, China.

Asian countries." To back up its assurances, Washington needed an "evident ability to respond rapidly with adequate force to Communist military probes without undue reliance upon nuclear weapons." Any increase in Washington's reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence or for responding to "non-nuclear aggression," Johnson argued, would make friendly countries more likely to work with Beijing than with Washington. This meant that he expected that the Kennedy administration's flexible response strategy, with its nonnuclear emphasis, could adequately deter Beijing.[63]

No version of Robert Johnson's studies ever received high-level sanction, but they had "official" standing as the basic State Department position and were considered authoritative enough to be summarized for President Johnson in April 1964. As Robert Johnson suggested many years later, he was interested in exposing the bureaucracy to nonalarmist thinking about the implications of a nuclear-armed China. "The point was to assure, as far as possible, that all parts of the government were singing from the same sheet of music," which was not "going to happen automatically," as was shown by the pressure from President Kennedy and McGeorge Bundy.[64]

The PPC's thinking had immediate impact. During a mid-October meeting with senior State Department officials, Rusk reviewed Robert Johnson's study and was favorably impressed. A few weeks later, Rostow's interagency planning group discussed Johnson's paper as well as the problem of "how to strangle the baby in the cradle" before Beijing tested a weapon. At least one official present, NSC staffer Robert Komer, believed that Johnson's estimate had made the issue of preventive action largely irrelevant. As he reported to McGeorge Bundy, "If my reading of the thrust of the [Johnson] paper is correct,"—that Beijing would remain "basically cautious"—"there would be less incentive for us" to attack Chinese facilities.[65]

---

63. Quotations from the October 15, 1963, study, pp. 41–47.
64. Johnson interview; and letter from Robert H. Johnson, May 6, 1999. For the "official" status of Johnson's October 15, 1963, report, see Lindsay Grant, State Department Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green, "Baguio Conference: Talking Points on the Chinese Communist Nuclear Question," May 25, 1964, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Regional Affairs, SN 64–66, box 1, Politico-Military Conference (BAGUIO). One of the highly abridged versions prepared for President Johnson unquestionably reached his desk; it was attached to Secretary of State Rusk's daily briefing. See memorandum for the president, "Items for Evening Reading," May 1, 1964, RG 59, President's Evening Reading Reports, box 1, President's Evening Reading Items, 1964.
65. "Highlights from the Secretary's Policy Planning Meeting Held October 15, 1963," October 24, 1963; and Robert W. Komer, NSC, to National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy, November 5, 1963, both in *FRUS, 1961–63,* Vol. 22, pp. 399–402, 404–405.

Komer's skepticism about preventive action was not enough to stop the ongoing planning at the CIA and Pentagon, but it may have been enough to give some senior officials pause for thought about the policy implications of the use of force. For all of the talk about taking out Chinese nuclear facilities, no one on the civilian side had subjected the idea to a detailed analysis. Sometime in the fall of 1963, Rostow "committed" to Rusk that he would have the PPC prepare a substantive study on forms of direct action against Chinese nuclear facilities. Given his expertise, Robert Johnson was selected to lead this project, which he coordinated with officials at the CIA and the Defense Department.[66]

While Robert Johnson was working on his study, President Kennedy was assassinated, leading to Lyndon Johnson's succession. The new president recognized the need for a more flexible China policy, but he was nevertheless ambivalent. In a phone conversation with Senator Richard Russell, only weeks after he came to power, Johnson said that "there's [no] question" that sooner or later the United States would have to recognize the PRC, although as Russell observed, such action was then "politically poison." The strength of the Taiwan lobby undoubtedly influenced the president's calculations, but he was also troubled by China's influence in East Asia, seeing it as a significant threat to American power and credibility in the Pacific.[67]

It would be months before Lyndon Johnson would take a position on military action against Chinese nuclear facilities, but NSC officials such as Robert Komer still saw no need for overreaction. Nevertheless, Komer's superior, National Security Assistant Bundy, wanted to see more work on preventive action, noting that he was "for it" (whether he meant action or more analysis is not clear). And the president had his own concerns. Showing some anxiety about the impending presidential campaign and a nuclear-capable China, Johnson told *Time* magazine correspondent Hugh Sidey that "we can't let [Barry] Goldwater and Red China both get the bomb at the same time. Then the shit would really hit the fan." Nevertheless, unlike his predecessor, Johnson made no public comments about China's nuclear program, much less remarks about taking "steps" against it.[68]

---

66. Johnson to Rostow, "Direct Action against ChiCom Nuclear Facilities."
67. Editorial note, *FRUS 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 3, 23–24; Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), p. 579; and Lloyd Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), pp. 115–117.
68. Robert W. Komer, NSC, to National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy, February 6, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 23–24; for Bundy's "I'm for it," ibid., p. 24, n. 8; Johnson quotation from Gardner, *Pay Any Price,* p. 119. For the Komer-LBJ relationship, see John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys:*

In mid-April 1964, Robert Johnson completed his study "An Exploration of the Possible Bases of Action against the Chinese Communist Nuclear Facilities." Owing to its highly sensitive subject matter, the study was classified "top secret." It remains classified, although its excised conclusions appear in the State Department's *Foreign Relations* series. Fortunately, several declassified reports, one prepared by Johnson himself, summarize major issues and arguments in the study.[69]

Robert Johnson identified four methods of attack: an overt nonnuclear air attack by the United States, an air attack by the ROC, covert ground attacks employing agents in China, and an air drop of ROC sabotage teams. A U.S. air attack, Johnson suggested, was problematic, because it would take too many sorties to destroy targets completely. A ground attack involving Chinese agents was impractical because such assets were unavailable. The Nationalists lacked the capabilities to stage their own air raid, and the United States could not convincingly disguise any assistance that it provided. If, however, the Nationalists dropped a 100-man team, they could cause great damage but not destroy a facility completely.[70]

Preventive military action (whether overt or covert) had, Johnson wrote, significant advantages: Destroying China's nuclear facilities would remove "the immediate incentive and justification for Indian development of nuclear weapons and the possible movement of Japan in the same direction." Further, China would lose the "political-psychological" and "defense" advantages provided by a nuclear capability.[71]

Robert Johnson also identified great disadvantages to any violent option. First, with all the gaps in intelligence about the PRC's nuclear program, Washington may not have identified all of the relevant targets. Second, an attack would only "buy some time," perhaps four or five years. Given Beijing's determination to acquire a nuclear deterrent, it was likely to try to restart the nuclear program and would probably build underground facilities and

---

A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush (New York: William T. Morrow, 1991), p. 120.

69. "An Exploration of the Possible Bases for Action against the Chinese Communist Nuclear Facilities," April 14, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 39–40; Robert Johnson to members of PPC, "The Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability and Some 'Unorthodox' Approaches to the Problem of Nuclear Proliferation," June 1, 1964, PPCR, box 264, Johnson, Chron File, January 1964, Bulky Reports; and Rathjens, "Destruction of Chinese Nuclear Weapons Capabilities."

70. Rathjens, "Destruction of Chinese Nuclear Weapons Capabilities."

71. Quotations in this and the next paragraph are from Johnson, "The Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability and Some 'Unorthodox' Approaches to the Problem of Nuclear Proliferation," June 1, 1964.

strengthen air defenses to prevent another attack. Third, Chinese retaliation, perhaps against Taiwan or U.S. bases in East Asia, could not be dismissed. Finally, an unprovoked attack could entail heavy foreign policy costs. Overseas and domestic critics would argue that the attack exemplified the United States' "unwillingness to accept the existence of Communist China as a major world actor." Others would argue that the action contradicted U.S. efforts to downplay the significance of a Chinese nuclear capability. Still others would charge the United States with racism by singling out China or point out the "grave risks of precipitating war."

A case for action that could win international acceptance would be one based on worldwide arms control agreements, such as treaties on nonproliferation and inspected suspension of nuclear materials production. Once such agreements had been negotiated, international opinion might accept action against China if it was overtly flouting them. By the time that such treaties had been negotiated, however, they would have little force against China because it would probably have already tested a nuclear weapon; like France, it would be an "existing" nuclear power. In any event, the French were unlikely to support such agreements. Unless they did, the Soviets would not support action singling out China. Further, Johnson saw Soviet acquiescence in U.S. action against China as "highly unlikely."[72]

Johnson believed that world opinion would be more likely to accept military action in response to aggression, for example, if Chinese forces openly intervened on the communist side in limited wars in Laos or Vietnam. The problem was that complete destruction of the known facilities would take sizable bomber attacks against sites deep within China's. Beijing or Moscow could readily misinterpret what was supposed to be a "limited war action" as the beginnings of a major attack on the mainland. The possibility of "retaliatory action . . . could not be ruled out."[73]

---

72. The last quotation is from "An Exploration of the Possible Bases for Action against the Chinese Communist Nuclear Facilities," p. 40. Some State Department experts on the Soviet Union argued that, from a pure balance-of-power standpoint, the United States should not work with Moscow against Beijing because a small Chinese nuclear capability "could interpose something of a deterrent to Soviet military pressure but . . . not threaten the U.S." A balance-of-power approach resonated with the thinking of influential China hands such as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green, but whether it carried any weight elsewhere remains to be seen. See Helmut Sonnenfeldt, INR, to INR Director Thomas Hughes, April 14, 1964, enclosing "The U.S. Interest in Communist China," October 14, 1963, RG 59, Records of the Office of the Counselor, 1955–77, HS Chron File, July–December 1963.

73. Johnson, "The Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability and Some 'Unorthodox' Approaches to the Problem of Nuclear Proliferation," June 1, 1964.

An earlier conclusion of Robert Johnson's study—that the Chinese nuclear threat was not serious enough to "justify . . . actions which would involve great political costs or high military risks"—flowed from his earlier analyses of Chinese prudence. Given the possible advantages of direct action, such as preventing a "chain reaction" of nuclear proliferation in Asia, Johnson allowed that a covert approach was the "most politically feasible form of action" as long as the United States could disassociate itself from it. Nevertheless, although a Nationalist sabotage team could conceivably destroy the Baotou facility, if it was determined that action against the others (e.g., at Lanzhou) was also necessary, then the problem was more complex. "Near-simultaneous attacks would be necessary and perhaps difficult to manage." Further, a Chinese retaliatory attack on Taiwan would put Washington "in a very difficult international position." In general, Johnson's preference was to reserve the covert option in the event of open Chinese aggression because its implementation would not involve the high risks associated with a U.S. bomber attack.[74]

Robert Johnson's analysis was implicitly contrary to President Kennedy's thinking in 1963. That is, Johnson argued that preventive action against China's nuclear program was dangerous and likely to fail and that it could hurt the United States' image and weaken its prestige, the intangible assets of world power.

Robert Johnson later wrote that his study reflected a "broad interdepartmental consensus," which suggested that its conclusions would carry no small weight when senior officials considered Chinese nuclear potential. But its immediate reception—even whether President Johnson saw it or received a briefing on it—remains obscure.[75] On April 20, 1964, only a few days after the report reached the White House, however, National Security Assistant Bundy and NSC staffer Michael Forrestal told colleagues that they were dissatisfied with another report from Rostow that summarized Robert Johnson's thinking on the implications of a nuclear China. According to JCS Chairman Taylor's assistant, Col. William Smith, Bundy and Forrestal believed that the paper "defused the issue too much" because a Chinese nuclear capability would "have

74. *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 39–40; and Johnson "The Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability and Some 'Unorthodox' Approaches to the Problem of Nuclear Proliferation."
75. Robert Johnson to Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, "The Secretary's Speech on the Far East and the Chicom Nuclear Problem," September 4, 1964, SN 64–66, DEF 12–1 Chicom. The copy of Johnson's April 14 report at the Johnson Library has no markings on it indicating that the president saw it or that Bundy read it. Telephone conversation with Senior Archivist Regina Greenwell, Lyndon Johnson Library, May 5, 1999.

far greater political consequences" than Rostow believed. Given Bundy's inclination toward preventive action against China, he may also have felt that Robert Johnson's analysis of military attacks was not positive enough.[76]

Perhaps to counter Bundy's apprehensions, and certainly to ensure that the president saw the PPC's analysis, at the end of April Rusk sent the president a highly condensed summary of Robert Johnson's thinking on the Chinese nuclear problem. Besides mentioning the continuing study of the covert option, the summary included one of the major conclusions of the report on direct action: that preventive military action was "undesirable except possibly as part of general action . . . in response to major ChiCom aggression." Given Rusk's friendly reception of Johnson's earlier work on China, this action served as a tacit and high-level endorsement for PPC thinking generally and that conclusion in particular.[77]

While U.S. discussion continued, the first eight months of 1964 saw a steady march toward production of China's first atomic bomb.[78] Even though faulty intelligence data led Robert Johnson to conclude that the Lanzhou facility was "incomplete and possibly incompleteable," by mid-January it had produced its first satisfactory highly enriched uranium and then began initial operations. Moreover, in April, the Jiuquan complex produced the first nuclear components for the bomb. In June, the Ninth Academy conducted a successful full-scale simulation blast test. On August 19, workers at Jiuquan assembled China's first nuclear test explosive, including the nuclear core, to verify its design.[79]

A New Estimate on Chinese Progress

To get a fix on China's nuclear progress, the U.S. intelligence establishment worked overtime to penetrate the ring of secrecy surrounding the effort. Some clues came from clandestine sources. Early in 1964, Robert Johnson and other

---

76. Memorandum by William Y. Smith, "Daily White House Staff Meeting," April 20, 1964, in *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 56–57.
77. Memorandum for the president, "Items for Evening Reading," May 1, 1964, RG 59, President's Evening Reading Reports, box 1, President's Evening Reading Items, 1964.
78. Enough interest in covert or military action against China's nuclear facilities continued for Johnson to recapitulate for a PPC discussion the arguments in his top secret study. See Johnson, "The Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability and Some 'Unorthodox' Approaches to the Problem of Nuclear Proliferation."
79. Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb,* pp. 135–136, 167–169; Norris, Burrows, and Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook,* p. 333; and Johnson, "The Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability and Some 'Unorthodox' Approaches to the Problem of Nuclear Proliferation."

officials at the State Department read CIA reports stating that Chinese officials had said that the first test would "definitely" occur in 1964. Former INR China specialist Allen Whiting recalls reading agent reports on Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to Mali. According to one report, Zhou told Premier Mobido Keita, who was very close to Beijing, that China would conduct an atomic test in October. Nevertheless, no one yet regarded such reports as decisive; thus Robert Johnson wrote that "we really don't know when the first detonation would occur."[80]

Overhead reconnaissance efforts were particularly important. Lop Nur had been added to the list of U-2 targets in the spring of 1964, when the planes flew two or three missions out of Charbatia in eastern India.[81] Nine successful or partially successful CORONA missions took place between the publication of the July 1963 estimate and August 25, 1964. In addition, ten GAMBIT satellites carrying high-resolution cameras, which could distinguish objects about eighteen inches apart, had been launched beginning in July 1963.[82]

The intelligence establishment collected data, but as DCI McCone told President Johnson on July 24, he could not "foretell when the Chinese would explode a device." Within a few days, however, CORONA photography of Lop Nur would make more accurate predictions possible. A SNIE published on August 26, 1964, reported that early-August CORONA photography of Lop Nur showed a tower and instrumentation sites. Thus the analysts concluded that "the previously suspect facility at Lop Nur is a nuclear test site which could be ready for use in two months."[83]

CIA analysts believed, however, "that [the detonation] will not occur until sometime after the end of 1964." That conclusion was driven by another: that China "will not have sufficient fissionable material for a test of a nuclear device in the next few months." The conviction that there was insufficient material resulted from the continued belief that China's first bomb would be fueled by plutonium, not uranium (the Lanzhou plant that had already produced the

---

80. Robert Johnson to Walt Rostow, "Possible APAG Discussion of the ChiCom Nuclear Problem," March 9, 1964, PPCR, box 265, Chron File, R. Johnson, January–June 1964; and interview with Allen S. Whiting, Crystal City, Virginia, December 13, 1996.
81. Pocock, *Dragon Lady,* p. 98; and Wheelon interview.
82. McDonald, "CORONA: Success for Space Reconnaissance," p. 716; and Jeffrey T. Richelson, *America's Secret Eyes in Space: The U.S. Keyhole Spy Satellite Program* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 358.
83. McCone, memorandum for the record, July 24, 1964; and DCI, SNIE 13–4–64, "The Chances of an Imminent Communist Chinese Nuclear Explosion," August 26, 1964, in Kevin Ruffner, ed., CORONA: *America's First Satellite Program* (Washington, D.C.: CIA, 1995), pp. 237–245, at p. 239.

required U-235 was described as "behind schedule"), and that only one plutonium reactor—the one believed to be at Baotou—could not produce enough plutonium for a bomb until at least 1965.[84]

The intelligence analysts believed that even if there were no major obstacles, it would take at least eighteen, and more likely twenty-four, months after the startup of the Baotou reactor before a nuclear device would be ready for testing. The earliest date that the Chinese could test, given such assumptions, would be mid-1965.[85]

The estimators went on to raise the possibility that China might have another source of fissionable material. One possible source would be from a facility started with Soviet help, prior to the withdrawal of Soviet assistance, at about the same time as work on the Lanzhou gaseous diffusion facility began. So far, overhead photography had not identified it.[86]

Intelligence analysts also raised the possibility that China might have acquired fissionable material from a non-Soviet foreign source.[87] The version of the estimate released in 1995 contains a sentence noting the possibility, with the remaining portion of the paragraph (more than seven lines) blacked out. Logic and other documents suggest, however, that the only possible foreign source was France. An August 15, 1963, State Department cable referred to indications of "French-Soviet and French-Chinese cooperation in the atomic energy field prior to the withdrawal of Soviet technicians from Communist China." It also noted a continuing personal relationship between the high commissioner of the French Atomic Energy Agency and several members of the PRC's Institute of Atomic Energy.[88]

The analysts were also unsure what the test site activity signified. On the one hand, they noted that it was incongruous to bring the site to a state of readiness without having a device nearly ready for testing—that it would be technically undesirable to install much of the instrumentation more than a few weeks before the actual test. On the other hand, analysts also noted that it would not

84. DCI, SNIE 13–4–64, "The Chances of an Imminent Communist Chinese Nuclear Explosion."
85. Ibid., p. 241.
86. Ibid., pp. 241–242.
87. Ibid., pp. 242–243.
88. Department of State airgram CA-1908, "French-Soviet and French-Chinese Cooperation in the Atomic Energy Field," August 15, 1963, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1963, AE 11–1 FR-USSR. The issue was of enough concern four years later that the *chef du cabinet* in the Ministry of Science, Space, and Atomic Affairs found it necessary to assure U.S. diplomats that there was "zero cooperation between the French and Chicoms on nuclear matters, military or nonmilitary." U.S. embassy, Paris, airgram A-1641, "Comment of French Official and Rumors of Franco-Chinese Nuclear Cooperation," April 18, 1967, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1967–69, Def 12-1 Chicom.

be surprising if there was uneven progress in various phases of the Chinese program. In addition, given Lop Nur's remote location and the poor transportation available, China might take a long lead time in preparing the installation. On balance then, the estimators believed that the detonation would not occur until at least early 1965.[89]

Such conclusions were disputed both within and outside the CIA. Two prominent nuclear advisers, Albert and Richard Latter, told the CIA deputy director for science and technology, Dr. Albert Wheelon, that the CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence, which had responsibility for studying foreign nuclear programs, was "screwing up," in assuming that a first bomb would rely on plutonium. Wheelon took the Latters to see DCI McCone. Moreover, Allen Whiting argued that a test was imminent. He doubted that the Chinese would put up the tower at Lop Nur that showed up in CORONA imagery unless they were planning a test. The agent reports of Zhou's statements about a nuclear test in October further convinced Whiting that the CIA estimates were too cautious.[90]

Final Policy Choices, Second Intelligence Thoughts

With their estimate under scrutiny, CIA analysts began to restudy the data. In the meantime, some U.S. officials were thinking about military options or at least threatening to use force. On September 4, 1964, Assistant Secretary of State Bundy suggested to his staff the possibility that a speech by Rusk could include a suggestion that Washington might take preventive action against Chinese nuclear facilities. Bundy's proposal quickly produced opposition from Robert Johnson, because any advance warning could help the Chinese foil an attack, and because it would have a negative political impact internationally, by stirring fears of war while providing Beijing with justification for its nuclear weapons program.[91]

How William Bundy responded to Johnson's advice is unknown, but the seemingly imminent Chinese test made the question of preventive action ripe for a presidential decision. The Chinese "nuclear danger" had been an agenda

89. DCI, SNIE 13–4–64, "The Chances of an Imminent Communist Chinese Nuclear Explosion," pp. 243–244.
90. Wheelon interview; and Whiting interview.
91. Robert Johnson to Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, "The Secretary's Speech on the Far East and the Chicom Nuclear Problem," September 4, 1964, DEF 12-1 Chicom.

item at several of President Johnson's Tuesday lunches, a gathering of his top national security officials, during the summer, but critically important decisions were made on September 15 when top advisers—McCone, McNamara, Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy—met at the State Department. They decided that it would be better to let the Chinese test occur than to take "unprovoked unilateral U.S. military action." Attacks on Chinese nuclear facilities would be possible only in the event of "military hostilities." Although cautious on unilateral action, the advisers had enough concern about Beijing's nuclear progress to consider the possibility of joint steps with the Soviets, such as a "warning . . . against tests" or "even a possible agreement to cooperate in preventive military action." Whether anyone at the table expected the Soviets to be any more receptive is unknown. In any event, Rusk was to make early contact with Ambassador Dobrynin. Further, to acquire more information, the advisers proposed another U-2 flight out of Taiwan over the test site. Later that day, President Johnson approved these recommendations.[92]

Only Soviet archives can confirm if Rusk met with Dobrynin to discuss a joint approach; if they did, no U.S. records of the talk have survived. But on September 25, McGeorge Bundy attempted to sound out the ambassador. A statement that Khrushchev had made on September 15, the same day that Johnson and his advisers discussed the Chinese nuclear problem, may have encouraged Bundy to believe that Moscow might be in the mood to consider joint action. Responding to Mao's hostile comments on Soviet border rights in the Far East, Khrushchev warned that the Soviets would use all "means at their disposal" to protect the borders, including "up-to-date weapons of annihilation." The Soviets had made their first nuclear threat against China.[93]

---

92. Agendas for Tuesday lunch, July 28, 1964, and August 19, 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, McGeorge Bundy papers, box 18/19, file Luncheon with President, Vol. 1 (1); memorandum for the record, September 15, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 94–95; a copy of same with fewer excisions appears on the National Security Archive's web site. See also the discussion by Chang, *Friends and Enemies*, p. 250; and John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 210–211.

93. In Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), p. 388, Shapley claims that Rusk did not meet with Dobrynin. However, Rusk's appointment calendar shows two meetings with the ambassador scheduled during the two weeks after the White House meeting on September 15; telephone conversation with Senior Archivist Regina Greenwell, Lyndon Johnson Library, April 17, 1997. For Khrushchev's threat, see Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking against China* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1982), p. 17.

However Khrushchev felt, Dobrynin was not interested in talking with Bundy about any anti-Chinese initiatives. Just as in May 1963, Bundy proposed a "private and serious talk about what to do about this problem." In response, Dobrynin admitted the "depth and strength" of the Sino-Soviet split, which he blamed on Mao's "personal megalomania," but he implicitly took a Chinese nuclear capability "for granted." He argued that Chinese nuclear weapons had "no importance against the Soviet Union or against the U.S." A Chinese test would have a "psychological impact" in Asia, but that was of "no importance for his government."[94]

The Soviet Union's negative response effectively settled the argument over direct action. Whether or not President Johnson was acquainted with any of the details of previous discussions of direct action, his disapproval of "unprovoked" unilateral action suggested that he had come around to a substantially less alarmist view than the one taken by President Kennedy. Whether White House officials still found the covert option attractive is unknown: When CIA Deputy Director for Plans Richard Helms raised the question of action against Beijing's nuclear facilities, White House staff told him "to keep his mouth shut."[95]

The election, only weeks away, undoubtedly had some impact on Johnson's thinking about the Chinese nuclear problem. In the heat of the campaign, with Johnson running on a "peace platform" against the hawkish Goldwater, the last thing he wanted to contemplate was any military action against China, with all of the risks that involved. Whether election concerns were a bottom-line consideration, however, is an imponderable. After all, in spite of the forthcoming election, he authorized feelers to Dobrynin; of course, Johnson may well have suspected that the Soviets would not be responsive.

Johnson's determination to avoid confrontation with China, made evident by his Vietnam policy, very likely shaped his stance on preemption. Although he worried that inaction on Vietnam would benefit China, Johnson wanted to avoid military measures that could provoke a wider war. That determination did not mean that senior advisers would not consider action against Chinese nuclear facilities as part of a Vietnam strategy. A few months later, McNamara told the JCS that China's nuclear capability was "a greater threat over a long time period" than North Vietnam; that made it worth targeting PRC nuclear

94. Memcon, September 25, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 104–105.
95. For "keep your mouth shut," see memo from Robert W. Komer, NSC, to Bundy, September 18, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, p. 99.

facilities if the United States began heavy bombing of North Vietnam. Johnson, however, would hold the line; when he escalated the war in 1965, he purposefully avoided action that could trigger conflict with China.[96]

Around the time of the Bundy-Dobrynin meeting on September 25, the U.S. intelligence establishment, probably drawing on new satellite photography obtained in late August and mid-September, had decided that the preparations at the Lop Nur site were basically complete. Also suggestive was an agent report from a member of a Malian government delegation that had recently visited China; it stated that the Chinese had scheduled a test for October 1, China's national day. Moreover, on September 11 Dobrynin had told Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson that Beijing could test "any time now."[97]

By this time, State Department officials, prompted by ACDA Deputy Director Adrian Fisher, were giving thought to an anticipatory statement about an impending Chinese test. As former INR official Allen Whiting later recalled, such publicity would allow Washington to upstage the Chinese, lessen the test's political impact, and "reassure neighboring countries that the U.S. was watching and aware." As part of that process, DCI McCone, one step ahead of his analysts, told NATO's North Atlantic Council in mid-September that the Chinese would test within sixty days.[98]

By late September, the White House and the State Department were ready to make an announcement. After Whiting indirectly leaked word of a Chinese test to CBS News, on September 29 reporters queried State Department spokesman Robert McCloskey about the accuracy of television reports of an

---

96. For McNamara's statement, see memorandum for the record, "Summary of Meeting of Joint Chiefs with Secretary of Defense Following Regular Secretary of Defense Meeting 9:30 A.M., November 2, 1964, re. Situation in South Vietnam," Wallace Green Papers, Marine Corps Historical Archives. The McNamara quote is also cited in David E. Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 254. For Johnson's emphasis on avoiding conflict with China over Vietnam, see Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), pp. 125, 142–143.

97. Memorandum for the Record, October 16, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68*, Vol. 30, p. 109; memcon, "Miscellaneous Matters," September 11, 1964, RG 59, RAALLT, box 21, Chron File, July 1964. For the Malian delegation and the reports of an October 1 test, see "The Secretary's Staff Meeting," October 28 and November 27, 1964, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Briefing Books, box 1, Secretary's Staff Meeting, August–December 1964. A Malian delegation visited China on June 19–July 4 and met with Mao and Zhou, among other senior officials. See U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report–Far East, Nos. 120 (June 19, 1964) through 132 (July 8, 1964).

98. Memorandum for the record, October 16, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68*, Vol. 30, p. 109; *Journals of Glenn Seaborg*, Vols. 7–9 (Berkeley, Calif.: Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, 1989), p. 254; and Robert Johnson to Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, "The Secretary's Speech on the Far East and the ChiCom Nuclear Problem," September 4, 1964, SN 64–66, Def 12–1 Chicom; and Whiting interview.

impending test. With President Johnson's consent, Secretary of State Rusk had already approved a statement that McCloskey read to the press. Noting that a Chinese nuclear explosion "might occur in the near future," McCloskey stated—for background only and not for attribution—that "from a variety of sources, we know that it is quite possible that [an] explosion could occur at any time." Downplaying the event's immediate significance, he observed that the Chinese were a "long way" from having nuclear delivery systems.[99]

Two weeks later, on October 15, Donald Chamberlain, the CIA's assistant director for scientific intelligence, informed Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Marshall Carter that the most recent information had confirmed that Lop Nur was probably ready to host an atomic test. Beyond describing specific items that turned up in overhead photography—including a 340-foot tower surrounded by a double fence, arrays for instrument emplacement, two small towers, and various bunkers and platforms—Chamberlain observed that the "high priority given to the completion of site construction suggests that a test is scheduled in the fairly near future." He also noted that the high level of flight activity to and from the area halted in September 1963, when the site was essentially complete, but had resumed in late September 1964, possibly reflecting final preparations.[100]

According to CIA scientists, a restudy of the Baotou reactor site indicated that adequate primary and backup electric power circuits for reactor operation had been installed by March 1963, resulting in a reduction in the confidence about the August 1964 judgment that the reactor did not begin operation until early 1964. In addition, the scientists wrote that "we no longer believe that evidence on plutonium availability justifies the on-balance judgment reached in August 1964. We believe the Lop Nur evidence indicates that a test could occur

99. Whiting interview; PPC Director Walt Rostow to the Secretary, "The Handling of a Possible Chinese Communist Nuclear Test," September 26, 1964, and Henry Owen, PPC, to the Secretary, "The Handling of a Possible Chinese Communist Nuclear Test," September 28, 1964, both in PPCR, box 265, RJ Chron File, July–December 1964; President Lyndon Johnson telephone conversation no. 5,890, with National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy, September 26, 1964, tape WH6409.15, LBJ Library. For Johnson's role approving the announcement, see memcon, October 27, 1964, RG 59, Executive Secretariat, Conference Files, 1949–72, box 359, Visit of Patrick Gordon Walker 10/26–27/64, Administration, Sub Misc, and Memcons; and "Transcript of Daily Press Briefing, Tuesday, September 29, 1964," RG 59, Records of Special Assistant to Undersecretary for Political Affairs, 1963–65, box 2, Psychological Preparations of Chinese Test, October 16, 1964.

100. Assistant Director for Scientific Intelligence Donald Chamberlain to Deputy DCI Marshall Carter, "Estimated Imminence of a Chinese Nuclear Test," October 15, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 107–108.

at any time." But they hedged their bets by concluding that "we believe a test will occur sometime within the next six to eight months."[101]

Detonation and Aftermath

The next six to eight months included, of course, the very next day. On October 16, 1964, Beijing announced the detonation of its first atomic device; U.S. nuclear intelligence platforms had already picked up its acoustic and electromagnetic signals. Eleven of thirteen U.S. stations with the capability to detect the detonation's electromagnetic pulse did so. Of particular importance were the TOE DANCER flights, which detected and collected nuclear debris from the test. The flights involved a variety of Air Weather Service aircraft loaded with special collection equipment. Debris was picked up on more than thirty individual sorties by aircraft flying from Yokota Air Base in Japan.[102]

Once the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) began to examine debris from the radioactive cloud, however, analysts had to abandon their assumption that the device employed plutonium. On October 20, the same day that a CORONA satellite snapped a picture of ground zero that showed clear signs of the detonation, AEC Chairman Glenn Seaborg told a cabinet meeting that, to the commission's surprise, radiological analysis had shown that the bomb contained U-235. Seaborg told McCone the next day that the Chinese bomb was "a uranium-235 device"—that is, an implosion design using uranium instead of plutonium. U.S. officials quickly saw this as "quite an accomplishment" that, as William Bundy put it, "probably advanced the date that Chicoms would be [a] full nuclear power."[103]

Where the highly enriched uranium came from, neither McCone nor Seaborg knew. They recognized that Lanzhou was one source, but statements that Khrushchev and Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan had made, some days before Khrushchev was deposed, added to the confusion. In conversations

---

101. Ibid.
102. *The History of the Air Force Technical Application Center, 1 July–31 December 1964*, n.d., pp. 11, 25, National Security Archive.
103. *Journals of Glenn Seaborg*, Vol. 9, pp. 254, 261; V. Gupta and D. Rich, "Locating the Detonation Point of China's First Nuclear Explosive Test on 16 October 1964," *International Journal of Remote Sensing*, Vol. 17, No. 10 (1996), pp. 1969–1974; and circular cable 727, October 23, 1964, SN 1964 64–66, DEF 12-1 Chicom. See also Glenn T. Seaborg with Benjamin S. Loeb, *Stemming the Tide: Arms Control in the Johnson Years* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1986), p. 116. Allen Whiting later recalled that he was "so happy that [he] danced a jig in the office." Whiting interview.

with foreign visitors, Khrushchev and Mikoyan had observed that the Chinese were behind schedule even though the Soviets had provided the information and materials necessary for a test. These statements motivated Rusk to protest to Dobrynin that this information was inconsistent with Soviet claims that assistance to China had been strictly for "peaceful uses." But later reports suggested that Soviet assistance had not been enough and that the Chinese may have found a new way to separate uranium. In December 1964, a U-2 flight ended some of the uncertainty; infrared detection systems confirmed that Lanzhou was indeed active.[104]

On the day of the test, the PRC launched a propaganda campaign, stressing three points: China's purpose in developing nuclear weapons was "to break the superpower monopoly," China would never be the first to use nuclear weapons, and all nuclear weapons should be eliminated. In effect, the Chinese were confirming the State Department's analysis that they would be a cautious nuclear power.[105]

In an attempt to neutralize any political fallout, hours after the detonation President Johnson issued a reassuring statement, based on a draft prepared long in advance. Johnson emphasized "Free World nuclear strength," reaffirmed "defense commitments to Asia," and downplayed the test's significance or any imminent threat. Perhaps because of the U.S. government's earlier efforts to minimize the test's importance, the world reaction was like Johnson's, "relatively restrained." "There was no panic"; rather in some Asian countries with significant Chinese populations, there was "pride in an 'Asian explosion.'" Beijing's scientific accomplishment had raised China's prestige.[106]

---

104. *Journals of Glenn Seaborg,* Vol. 9, p. 261; memcon, "Soviet Leadership Change: Chinese Communist Nuclear Explosion," October 23, 1964, RG 59, Secretary's Memoranda of Conversation, 1953–64, box 30, SecMemcon, October 1964; memcon with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, November 19, 1964, ibid., SecMemcon, November 1964; "Secretary's Staff Meeting Minutes," December 21, 1964, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Briefing Books, box 1, Secretary's Staff Meetings, August–December 1964; Westerfield, *Inside CIA's Private World,* p. 246; R.E. Lawrence and Harry W. Woo, "Infrared Imagery in Overhead Reconnaissance," *Studies in Intelligence,* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 1967), pp. 17–40, at p. 23; and Pocock, *Dragon Lady,* pp. 100–115.

105. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China: Views on Nuclear Arms Control,* January 1987, p. 7.

106. Public Papers of the President, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64, Book 2 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1965), p. 1357; State Department Executive Secretary Benjamin Read to National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy, "Standby Statement for Chinese Communist Nuclear Test," September 30, 1964, RG 59, RAALLT, box 26, China Nuclear Capacity; Background Paper, "Effect of Chicom Nuclear Explosion," December 8, 1964, RG 59, Records of Special Assistant to Undersecretary for Political Affairs, 1963–65, box 2, Comments on Chinese Test; and Lindsay Grant, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, to Assistant Secretary of State McGeorge Bundy, "Policy Implications of Far Eastern Reactions to CCNE," October 23, 1964, RG 59, SN 1964–66, DEF 12–1 Chicom.

The reaction to the test was far from calm in Taiwan, however. There "pride" could also be found, but the test shocked Chiang Kai-shek; his reaction was "convulsive." Chiang had played down U.S. as well as his own intelligence service's estimates of an early test, and the explosion represented a "severe blow" to his hopes for "Mainland recovery." Seeing his regime as Beijing's chief target, Chiang demanded military action against mainland nuclear facilities before China had a capability to deliver weapons. Rusk would try to assure the Nationalists that Beijing would "pursue a cautious policy" to avoid destruction of its nuclear facilities, but that did not discourage Chiang or his spouse from repeating demands for action in the months that followed. Johnson, Rusk, and McNamara, however, were much more interested in ensuring that the escalating Vietnam War did not involve direct conflict with China. They were content to make the usual assurances that U.S. nuclear forces were sufficient to deter Beijing.[107]

Even if reaction from much of the world was "restrained," the Chinese nuclear test quickly raised concerns about a possible "chain reaction" of nuclear proliferation in Asia. Intelligence reports from the capitals of two key countries, Japan and India, suggested that heads of state there were considering the possibility of developing national nuclear weapons programs, even though antinuclear public opinion made early action unlikely. Even before such reports were available, President Johnson decided to appoint a panel of "wise men"—former senior government officials—to make recommendations on "means to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons."[108]

The panel, headed by former Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, scrutinized a variety of strategies to curb proliferation, one of which included the possible use of force against China's nuclear facilities. Action against China would have been part of a radical nonproliferation policy that would have included a no-first-use policy, substantial withdrawal of tactical nuclear weap-

---

107. Grant to Bundy, "Policy Implications of Far Eastern Reactions to CCNE"; U.S. embassy, Taipei, cables 324, 334, 339, and 363, October 17, 20, 23, and 29, respectively, RG 59, SN 1964–66, DEF 12–1 Chicom; and memcon, "Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability," December 3, 1964, SN 1964–66, UN 6 Chicom. For the conversation with Madame Chiang Kai-shek, see memcon, "China," *FRUS 1964–68,* Vol. 30, pp. 207–208. For Chiang's disregard of warnings from his intelligence service, see U.S. embassy, Taipei, airgram 328, "President Chiang on CCNE's Impact on GRC Recovery Plans," December 15, 1965, SN 1964–66, Pol 1 Chinat.

108. Robert Rochlin, ACDA, to Raymond Garthoff, Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, "Comments on Non-Proliferation Paper of December 12, 1964," December 31, 1964, copy at National Security Archive; editorial notes, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 11, pp. 120–121, 126.

ons from Europe, a blockade of France's Pacific nuclear test sites, and a nuclear strategy of minimum deterrence.[109]

As part of the review of policy options, George Rathjens, an ACDA official, critiqued Robert Johnson's report on the basis of a worst-case analysis. He argued that Johnson had underestimated the effects of Chinese nuclear capabilities, asserting, for example, that the United States would be far more devastated than China by the destruction of two or three of its top cities. He further claimed that Johnson had given "inadequate weight to the near term anti-proliferation effects of destroying Chinese nuclear capabilities."[110]

Rejecting a radical antiproliferation policy, the Gilpatric Committee tacitly followed Johnson's approach by eschewing proposals for attacks on China's nuclear facilities. Nevertheless, the committee saw nuclear proliferation as a "grave threat" and called for a vigorous nonproliferation policy, including the formulation and passage of an international treaty. Implicitly accepting a nuclear China, it suggested a reexamination of U.S. policy toward China and advised encouraging China to participate in arms control agreements.[111]

In part because the Gilpatric Committee raised troubling questions about the MLF, which still enjoyed significant State Department support, President Johnson did not see its report as an opportunity to push for major initiatives on nuclear proliferation policy. Moreover, despite his work on a nonproliferation agreement, Secretary of State Rusk was far from sold on nonproliferation policy. He even encouraged top secret State-Defense studies on the possibility of a "nuclear weapons bank" to which India and possibly other countries would have access in the event of a confrontation with China, giving them an alternative to their own national nuclear weapons programs. Although the Chinese nuclear test had encouraged the first high-level policy review of nuclear proliferation, it would take more political pressure before Johnson was willing to make a significant political investment in a nonproliferation treaty.[112]

---

109. For alternative policies considered by the committee, see papers entitled "Problem Areas," National Security Archive; *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 11, p. 165; and Raymond L. Garthoff, "A Comment on 'LBJ, China and the Bomb,'" *SHAFR Newsletter,* Vol. 28, No. 3 (September 1997), pp. 28–29.
110. Rathjens, "Destruction of Chinese Nuclear Weapons Capabilities."
111. Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, "A Report to the President by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation," January 21, 1965, *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 11, pp. 173–182.
112. For Johnson's ambivalence about the Gilpatric report, see Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide,* pp. 136–149. For Rusk's interest in a "weapons bank," see Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "Review of Non-Proliferation Policy," December 4, 1964, RG 59, Records Relating to Arms Control and Disarmament, 1961–66, box 9, Defense Affairs 18-10 Non-Proliferation, November–December 1964. For U.S. policy toward the Indian nuclear problem, see George Perkovich's pathbreaking study, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact of Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Wariness about Beijing's nuclear activities guaranteed continued U.S. efforts to monitor them. Even before the October 16 test, the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) accelerated its schedule of satellite launches so that it could photograph and monitor the progress of the identified Chinese nuclear and missile facilities while trying to discover new sites. Given China's expanse, this was a huge task, and a higher priority—the completion of satellite photographic coverage of the Soviet Union—limited the resources that could be devoted to China. Indeed, after the CIA published a NIE on the Chinese military, an analytical postmortem pointed to the problem of "insufficient information," the "insufficient priority assigned to the analytic effort," and "some lack of resources available for that effort." During the 1960s the CIA and NRO would develop a variety of systems—including satellites, remotely piloted vehicles, and emplaced sensors—designed to monitor Chinese nuclear and missile developments.[113]

Not long after the Gilpatric report was issued, rumblings of interest in a preemptive approach would be heard among U.S. officials. In the spring of 1965, U.S. naval intelligence predicted that the Chinese were only a few years away from a rudimentary submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capability, thus giving Beijing the ability to strike U.S. territory—unquestionably Hawaii, possibly the U.S. West Coast—from a submarine in Pacific waters. The navy even suggested that the Chinese might consider initiating a "catalytic war"—attacking the United States with submarine-launched missiles in such a way as to make the United States believe the attacker was the Soviet Union and respond accordingly. During a briefing to State Department officials, Paul Nitze, now secretary of the navy, and other navy officials proposed sinking a Chinese missile-launching submarine on its maiden voyage. The navy's fears were premature, however; the Chinese were trying to develop an SLBM, but they would not even test-launch one from a submarine until the early 1980s.[114]

---

113. Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance, "Photographic Coverage Contemplated during the Next Six Months of Significant Chicom Targets," October 2, 1964, copy at National Security Archive; and Department of State airgram CA-13358 to U.S. embassy, Bangkok et al., "Post-Mortem on NIE 13-3-65, 'Communist China's Military Establishment,'" June 11, 1965, SN 1964–66, INT 2-2. See Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The Wizards of Langley: The CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, forthcoming).

114. Garthoff, "A Comment on the Discussion of 'LBJ, China, and the Bomb," p. 30; PPC officials Richard G. Golbert and W.E. Gathright to PPC Director Walt Rostow, "The ChiCom 'G' Class (Missile-Launching) Submarine," May 4, 1965, RG 59, Records of Policy Planning Staff, 1965–69, Subject and Country Files, 1965–69, box 328, miscellaneous folder. Using a confrontation with China over Vietnam to bomb nuclear facilities would also continue to interest senior officials. See Ambas-

China's nuclear test did not generate rapid changes in U.S. China policy, but it created pressures for change. Indeed, shortly after the test, U.S. diplomats realized that international support was "eroding" for their policy against admitting the PRC into the UN. But Washington would continue to hold the line. For Rusk, admitting China could only encourage Beijing to "continue the Communist push into Southeast Asia." To contain Chinese influence, the administration waged war in Vietnam even though Vietnamese nationalists were determined to preserve their independence from the giant to their north.[115]

Conclusion

While carefully monitoring the situation, President Johnson and his advisers avoided military confrontation with China during 1964–68. Instead, they focused on U.S. and allied nation trade controls to ensure that high-tech products did not reach Beijing's nuclear program. Moreover, officials in the Pentagon and the State Department would justify antiballistic missile programs by pointing to a Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile threat anticipated to materialize during the 1970s. Although that is another story, defense against a Chinese missile threat would be a significant thread in U.S. ABM policymaking through the early Nixon administration.

The reliance on export controls, military containment, and continued intelligence monitoring was a long way from Kennedy's fancies about "anonymous" planes striking at Chinese nuclear facilities. Whether Kennedy would have taken a cautious approach or pushed for military action, with all of its dangers, will never be known. He had made his pronouncements about a "menace" and an "intolerable" Chinese nuclear threat in the absence of systematic analytical work on the implications of the Chinese nuclear capability and the pros and cons of an attack. Kennedy never saw Robert Johnson's 1963 study of a nuclear China and was dead by the time that Johnson had completed his cost-benefit analysis of military action. Lyndon Johnson, who was rhetorically more cautious about China and Johnson's analyses (which were available to the White

---

sador Llewellyn Thompson to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "China Study," July 15, 1965, RG 59, Records of Policy Planning Staff, 1965–69, box 325, miscellaneous folder.

115. U.S. embassy, Paris, POLTO 654 to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, October 28, 1964, SN 64–66, NATO 8–2; Foot, *The Practice of Power,* p. 42; and memcon, "Communist China and the UN: Southeast Asia," November 13, 1964, Secretary of State's Memoranda of Conversations, 1953–64, box 30, November 1964. For Rusk, Johnson, and China, see Warren Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (Totowa, N.J.: Cooper Square, 1980), pp. 280–289; and Garson, "Lyndon B. Johnson and the China Enigma," *Journal of Contemporary History,* Vol. 32, No. 1 (January 1997), pp. 63–80.

House) made a strong case against proposals for military action unless Washington had world opinion on its side or Beijing was menacing its neighbors.

Enlisting world opinion required tacit if not explicit Soviet support. As a number of historians have pointed out, Kennedy wanted to enroll Moscow in a political or even military campaign to halt Beijing's nuclear effort. But the Soviets rebuffed U.S. overtures in 1963 and 1964. Whatever fears of a nuclear China Khrushchev may have had, he was perhaps more interested in mending fences with Beijing and certainly in avoiding a credibility crisis in the world communist movement if even a word of the U.S.-Soviet talks on China leaked.

President Johnson was troubled enough by the implications of a nuclear China to approve an overture to Moscow, but his rejection of unilateral action suggested that he saw no "intolerable" threats if Beijing successfully tested a weapon. If the president had read or remembered the synopses of Robert Johnson's studies, he could have concluded that Beijing's cautious military policy and its weak strategic position made a nuclear-capable China a tolerable inconvenience. Most important, President Johnson was wholly averse to confrontation with China. To prevent a U.S.-China war and the risks of global conflict, he abstained from unilateral attacks on Baotou and Lanzhou just as he would limit escalation against North Vietnam or fend off proposals from Chiang for operations on the mainland. No doubt Johnson also assumed that the forthcoming presidential election made inaction on the China nuclear problem even more desirable. Thus he preserved his freedom of action; Johnson could pursue attacks on nuclear sites if the Chinese military ever acted in ways that threatened American power in Asia and the Pacific.

The Chinese nuclear test did not bring the foreign policy or military debacle that President Kennedy feared, but it may have accelerated Sino-American rapprochement. Significant shifts in the U.S. stance toward China occurred late in the Johnson administration, and the next president, Richard Nixon, believed that China's nuclear potential made a fresh approach, not preventive action, mandatory. Nixon, though, was hardly blasé about Mao's China, as evidenced by his emphasis on a possible Chinese ICBM threat. Significantly, Nixon would learn that the Soviets were far more worried than he was about a nuclear China. In August 1969, with Sino-Soviet forces engaged in border fighting, Moscow threatened action against China's nuclear capability, although whether with actual intent remains to be seen.[116]

---

116. Raymond Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1994), pp. 236–237; and Gobarev, "Soviet Policy toward China,"

The history of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' decisions and actions with respect to China's emerging nuclear capability concerns a key point in U.S.-China relations, the history of the Cold War, and the effort to curb nuclear proliferation. The U.S. intelligence community's efforts to monitor and forecast China's nuclear progress and its possible impact on world affairs represents an important part of the community's history. Yet policymakers at other agencies established the parameters for intelligence work; thus presidents demanded aggressive intelligence collection on China's nuclear efforts, and one even backed preventive covert action, while State Department analysts may have helped discourage senior officials from approving a unilateral attack. Thus when the intelligence and policymaking stories are intertwined, one obtains a more comprehensive understanding of the contribution that each made to U.S. policy on a momentous issue.

The account also represents a case where, despite a leader's (specifically Mao Zedong's) cavalier rhetoric about nuclear war, acquisition of a nuclear capability did not produce an onslaught against his neighbors. Here the estimate, from CIA and State Department officials, that a nuclear China would not behave aggressively proved far more accurate than the worst-case fears of President Kennedy and National Security Assistant Bundy. There would probably be little dispute that restraint (on both sides) was wise or that an attack on China's nuclear facilities would undoubtedly have done far more harm than good.

Today's world is different in many ways from that of the early 1960s. U.S. intelligence capabilities—both in terms of collection and analytic capabilities—are much greater. Preventive attacks do not seem to be a particularly viable option because of the undoubted adverse international reaction in all but the most dire circumstances, and possibly even then. As a result, missile defense is today proposed to deal with situations that in the past would have produced proposals for preventive action. In addition, there is not one but a number of rogue regimes seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—with Saddam Hussein's Iraq at the top of the list.

Yet the history of how the United States dealt with China's emerging nuclear capability is not irrelevant today. The Johnson administration's restrained approach toward the Chinese nuclear program is significant not because it sug-

---

p. 47. For the argument that Nixon seriously considered tacit support for Soviet action against Chinese nuclear facilities, see Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China, An Investigative History* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999), pp. 62–63.

gests that restraint is always the best choice, but because it highlights the different variables that must be considered in choosing among diplomatic, economic, and military (including preventive action and missile defense) options. Those variables include the limits of intelligence collection and uncertainties in intelligence analysis concerning the nature and status of a WMD program, the likely impact a specific WMD capability will have on the conduct of a nation and its leadership, probable overseas reactions to various U.S. decisions, the possibility of international action, and the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear capabilities on decisions to develop or employ WMD. The necessity for astute assessment of those variables when making decisions on how to deal with WMD proliferation will be an enduring challenge for U.S. and international policymakers.