

The Political History of China's Nuclear Bomb

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To begin with, it has been a matter of great interest as to how such a sophisticated technological, military feat was ultimately accomplished by a poverty-stricken nation with limited industrial and scientific resources. This can be considered as being extraordinary, especially in the midst of the enormous internal political turmoil of the Great Leap Forward in China. In the backdrop of China's emergence as a modern nuclear power, there arose a need to chronicle the policy changes within China with Mao Zedong originally formulating the revolutionary struggle in terms of a "people's war", deriding the bomb as a paper tiger in 1946. However, with the development of modern nuclear bombs and missiles, Mao recast the struggle into one with a military-technical emphasis that relied on assured nuclear retaliation to ensure deterrence. The realisation that nuclear weapons allowed the People's Republic of China (PRC) to take diplomatic and military positions with a much greater level of confidence dawned, thus, ending up redefining China's quest for security.

Chinese analysts and thinkers define sovereignty rigidly despite the fashion for modifying the principle of national independence to accommodate international organisations and global commerce. Chinese officials speak passionately about the humiliation that China

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suffered at the hands of the European powers during the 19th century and about their country's determination never to repeat the experience.¹ Chinese leaders wish to obtain as much international influence as they can, so as to settle as many disputes as possible on their own terms. In the words of Col Peng Guangqian of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), "The development of modern China cannot be separated from the outside world, especially at a time when the world is growing smaller each day."² Accordingly,

Peng concludes that China's development depends on a favourable international strategic situation. China's leadership continues to ground its political discourse in the precepts of Marx, Lenin and Mao. Mao Zedong initially called on his people to develop nuclear weapons, "We also need the atom bomb," Mao stated in 1956. "If our nation does not want to be intimidated, we have to have this thing."³

Mao's view of war remained both complex and different in many significant aspects from the traditional Western military view. Mao did not hesitate to describe war as "the highest form of struggle between nations, states, classes, or political groups."⁴ Moreover, neither was he reluctant to assert that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."⁵ Mao often cited Lenin's rendering of Clausewitz to the effect that "war is simply the continuation of politics by other means."⁶ Mao also questioned the theory that "weapons mean everything," which he described as "a mechanist [*sic*] theory of war."⁷ Having long regarded a country's independent capacity to display, deploy and commit its armies as a vital component of its sovereign independence, Mao dreamed that China would acquire the unshackled ability to mobilise and use effective military power, *for only*

that power would distinguish the new state from its humiliated predecessors.⁸

On the debris of a dead imperialism, the victorious people would create with extreme rapidity a civilization thousands of times higher than the capitalist system and a truly beautiful future for themselves.⁹

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Mao Zedong, at the initial outset dismissed the dangers of nuclear war and reaffirmed the principles of people's war. However, for several months in 1955, the possibility of a preemptive nuclear strike against China, perhaps in the near future, received high-level attention in the political corridors of Beijing. The revolutionary elite under Mao Zedong came to power in 1949 with beliefs that may well have led to the nuclear weapons decision even without the unbroken chain of crisis. The leadership's nationalistic ideology and concepts of force and diplomacy shaped its perceptions of the enduring dangers to China and the restoration of China's international position. Memories of the civil war and fear of aggression by hostile outside powers imbued the top command with a strong military bias and an assurance that its appraisal of China's situation was wholly realistic.¹⁰

Chinese Nuclear and Military Thinking

For Mao in the late 1940s, the strategic calculus was clear. The struggle against imperialism could be intensified and need not be intimidated by the American nuclear threat. He reasoned that the Soviet Union and the US would continue to compete for the lands that lay between them and would not directly fight one another. Mao said that the “vast zone” between the US and the Soviet Union had become the battleground, and China as one of the targets in that zone could take

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actions to achieve victory in the struggle between the forces of peace and war.¹¹ Mao had said in 1955 that the atomic bomb was not “an invincible magic weapon.”¹² It had not altered the calculus of strategic conflict. Thus, he could reaffirm a policy line carried over from the revolution that one should despise the enemy strategically but take it seriously tactically.¹³ As Beijing leaned closer to Moscow during the Korean conflict, Washington increasingly focussed

on ways to exploit China’s weaknesses. At the end of the Korean War in 1953, senior security specialists both in China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Eisenhower Administration, shared a deep frustration about the war’s lessons. The Chinese knew first-hand the devastating might of modern arms and the high cost and probable military irrelevance of earlier revolutionary doctrines. The war introduced Mao’s China to advanced armaments and techniques and, as we shall see, to the threat of nuclear attack. To survive in the modern world, China would have to have modern arms.¹⁴

Mao called for preparedness against a sudden turn of events (and) advocated envisaging the worst possibilities while defining a new world war as the worst.¹⁵ The emphasis on the possible outbreak of a global conflict marked a visible departure from long-standing Maoist considerations of strategic policies. It was long known that in 1955, the Chinese military was preoccupied for a long time with questions of nuclear strategy.¹⁶ Chinese leaders have long held the view that that they reached the decision to launch their nuclear weapons programme under duress. The Chinese Politburo had tentatively initiated the nation’s first five-year plan in 1953, but then the Party leaders delayed formal approval for two years because of “objective difficulties.” Many Chinese specialists have argued that, in

addition to the country's internal problems, the government had to postpone the effort to modernise China since, during the years of the Korean War (1953-55) and the Taiwan Strait crisis (1954-55), the United States (US) was actively seeking to unseat Communist rule in Beijing and restore Chiang Kai-shek back to power on the mainland.¹⁷

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Mao understood the importance of nuclear weapons and the power they bestowed. Particularly revealing of his great concern with what he called "US atomic blackmail" were his remarks at the end of January 1955 to the Finnish envoy to China. In an interview, in which the Chairman assailed the US for "contemplating an atomic war," he began by merely echoing his 1946 pronouncement that atomic weapons are "paper tigers," observing, "The US cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atom bombs."¹⁸ But then, in a somewhat atypical excursion into hyperbole about nuclear weapons, he added: "Even if the US atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be a major event for the solar system."¹⁹

In October 1951, Frederic Joliot-Curie in Paris urged the Chinese radiochemist Yang Chengzong to seek out Mao upon Yang's return to China. "Please tell Chairman Mao Zedong, 'You should own the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb is not so terrifying'." He noted that the "fundamental principles of the bomb had not been discovered by the Americans." Irene Joliot-Curie then gave Yang ten grams of radium salt standardised for radioactive emissions, because she wanted "to support the Chinese people in their nuclear research." By 1955, this French advice and assistance had helped raise the level of consciousness in

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Beijing about the bomb and its potential significance for China. Mao characterised that significance for his senior colleagues in 1958, when he told them that without atomic and hydrogen bombs, “others don’t think what we say carries weight.”²⁰

The Chinese public position on nuclear weapons became more lucid when Jen-min Jih-pao conceded that the “Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has consistently held that nuclear weapons have unprecedented destructive power and that it would be an unprecedented calamity for mankind if nuclear war should break out.” The Chinese, however, continued to insist that nuclear

war “would result in the extinction of imperialism and definitely not in the extinction of mankind” and that under “no circumstances must Communists act as voluntary propagandists for the US imperialist policy of nuclear blackmail.”²¹ In October 1960, Gen Fu Chung, Deputy Director of the PLA’s Political Work Department, wrote, “The issue of a future war will not be decided by guided missiles or atom bombs... It will still be decided by man.”²² Whatever the actual motivation underlying charges and countercharges of this nature, there is confirmation to believe that based upon China’s military doctrine on nuclear war, its assessment of the threat, and views on deterrence, the hypothesis that the Chinese did understand the significance of nuclear warfare, does find support. For an instance, in October 1957, the Chinese Air Force doctrine defined the military threat as that of destruction of military areas, industrial complexes, and communication centres by surprise attacks from the air. It emphasised

the immediate need for a combat-ready air defence system, and pointed to the need to destroy the enemy in the air before vital centres could be destroyed.²³

China's review of its inherent vulnerability to nuclear warfare in the 1954-55 time period can be attributed in part to a growing awareness of the enhancement of the US' striking power in the Far East during that time. US Secretary of State Dulles in March 1955, described US sea and air forces in the area as "now equipped with new and powerful weapons of precision" and counted

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"atomic missiles" among conventional weapons. Chinese newspapers ran numerous comments on the reported assignment of missiles to Taiwan in 1957, the increase in US military (including nuclear) capabilities during the 1958 Quemoy crisis, stationing of anti-aircraft missiles in Taiwan and Japan, the proposed build-up of Polaris submarines in the US Pacific Fleet, the reported presence of B-52s in the Far Eastern theatre, the rotation of jet fighter planes, US manoeuvres, as well as efforts to strengthen US capabilities for low-level military operations in the area.²⁴ Evidence strongly suggests that the US military posture in the Western Pacific imposed important restraints on Chinese military actions that could well result in a direct confrontation with the United States: the 1962 Fukien build-up when *New China News Agency* (hereafter referred to as NCNA), pointed out that "it is only because they [the Chiang Kai-shek bandit troops] are shielded by US imperialism, that they are able to hold on to Taiwan and the other coastal islands."²⁵ At the same time, Beijing's unwillingness to risk an independent confrontation with US forces in the area indicated that China had been deterred from taking military actions directly involving US interests in the area.²⁶

When the crisis in the United States began deepening, the Chinese Politburo expressed ever greater concern about the possible American use of nuclear weapons against China. In January 1955, *Renmin Ribao* accused the US of treating atomic weapons as conventional arms, and the following week, Zhou Enlai claimed that the US was “brandishing atomic weapons” in an attempt to maintain its position on Taiwan.²⁷ No sooner was the Formosa Resolution passed, that the Chinese press alleged that it included the threat to use atomic weapons against the Chinese people.²⁸ By this time, the Chinese Politburo had launched the nation’s nuclear weapons programme. As the decision-making process began in January, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai invited nuclear scientist Qian Sanqiang to a meeting in his office with Bo Yibo, a minister in charge of economic affairs, and Li Siguang and Liu Jie from the Ministry of Geology.²⁹ In the discussions that followed, Qian, as head of the Institute of Physics (and later Director of the Institute of Atomic Energy), lectured Zhou on the atomic bomb and the status of China’s nuclear research and evaluated the country’s manpower and facilities in the nuclear field. Zhou questioned Liu Jie about the geology of uranium and, with Qian, reviewed the fundamentals of atomic reactors and nuclear weapons. At the conclusion of this unusual seminar, Zhou instructed those present to prepare for a full-dress meeting with Chairman Mao.³⁰

As a follow-up, Mao presided over an enlarged meeting of the Central Secretariat called in order to discuss the reasons for, and the possibilities of, starting a nuclear weapons programme.³¹ At the Central Secretariat meeting, attended by all the senior members of the Politburo, Qian Sanqiang was joined by Minister of Geology Li Siguang, an eminent scientist, and Liu Jie. Understandably, Mao turned the meeting over to the scientists, and the conference room in Zhongnanhai, the political and state centre in the Forbidden City, became a classroom in introductory nuclear physics and uranium geology.³² After hearing the scientists out,

Mao began by highlighting the promising evidence concerning China's uranium potential and the building of its scientific base and stated, "During the past years we have been busy doing other things, and there was not enough time for us to pay attention to this matter (of nuclear weapons). Sooner or later, we would have to pay attention to it. Now, it is time for us to pay attention to it. We can achieve success provided we put it on the order of the day. Now, (because) the Soviet Union is giving us assistance, we must achieve

success! We can also achieve success even if we do this ourselves." The Chairman announced that China would immediately devote major efforts to developing atomic energy research for military purposes.³³

When Mao Zedong stated that a nuclear weapon was an accessory to hegemonism and China would never become hegemonistic of the likes of the US and USSR, he, in fact, started the Chinese nuclear project simultaneously. This logic has also been reflected in Mao's speeches during the Cultural Revolution. Later, Hu Jintao argued that while China places more importance on the development of its military capability, it must simultaneously emphasise more on the peaceful essence of its foreign policy since "the emphasis can mediate the symbolic and realistic aspects of its policy, symmetrize these two sides, and create legitimacy of this policy."³⁴ The document accepts that despite this mediating and symmetrical logic, observers usually would suspect and try to figure out China's real nuclear policy because of the rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal. The document further states that China's policy of not initiating a nuclear war does not mean that Beijing would not continue to expand its nuclear arsenal, since it only goes to improving its nuclear capability.³⁵

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Factors and Explanations Swaying China's Nuclear Weapons Development

By January 1955, the Chinese leadership decided to obtain their own nuclear arsenal primarily in the backdrop of three major events beginning with the ending of the Korean War in 1953, hostilities at the time of, and shortly after, the 1954 Geneva Conference on Korea and Indochina, and the crisis in the Taiwan Strait in late 1954 and early 1955.³⁶ Moreover, the rate of development of China's nuclear weapons programme was

influenced by deterioration in China's economic situation since 1959 and the withdrawal of Soviet technicians in mid-1960, presumably including those attached to China's nuclear programme. It is difficult, however, to determine the impact of either of these developments.³⁷

Among the options open to China were using nuclear weapons as an umbrella for overt non-nuclear military operations and for purposes of political propaganda exploitation of a nuclear capability. Besides, threats to national security may well have caused the urgent need for nuclear weapons, and immutable scientific realities and technological capabilities could have set the initial outer limits of the programme's speed, scope and autonomy. However, the decision that China's security required the acquisition of nuclear weapons stemmed from values and perspectives shared by Beijing's revolutionary commanders. While most of the leaders of the strategic weapons programme probably accepted those inherited values and perspectives in the beginning, the programme's seven essential tasks gradually superimposed new perspectives and, ultimately, new values on the old.³⁸ Analysis of Communist China's foreign and military policies shows that a major objective was the achievement of great power

status and recognition of Beijing. China's attempt was to establish hegemony in Asia, by incorporating Taiwan into its domain and further extending Chinese influence into South and Southeast Asia as well as towards Japan and Korea. However, the degree to which the Chinese could hope to achieve this objective remained largely dependent on the extent to which US power and influence could be kept away including the US base-alliance system in the Far East, US security and military assistance arrangements, as well as American access to the area.³⁹

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While assuming that no major change in the politico-military environment in the Far East occurred in the period prior to Beijing's initial detonation of a nuclear device, the problem for the Chinese, despite an improving military posture, continued to be that of finding appropriate means to pursue their political objectives in the Far East while remaining militarily inferior to the United States. The Chinese Communists debated upon exploiting a nuclear detonation at the political propaganda level, designed to achieve varying objectives and tailored to a number of audiences with different attitudes.⁴⁰ China appeared willing to detonate an unsophisticated nuclear device at the earliest possible date until secret underground testing enabled it to develop an operational nuclear-weapons capability. Undoubtedly, a key element in Beijing's propaganda calculations was that China would be the first Asian nation to enter the "nuclear club." It was assumed that a nuclear detonation would be described as a great scientific achievement, reflecting the extent of China's economic and scientific progress since 1949, as a visible result of China's "great leap forward". This, in turn, would confirm the superiority of the Chinese road to

industrialisation and of China as a model for Asia.⁴¹ China's nuclear detonation was expected to forward its claim to recognition as a voice in international organisations, particularly the United Nations, and also as a means of obtaining a political price for Beijing's participation in disarmament negotiations.⁴² In order to bring to bear the pressure of its 'nuclear threat' in order to affect a 'peaceful' but favourable solution to the Taiwan issue, the design would be to use China's emerging military potential to foster differences between the Chinese Nationalists and the United States, between the Chinese Nationalists and the Taiwanese, and within the Chinese Nationalist elite itself.⁴³

In June 1960, Gen Li Cheh-min argued that "modern revisionists, frightened out of their wits by the imperialist blackmail of nuclear war, exaggerated the consequences of the destructiveness of nuclear war and begged imperialism for peace at any cost, in fact, playing the role of helping the imperialists undermine the militant spirit of the people."⁴⁴ In fact, the degree to which the Chinese could hope to assert leadership in the Far East largely depended on the extent to which they could manage to curtail US access to the area. Thus, another pay-off envisaged by the Chinese from their detonation of a nuclear device would be the reinforcement of trends in Asia toward neutralism and accommodation with Beijing, providing unfavourable Asian and American responses. To strengthen neutralist trends and to cause US allies to limit American use of bases and facilities in the area, it was expected that the Chinese would exaggerate their nuclear threat, to deprecate the US military position in the area, to exploit the Asian fear of nuclear war, and to focus particular attention on Taiwan and the off-shore islands as a probable source of war.⁴⁵

Moreover, hoping that the Asian fears of involvement in a nuclear war would likely foster a trend toward neutralism and accommodation with the mainland, Beijing could be expected simultaneously to take measures designed to minimise unfavourable

Asian and American reactions to China's nuclear detonation. China would probably seek to justify its testing by attempting to shift the onus for its detonation of a nuclear device to the other side.⁴⁶ Moreover, China blamed the United States for consistently ignoring its proposal for the establishment of a zone of peace in the Far East and Pacific, including a zone free of nuclear weapons; that the United States was responsible for the failure to reach any agreement on the suspension of nuclear weapons testing or on the banning of nuclear weapons. According to the *Jen-min Jih-pao*, December 22, 1961, "We hold that if the United States is not willing to reach agreement on the banning of nuclear weapons, then all peace-loving countries are naturally entitled to conduct nuclear tests, manufacture nuclear weapons in order to safeguard their own security and put a further check on US imperialism's threat to unleash a nuclear war. There will be undoubted insistence that China has every right to test and produce nuclear weapons unless (1) international agreement is reached on general disarmament, or (2) an agreement is reached creating a zone in the Far East and Pacific free from weapons of mass destruction. While in no way prepared to accept an Asian nuclear-free zone, unless perhaps all its other objectives in the area were realised, China may well continue to advance the concept on an undefined and ambiguous basis. Or, in line with what Chou En-lai told Edgar Snow in the fall of 1960, it might demand American recognition and removal of American forces from the Taiwan area as prerequisites for negotiations leading to such a zone."⁴⁷ China would hope to use its nuclear threat to enhance the role of its conventional forces by opting for what they hoped would be quick gains through local conventional operations behind the shield of their incipient deterrent capability.⁴⁸ In a 1966 analysis, the utility of nuclear weapons for conventional war was questioned, although not totally dismissed:

Chinese political or low-level military successes in the context of increasing strength and capabilities could make future military responses all the more difficult.

The nuclear weapon is after all only a type of weapon; it cannot replace the conventional weapon, much less a decisive battle by ground forces. The ultimate victory in war is not decided by firing rockets that carry nuclear warheads... it is in the final analysis decided by fighting at close quarters... on the battlefield, by soldiers using conventional weapons to fight a series of ground battles to wipe out... the enemy... The more nuclear weapons are

used and the stronger fire power is, the more it is necessary to rely upon fighting at close quarters and fighting at night to solve problems, the more it is necessary to bring the human factor into play.

Moreover, China was also expected to reason that possession of a nuclear capability would deter resistance to Chinese moves and lead to pressures against US intervention or the imposition of restrictions on the American use of bases and facilities in the area, thus, keeping the risks of such actions within acceptable limits. Post possessing a nuclear capability, China may: (1) be more prone to provide overt or covert support to regional adversaries; (2) consider the time appropriate to test US and free Asian responses in such areas as Taiwan and the off-shore islands with a view to exploiting the situation both militarily and politically; and (3) be even more willing to make overt use of its military power to compel the settlement of border problems on its terms.⁴⁹

The advantages accruing to the Chinese as a result of their developing a modest nuclear capability provided that caution and rationality continued to characterise Chinese military behaviour and that the United States retained the determination and capability to make the risks of overt Chinese military operations in the area extremely high,. The Chinese were likely to find that the advantages of possessing a modest nuclear

capability lay in its political propaganda usage and would serve as a back-up for low-level military operations.⁵⁰ The challenge that Communist China would pose to the United States and other Asian countries as it progressively moved toward the acquisition of nuclear capability remained a challenge that would not necessarily be a clear-cut military one, and may increase China's ability to make gains with little risk. Chinese political or low-level military successes in the context of increasing strength and capabilities could make future military responses all the more difficult. In sum, there would be little reason to underestimate the possibilities open to the Chinese in the political, low-risk use of their inferior military forces, nuclear and otherwise.⁵¹

The lure of science and engineering as much as nationalism shaped the mindset of those who met the nuclear challenge.

Some of this dedication can be explained in the backdrop of a rising tide of Chinese nationalism. A new pride was being experienced by Chinese nationalists while their country fought the most powerful nation in the world. For them, the Korean War had spawned an angry determination to make a difference to the strengthening of the New China.⁵² The lure of science and engineering as much as nationalism shaped the mindset of those who met the nuclear challenge. As Mao had written in 1937 that conceptual knowledge depends on social practice, and social practice could take many forms: production, class struggle, political activity, and scientific and artistic pursuits. Such practice, as guided by the Party, determines valid knowledge and differentiates between right and wrong. Party-managed practices, Mao predicted, would imbue the Party's cadres and members with the confidence of having true knowledge and of being right.⁵³

With Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping consolidating power and leading China in a new, more pragmatic direction, more so in the backdrop of the Chinese leadership

seeing enormous amount of political *guanxi* being expended, Beijing wanted to realise its long-term aspirations to augment its position and role in global politics and that nuclear weapons play a fundamental role in its plans, given China's foreign policy aspirations; its ability to achieve those aspirations; and its nuclear arsenal as a critical assurance of military supremacy.

Notes

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