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Implications of A Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation  
and Nuclear Capability

1. Acquisition by Communist China of nuclear weapons will not in itself alter the real relations of military power in Asia. A Chinese Communist (ChiCom) nuclear capability need not impose new military restrictions on the U.S. response to aggression in Asia. (These conclusions assume rationality and reasonable prudence by Communist China in making military decisions.)
2. There is a considerable difference between a first test device and a stockpile of deliverable weapons. Development of delivery systems poses a further problem.
3. As Communist China gradually acquires a stockpile of nuclear weapons and delivery means it will have the military capability to pose a nuclear threat to U.S. bases in Asia and to use nuclear weapons as an umbrella for overt non-nuclear operations and for support of insurgency. However, when account is taken of the over-all nuclear balance and other considerations, it is evident that the real military value of even a quite substantial ChiCom nuclear capability will be very limited. They cannot rationally contemplate using such weapons against countries of Southeast Asia, for example.
4. The great asymmetry in ChiCom and US nuclear capabilities and vulnerabilities makes ChiCom first use of nuclear weapons highly unlikely against Asian nations or others except in the event of an attack upon the mainland which threatens the very existence of the ChiCom regime. (A limited ChiCom intercontinental capability, when and if achieved, would not eliminate this basic asymmetry. But the ChiComs (and non-Communist Asians) might believe that such a capability would have increased effect as a deterrent because of an unwillingness by the US in situations in which its interests were marginally engaged, to assume the marginal risks of the absolute level of damage which the ChiComs could inflict.)

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5. The basic military problems we will face are likely to be much like those we face now; military probing operations designed to test the level of the US commitment and response; relatively low-level border wars; "revolutionary" wars supported by the ChiComs; and pressure to keep US nuclear weapons from the area.

6. Peiping's tactics in exploiting its test and capabilities are likely to be political and to have two broad strands: (a) As expected, it appears to be seeking to counter adverse effects by emphasizing the alleged defensive character of its action and offering "peace" proposals. (b) It may also be expected, either explicitly or implicitly, to seek to instill fear of its power and to apply pressure on the US military presence in Asia.

7. Although efforts by Peiping to engage in nuclear blackmail are certainly not precluded, political exploitation of its capability in a threatening manner will be inhibited by such factors as a desire to avoid action which might result in adverse political reaction in Asia, in a serious Japanese rearmament effort or in endangering Peiping's chances for leadership of the world revolutionary movement.

8. A ChiCom capability is likely initially to confirm both aligned and non-aligned Asian countries in their present policies with respect to alignment. Some Asian countries will seek US actions of reassurance. (At the same time neutrals (and perhaps some allies) in Asia and elsewhere may push harder for an Asian nuclear free zone, for ChiCom membership in the UN and participation in arms control and disarmament negotiations, etc.) Longer-term effects will depend upon US policies and the general evolution of the Asian situation.

9. Desires for reassurance may find expression in requests for new or confirmation of existing defense guarantees and specific application of these to defense against ChiCom nuclear attack. With the US nuclear deterrent in the background evidence of US will and ability to respond rapidly to communist aggression without undue reliance upon nuclear weapons will be an important form of reassurance to Asian nations and a deterrent to ChiCom miscalculation.

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 16, 1964

Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT  
ON CHINESE COMMUNIST DETON-  
ATION OF NUCLEAR DEVICES

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The Chinese Communists have announced that they conducted their first nuclear test today. By our own detection system we have confirmed that a low yield test actually took place in Western China at about 3 a. m. EDT.

As Secretary Rusk noted on September 29, we have known for some time that the Chinese Communists had a nuclear development program which was approaching the point of a first detonation of a test device.

This explosion comes as no surprise to the United States Government. It has been fully taken into account in planning our own defense program and nuclear capability. Its military significance should not be overestimated. Many years and great efforts separate testing of a first nuclear device from having a stockpile of reliable weapons with effective delivery systems.

Still more basic is the fact that if and when the Chinese Communists develop nuclear weapons systems, free world nuclear strength will continue to be enormously greater.

The United States reaffirms its defense commitments in Asia. Even if Communist China should eventually develop an effective nuclear capability, that capability would have no effect upon the readiness of the United States to respond to requests from Asian nations for help in dealing with Communist Chinese aggression. The United States will also not be diverted from its efforts to help the nations of Asia to defend themselves and to advance the welfare of their people.

The Chinese Communist nuclear weapons program is a tragedy for the Chinese people who have suffered so much under the Communist regime. Scarce economic resources which could have been used to improve the well-being of the Chinese people have been used to produce a crude nuclear device which can only increase the sense of insecurity of the Chinese people. Other Asian nations have wisely chosen instead to work for the well-being of their people through economic development and peaceful use of the atom. In this way they have made a great contribution to the peace and security of the world.

The Chinese Communist nuclear detonation is a reflection of policies which do not serve the cause of peace. But there is no reason to fear that it will lead to immediate dangers of war. The nations of the Free World will recognize its limited significance and will persevere in their determination to preserve their independence.

We join all humanity in regretting the contamination of the atmosphere caused by the Chinese Communist test. We will continue in our own efforts to keep the atmosphere clean. We will pursue with dedication and determination our purpose of achieving concrete practical steps on the road that leads away from nuclear armaments and war and toward a world of cooperation, development and peace.

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