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S-E-C-R-E-T

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

7 January 1963

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1. The object of this study is to examine overall Chinese air capability and to assess its effectiveness in operations against India.

I. THE COMMUNIST CHINESE AIR FORCE

History

2. From a humble beginning in 1949 the Communist Chinese Air Force has developed rapidly into a significant force; indeed, in combat strength it is now the third largest Air Force in the world. Initially, and for a number of years, its expansion was made possible by the provision of technical advisers, instructors, and aircraft by the USSR. An impetus to development was given by the Korean War. An aircraft

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GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic
Downgrading and
Declassification

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industry was built up with extensive aid from the Soviet Union and the manufacture of relatively modern Soviet types, such as MIG-17 (FRESCO) fighters was started in the late fifties.

Economic and Political Considerations

3. The development of the aircraft industry was part of a wide programme of forced industrial development, designed to transform China into a powerful self-sufficient industrialised nation in the shortest possible time. Initial progress was impressive but in 1958 the regime ordered the adoption of radical programmes which attempted to accelerate greatly the pace of production and development. At the same time they introduced the communes in the countryside. It is now clear that those policies failed and aggravated by the bad weather conditions in the past three years, they have resulted in poor harvests and a severe setback to the economy as a whole. A serious food shortage caused a pronounced deterioration in the health, strength and morale of a significant part of the populace. A drastic reorganisation of economic priorities in 1961 has now resulted in heavy industry being placed after agriculture and light industry A slight improvement in the food situation has been experienced in 1962.

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4. The abrupt withdrawal in 1960 of most of the Soviet engineers, technicians and economic advisers, plus the sharp reduction in imports of Soviet equipment, have seriously reduced production in industries of defence importance. Unless this situation is remedied, China will be unable to build such equipment as modern aircraft (e.g., the MIG-21 FISHBED and TU-16 BADGER) in significant quantitities for some years.

5. We believe that as a result of the discord in Sino-Soviet relations the Soviet Union has not supplied any modern offensive aircraft to China in the past two years, although she has been willing to make them available to other countries such as Iraq, Indonesia, and the UAR. We consider that as long as the serious rift in relations remains the Soviet Union will be reluctant to supply modern aircraft to China and China will be faced with growing obsolescence in her Air Forces. Even in the unlikely event of her economic problems and ideological differences being resolved in the near future, it would be several years before China could significantly improve her air capability, unless combat aircraft were directly supplied by the USSR.

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Organisation of the Air Force

6. The Communist Chinese Air Force (C.C.A.F.), subordinate to the Ministry of Defence, is organised as a single entity encompassing all phases of air operations and has no operational commands. However, in most other respects it reflects Soviet concepts and principles. C.C.A.F. headquarters is located at Peking and consists of operational, logistic and training elements. The Communist Chinese Naval Air Force (C.C.N.A.F.) is an integral part of the Navy with its Headquarters also at Peking.

7. The air defence system is controlled from Peking through at least seven district air defence headquarters, which are responsible for the co-ordination and control of activities in their particular areas. During air defence operations naval fighter units are under the operational control of the C.C.A.F., through these district headquarters.

Strength and Deployment

8. The C.C.A.F. and C.C.N.A.F. have a combined strength of about 2,650 aircraft; the majority of which are jet fighters (1,920) deployed along the coastal periphery and adjacent to major inland centres. The IL-28 jet light bomber force (325), the piston

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TU-2 light bombers (105), the special ground attack aircraft (40 IL-10 and 30 MIG-15), and a few obsolescent TU-4 medium piston-engined bombers (15) are deployed mainly in northern areas. [redacted] 25X1

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25X1 [redacted] We estimate the strength of the transport force to be approximately 195 obsolescent piston-engined short-range aircraft, made up mainly of the LI-2 CAB, the IL-12 COACH and the IL-14 CRATE. (CAB is very similar to the Dakota or DC-3, COACH and CRATE resemble the Convair 240.) [redacted] 25X1

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Airfields

9. There is a well-developed airfield system in China. Approximately 260 airfields are distributed throughout the country, including 135 which are suitable for jet fighters or jet light bombers, and 30 which can be used for jet medium bombers.

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10. The distribution includes a network of airfields stretching some 400 miles inland, providing a strong support for the coastal bases. It also provides facilities for redeployment of aircraft (mobility is stressed in the C.C.A.F./C.C.N.A.F.) to any sector in eastern and coastal regions from North Korea to the Indo-China borders.

11. Most Chinese airfields adjacent to the Indian border are at very high altitudes and have natural or gravel surfaces, rendering them generally unsuitable for sustained jet operations. However, the Chinese do possess some airfields in the area which are not at very high altitudes and which would be usable for light bomber or fighter action against India. The airfields most likely to be used for operations against the Ladakh-Jammu-Kashmir area, are Hotien (Khotan) at 3,000 feet elevation with a crushed rock runway, and Soche (Yarkand) at 4,400 feet elevation with a sod or natural surface. [redacted] 25X1

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12. High elevation and natural runway surfaces alone would not prevent the Chinese from conducting militarily significant

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jet operations. A number of operational factors must be considered. Air temperature as well as runway length is important in estimating required take-off distances. We do not believe that reduction in radius of action and/or bomb load would arbitrarily be required in all instances. For example, at Lhasa, at 14,000 feet elevation and 0° Centigrade, we believe that a BEAGLE could take off with a full 4,400 pound load using less than 5,000 feet of the available 13,000 foot runway.*

Offensive Capability

13. The C.C.A.F. jet light bomber force has had no operational experience, but has been carrying out operational training for several years in the bombing role. It probably has a limited radar bombing and E.C.M. capability, and we estimate that it has the ability to mount reasonably effective operations. A piston-engined light bomber force is still retained but its effectiveness in the race of opposition would be very low.

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14. The medium bomber force possesses a very limited strategic bombing capability due to its small size. The BULL, a piston-engined bomber dating from 1948, would be highly vulnerable to jet interception.

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The BAT, with a 440 nautical mile (n.m.) radius and normal bomb load of 3,300 pounds, would be the most reliable aircraft for tactical strikes because of its slower take-off speed and greater maneuverability at low levels. The BEAGLE could bomb targets in northern India from bases in Szechuan (Chengtu), Tibet, Yunnan, and possibly Sinkiang. The BULL and the BADGER, with combat radii of over 1,600 nautical miles, could cover northern and northeastern India, including New Delhi and Calcutta, from their base in Sian.

Defensive Capability

16. The C.C.A.F./C.C.N.A.F. is basically a defensive force. About three-fourths of its aircraft are fighters, of which less than 10 percent have an all-weather capability. Its air defence

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role is restricted by lack of the most modern types of aircraft, insufficient flying time for combat proficiency, lack of air-to-air missiles, and logistical weaknesses in POL and aircraft engines and parts for sustained combat.

17. A comprehensive radar network [redacted] exists along the coast from Hainan in the south to the Soviet frontier. Inland there is a partial coverage up to a depth of about 500 miles. [redacted]

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18. Despite the deficiencies listed above, as well as weaknesses in pilot proficiency and fighter tactics, in China proper the C.C.A.F./C.C.N.A.F. would have a good chance of intercepting intruding aircraft during daylight hours in clear visibility. [redacted]

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the Chinese are not equipped to handle tactical intercept air operations from bases in Tibet. The nearest jet fighter unit is probably located at Chengtu, but units could be swiftly redeployed to Tibet and Sinkiang.

19. Within China proper we have firm evidence of a small number of surface-to-air missile sites at Peiping, San Yuan (near Sian), and at the Shuang-cheng-tzu missile test facility. Moreover, China has a well co-oridnated conventional anti-aircraft defence system in her coastal provinces. Inland, however, the scale of defence decreases rapidly and only the more important cities are known to have reasonable A.A. cover.

Air Transport Capabilities

20. The operating capability of the air transport force is low by Western standards [redacted] 25X1

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21. Air transport plays an important part in Chinese defence plans. The main task is to provide logistic and tactical support of all Armed Forces. In view of China's size and comparatively

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poor transport facilities, the available air transport effort is inadequate. However, a considerable part of the small civil air force is regularly used for carrying freight, and conversion to military use of a small part of this fleet could quickly be effected.

22. The Chinese Communists would use transport aircraft in airborne operations; however, extensive airborne operations are unlikely if they would cause a major disruption of essential air transport operations. The Chinese are severely handicapped by a lack of aircrews trained for airborne operations, and by lack of suitable transport aircraft with a "heavy drop" capability. Nevertheless, in favorable circumstances a limited operation might be undertaken. Supply dropping could also be carried out.

II. AIR OPERATIONS AGAINST INDIA

23. Communist China is extremely sensitive to the possibility of an attack by Nationalist China in the present period of economic difficulties, but we do not believe the resulting desire to maintain a strong air posture in China proper would seriously handicap Communist China's ability to wage an air campaign against India.

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Even so, it is unlikely that the Chinese Communists could deploy and logistically support more than 290 tactical aircraft for operations against India (i.e., 180 jet fighters, 50 jet light bombers, and 60 piston light bombers).

Logistic Support

24. The key to air operations against India would be the amount of logistic support, particularly POL, which the Chinese could provide to forward bases. We have little evidence of stock-piling of air supplies in the Tibetan area. Theoretically, if the Chinese exerted a maximum effort, they might be able over a short period to deliver a total of 2,240 tons daily to the Tibetan area for all purposes. Of this daily total 2,000 tons would come by road and 240 tons by air (assuming the use of virtually all available military and civil transport aircraft). It is not likely that the Chinese would choose to make such an all-out effort. Despite the recent border fighting, the total tonnage currently delivered into Tibet is estimated to be no more than 500 to 700 tons daily, virtually all by road.

25. Because of Army demands, the amount that could be brought in by land routes to support air operations against India

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would be limited. However, we believe that up to 50 transport aircraft could be diverted to support such air operations without imposing unacceptable restrictions on the overall Chinese air transport system. Under optimum conditions, these 50 transports could supply some 60 tons daily for a sustained period from railheads in China proper. This daily tonnage by itself would suffice to support the following alternate operations:

(a) 6 light bomber sorties at 3 short tons per flying hour, or

(b) 16 piston light bomber sorties at 1 short ton per flying hour, or

(c) 28-31 jet fighter sorties at 1 1/2 short tons per flying hour, or

(d) 32-37 jet ground support sorties at 2 short tons per flying hour.

Stockpiling prior to operations would, of course, allow an increased effort.

26. There is no reason, however, to assume that Chinese Communist tactical air operations would be restricted to supplies

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which could be delivered by air. Of the potential daily maximum tonnage which could be supplied by ground and air to the frontier areas of Tibet and Sinkiang in an all-out effort, we believe some 500 tons could be allocated for the support of the 290 tactical aircraft listed in paragraph 23.

27. Strategic air operations by medium bomber from bases in China proper are unlikely to be restricted by logistic considerations.

Offensive Operations

28. There is no evidence of light bomber deployment into South-West China or Tibet. However, if China adopted such a course, a few jet light bombers, operating from Lhasa or, more likely, from Nagchhu Dzong, could carry out attacks in the NEFA area. BEAGLEs, operating from Kunming or Cheng-Tu could also cover most of the NEFA area. The piston-engined BAT would be suitable for operations, and in comparison with jet aircraft, would probably give a higher rate of utilisation. However, it would be highly vulnerable to jet interception. The Chinese could only provide very limited close support of their troops; in some areas terrain would limit the effectiveness of such attacks.

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29. By day, in a strategic role, BEAGLE could also operate against cities such as Delhi and Calcutta from Soche (Yarkand) and Nagchhu Dzong. By night, because of difficulties of operating from Tibetan airfields, we do not consider it likely that the Chinese would attempt such operations with the BEAGLE aircraft. However, we believe that the light bomber force is probably capable of night operations and that a few sporadic raids could be mounted. The medium bombers, operating from such bases as Hsi-ning, Ka-erh-mu (Golmo), and Lhasa, would have the capability to reach strategic targets such as New Delhi by day or night. Approximately four to six BULL could be launched in an attack, but these aircraft would not have long-range fighter protection and would be vulnerable to jet interception if detected. If either of the two BADGERs previously identified should be operational, they could be employed with considerably more effect in a limited strategic bombing role.

30. It is reasonable to assume that the continuing expansion of early warning radar facilities in China has by now placed some radar equipment in the northwestern frontier area, and if such is the case, that a limited air defence radar capability exists in the general Ladakh region. It would be possible to operate a few

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fighters in the air defence role in Tibet although our evidence does not suggest that fighters are currently deployed there. Such aircraft would encounter difficult operating conditions, and terrain would limit radar effectiveness. In southwestern China air defences would attain a higher standard but effectiveness would be very limited at night or in poor weather.

Airborne and Air Supply Operations

31. In view of the limitations of and other calls upon the transport force, extensive airborne operations are unlikely. The air situation, however, would not necessarily be unfavorable to the Chinese in all areas where they might contemplate limited airborne operations.

III. CONCLUSIONS

32. Although the Communist Chinese Air Forces are numerically large, the aircraft are obsolescent, few have an all-weather capability, they lack such advanced weapons as air-to-air missiles, and pilot combat proficiency is only fair. Moreover, China is unlikely to obtain more than a few modern combat aircraft in the next few years, either from their own industry or from the Soviet Union.

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33. China's ability to wage a tactical air campaign against India would be seriously handicapped by difficulties in the provision of logistic support. The scarcity of suitable airfields in Tibet and Sinkiang would constitute an added hindrance. Although the Chinese could deploy and support approximately 290 tactical aircraft for operations against India without seriously weakening their defence posture toward Taiwan, we estimate that they would initiate tactical air operations only if the leadership considered it necessary for the achievement of basic objectives. We believe that China is unlikely to undertake air attacks deep into India except in retaliation or in the event of a change in their military objectives.

34. The Chinese could mount only light, sporadic raids against India with piston bombers (BATs and BULLs) and such aircraft would be highly vulnerable to jet interception if detected. However, it is likely that Chinese BEAGLEs could be effective against Indian targets in sustained operations involving limited numbers of aircraft. If China's two BADGERs should prove to be operational, they could play a small but important strategic bombing role. Moreover, we would hesitate to ignore or minimize

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the psychological significance of even token Chinese raids on Indian cities and military targets.

35. Although Chinese air defences in the Himalayan frontier area generally are weak, we believe the Chinese Air Force could provide adequate defence for a few localities. The five airfields in the Sinkiang-Tibetan area most likely to be used in operations against India (Hotien, Soche, Lhasa, Nagchhu Dzong, and Yu Shu) would be vulnerable to air attack. However, we do not believe that this alone would deter the Chinese from mounting operations from them.

36. We believe that the Chinese are capable of undertaking limited airborne operations, although this appears unlikely in present circumstances. There is some evidence that limited supply drops have already taken place.

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