

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505



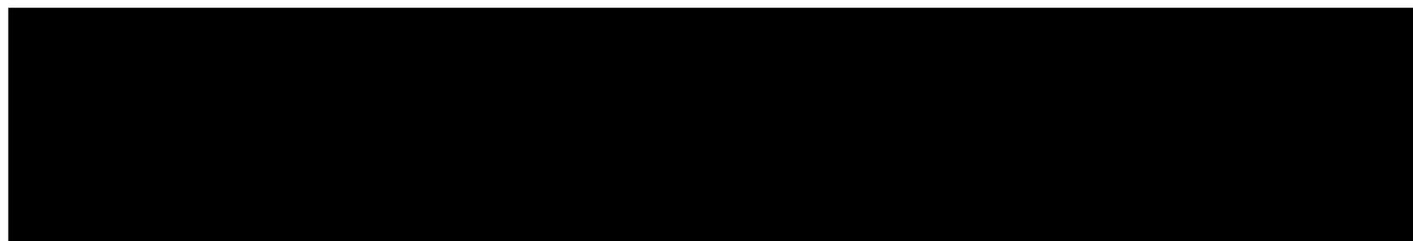
DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

3 March 1987

China's Marines: In Search of Professionalism [REDACTED]

Summary

The Chinese probably see the visit to China of US Marine Corps Commandant, General P. X. Kelley, as an opportunity to study the organization and tactics of the United States Marine Corps, possibly as a model for China's fledgling Marine forces. Beijing seems most interested in the US Marine Corps' recruit selection and training, coordination of combined-arms operations, and logistics and organizational setups. We believe Beijing could institute major reforms in its amphibious training and tactics as a result of close contacts with the US Marine Corps that could significantly enhance China's amphibious warfare capabilities over the next five to 10 years. [REDACTED]



EA M 87-20040C  
SC-01871-87  
Copy 1 of 61



WARNING NOTICE--INTELLIGENCE  
SOURCES OR METHODS INVOLVED

DECL OADR  
DERIVED FROM Multiple

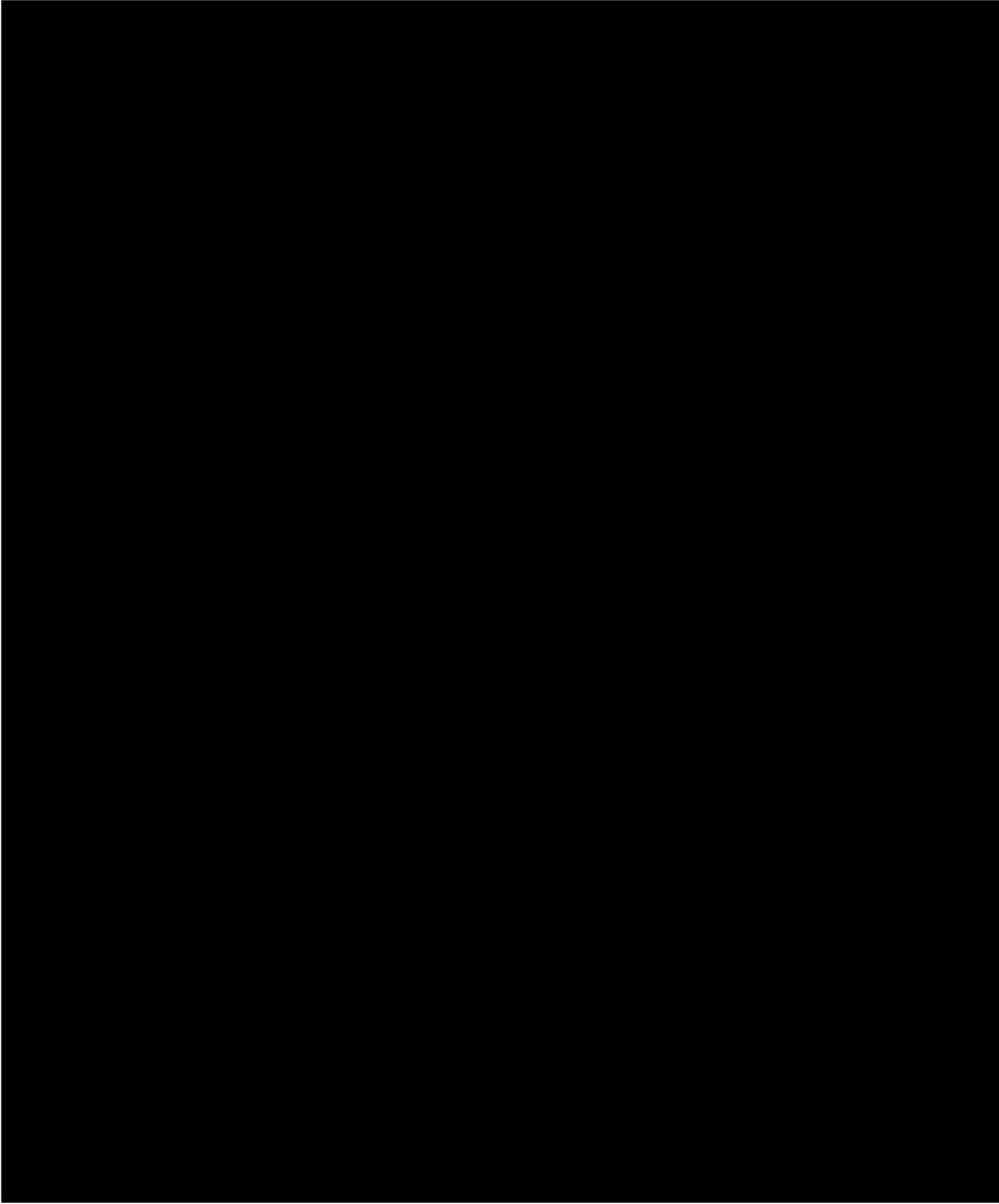
Beijing has almost no experience in modern amphibious operations and created its first Marine brigade of 5,000 men in the South Sea Fleet in 1980. The Chinese Marines have been involved in increasingly realistic training but still lack adequate naval gunfire support and the experience in complex combined-arms operations to conduct a landing against anything but a lightly defended beachhead. Beijing has worked to ensure its Marines have adequate amphibious lift capability and the South Sea Fleet now has enough landing ships to transport the entire Marine brigade. [REDACTED]

US allies in the Pacific almost certainly will express concerns anew if China makes significant improvements in its Marine force, especially if the United States is perceived as aiding this development. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that Beijing's primary concern is defense of the Paracels and we see no indications that the Chinese intend to use their amphibious forces to support major offensive operations against Taiwan or Vietnam. [REDACTED]

#### Looking South

The Chinese military has almost no experience in modern amphibious warfare (see the inset) and only began developing a Marine assault force for its Navy in the late 1970s, largely as a result of escalating tensions with Vietnam. According to Chinese press accounts, the Navy formed its first dedicated force of Marines in the South Sea Fleet in 1980, after China's border war with Vietnam:

- We believe Beijing's primary concern is defending the vulnerable Paracel Islands, seized by China from Vietnam in 1974 but still claimed by Hanoi. Over the past several years, the new Chinese Marines have held several exercises aimed at reinforcing the Paracels. The largest of these took place in late May and early June, 1984, following a joint Soviet-Vietnamese amphibious exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin. [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] naval facilities in southern China--such as those at Zhanjiang, Yulin, and on the Paracels--make them effective jumping-off points should Beijing decide to threaten Vietnamese holdings in the South China Sea. Beijing claims the Spratly Islands, for example, 10 of which are occupied by Vietnam, eight by the Philippines, one by Taiwan, and three by Malaysia. [REDACTED]



### The History of Chinese Amphibious Warfare

All of China's amphibious assaults have been carried out by units of the Chinese ground forces cross-trained in amphibious assault, not by Navy-subordinated assault units. Immediately after their seizure of power, the Chinese Communists--employing tactics derived largely from riverine operations--used wooden junks and US landing ships captured from the Nationalists to stage amphibious assaults on Nationalist-held islands along the Chinese coast:

- o In October 1949, Beijing's first major assault ended in failure when Communists troops, landing in lightly armed junks and rafts, took several thousand casualties in an aborted attack against Jinmen Island in the Taiwan Strait.
- o In March 1950, the Communists successfully seized Hainan Island by staging a diversionary landing at the city of Haikou but conducting the main assault on beaches to the west and east of the city. Communist casualties were high, however, as hundreds of Chinese troops drowned when their rafts towed by motorized junks capsized. [REDACTED]

Beijing's most impressive assault occurred in January 1955 when 6,000 Chinese soldiers using four amphibious landing ships and numerous junks overwhelmed a garrison of 1,100 Nationalist troops on Yijiang Island, just north of the Taiwan Strait. This was the first coordinated assault with air and naval gunfire, and US observers noted that the operation was carried out in textbook fashion. [REDACTED]

Beijing's most recent experience with amphibious operations was an assault in January 1974 on four islands in the Paracel Islands, then held by South Vietnam. Eyewitness accounts indicate that Chinese infantry units simultaneously attacked the islands in a coordinated, well executed attack. Six hundred PLA soldiers, supported by naval gunfire, landed using rubber rafts. Once ashore, the units quickly overwhelmed the defenders and employed reconnaissance-by-fire techniques during sweeps across the islands. Their use of this potentially dangerous technique, coupled with their ability to use identifiable terrain features to delineate unit boundaries, indicated that the assaults were well rehearsed. [REDACTED]

The development of the Navy Marine force in the South Sea Fleet appears to be a priority of Chinese Navy Commander Liu Huaqing. After Liu took charge of the Navy in 1982, we believe he spearheaded several professional reforms, including an increase in realistic training (see the photo). We believe that Liu's interest in the Marines stems from his experience as Deputy Chief of the General Staff, when he reportedly was

[REDACTED] SC-01871-87

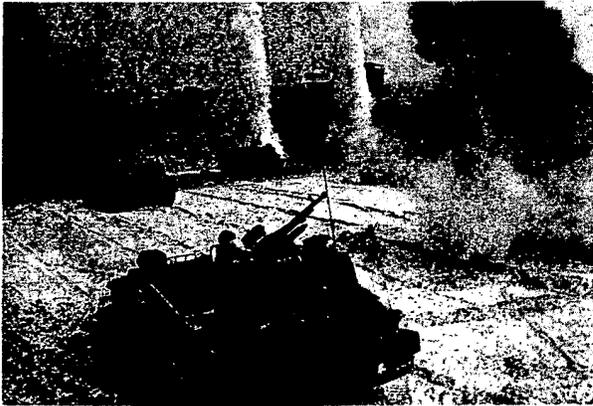
---

The Changing Look of China's Marines

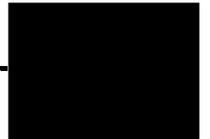
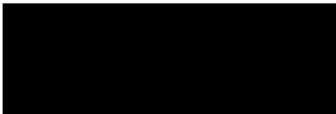
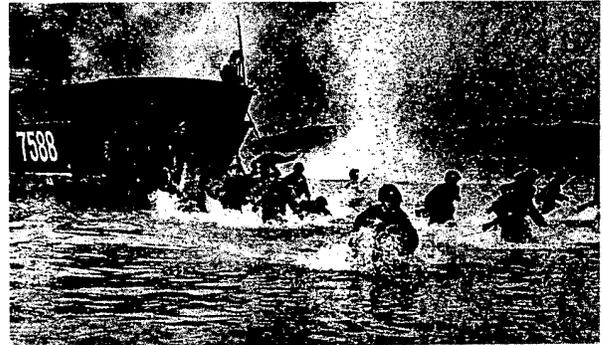
1983



1986

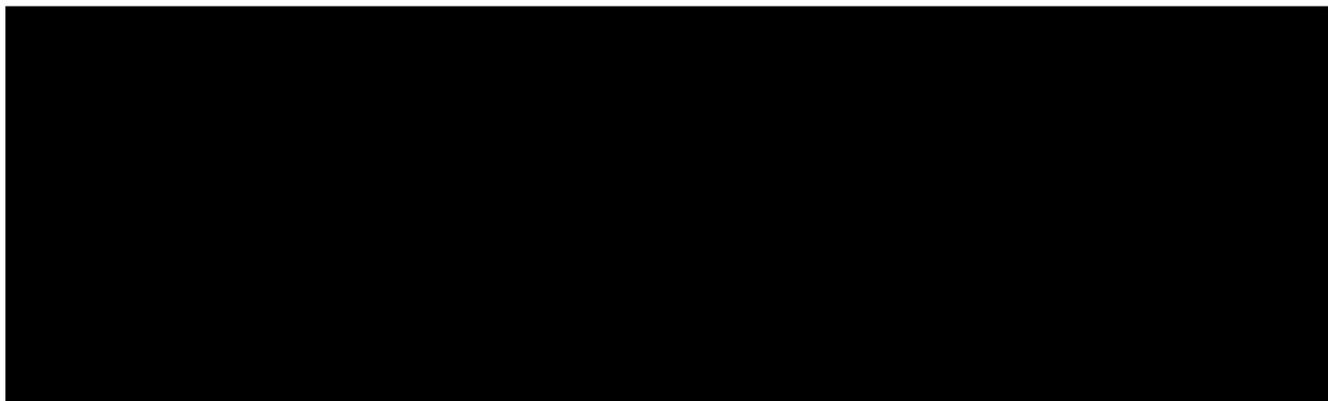


1986



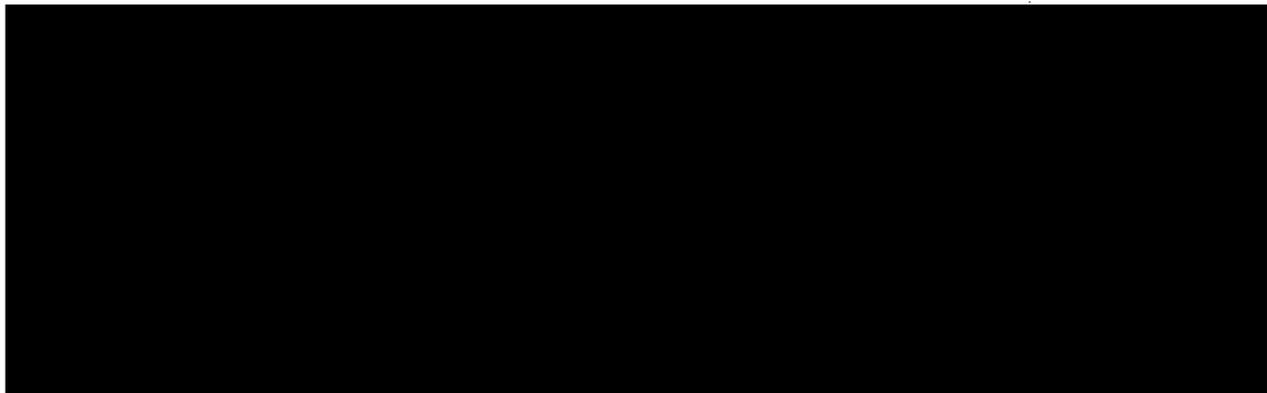
assigned the key role of tactical commander in the Chinese operation in 1974 to seize the Paracels. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the Chinese had planned in the early 1980s to form three Marine divisions--one each in the North, East, and South Sea Fleet areas, but China's military reduction-in-force probably delayed plans for building more than one unit. By 1985 only one Marine division had been formed in the south. This unit was subsequently reorganized into a brigade.<sup>1</sup> [REDACTED]



#### **Amphibious Lift Capacity**

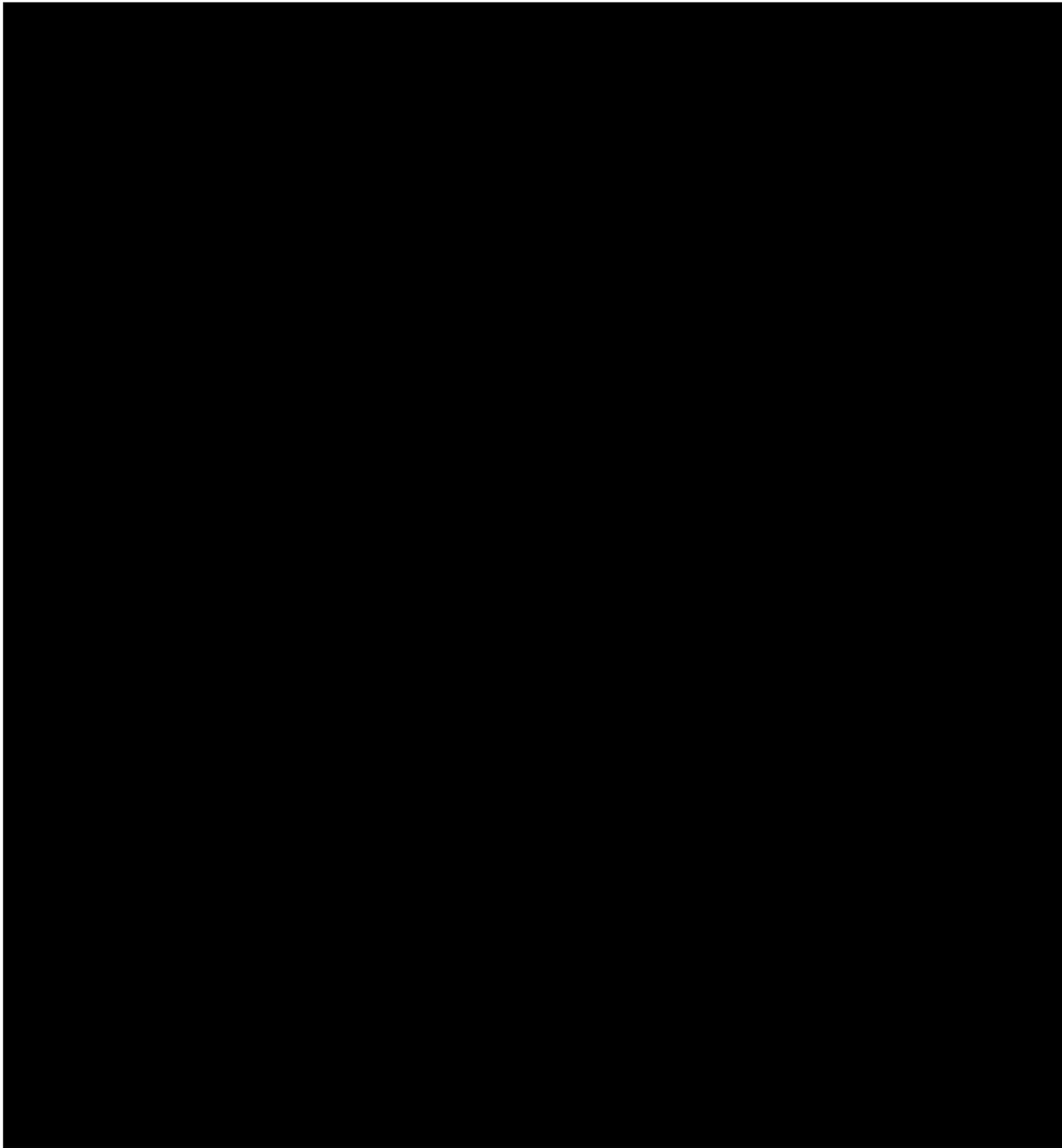
Beijing has also worked to ensure that its fledgling Marine force in the south has the needed oceangoing amphibious lift capability:



[REDACTED] Beijing built three of a new class of tank-landing ship (LST) for the East Sea Fleet in the late 1970s [REDACTED] Designated the Yukun-class,

<sup>1</sup> We believe that the South Sea Fleet Marine division was probably still in the process of fleshing out its ranks and was nowhere near divisional size when the military began to reorganize in 1985. The move to brigade echelon therefore was almost certainly a cosmetic change rather than a reduction in size. [REDACTED]





the LST is slightly larger than a US-511-class LST and can lift 12 tanks or 1,000 troops in combat. We estimate that in all three of its fleets Beijing has the capability to lift two to three lightly armed infantry divisions (approximately 24,000 men) or two Marine brigades--if they had them--of 5,000 men each with tanks, armored personnel carriers, and heavy weapons (see the table). [REDACTED]

China's Amphibious Warfare Ships			
	North Sea Fleet	East Sea Fleet	South Sea Fleet
LST (IOC)			
US-511 (1943)	7	6	0
Yukan (1978)	0	3	0
LSM (IOC)			
US-1 (1944)	0	7	0
Yuling (1970)	1	0	0
Yudao (1979)	0	1	0
Yuliang (1977)	0	0	31
Total	8	17	31

This table is Secret Noform Wintel.

Chinese naval planners are also closely studying the role of air-cushion vehicles (ACVs) and helicopters in modern amphibious assaults, but are still in the experimental stage with such assets. Beijing has published photos of small numbers of Chinese troops disembarking from an ACV and helicopters during amphibious exercises. China's experiments with ACVs since the mid-1970s have produced nearly a dozen variants for both military and civilian use. [REDACTED]

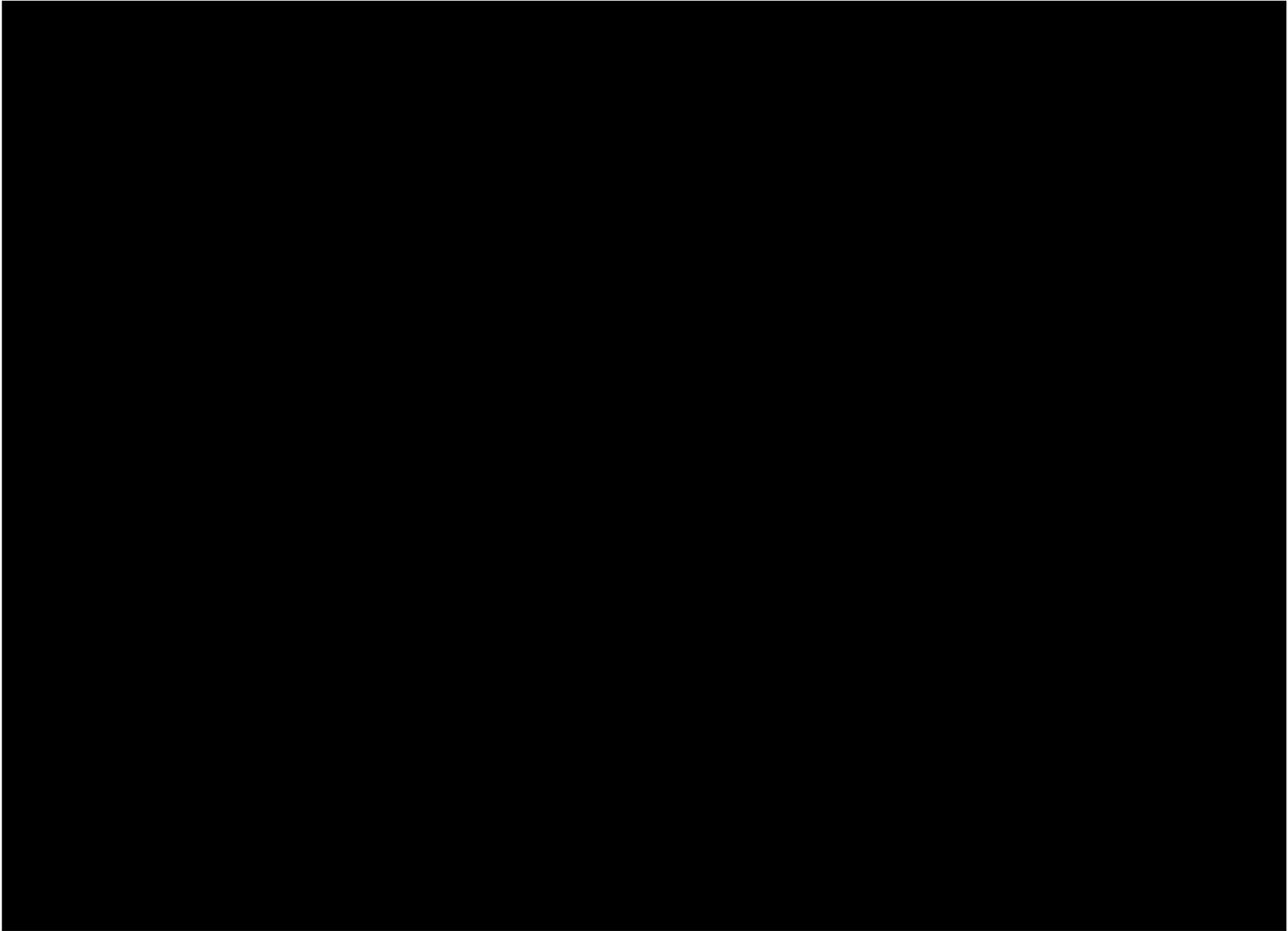
#### Major Deficiencies Limit Power Projection

Despite the formation of a Marine force, we believe China's ability to project power ashore remains extremely limited. Besides the small size of its one Marine brigade, major deficiencies in China's training program and fire support for the Marines are apparent:

---

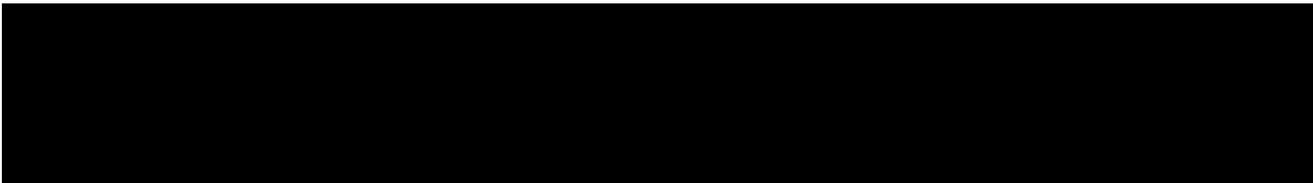
**Chinese Commandos Disembarking From an Air Cushion Vehicle**



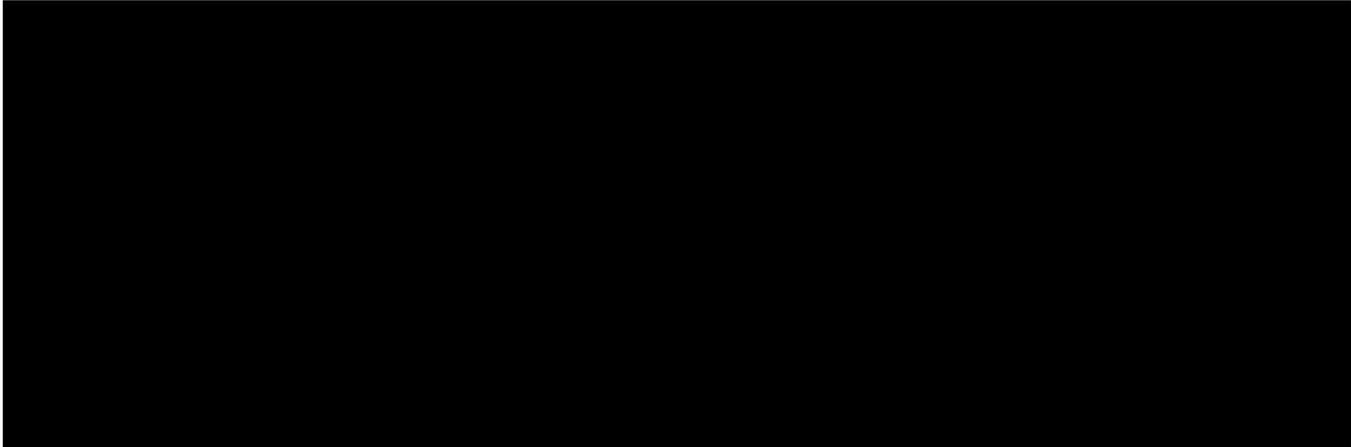


**The US Marine Corps: A Role Model for the Chinese**

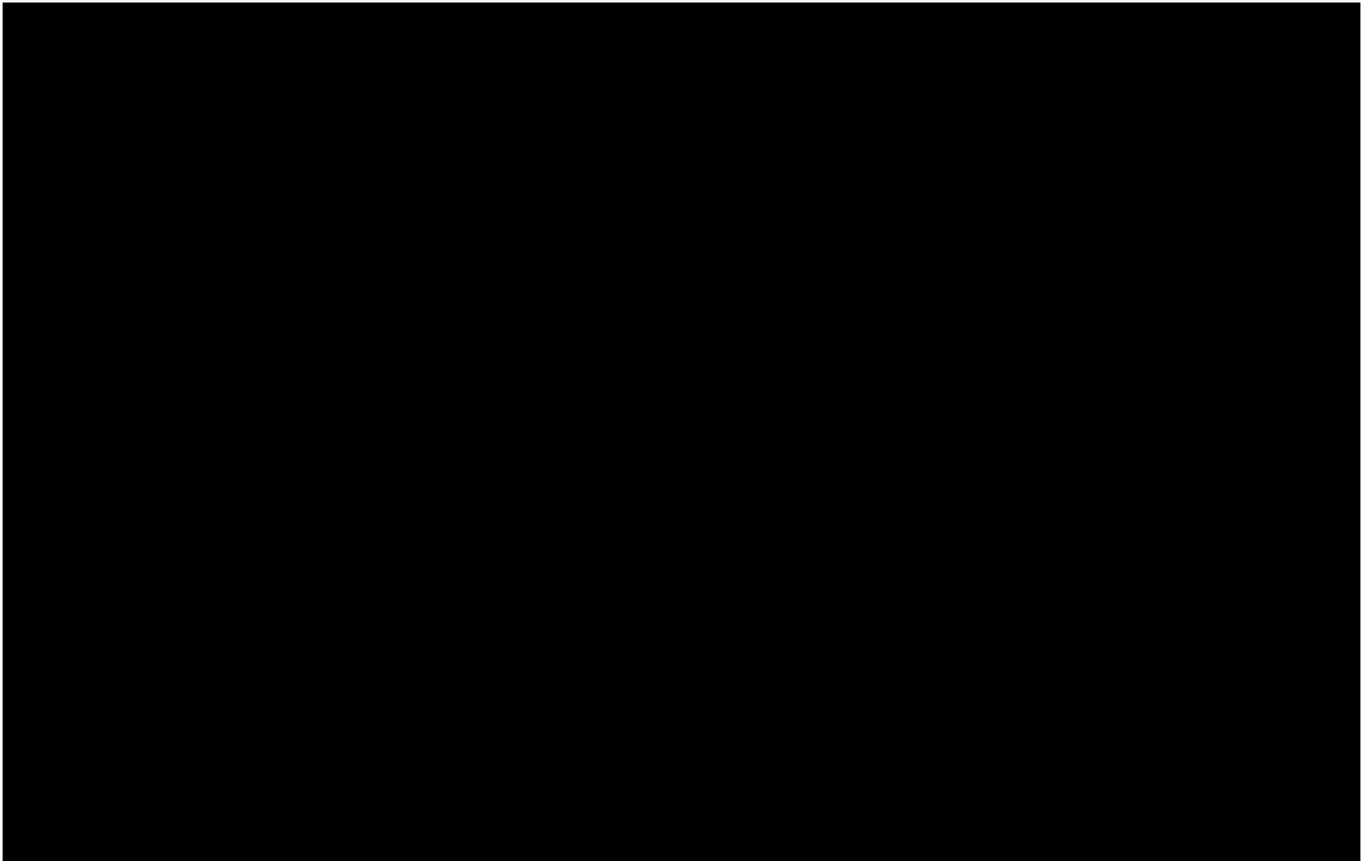
The visit of US Marine Corps Commandant General P. X. Kelley to China this month will constitute the first significant contact between the Chinese military and the US Marine Corps. We believe the Chinese Navy views the visit not only as an opportunity to further enhance US-China naval relations, but also as an opportunity to improve China's Marines by studying their US counterpart. The Chinese have taken a similar approach with other US service arms:



SC-01871-87



**What Beijing Seeks**



**Implications for the United States**

Taiwan and our Asian allies, who are concerned about the US-China military relationship, almost certainly will express their concerns anew if the United States



develops closer contacts with the Chinese Marine force. By studying US Marine Corps organization, tactics, training, logistics, and equipment over a long period, the Chinese could make major improvements to their fledgling Marine force and significantly enhance its amphibious assault capability. In our opinion, if properly trained and organized for amphibious assault, Beijing's small Marine force would be capable of small operations such as seizing disputed islands in the South China Sea, raiding Vietnamese installations in the northern Gulf of Tonkin, or even spearheading an assault on the Taiwan-occupied Pescadores. [REDACTED]

We have no evidence, however, that Beijing intends to use its amphibious forces to support major offensive operations against Taiwan or the Vietnamese:

- Beijing has maintained a low military profile along the Taiwan Strait since announcing its policy of peaceful reunification in 1979. Although Chinese leaders have on occasion threatened a naval blockade if Taiwan continued to ignore Beijing's diplomatic overtures, an amphibious assault is seen only as a last resort.
- A senior Chinese official has admitted that Beijing lacks the amphibious forces for an assault on Taiwan. [REDACTED] China, however, stopped building landing ships in 1981, and shows no inclination to resume construction. [REDACTED]

We believe that Beijing sees its Marines as primarily defending Hainan Island and the Paracels against aggression from Hanoi. Strong Vietnamese coastal defenses make a Chinese assault on Vietnam highly unlikely. In addition to deficiencies in training and fire support for China's Marines, Chinese warships lack an effective air defense capability, severely limiting the ability of the South Sea Fleet to project power into the South China Sea. Any amphibious task force operating in the Spratlys, for example, would be out of range of Beijing's land-based fighters. [REDACTED]

Political costs would also weigh against Beijing's attempting to take the disputed islands in the Spratlys by force. The Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan also have garrisons in the Spratlys, and any Chinese assault--even one directed solely against the Vietnamese-held islands--could sour relations with Southeast Asian nations at a time when China seeks their support against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia and the USSR who bankrolls Vietnam's military machine. We believe Beijing is unlikely to risk poisoning its growing political ties to these states by a confrontation in the Spratlys with Vietnam unless severely provoked. [REDACTED]