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Communist China's Advanced Weapons Program

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Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

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COMMUNIST CHINA'S ADVANCED WEAPONS PROGRAM

THE PROBLEM

To make a preliminary evaluation of recent information bearing on Communist China's advanced weapons program.

THE ESTIMATE

1. On 27 October 1966, the Chinese announced that they had successfully launched a guided missile which carried a nuclear warhead. We have confirmed that there was a nuclear explosion, [redacted] [redacted] detonated in the lower atmosphere about 100 miles east of the Lop Nor nuclear test site. As nearly as we can ascertain, the device was delivered by a ballistic missile, as the Chinese claim. Such a missile, in or near the MRBM class, may have been fired from the Shuang-ch'eng-tzu missile test range over a distance of about 400 nautical miles. At this point we are not able to judge with confidence what this event implies for China's advanced weapons capability. The Chinese may have conducted this test for propaganda and political purposes, using equipment that would not be satisfactory for a weapon system. We think it somewhat more likely that they have tested a missile-warhead combination which, while considerably below US or Soviet standards, could be used as a weapon in the short or perhaps medium range. If this is the case, the Chinese could have a few such weapons ready for deployment in 1967 or 1968.

2. We have recently received information indicating that the Chinese also have under development a much larger and more complex missile system. We believe that this is an ICBM, although a space role cannot be discounted. We believe a launch facility will be completed early in 1967. No major component of an ICBM has been

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detected but there are indications that the Chinese might be able to begin flight testing by the latter part of 1967. If so, and if they are able to produce the missiles and other equipment necessary to sustain an active and successful test program, a few ICBMs, with fission nuclear warheads, could be operational by the early 1970's. The first generation of such missiles would probably be large, costly, and, again by US or Soviet standards, deficient in reliability and accuracy. Nevertheless, the Chinese would probably wish to have a few operational at least for political and psychological effect. The development of an ICBM booster would also give the Chinese the capacity to put a fairly large payload into orbit early in the ICBM test program.

3. An ICBM could not be fired to full range within the borders of China, and we cannot establish at this time how the Chinese would carry out full range ICBM tests. Preliminary flight testing of system components, however, could be accomplished within the borders of China.

4. At the same time, the Chinese will be working toward a high-yield thermonuclear warhead. The third Chinese test device, which contained some thermonuclear material, performed quite inefficiently and apparently was heavy and bulky, indicating that the Chinese have much to learn about thermonuclear technology. It did, however, constitute an initial step toward the attainment of a thermonuclear capability. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Chinese will be able to develop a thermonuclear warhead by the early 1970's.

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