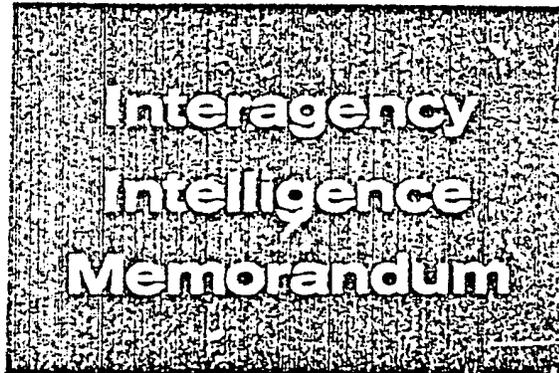


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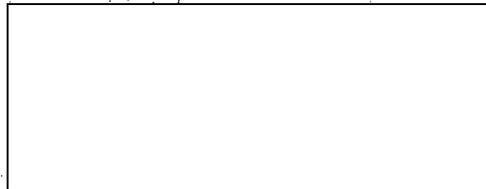
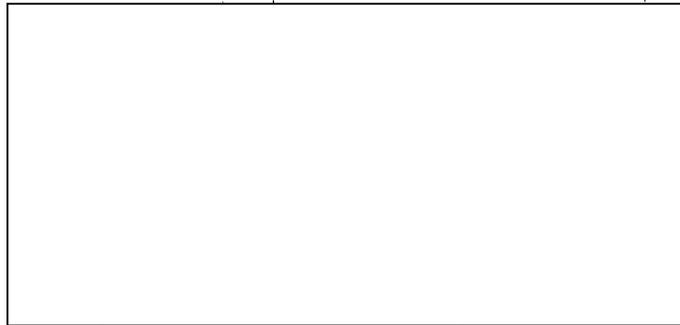
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*PRC Military Options in the East
and South China Seas*

Secret

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PRC MILITARY OPTIONS IN THE
EAST AND SOUTH CHINA SEAS

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PRC MILITARY OPTIONS IN THE EAST AND SOUTH CHINA SEAS¹

NOTE

This paper assesses the military options (for planning or implementation) available to the PRC through 1978 in the areas of the East and South China Seas. In addition to Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait, attention is focused on the offshore islands and the P'eng-hus in the East China Sea, and on Pratas Reef and the Spratlys in the South China Sea. *The conclusion is that it is unlikely that the PRC will initiate any major military confrontation in these areas during the near term, although the PRC is likely to extend gradually its activities in the waters of the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The PRC would be unable to mount a successful nonnuclear invasion of Taiwan much before 1980.*

¹ This memorandum has been prepared jointly by the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency with contributions from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State.

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THE PROBLEM

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Peking has insisted that Taiwan is Chinese territory and has vowed to "liberate" and reunite the island with the mainland. Peking has also claimed other smaller island areas in the East and South China Seas, most recently on November 25, 1975 in a tough statement aimed at North Vietnam and the USSR in the authoritative *Peoples Daily*. Although Chinese leaders have repeatedly indicated a political solution would be the preferred means of acquiring the claimed territories, they have also stated that China would not rule out the use of force in solving the Taiwan problem. The PRC, moreover, used force against the South Vietnamese garrison in seizing the Paracels early in 1974. Peking, therefore, has preserved its options on how to regain claimed territories and could attempt a forceful solution if efforts at a political solution fail or severe provocations occur. Peking's policy also allows for various military pressures as part of the option mix. For example, the PRC used force against the Republic of China (ROC) military forces on the offshore islands of Quemoy (Chin-men) and Matsu in 1958 and carried out a major defensive build-up in the Strait in 1962.

In the case of Taiwan, Peking's nonmilitary pressures may be insufficient to bring about a negotiated settlement:

- Diplomatic isolation has not affected Taiwan's economic viability as a *de facto* independent state nor weakened its will to resist negotiations with Peking.
- Peking has limited economic leverage against Taiwan because the island republic has maintained an extensive network of informal and commercial relations, because Taiwan will undoubtedly continue to have an adequate supply of petroleum, and because the island has been able to cope with the effects of the present world economic recession.
- Peking's united front tactics have had little effect against the fairly stable internal political situation on Taiwan. Beefed-up PRC propaganda broadcasts to Taiwan in September 1975 and the PRC release of Kuomintang prisoners during the year were examples of Peking's continuing attempts to keep pressure on Tai-

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wan. However, ROC mainlanders and native Taiwanese both have a great investment in Taiwan's continued prosperity and relatively high standard of living. The principle of reunification also runs counter to the general separatist sentiment among the native Taiwanese.

Thus, military measures could appear to the leaders in Peking to be a necessary additional tool, although the leadership would be reluctant to undertake any military action where chances of success were not assured.

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DISCUSSION

CONSTRAINTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

1. There are significant constraints—political, economic, and military—upon Peking's use of military action to regain its claimed territories in adjacent seas (see Figure 1). While these factors would be major constraints upon an invasion of Taiwan and the P'eng-hus (Pescadores), they would be less of a restraint against increased "non-belligerent" military activity or small-scale operations in areas not covered by treaty with the United States.

The International Equation

2. China's reluctance to knock akilter the delicately balanced Sino-US-Soviet triangle is probably the most important political constraint. The American connection helps China avoid an armed conflict with the Soviet Union. This has been of sufficient importance to Peking that it has agreed to maintain *de facto* diplomatic relations with the US despite the United States' formal recognition of Taiwan and US security guarantees for the island. Peking would be particularly reluctant to make any major military move prior to the US presidential election of 1976.

3. Peking is anxious to prevent the growth of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia as well as that of Hanoi. Aggressive PRC military action in the Taiwan area or the South China Sea would alarm nations in Southeast Asia such as the Philippines and Thailand which China is currently cultivating and—if directed against Vietnam interests—could push Hanoi closer to Moscow.

4. PRC aggression against Taiwan could drive Japan away from China and perhaps closer to the Soviet Union while strengthening the arguments of those in Japan who advocate national rearmament and domestic development of nuclear weapons. PRC military action against Taiwan might also contribute to instability in the Korean peninsula, something Peking would prefer to avoid.

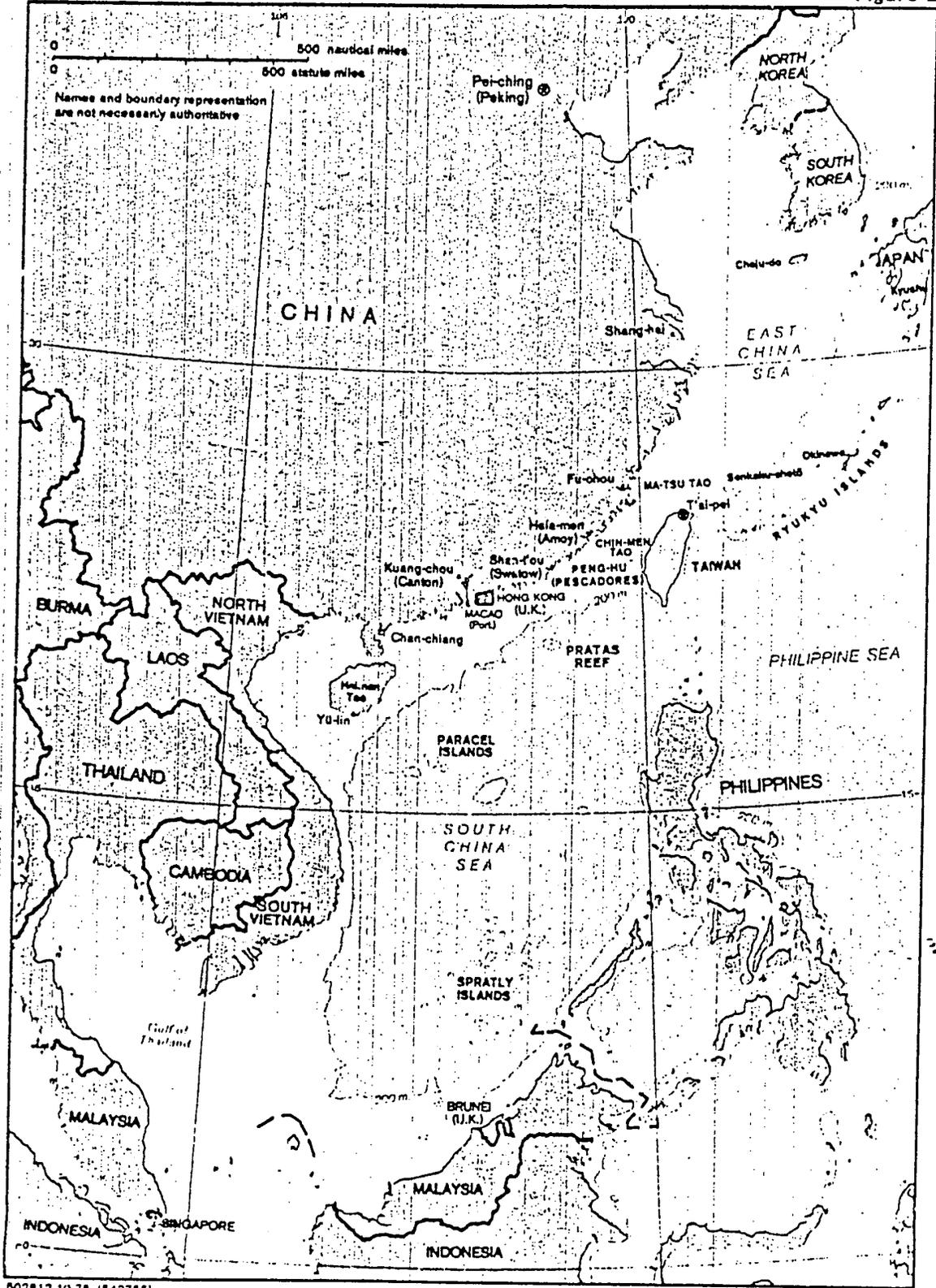
Military Constraints

5. The US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty is a major obstacle to PRC military action against Taiwan. For the near term the PRC probably would be reluctant to take any action that reduced the possibility of formal US recognition of the PRC and abrogation of the treaty. Even if the US-ROC treaty were abrogated, Peking probably could not be sure the United States would not aid Taipei, especially in the first several years after the treaty's demise. Even while in effect, however, the treaty does not commit the United States to the defense of the offshore island groups such as Chin-men and Matsu or of those islands in the South China Sea claimed and garrisoned by the ROC.

6. Small operations, such as an assault on Pratas Reef (Tung-sha), could be undertaken without affecting China's overall defense posture. Also, China has sufficient personnel and material resources to attempt small amphibious operations against the lightly defended island garrisons in the Spratlys in the South China Sea. Amphibious operations against the heavily defended offshore islands or Taiwan would be extremely costly in men and

Islands in the China Sea

Figure 1



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materiel. It could take years for the military sector to regain its losses after a large-scale operation to invade Taiwan. War damage in Taiwan would also result in expensive rehabilitation costs and a hostile population.

7. To attack Taiwan, Peking would have to draw on its strategic reserve in central China as well as on air forces now generally committed to protection of its northern border, thus adversely affecting its strategic posture vis-a-vis Moscow. Moreover, Chinese preoccupation with a major operation against Taiwan could present Moscow with opportunities for increased pressure against China, including conventional military operations against the mainland; this is a risk that Peking would be extremely reluctant to run.

8. There are significant factors inhibiting amphibious operations by the PRC, particularly across the Taiwan Strait. These include a shortage of amphibious landing ships, the lack of a modern shipborne air defense system,² limited air control systems, and the need for extensive force training and the establishment of a command-and-control system for large operations of this type. The most critical barriers to establishing and maintaining a beachhead on Taiwan are the shortage of amphibious landing ships and the limited capability to resupply a large force. These could be remedied before 1980, but only if the PRC embarked on a concerted building program and attempted to expand its logistic capability in the near future. A major training program also would have to be implemented afterwards. But a building program for amphibious ships would disrupt other ship construction projects, and there is, moreover, no evidence that the PRC has embarked on any of these programs.

9. Taiwan would surely detect a PRC attempt to improve its capability to launch an invasion of Taiwan. With or without US support, the ROC almost certainly would respond with a military build-up of its own. This build-up could offset the improvement of PRC capabilities. However, in the unlikely event of a Sino-Soviet rapprochement, the PRC would be able to concentrate its attention almost entirely on invasion preparations.

² This is not essential if air superiority has been gained.

Under such circumstances the ROC would probably be unable to match the PRC effort.

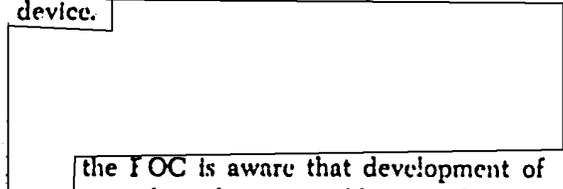
PROVOCATIONS AND SITUATIONAL CHANGES

10. Despite all of these constraints, there are certain provocations and situational changes which, though unlikely over the short term, could motivate the PRC to consider military action:

— A formal declaration of Taiwan independence. This is highly unlikely in the near term, particularly under the present leadership of Premier Chiang Ching-kuo. Such a declaration would be an act of desperation, as it could provoke a PRC attack, could undermine political stability in Taiwan, and would probably not gain the support of the US.

— An ROC approach to the USSR. This too would be an act of desperation. Premier Chiang is adamantly against this, and there seems little the ROC or the USSR could gain from a relationship. However, such an approach could be urged upon Chiang if there were a perceived loss of US guarantees of military support and if PRC actions became more aggressive toward Taiwan.

— ROC development of a nuclear explosive device.



the ROC is aware that development of such a nuclear device would jeopardize its relations with the US and provoke Peking.

— Leadership changes in the PRC that would call for increased pressures on the ROC and the US to resolve the Taiwan problem sooner. Such pressures might conceivably result from internal factors, and could be linked to some measure of accommodation with the USSR.

— A Vietnamese initiative to take complete control of the Spratly Islands. Such action might result in a preemptive operation to seize the entire Spratly group despite possible damage to Chinese foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia, i.e., despite fears of increased Soviet

influence in Vietnam and alienation of the Philippines which maintains a presence in the islands. The PRC could, alternately, undertake to occupy the ROC-held island of Itu Aba if it perceived that the Vietnamese were preparing to take the island.

to venture farther from the coast. The Chinese seem determined to assert their right to use the Strait more extensively, but are expected to operate relatively close to the mainland. At the same time, they probably will expand their naval forces in the area.

OPTIONS

11. The constraints and the limited possibility for provocative changes, described above, lead to the conclusion that it is unlikely that the PRC will initiate any major military action in these areas during the near term. Nevertheless, in the strategic mix of actions designed to acquire Taiwan, military pressures—as well as political, psychological, economic elements—are already present. An examination of military options follows.

A. Gradual Expansion of PRC Activity in the Taiwan Strait

12. China's military strategy will probably be one of increasing pressure in increments small enough to avoid alarming the United States while at the same time large enough to cause growing concern on the part of the ROC leadership. In this regard, a gradual expansion of PRC activity in the Taiwan Strait is most likely (see Figure 2).

13. In the past, Peking has been reluctant to conduct extensive air operations over the Strait, and, to our knowledge, PRC aircraft have never flown sorties near or over Taiwan. To do so would represent a high risk of confrontation because the ROC air force overflies the entire Strait area. We have no evidence yet pointing to a change in this PRC policy.

14. The Chinese have made some moves during the past two years that indicate that the balance of naval power in the Strait area is beginning to change. Three Riga class guided-missile destroyer escorts passed through the Strait during the Paracel Islands confrontation, the first time that a PRC major naval unit had made such a transit. The Chinese have also begun to deploy missile boat squadrons in the northern approaches to the Strait, a move that substantially increases Chinese capabilities to react militarily and foreshadows the establishment of other missile boat squadrons in the southern approaches. In addition, small naval units have begun

15. The effect of the gradual shift in the balance of power in the Strait area appears to be somewhat greater freedom for PRC naval forces. PRC missile boats are an inhibiting factor for the ROC Navy, and Taiwan has expressed concern about their presence. It is probable, however, that both sides will attempt to limit the risk of confrontation, but the possibility of miscalculation clearly increases as forces in the area build up.

B. Operations Against the Offshore Islands

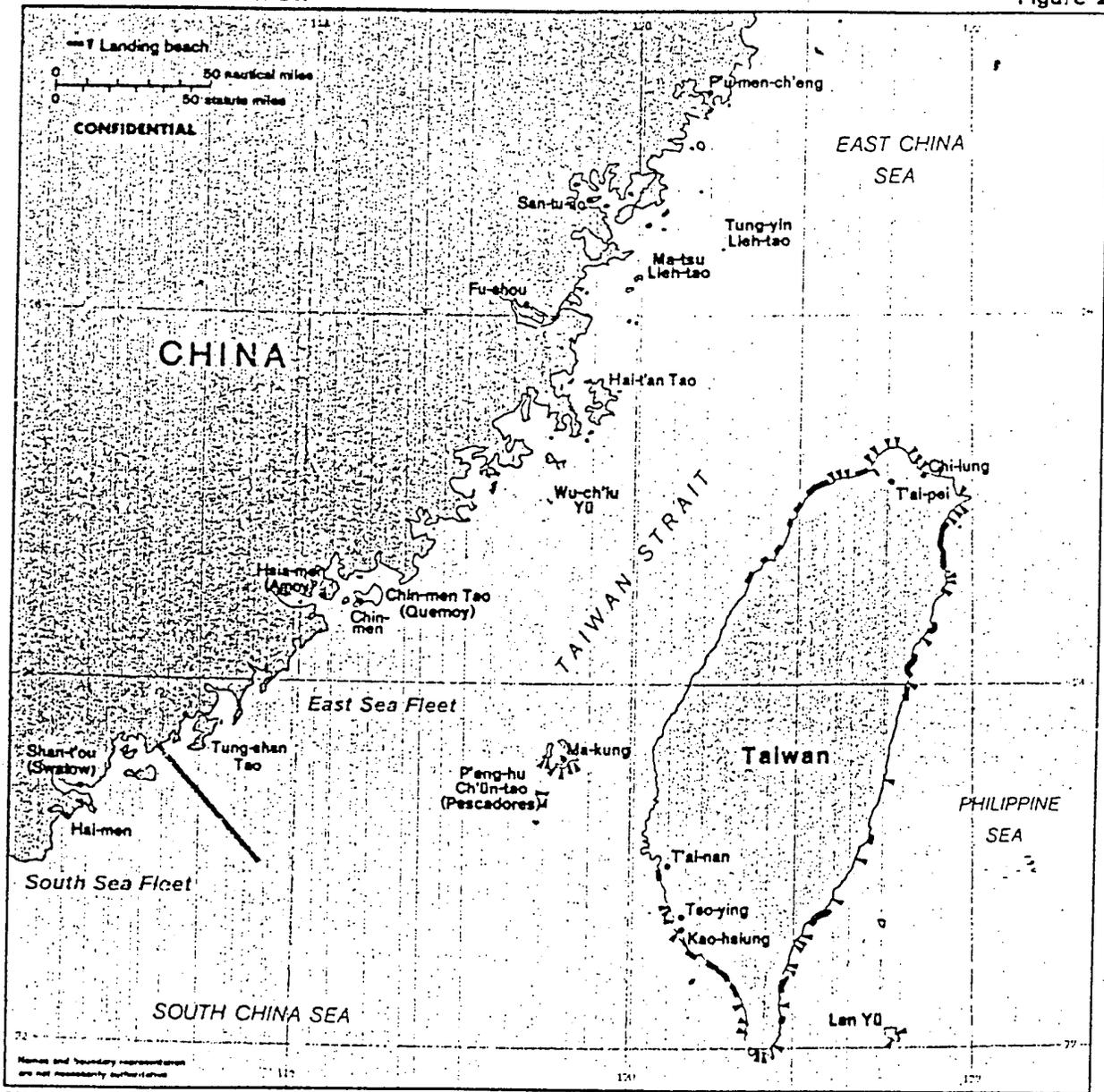
16. The likelihood of a major operation to take or blockade the offshore islands in the near term is low. The political constraints may be slightly less serious than would apply to Taiwan and the P'eng-hus covered by the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty, but conflict in the area could reawaken US memories of previous crises and arouse fear that Peking had opted for a military solution to the Taiwan problem. Moreover, the military costs to the PRC would be very high for the results that might be achieved. The islands' loss would not substantially affect Taiwan's economic viability and might only draw attention to its viability as an entity independent of the mainland. Moreover, the islands symbolically and legally tie Taiwan to the mainland in the minds of the Chinese on both sides of the Strait.

17. If Peking made a decision to initiate military action, lesser measures such as blockade or harassment would be preferable to an assault. Harassing activity against the offshore islands or against traffic to these islands could occur in reaction to possible confrontations as the PRC expands its naval activity in the Taiwan Strait. Peking also could initiate harassing activity as part of a tougher, more militant stance toward Taiwan.

18. The offshore islands controlled by the ROC consist of four island groups: Chin-men (Qiemoy), Matsu, Wu-ch'iu, and Tung-yin. Only two are defended in strength: Chin-men, which is within four miles of the mainland and controls access to

Taiwan Strait Area

Figure 2



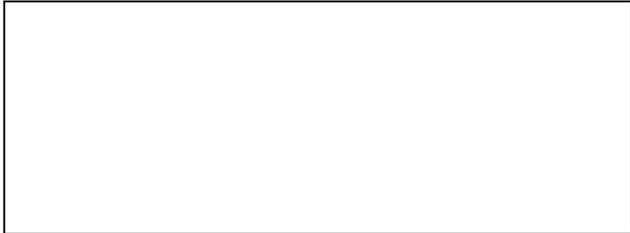
Names and boundary representation are not necessarily authoritative

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the port of Hsia-men (Amoy), and Matsu, which is within seven miles of the mainland and controls the primary sea approaches to the port of Fuchou (see Figure 3). The two smaller island groups of Wu-ch'iu (about halfway between Matsu and Chin-men) and Tung-yin (northeast of Matsu), are manned only by small irregular units which receive low priority in ROC defense planning. Chin-men has numerous beaches suitable for amphibious operations and flat areas that could be used for air-borne operations. The Matsus consist mainly of rugged hills and a rocky, precipitous shoreline with only a few minor beaches. One of the two airfields on Chin-men could be used by jet fighters. The forces deployed on Chin-men and Matsu constitute more than a fifth of the entire ROC army and include units at the highest state of readiness. Because most of the islands lie within artillery range of the mainland, the ROC has built extensive underground defensive positions. Heavily mined beaches, defensive obstructions, and narrow, shallow channels protect most approaches to the islands.

19. The PRC has demonstrated a capability and periodic willingness to harass the offshore islands. Chin-men and Matsu are, of course, within artillery range, and antiaircraft artillery in some areas can harass high-flying ROC aircraft if they are on the PRC side of the islands. PRC SAMs also could be deployed opposite the islands for more effective coverage of the air space. The PRC might attempt to impose restrictions on access to the islands as a means of exerting its control. PRC aircraft and naval units could interrupt military air and sea traffic or even the activity of ROC fishing boats in the vicinity. The PRC navy, however, would have to deploy missile combatants from the East and South Sea Fleets in the event of ROC counteraction, and Peking would have to expect an increase in ROC combat air patrols and air and naval escort activity with an enhanced probability of air and sea engagements between opposing forces.

20. The offshore island groups depend upon Taiwan for all classes of supply and are thus vulnerable to blockade. A blockade, which in Peking's eyes would be preferable to an amphibious assault, would effectively isolate a large portion of the ROC's best fighting men from Taiwan's own defense from the first day. The ROC alone is not capable of breaking a blockade there;



C. Operations Against the P'eng-hu (Pescadores) Islands

21. A PRC military operation against the P'eng-hu Islands is a most unlikely option in the near term. Not only would the constraints described above fully apply, but seizure of the islands is not essential for an invasion of Taiwan and the military preparations and costs would be high.

22. The P'eng-hu island group consists of over 60 small islands totaling some 45 square miles, which lie about 25 miles west of south-central Taiwan and about 80 miles from the mainland (see Figure 2, page 8). In general, the coasts are steep and rocky with a few isolated sand and pebble beaches banked by more moderate slopes. The ROC maintains a naval base there and a garrison of only one light infantry division and a special warfare group. Most of the islands have well prepared defensive positions. There is one beach suitable for a limited amphibious operation on the main island of Ma-kung where there is a seaport and an airport. The terrain provides good drop zones for airborne operations, although the weather is frequently unfavorable except in late spring and the summer.

23. A successful blockade of the P'eng-hus would require gaining air superiority, but this could be accomplished only at a fearful loss of aircraft. If Peking attempted to blockade the islands without first gaining air superiority, the PRC probably could not completely prevent the movement of supplies and troops from Taiwan, particularly by air.

24. The disadvantages of attacking the P'eng-hus outweigh the advantages. Possession of the P'eng-hus would aid in controlling the Taiwan Strait and provide a forward operating base for a PRC invasion of Taiwan. The United States, however, is committed under the Mutual Defense Treaty to come to the aid of the ROC in the event of an attack upon the P'eng-hus. Even if the US did not intervene, an amphibious assault upon the islands would be no simple matter. As indicated, an assault

upon the P'eng-hus would require the same air and naval preparation as an invasion of Taiwan.

25. Possession of the P'eng-hus, moreover, would almost certainly not force the ROC government to negotiate or surrender. The ROC would not be likely to capitulate so long as there were hope of repelling PRC forces on the beaches of Taiwan and hope of US intervention. With US support for Taiwan, the PRC enterprise would end in failure. Whether or not the United States did intervene, there would be a serious deterioration in Sino-US detente. Moreover, the USSR might attempt to exploit Chinese vulnerabilities resulting from such a confrontation. Considering all of the dangers and costs, the PRC would undoubtedly prefer to gamble its forces on the invasion of Taiwan than settle for the limited and uncertain gains involved in taking the P'eng-hus.

D. Operations Against Taiwan

26. Any operation against Taiwan Island is highly unlikely in the near term in view of the constraints and risks already described (most significantly the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty). Even in the event of provocations or major changes in the strategic situation so that there was no US involvement, the PRC probably would not have the capability to mount a successful nonnuclear invasion much before 1980 without unacceptable losses.

27. *Assault on Taiwan.* If Peking planned to launch an attack about that time, preparations would probably become apparent long before the event. These preparations would include an increase in the production of landing ships, specialized training in submarine warfare and amphibious operations, air-crew proficiency training, massive fleet training operations, development of modern shipborne air-defense systems, and the improvement of air-defense facilities opposite Taiwan.

28. To initiate an operation, the PRC would probably move its submarines into positions surrounding the island and deploy guided-missile patrol boats to cordon off the Strait area. Once this was accomplished, air and naval strikes would be initiated to destroy ROC air and naval forces.

29. 



30. Combat between the ROC and PRC air forces would be extremely costly to the PRC. Despite a pronounced numerical inferiority, the ROC air force has superior aircraft, skilled and experienced pilots, and an effective air-to-air missile system^f whereas the PRC has few, if any, operational air-to-air missiles. Moreover, because most air combat probably would occur near Taiwan, PRC aircraft would be exposed to ROC surface-to-air missiles and ROC pilots would have longer time for air engagements than PRC pilots, whose operations would be shortened by fuel requirements for round-trip flights from the mainland.

31. Despite these disadvantages, the PRC could deploy a large number of aircraft to airfields within range of Taiwan and eventually overwhelm the ROC air force. Within 550 nm of Taiwan, the PRC currently has about 1,470 combat aircraft (1,220 air defense fighters, 110 fighter bombers, and 140 light bombers) against 288 ROC combat jet aircraft. Additional aircraft could be summoned from other areas of China, permitting the PRC almost continuous coverage of important areas of Taiwan.

32. The ROC navy, however, is currently being refitted with modern armament including missiles, anti-submarine rockets, and possibly torpedoes. By the end of this decade a number of units of the ROC navy should have firepower equaling that of PRC counterparts, but not that of the navy as a whole. However, Peking could still count on a numerical advantage in its efforts to gain uncontested control of the waters around Taiwan.

33. The most critical factors in any amphibious operation, however, are establishing and maintaining a beachhead. The PRC's shortage of amphibious landing ships and limited capability to resupply a large force clearly restrict its capabilities until at least 1980. It would probably take two years of concerted building to double the inventory of landing ships; but this would only provide a limited lift capability of about six divisions, which probably does not give the margin of superiority necessary

to overcome the ROC opposing forces anticipated at the landing beaches.

34. Because of the limited numbers of amphibious landing ships presently available,³ the PRC for the near term is not assured of landing enough heavy equipment in the initial beach assault to break out of the beachhead and gain a port to bring in the needed additional heavy equipment and troops. For a successful invasion, the PRC would need at least a 3 to 1 numerical superiority or a total of some 70 divisions.

35

[Redacted]

[Large redacted area]

[Redacted]

37. The main limitation for the submarine force would be operating conditions in the Strait area. There, some relatively shallow depths, along with numerous navigational obstacles, provide hazards for combat operations. An effective naval blockade would require attacks on foreign shipping, a measure Peking would be reluctant to undertake.

E. Operations Against Senkaku Islands

38. The chances for a PRC military move against the uninhabited Senkaku Islands is low. No particular military advantages would be gained by occupying these islands, and any military activity in this potentially oil-rich area also claimed by Japan would endanger Sino-Japanese relations. However, the PRC could emphasize its sovereignty claims by occasional naval patrols to show the flag near the area.

F. Operations Against Pratas Reef (Tung-sha)

39. The PRC already has the capability to harass or seize Pratas Reef at any time, but the likelihood of attack is low because the gains—if any—would be very limited and an attack might have some adverse effect on PRC relations with neighboring states and the US.

[Redacted]

40. Pratas is a circular coral barrier reef, roughly 13 miles in diameter, with an island on the west side (see Figure 4). It is about 135 miles from the mainland and 240 miles southwest of Taiwan. The reef is claimed by both Chinas, but by no other nation. The ROC maintains a weather station and small garrison—about 400 men in all—on the island. The island has an airfield with a 5,000-foot concrete runway but few, if any prepared defensive positions. The reef area contains no known deposits of oil and is of little intrinsic military value. Four years ago a flotilla of 15 PRC ships circled the reef,

³ Of the 450-500 units, only 35 are landing ships and the remainder are small landing craft. These units could lift only three infantry divisions and their equipment.

but there was no exchange of shots, and the ships eventually withdrew.

41. Extension of maritime reconnaissance to include the reef area (which is within range of PRC fighter and bomber aircraft) is conceivable as China expands its activities in those waters. Seizing Pratas

[redacted]

would be patently directed against the ROC. Such a step also could serve as a demonstration of willingness to use force eventually against Taiwan. Because the Pratas campaign would be an aggressive military operation, Peking would probably delay action until the Chinese came to feel that heavy-handed pressures to force a political settlement were both necessary and internationally tolerable. The seizure of Pratas could at the same time serve as a warning to Hanoi that China could take possession of all the islands China claims in the South China Sea and that Vietnamese military initiatives in the Spratly Islands could not be made with impunity.

42. [redacted]

43. A blockade is also possible and would result in fewer casualties, but it might be lengthy unless the ROC defending troops were induced to defect. Pratas and the Spratlys are resupplied once in four months [redacted]

G. Operations Against the Spratly (Nan-sha) Islands

44. Operations against Spratly Island garrisons would be more difficult than against either the

Paracels or Pratas because of the much greater distance and the international complexities resulting from the presence of garrisons from three different countries. Near-term likelihood of PRC operations in the area is therefore low unless one of the claimants, most likely Vietnam, attempts to resolve the sovereignty question by force.

45. The Spratly Islands, an archipelago of about 80 rocks, reefs, cays, and small sand and coral islets all with a total land area of only one square mile, sprawl over a large area of the southern portion of the South China Sea (see Figure 5). They lie about 300 miles from Manila, 750 miles from Taiwan, 550 miles from the PRC island of Hainan, and 300 miles from Saigon. The most southerly islands are located on the continental shelf extending northward from East Malaysia. Sovereignty over the island group has been in dispute for over a century. Present claimants include the PRC, the ROC, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The possibility of discovering seabed resources in the area insures continuing friction over ownership. The PRC also claims they lie astride independent shipping lanes. The PRC is the only claimant that does not maintain a presence in the islands. The ROC presence consists of a single garrison of about 200-300 men on the island of Itu Aba (also called Tai-p'ing). There is a civilian population, all Chinese, of 100. Vietnam and the Philippines have small garrisons on four islands each. Vietnamese garrisons total about 100 men, and Philippine garrisons about 200 men. Two of the Vietnamese-garrisoned islands are in close proximity to Itu Aba and one, Sand Cay, is reportedly being fortified with new pillboxes.

46. To our knowledge, neither PRC naval ships nor aircraft have ever ventured to the Spratlys.⁵ Major surface combatants or submarines would be necessary for patrols in the Spratly Islands because they are the only PRC naval ships with the unrefueled range to reach and patrol the islands. PRC patrols would encounter no ROC air opposition, and the ROC navy presently could offer only token resistance. However, the problem is complicated by the conflicting claims to the islands and the presence of Vietnamese and Filipino garrisons. A

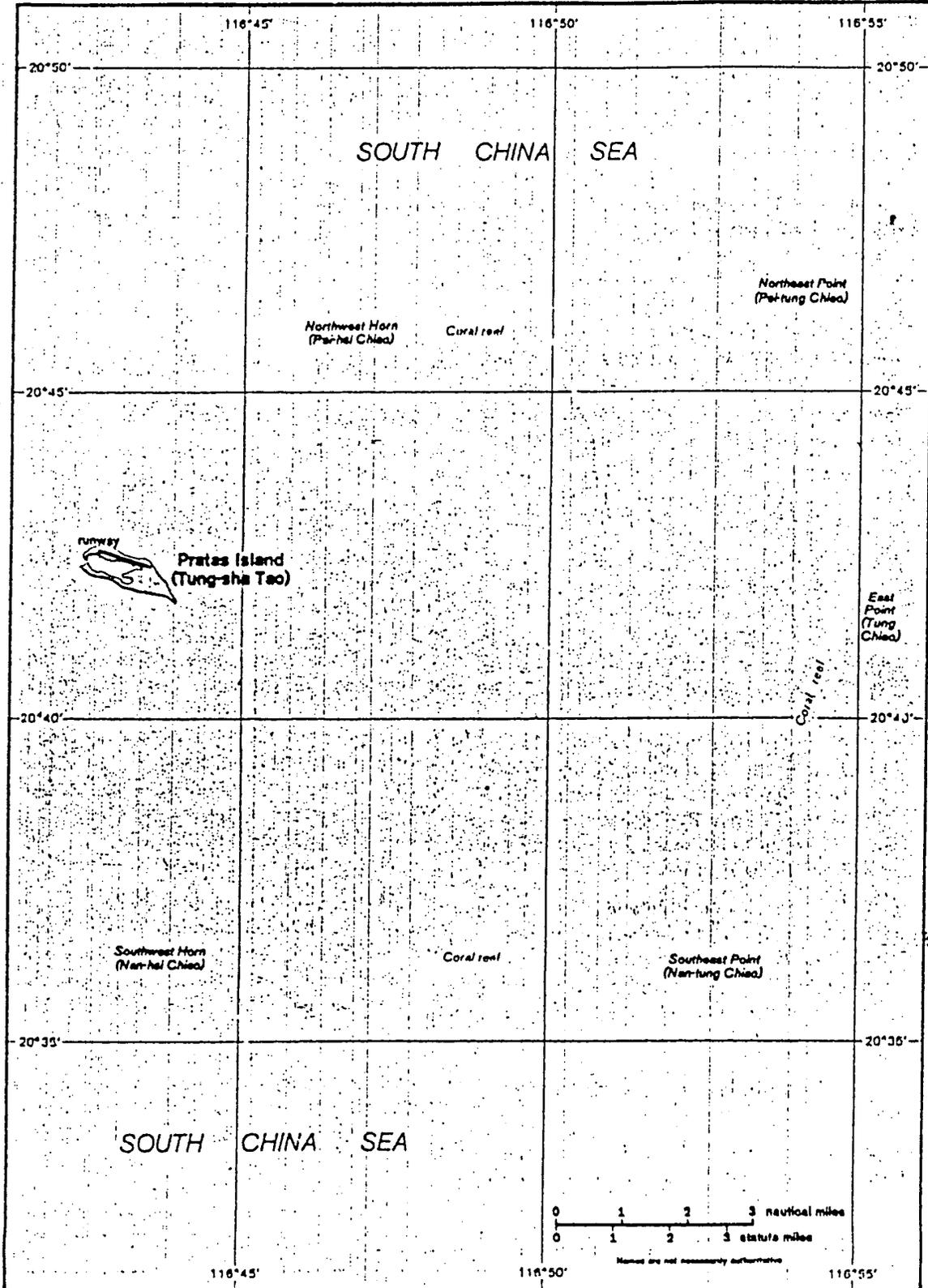
⁴ It is estimated that 600 Chinese ground troops participated in the operation to seize the Paracel Islands.

⁵ The PRC, nevertheless, is building a naval base in the Paracels and has extended its submarine activity in the area of the Paracels.

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Pratas Reef

Figure 4



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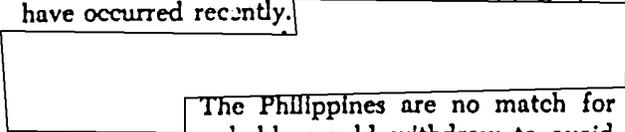
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PRC presence in the Spradys could provoke Vietnamese air and naval response and adverse political reactions from the Vietnamese and Philippine governments. Further, any PRC encroachment in the area could alarm all the other Southeast Asian nations regarding Chinese intentions in the general area.

47. An operation to seize the ROC-garrisoned island of Itu Aba in the next few years would not provide any great military or political advantage vis-a-vis Taiwan except as a demonstration of willingness to use force to repossess claimed territories, and it would only complicate Chinese foreign policy initiatives in Southeast Asia. It might also bring the Chinese into confrontation with Vietnam, something Peking would prefer to avoid. So long as the ROC garrison remains, it helps to maintain a "Chinese" claim to the islands without risking incidents between PRC forces and the forces of the other claimants.

48. Nevertheless, if one of the claimants, most likely Vietnam, attempted or threatened to resolve the question of sovereignty of Itu Aba by force, the PRC might be provoked to intervene. Minor

shooting incidents involving ROC and Vietnamese have occurred recently.



The Philippines are no match for the PRC and probably would withdraw to avoid a confrontation. Only the Vietnamese might be willing to mount a stiff resistance, and in a confrontation the Vietnamese would have to cope both with major Chinese surface combatants and with Chinese military pressures on the Sino-Vietnamese border. Vietnam could provide military fighter aircraft to cover the Spratlys, while the Chinese would be limited to sorties by medium jet bombers and light jet reconnaissance aircraft.

49. A successful blockade or amphibious attack upon Itu Aba or other islands of the Spratly group would require a large-scale out-of-area operation by PRC forces. Should this option become acceptable, the required naval assets are available in the South Sea Fleet. Troops could come from the Kuang-chou Military Region. All the garrisons in the islands are small and, without outside air support, could defend only briefly against attack.