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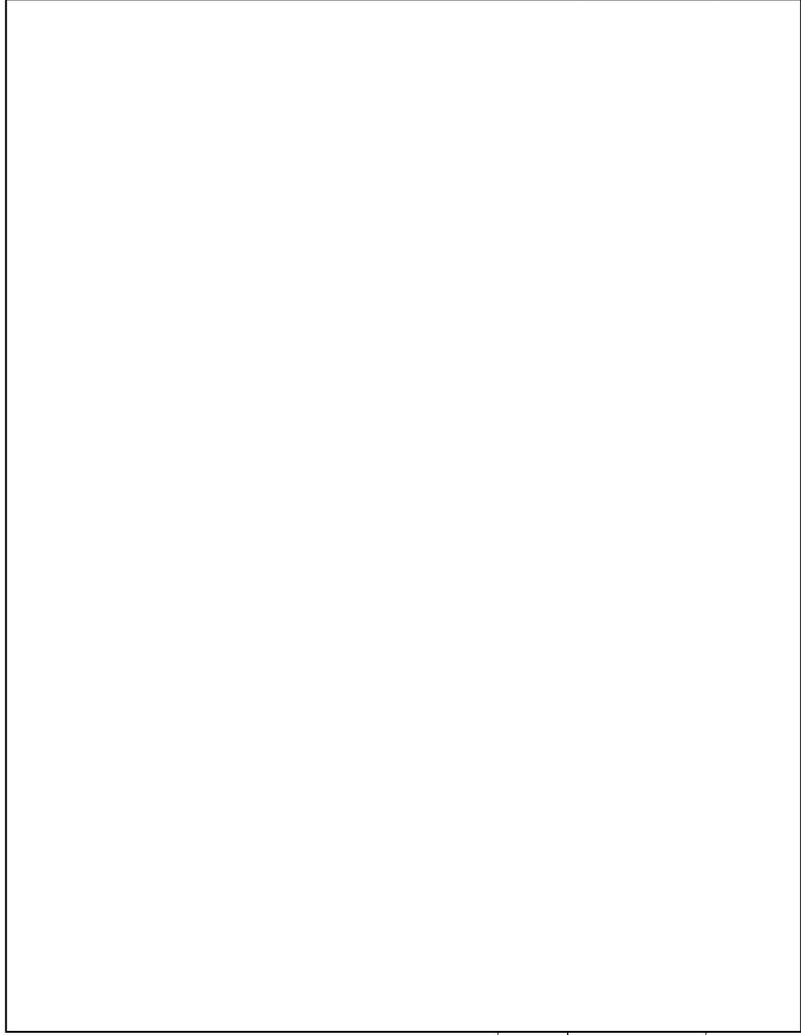
# China's Defense Strategy and Force Posture

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September 2003

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## China's Defense Strategy and Force Posture

Central Intelligence Agency  
National Foreign Assessment Center

September 1978

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### *Key Judgments*

The Chinese have identified the Soviets as their most dangerous potential adversary and have committed a large portion of their forces to meeting that threat. Their small but growing nuclear forces could deliver weapons on targets throughout Asia, and a few warheads could reach the western USSR. China's large conventional forces could quickly overwhelm its small Asian neighbors; they have major shortcomings, however, and we believe they would have difficulty against the Soviet Union, Taiwan, or India. The forces pose little direct threat to the United States.

#### **Strategic Programs**

China's ballistic missile force, consisting largely of MRBMs and IRBMs, has grown only modestly over the past two years.

The nuclear test program lags far behind that of the USSR and the United States but has provided Peking with an effective weapons research, development, and production capability.

China has an ambitious space program that emphasizes the development of earth satellites

#### **General Purpose Forces**

China's conventional forces comprise more than 4 million men, making them the second largest in the world. These forces maintain an essentially defensive posture. They lack sophisticated weapons and have serious deficiencies in firepower and mobility.

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The Army is basically an infantry force. It has relatively few tanks and lacks the antitank guided missiles to blunt an attack by a modern armored force.

The Air Force has thousands of combat aircraft, but most are obsolescent fighters. It lacks modern high-performance aircraft and such sophisticated weapons as air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles.

The Navy is primarily a coastal defense force. It has few major surface warships and is deficient in such areas as antisubmarine warfare and air defense.

#### **Modernization**

The Chinese recognize their military shortcomings and have committed themselves to a long-term program to improve and modernize the armed forces. It places equal emphasis on improving the quality and combat skills of troops and acquiring modern arms.

Because they cannot develop sophisticated weapons quickly, the Chinese have recently shown considerable interest in buying advanced conventional weapons and technology from Western Europe. Because they are short of funds, they probably will buy only limited quantities of arms, while acquiring the technology and licensing rights to produce modern arms domestically.

#### **Sino-Soviet Military Balance**

The Chinese and Soviets maintain a large portion of their armed forces along the disputed border. The Chinese are more numerous by 4 to 1, but the Soviets have substantial advantages in firepower and mobility. Both sides maintain an essentially defensive posture—the Soviet forces close to the border, the Chinese well back from it. A conventional war would be risky and costly for either side.

The Chinese are no match for the Soviets in a nuclear exchange and would be overwhelmed if hostilities escalated to that level. However, their nuclear forces could devastate Soviet urban areas in the Far East and make it difficult for surviving Soviet forces to sustain operations.

#### **China-Taiwan Military Balance**

The Chinese maintain a strong defensive posture opposite Taiwan. They could devastate the island with their nuclear weapons, but we believe they are unlikely to do so. In conventional forces their advantage is also overwhelming, but their ability to bring those forces to bear on Taiwan is limited; they lack the amphibious and airlift capability necessary to mount and sustain an invasion.

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Peking has several military options short of invasion that it could use against Taiwan:

- A blockade of Taiwan and the Offshore Islands (Quemoy and Matsu).
- Assault on (and, probably, capture of) the heavily defended Offshore Islands.
- Capture of the lightly defended Pratas Reef and Pescadores Islands.

The high political, economic, and military costs of these actions deter Peking.

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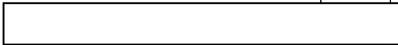


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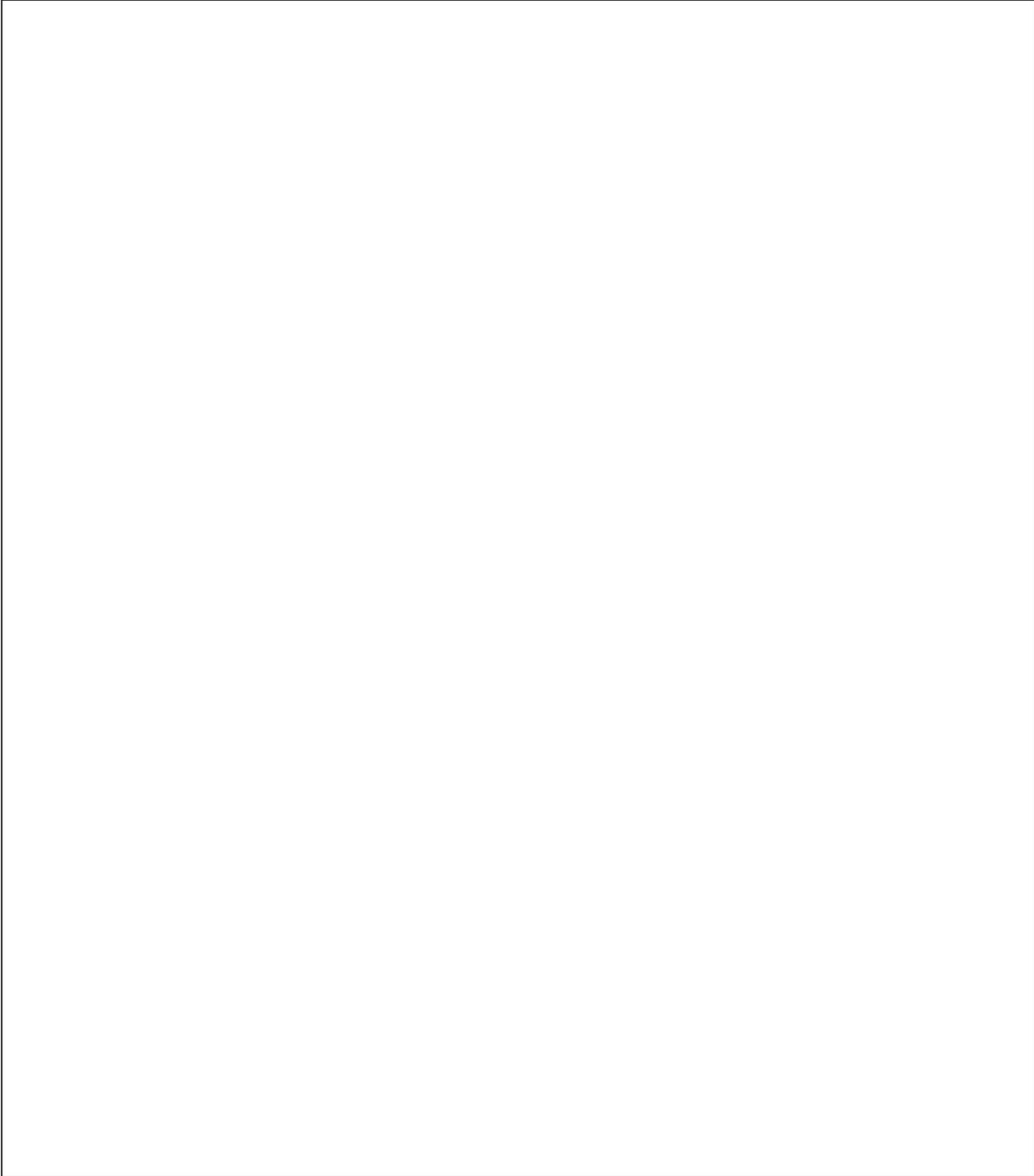
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## PREFACE

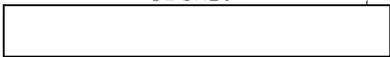
This Intelligence Assessment provides a review of Chinese military forces and programs, recent developments in both, and a comparison of Chinese capabilities with those of the Soviet Union and Taiwan. It is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis, but rather an overview for those readers who do not require detailed knowledge of weapons systems or order of battle.

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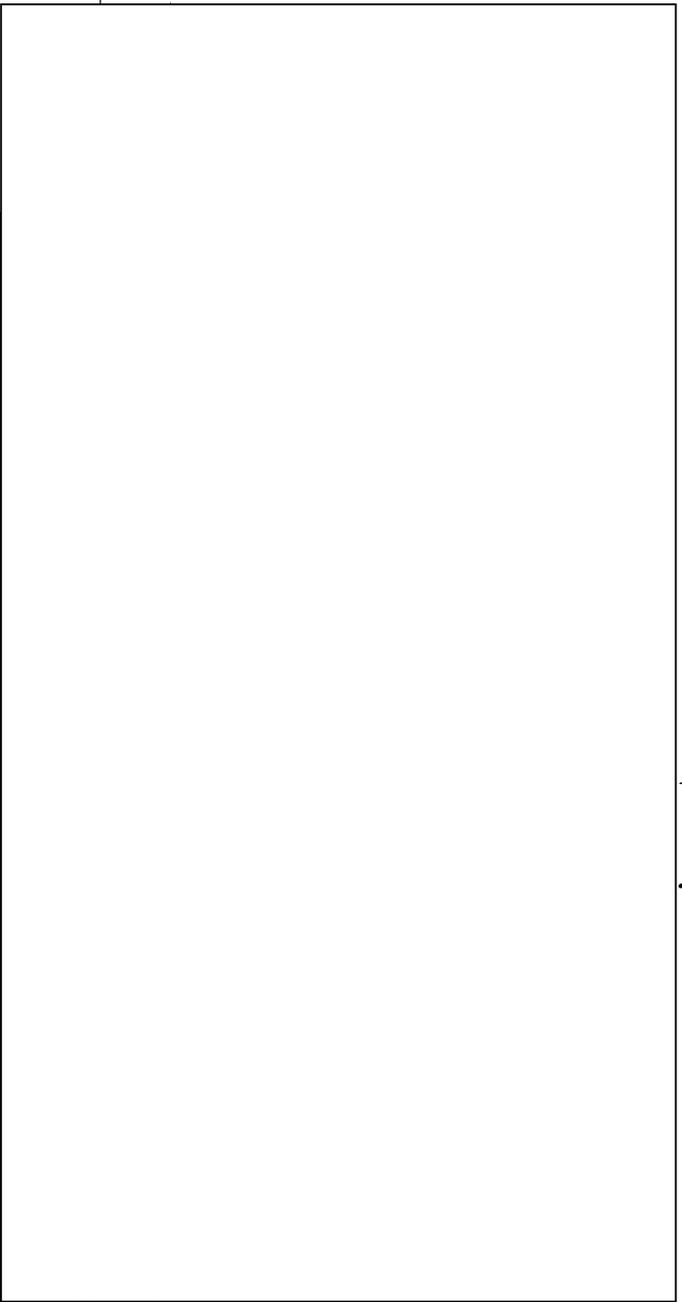
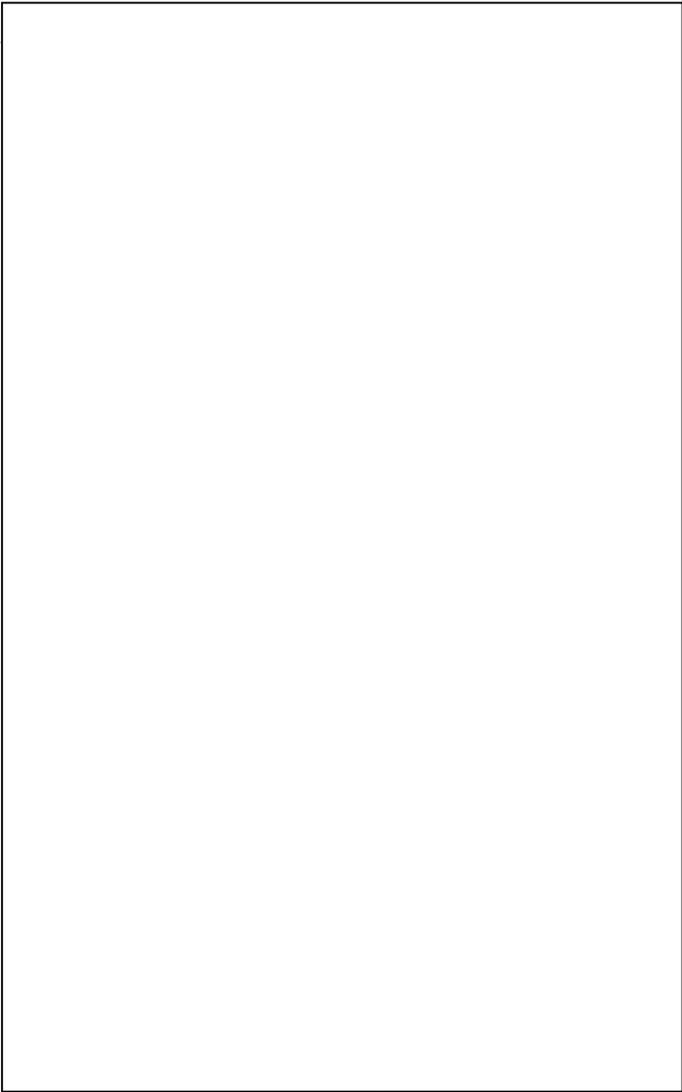
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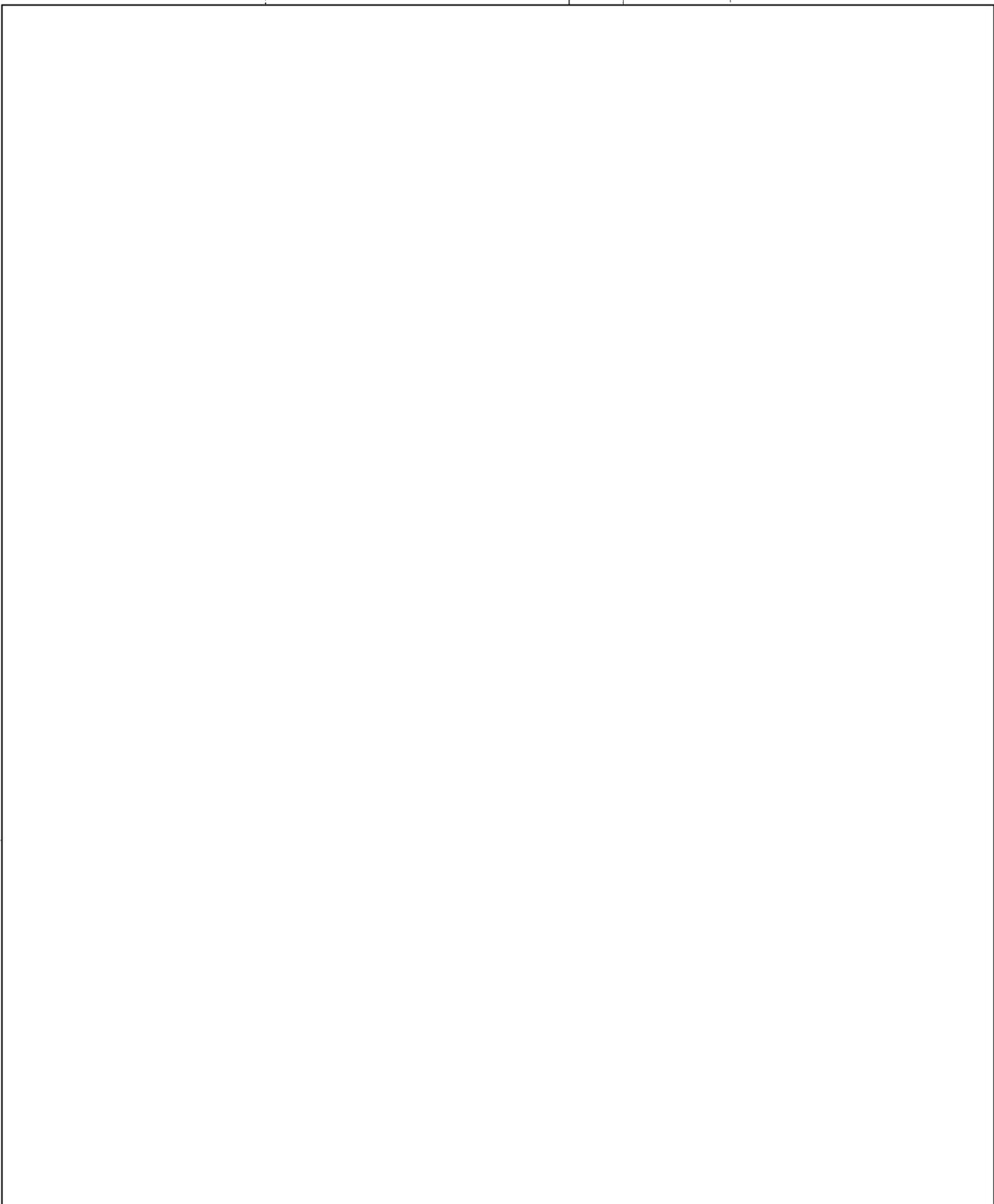
## **China's Defense Strategy and Force Posture**

**The Chinese base their national defense strategy on deterring an attack by making it too costly for a potential enemy. They have implemented this strategy by building a modest but credible nuclear force and large conventional armed forces capable of fighting a protracted war.**

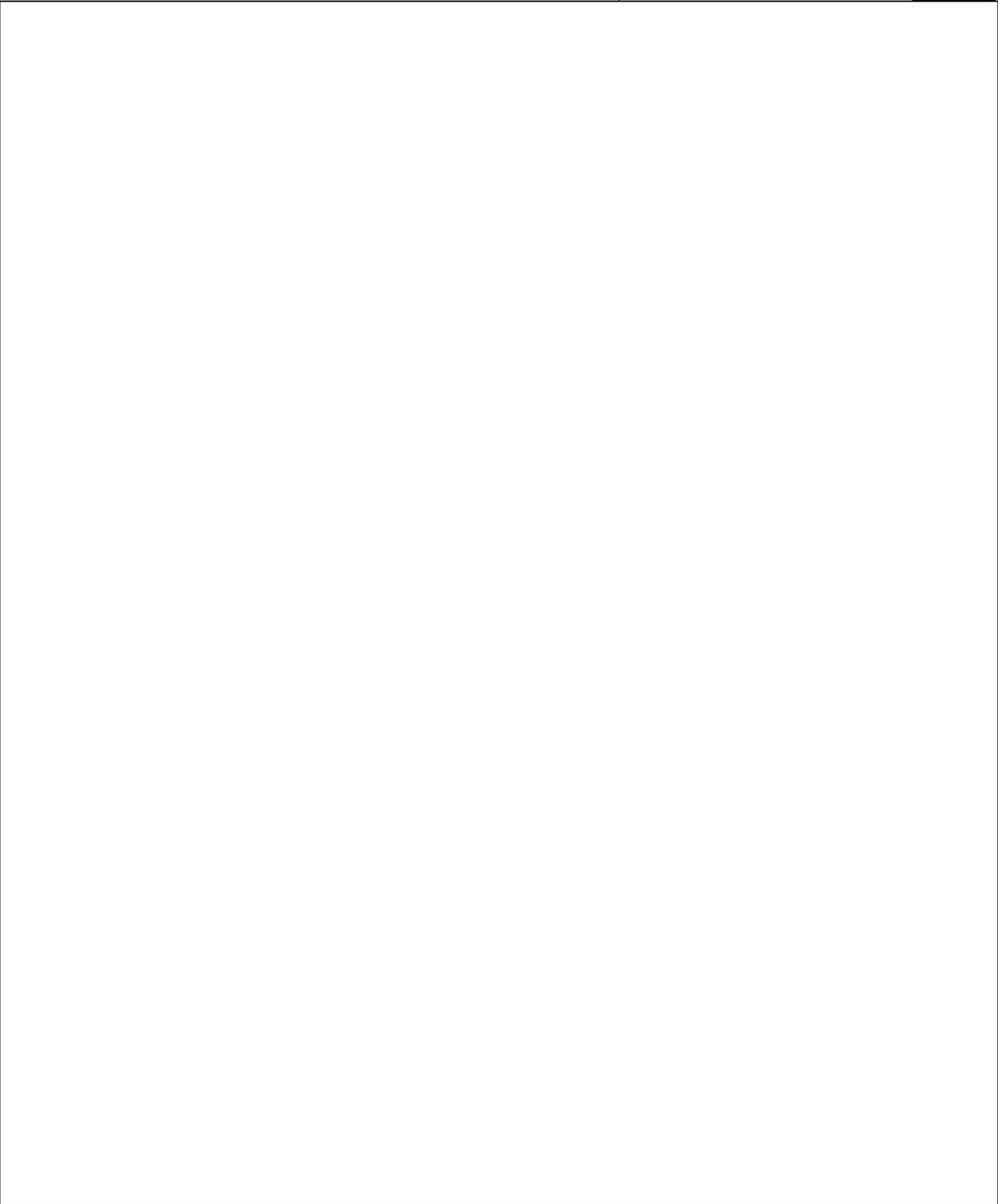


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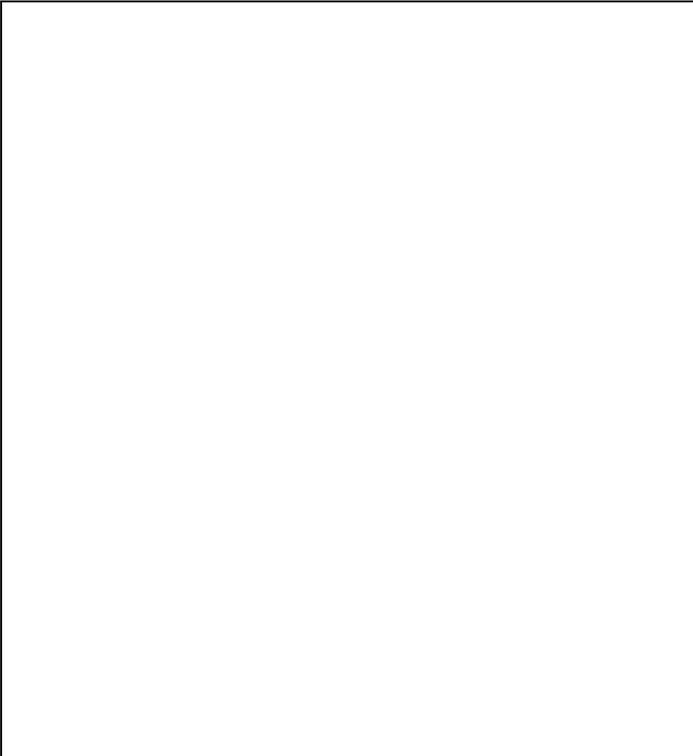
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**General Purpose Forces**

The Chinese have one of the largest conventional armed forces in the world—over 4 million men. They do not pose a direct military threat to the United States, but they could attack US bases and US allies in the Far East. Peking considers the Soviet Union to be its most dangerous potential adversary; about half of the armed forces are arrayed in a defensive posture to meet the Soviet threat. Another third of the forces are located along the coast, where Peking continues to perceive a threat. Most of the remainder are located in central China as a reserve; only a few units are in western China and Tibet.

**Employment for Attack**

China could overwhelm its smaller neighbors. Against the Soviet Union, Taiwan, or India, however, its conventional military forces would be hampered by inadequacies in firepower, mobility, and logistics, as well as by geographic and topographic factors.

The vast distances involved and the quality of the Soviet forces along the border would allow the Chinese to make at best only shallow incursions into the USSR. The Taiwan Strait is still an effective barrier against a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The difficult terrain of Tibet would limit any attack against India. Indian troops would be defending their own territory over lines of communication much shorter than the Chinese; if the Indians were determined, the Chinese would not be able to mount and sustain an offensive through Tibet with a force large enough to defeat them.

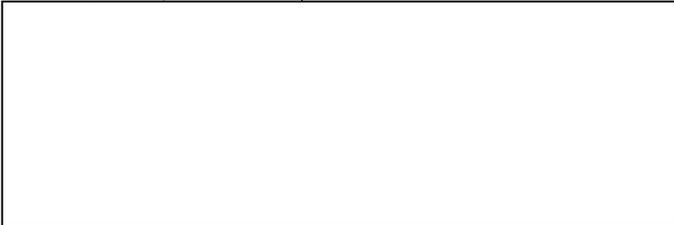
**Employment for Defense**

To counter an invader with superior firepower and mobility, the Chinese would employ distance and terrain. They do not intend to give up territory easily, but hope to wear down the attackers as they try to drive through successive lines of increasingly stronger forces. The Chinese continue to emphasize dispersal, redundancy, and other passive defense measures to improve the survivability of military industries and certain elements of the armed forces.

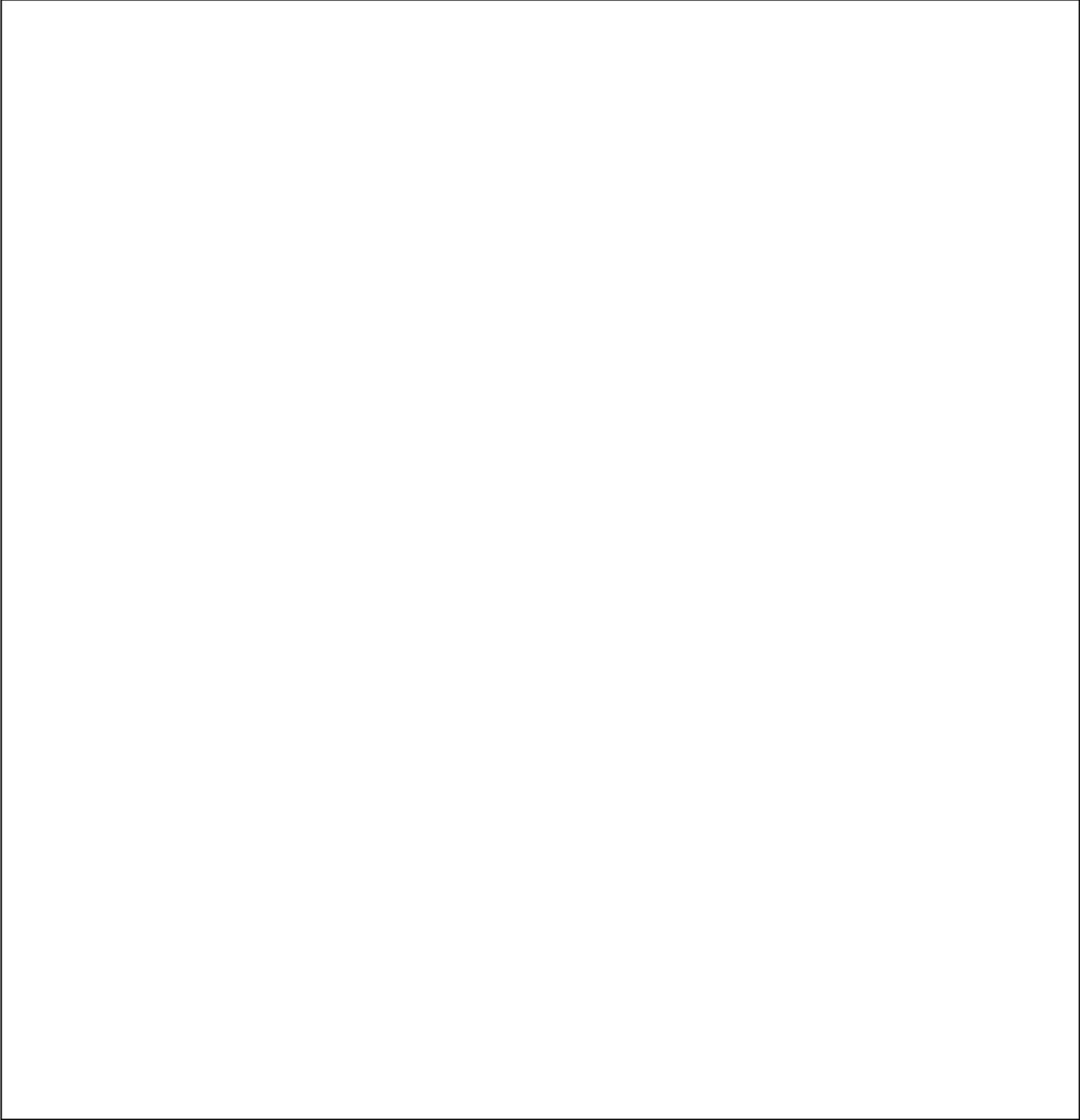
The sheer size of China's standing armed forces compensates to some degree for their inadequacies. Moreover, the vast mobilization potential would provide considerable resources during a prolonged war. China has some 7 million lightly armed men organized into paramilitary organizations. They could be used primarily to wage guerrilla warfare, support regular forces, and maintain internal security. They could not be turned into regular troops quickly;



**Ground Forces**



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The regional forces, [Redacted] are organized, armed, and trained for defense of specific areas. The best equipped regional divisions have more artillery fire support than the infantry divisions of the main force. Some of the regional divisions man elaborate fixed defenses, which have been established on most of the major avenues of approach.

Most of the ground force equipment produced by China's arms industry is based on older Soviet designs. Though unsophisticated by US and Soviet standards, the small arms, tanks, and artillery are rugged, reliable, and generally adequate for their intended use. [Redacted]

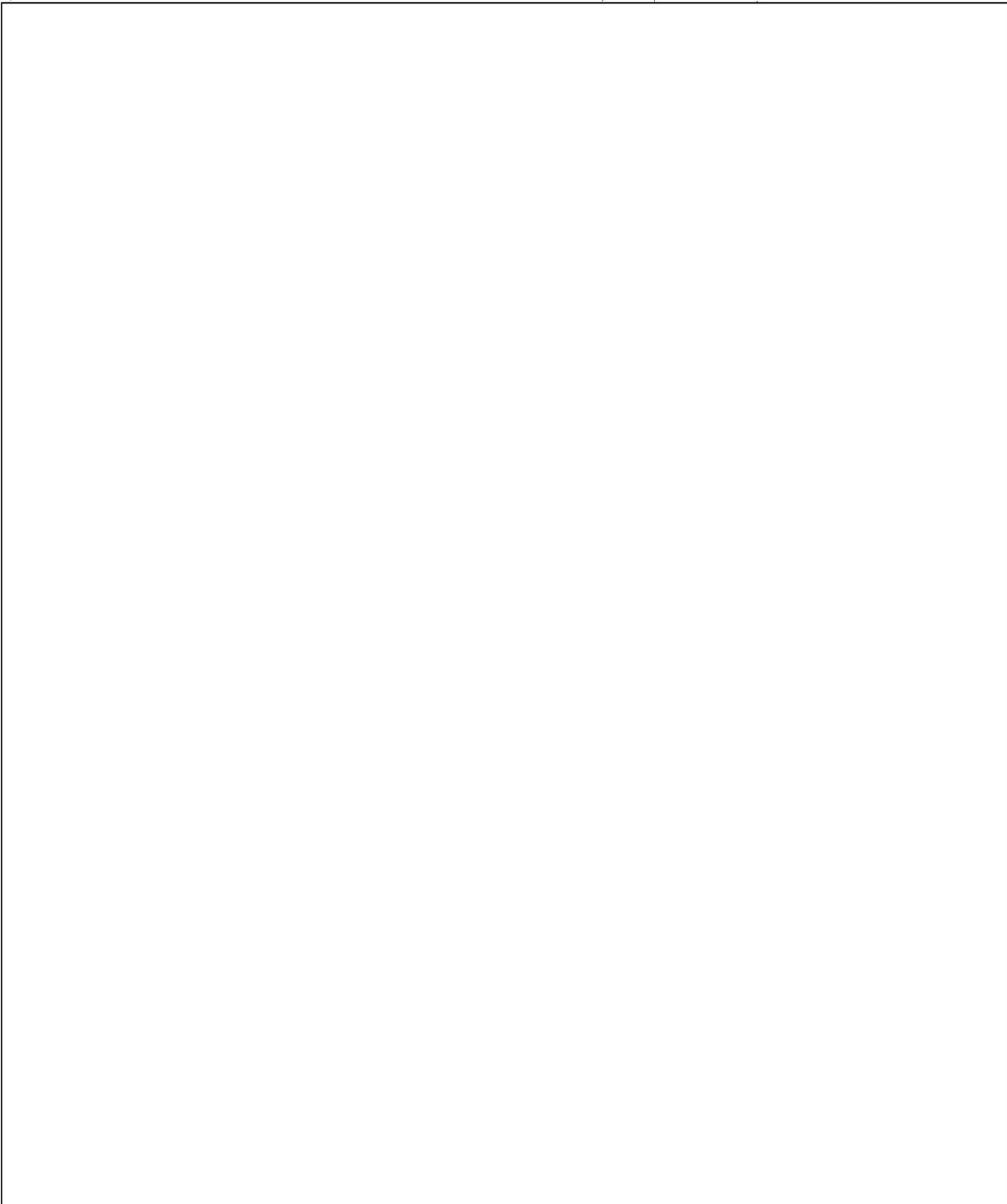
[Redacted]

The Chinese produce a wide variety of rudimentary protective equipment for chemical and biological defenses, and they emphasize its use in training. They have the industrial base and technical competence to produce chemical warfare agents, but [Redacted]

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improving the quality and combat skills of troops and on acquiring modern arms. The Chinese cannot develop sophisticated weapons quickly, and they foresee a gradual weakening relative to the Soviets unless they begin arming their forces with modern weapons. Therefore the Chinese are interested in buying advanced conventional weapons and related technology from Western Europe. They cannot afford to buy everything they need, however, and have adopted a strategy of buying limited quantities of modern arms outright and, in addition, acquiring the technology and licensing rights to produce and develop them domestically.

Purchases of European military equipment are unlikely to have any major impact on China's force capabilities soon. China would need many years to field modern weapons in large numbers, to establish a support structure to sustain them, and to train personnel in their operation. Because most of the weapons they are seeking are unlike any they now have, the Chinese would need to make major changes in their force structure before they could effectively integrate the weapons into operational units.

Units stationed along the Sino-Soviet border would get the new weapons first. Modern weapons would enhance their effectiveness, but no single weapon system—in the relatively limited quantities that China is likely to acquire from Western Europe—would significantly change the current military situation on the Sino-Soviet border.

#### **Modernization**

China is well aware of its military shortcomings and since about 1975 has renewed its efforts to improve and modernize its armed forces. The long-term program places equal emphasis on

#### **The Sino-Soviet Military Balance**

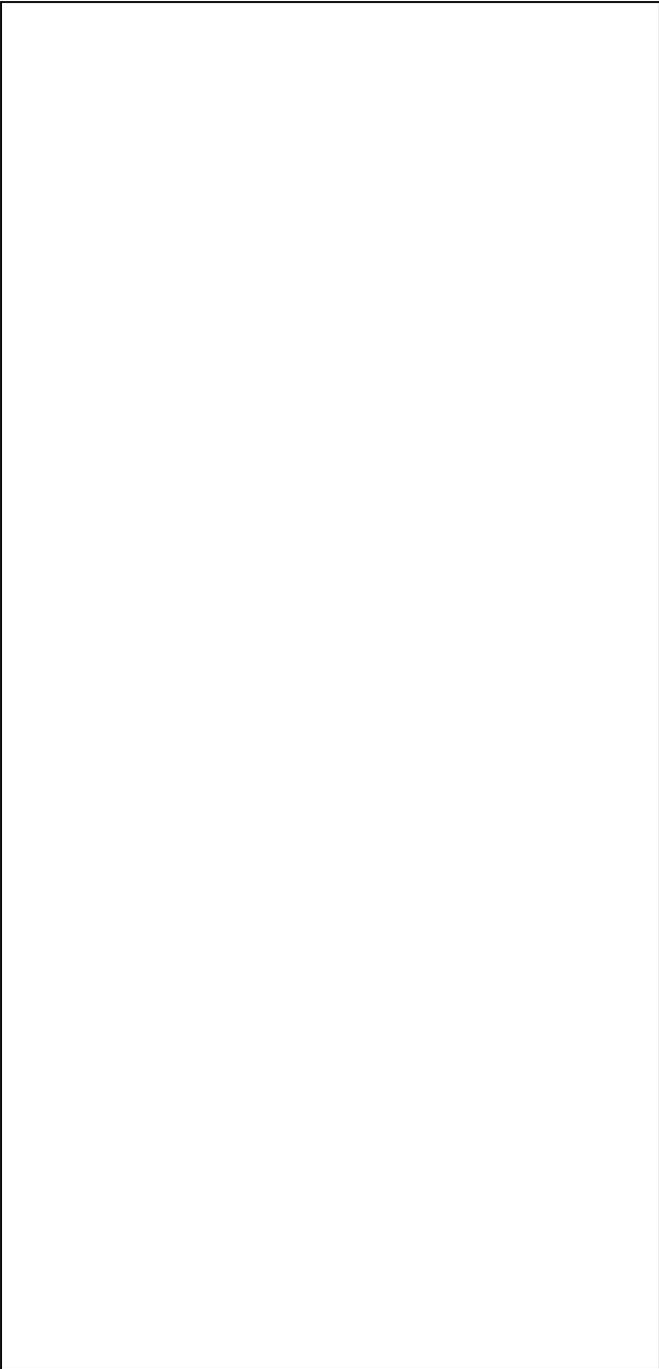
China has identified the Soviet Union as its most dangerous potential adversary. Both countries maintain a substantial portion of their

forces along the border; both keep their forces in an essentially defensive posture; and a conventional war would be risky and costly for both.

Soviets' urban support bases in the Far East and make it difficult for surviving Soviet military forces to sustain operations.

Chinese conventional forces could make only shallow incursions into Soviet territory—Soviet forces and strong fixed defenses are capable of halting an invasion. Soviet troops invading China would meet forces that are organized, equipped, and deployed for a nonnuclear defense. We believe the Chinese would have a reasonable chance of stalemating a Soviet conventional attack before it reached the North China Plain.

Should hostilities escalate to the use of nuclear weapons, China would be no match for the USSR. Nonetheless, if they could launch their nuclear forces, the Chinese could devastate the



**Improvements**

Military capabilities on both sides of the border have been improved at a deliberate pace, with only modest increases in the size of the forces. These improvements often have taken the form of constructing fixed defenses and upgrad-

ing and increasing equipment inventories. The Soviets have also improved their logistics.



For their part, the Chinese are upgrading and adding to the number of tanks and artillery pieces, as well as forming some new units. They are also improving their fixed defenses and providing greater fire support to regional units manning those positions.

We expect both sides to continue making qualitative improvements in their forces. Both will add more and newer equipment and improve their supporting infrastructure. The Soviets are building a second trans-Siberian rail line, well back from the border. It will improve their ability to support their forces, but we do not expect it to be completed before the 1980s.

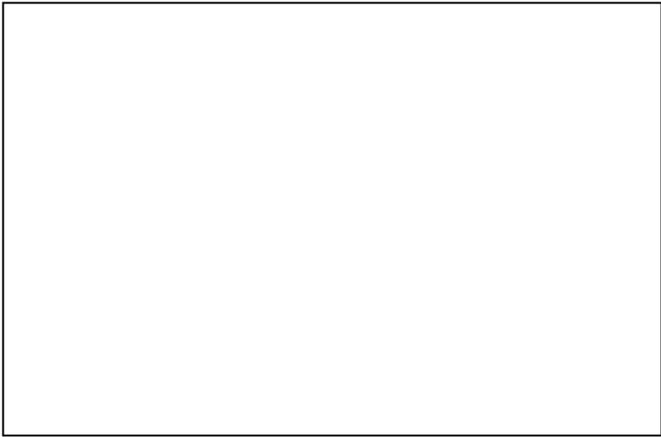
**The China-Taiwan Military Balance**

**Forces**

China also maintains a strong defensive posture along its eastern coast, opposite Taiwan (see table 4). Besides having an overwhelming advantage in conventional forces, the Chinese could completely devastate the island with their nuclear weapons. We believe they would not use nuclear weapons, however; and their ability to bring their conventional military power to bear on Taiwan is limited. They do not have the amphibious or airlift capacity to mount and sustain an invasion on the scale that would be necessary, and they have not yet assigned a high priority to developing that capacity.

**Ability To Invade**

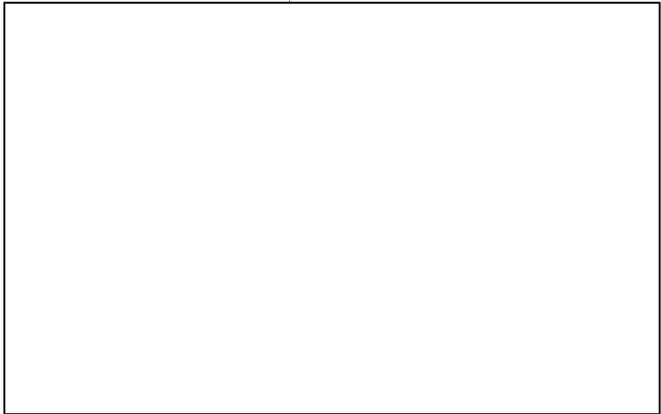
If they invaded Taiwan, the Chinese would face a relatively modern, US-equipped National-



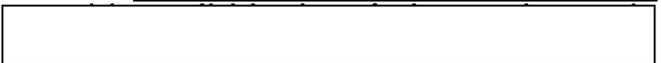
A successful invasion would also require control of the air. Peking could assign a substantial part of its [redacted] aircraft to the attack but could employ only a few at a time, because only a few airfields are within fighter range of Taiwan. The eventual victory in the air would be costly.

The Nationalists have fewer [redacted] combat aircraft, but most of them are armed with air-to-air missiles and are more modern than those of China. Nationalist pilots are better trained and would take a heavy toll of Chinese fighters and bombers. Nonetheless, China's sheer numbers would eventually prevail, and the Nationalists' air force and most of their ground-based air defenses would be destroyed.

ist army [redacted]



China would need a naval bombardment and a logistic support capacity far in excess of what it now has. [redacted]



**Other Military Options**

China has several military options short of invading Taiwan itself but has been deterred, so far, by the political, economic, and military costs. The naval and air forces could blockade Taiwan and the Offshore Islands (Matsu and Quemoy); Taipei would need help to break such a blockade. The Chinese could capture the strongly defended Offshore Islands, but this would be an extremely costly operation. To capture the lightly defended Pratas Reef and Pescadores Islands, on the other hand, would require only a comparatively modest military effort.

