



Nuclear War Planning and the Challenge of Civilian Oversight

The Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Moorer years: JCS Chairman Admiral Thomas Moorer, flanked to left by Army Chief of Staff General William Westmoreland and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., and to the right by Air Force Chief of Staff General John Ryan and Marine Corps Commandant General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr. (copy from [Naval History and Heritage Command](#))

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Joint Chiefs Wanted to Keep SecDef Melvin Laird Out of the Loop on Nuclear War Plans, Declassified JCS Document Shows

JCS Sent Message on Targeting Beijing's Nuclear Forces during Nixon Trip to China

Miffed by Timing and Implications of Message, Laird Ordered Its Recall

Washington D.C., January 22, 2020 - On 24 February 1972 Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's inbox included a Joint Chiefs of Staff message concerning the ongoing efforts by

military planners to develop a “Communist Chinese Nuclear Package” for the Single Integrated Operational Plan, the Pentagon’s nuclear war plan. Laird’s office was mistakenly included in the message’s routing. According to documents published for the first time by the National Security Archive, the message “displeased” Laird in part because it showed that the Joint Chiefs had been excluding his office from their nuclear target planning discussions. For Laird, the message's timing was also problematic: that week President Richard Nixon was visiting China for the first time. Having already initiated a major review of nuclear war planning, Laird ordered the Joint Chiefs to recall the message and to suspend further discussion of it until the policy review had been completed.

The idea of a special nuclear targeting plan for China had emerged as early as 1966 when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara asked the Joint Chiefs to review U.S. strategy for a “nuclear attack” against China in conflicts that involved the Soviet Union or with China only. McNamara’s request remains classified so it is not clear what motivated him in particular, whether concerns about the Vietnam War escalating into direct conflict with China or Beijing’s progress in developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles that could threaten U.S. allies in the region and perhaps eventually reach U.S. targets (although it took decades before China had an ICBM capability). In any event, by the close of the Johnson administration, top Pentagon officials were asking the Joint Chiefs to develop specific target lists for nuclear targeting of China but also to make recommendations about methods of attack and which delivery systems to use against which targets.

When the Nixon administration came to power in early 1969, the Joint Chiefs continued work on a nuclear targeting plan focusing on China, although top civilian officials were not involved as before, for reasons unknown. By the fall of 1969 the Chiefs were on the verge of a decision whether the SIOP should include a “separate” China package, aimed at nuclear targets and facilities, and whether to assign the Director of Joint Strategic Target Planning (DSTP) the task of developing the option.

The planners were to consider whether guidance for the “Peking package” would be relevant for the development of a separate China nuclear option in the SIOP. The “Peking package” may have referred to a plan to include Chinese political and military control centers in a plan to strike “Alpha” targets – Chinese nuclear delivery capabilities – as long as they were not in urban areas. The “Peking package” may have been derived from a [“Moscow Peking Missile Package”](#) that was developed in the late 1960s. This was one of many “sub-variations” of the SIOP attack options that target planners had developed.

Whatever accounted for the delay, possibly a simple lack of urgency, in developing the China nuclear package, it was not until early 1972 that the Joint Chiefs had formulated instructions to the DSTP, which they asked the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Command to review. The message described the target categories assigned to the “China nuclear package”, which had two variants: the destruction of the Chinese nuclear threat to U.S. allies and forces in East Asia and the destruction of China’s prospective threat to launch ICBMs that could reach the continental U.S. The general objective of the variants

was to “negate any immediate Communist Chinese nuclear threat to the United States and preclude the PRC from emerging as the dominant nuclear power following a nuclear exchange between the US and the USSR.” The circumstances in which the U.S. would launch such attacks was not discussed, but the underlying purpose would have been to preserve the central role of American power in world affairs.

Laird was “displeased” that he had learned only inadvertently that the Chiefs had been having this discussion of a major nuclear policy issue. As noted, the timing of the message disturbed him, just when President Nixon was in China, but he also had other concerns. Laird had already authorized a panel directed by Assistant Secretary of Defense John S. Foster to review nuclear war planning. The goal was to give the president more choices during a military crisis than to rely on the catastrophic nuclear strikes that were characteristic of the SIOP. Nixon himself brought up the issue publicly by mentioning “new and disturbing problems” raised by strategic parity with the Soviet Union: “Should a President, in the event of a nuclear attack, be left with the single option of ordering the mass destruction of enemy civilians, in the face of certainty that it would be followed by the mass slaughter of Americans?”[\[1\]](#)

What bothered Laird was that the Joint Chiefs were considering major changes in targeting policy before the Foster policy review had been completed. Therefore, he directed JCS Chairman Thomas Moorer (who was a member of the Foster Panel) to put the “China package” proposal in abeyance until the Foster panel had completed its work, although he was free to bring up the matter directly with the panel. It is worth noting that Laird did not criticize the idea of planning a nuclear strike designed to destroy China’s nuclear forces. A “disarming strike” against China had been the subject of continuing discussion at meetings of the Defense Program Review Committee during [1971](#) and [1972](#), in which senior Pentagon officials participated.

The flap over the China package raises an interesting question. Why did the Joint Chiefs believe that the secretary of defense had been erroneously placed on the distribution list for the message? More may be learned from the Admiral Moorer diaries, but one implication appears to be that highly sensitive information on nuclear targeting did not typically reach the secretary’s desk or the inbox of senior civilian defense officials generally. A few years earlier, national security adviser Henry Kissinger received a briefing at SAC headquarters where, according to the DSTP, “certain aspects of the SIOP ... were deliberately not gone into.” In general, military target planners believed that their work required a high degree of secrecy and organizational autonomy and that interference by civilian officials was to be avoided. Of course, Laird would have seen it differently, that target planning had such important political implications that civilian authorities had to be in the loop, which to an important extent was why he had established the Foster panel in the first place.[\[2\]](#)

The subset of documents from the late 1960s published in today’s posting have long been declassified but not enough was in the public record to indicate the how far the “China package” went in the Pentagon planning process. With the recent declassification of the

JCS message from February 1972 it becomes evident that senior military planners intended to continue discussion of a policy option that already had some support in the national security bureaucracy. That China would be excluded from the SIOP by the end of the decade few may have anticipated.

The document



[Document 1](#)

[Assistant Secretary of Defense Alain Enthoven to Secretary of Defense, "JCS Study of Nuclear Targeting of Communist China," 23 October 1968\]](#) attached memorandum from [\(Acting\) Secretary of Defense Paul H. Nitze to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, same topic, 25 October 1968, Top Secret](#)

1968-10-25

Source: Defense Department FOIA release

In response to a directive from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1966, the Joint Chiefs had begun working on a nuclear targeting plan against China in the context of a war with Beijing or if the Soviet Union was "involved." Looking at the Chiefs' latest version of the study, Alain Enthoven who presided over system analysis in the Pentagon, did not believe it included enough options. Working with Paul Nitze, Enthoven developed recommendations for more study of the Chinese economy so that more target lists of civilian and military installations could be developed.

In the instructions to the Chiefs, Nitze pointed to two important conclusions in their study: 1) that it was not practical to "target for a large percentage of casualties" in China, presumably because it would require too many weapons, and that it was possible to achieve high levels of damage against military and industrial target "with very low levels of fatalities." Nitze asked the Chiefs for further consideration of the details of placing weapons on specific targets under the various attack options.



[Document 2](#)

[Major General Pete Stanis, Deputy Director, Joint Staff to Secretary of Defense, "Study of Strategic Nuclear Targeting of Communist China," 13 November 1968, Secret](#)

1968-11-13

Source: Defense Department FOIA release

Maj. Gen. Stanis informed the secretary of defense that the 25 October 1968 memorandum on China targeting and presumably the JCS study had been forwarded to the "principle [sic] planning agency" for the SIOP, the Joint Strategic Targeting Planning

Staff, for its views. Once comments had been received, the Joint Staff would decide on "appropriate action."



[Document 3](#)

[Lt Colonel Robert H. McCully, memorandum for Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, "The Single Integrated Operational Plan," 4 November 1969, Top Secret, Excised copy](#)

1969-11-04

Source: Air Force FOIA release

This document includes a timeline for the development of a China nuclear option from McNamara's original request to the Joint Chiefs in 1966 to the course of Pentagon planning. According to the chronology, in March 1969, the DSTP had commented on the 25 October 1968 secretary of defense memorandum indicating the "feasibility of developing [a] target list consistent with attack strategies," although current SIOP guidance did not provide scope for "selective targeting." The excisions in this document make it difficult to fully understand what the military planners had in mind, but the implication was that by the fall of 1969 they were seeking a specific SIOP option to destroy nuclear forces and installations in China. All of the planning activity described involved military offices only; civilian officials were not yet in the loop. The next step proposed by the Air Staff was for the Joint Staff to review the proposal before it went to the DSTP.



[Document 4](#)

[\[Sayre A.\] Swartzrauber to JCS Chairman et al., "Single Integrated Operational Plan," 25 February 1972, Top Secret, enclosing memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to JCS Chairman on same topic, 25 February 1972, and JCS message 3440, same topic, 24 February 1972, Top Secret](#)

1972-02-24

Source: National Archives, Record Group 218, Records of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman's Files, Thomas A. Moorer, box 48, SIOP, mandatory declassification review request

The JCS message that went mistakenly to Secretary Laird was a request that the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Command review the instructions to the DSTP. The message described the target categories assigned to the "China nuclear package," which had two variants: one to minimize the Chinese nuclear threat to U.S. forces and allies in East Asia; the other to destroy a Chinese ICBM threat to the United States. Each of the variants had Designated Ground Zeroes of different scope: 160 for the option to minimize the Chinese nuclear threat to U.S. allies and U.S. forces in the region, while 12 (possibly a

typo for 120) DGZs would be required to destroy ICBM capabilities. The general objective was to "negate any immediate Communist Chinese nuclear threat to the United States and preclude the PRC from emerging as the dominant nuclear power following a nuclear exchange between the USA and the USSR." The circumstances in which the U.S. would launch such attacks was not discussed.

According to one of Moorer's assistants, Admiral Swartzauber, the JCS message "displeased" Secretary of Defense Laird. It was not only the timing (President Nixon was in Beijing) that irritated Laird but the fact that a major policy message on U.S. nuclear war planning had been sent while a special panel on nuclear targeting policy, chaired by Assistant Secretary of Defense John S. Foster (and of which Moorer was a member), was beginning its deliberations. According to Laird, "I believe we should hold in abeyance consideration of any target/SIOP changes like those addressed in the message, at least until the policy review and guidance panel I appointed ... had an opportunity to make its initial report to me."

By setting up a special panel on nuclear targeting, Laird was responding to White House concerns about the immense destructiveness of the nuclear strikes included in the SIOP. Briefings on war plans and the huge casualty levels that they would cause had made Nixon, like other presidents, alarmed and uneasy. He also saw a credibility problem; in a crisis and confrontation, U.S. adversaries, nuclear or otherwise, would not find it believable that the U.S. would actually launch attacks that could destroy the world. The SIOP would have to be modified with small attack options to make it more suitable for crisis management. The damage that a few nuclear weapons would cause would still be terrible, but some nuclear policy experts believed that threatening to launch smaller attacks might be more believable. It was in that context that Laird gave the Foster panel its marching orders.

Categories:

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Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird with John S. Foster, Director of Defense Research and Engineering, at a Pentagon reception in Foster's honor, 2 October 1972. Foster had been chair of the National Strategic Targeting and Attack Panel at the time of the kerfuffle over the JCS message on China targeting. (Photo, courtesy, OSD Historical Office)

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

NATIONAL MILITARY COMMAND CENTER
MESSAGE CENTER

Handwritten signature/initials

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TOP SECRET

3440

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ACTION J5(02)1-2

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OPR CJCS DJS SJCS(03)9-11

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~~TOP SECRET~~ 3440

JCS SEND

SUBJ: THE SINGLE INTEGRATED OPERATIONAL PLAN (U)

REF: SM-762-69, 7 NOV 69, SAME SUBJECT.

1. (S) REFERENCE PROVIDED INSTRUCTIONS TO DSTP FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE COMMUNIST CHINESE NUCLEAR PACKAGE (CCNP).
2. (TS) DSTP HAS RECOMMENDED THE REFERENCE BE CHANGED AS FOLLOWS:
 - A. DELETE PARAGRAPH 1 AND SUBSTITUTE THE FOLLOWING: (QUOTE) "THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF HAVE DETERMINED THAT THERE IS A REQUIREMENT IN THE SINGLE INTEGRATED OPERATIONAL PLAN (SIOP) FOR A COMMUNIST CHINESE NUCLEAR PACKAGE TO BE TARGETED AND EXECUTED WITH ANY SIOP ATTACK OPTION IN A MANNER SIMILAR TO THE PRESENT PEKING PACKAGE. THIS PACKAGE SHOULD CONTAIN ALL NUCLEAR INSTALLATIONS INCLUDING NUCLEAR PRODUCTION FACILITIES, ALL ASSEMBLY/STORAGE SITES FOR NUCLEAR WEAPONS, AND THOSE MISSILE NUCLEAR DELIVERY SYSTEMS CAPABLE OF ATTACK UPON THE CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES. IT IS REQUESTED THAT YOU INITIATE THE NECESSARY ACTION TO PROVIDE THIS CAPABILITY BY REVISION TO THE SIOP AND THAT YOU PROVIDE THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF WITH THE BEST ESTIMATE ON THE EARLIEST SIOP REVISION IN WHICH THE CHANGE COULD BE INCORPORATED" (ENDQUOTE).
 - B. DELETE PARAGRAPH 3 AND SUBSTITUTE THE FOLLOWING: (QUOTE) "EXECUTION OF THE ABOVE PACKAGE SHOULD TO THE MAXIMUM EXTENT POSSIBLE, NEGATE ANY IMMEDIATE COMMUNIST CHINESE NUCLEAR THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES AND PRECLUDE THE PRC FROM EMERGING AS THE DOMINANT NUCLEAR POWER FOLLOWING A NUCLEAR EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE US AND USSR" (ENDQUOTE).

EXEMPT FROM
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DATE: FEB 15 2000

REVIEW DATE: FEB 2010

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The top of the first page of JCS telegram 3440, 24 February 1972, shows the mistaken routing to "SECDEF."



TOP SECRET
Approved For Release 2004/02/23 : CIA-RDP78T04563A00110020

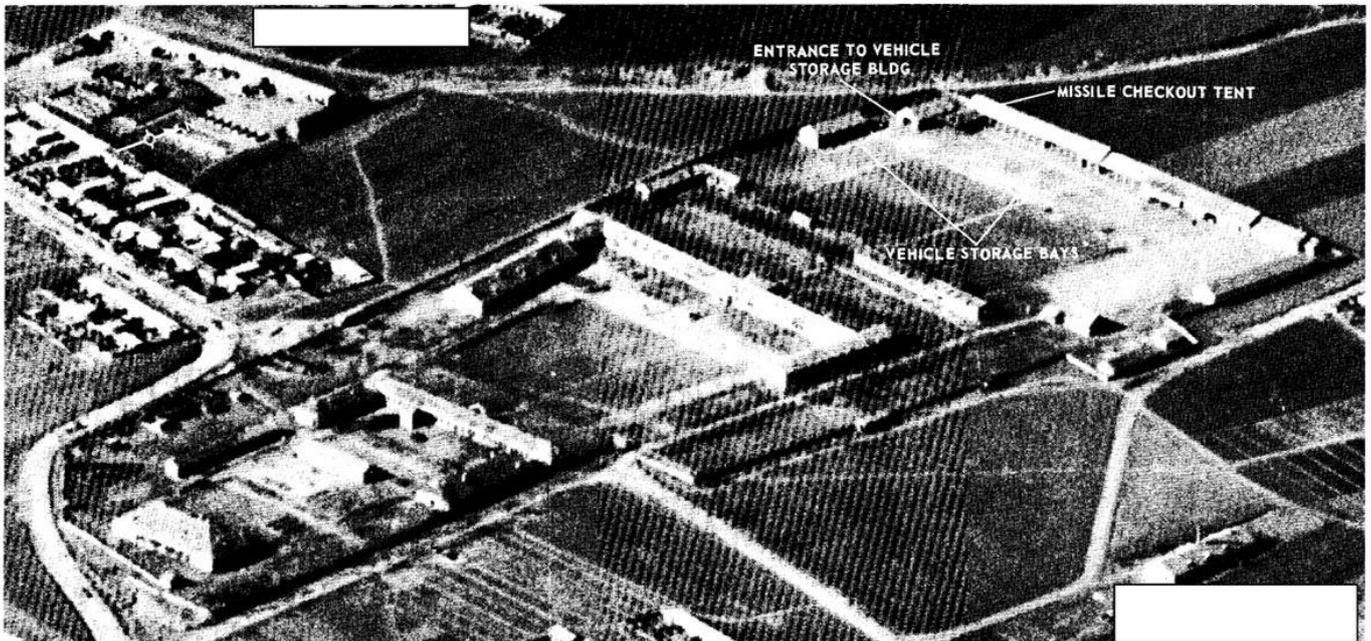


FIGURE 3. TENG-SHA-HO MILITARY INSTALLATION

Declassified intelligence reports indicate that beginning in the 1960s, the U.S. had been taking overhead photos of Chinese ballistic missile sites and related facilities, although few have been released. This is a photo from 1972 of CSS-1 (Dong Feng 2) medium-range ballistic missile equipment at the Teng-Sha-Ho military installation near the port city of Dalian. It was very likely on the targeting list developed for the "China Package." National Photographic Interpretation Center, Basic Imagery Interpretation [Report](#), "CSS-1 Missile Equipment Teng-Sha-Ho Military Installation [Excision], Ground Forces Facilities China," April 1972.

Notes

1. "First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970's," 18 February 1970, in *Public Papers of the President of the United States, Richard Nixon 1970* (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 173.

2. Quotation from CINCSAC message, 10 March 1970, from [Document 12](#), National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 173, 23 November 2005; Peter Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians: Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 59-60.

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