Los Angeles Times, May 30, 1999, “China-U.S. Relations: A Habit of Distrust: Playing Catch-up, but Far Behind” by Robert Norris

Last week, the long-anticipated Cox committee report on Chinese espionage was released. While Chinese pursuit of U.S. secrets has been on the front pages for the past few months, the 1,016-page report unleashed a frenzy worthy of the best Cold War scandals. No doubt Rep. Christopher Cox (R-Newport Beach) and his congressional colleagues see themselves as America's saviors, with a finger in the nuclear dike. Ignore for a moment the partisan undercurrents in this modern-day who-lost-China fever and put aside disagreements over President Bill Clinton's China policy. Let's just examine the report's main assertions.

Four are made about nuclear weapons: First, the Chinese have conducted a pervasive and successful penetration of U.S. nuclear-weapon laboratories for the past 20 years. Second, the secrets stolen were essential to China's modernization. Third, Chinese weapons are basically copies of ours. Finally, in highly inflammatory language, China is depicted as an emerging nuclear nemesis. Sounds pretty bad, but let's take a look at each claim.

The Central Intelligence Agency's April 21 damage assessment on Chinese spying is perhaps a better guide than the Cox report. It concludes: "China's technical advances have been made on the basis of classified and unclassified information derived from espionage, contact with U.S. and other countries' scientists, conferences and publications, unauthorized media disclosures, declassified weapons information and Chinese indigenous development. The relative contribution of each cannot be determined." The Cox report makes it seem as though everything the Chinese may have learned came from spying and not from Aviation Week and Space Technology magazine or the latest physics conference.

An extraordinary amount of information covering a wide range of technologies is available in the public domain, useful to Chinese, or anyone else for that matter. The basic concepts of nuclear weapons are widely known. Scientific secrets are neither absolute nor one nation's property.

It is somewhat arrogant, especially after the Iraqi experience, to believe other nations' scientists are incapable of building weapons of mass destruction. Unless interrupted for some reason, every nation that has set out to build a nuclear weapon has succeeded. Refinements soon follow. The tricks Chinese may or may not have learned from us about how to make a missile warhead lighter and more compact have been "discovered" by other nuclear powers. Chinese are traversing paths others have taken and would have eventually discovered the "tricks" on their own, given enough time and effort.

The Cox report is largely silent on the composition and character of China's nuclear forces. A comparison with the United States is instructive. The U.S. has some 10,000 nuclear weapons, of which more than 7,000 comprise the strategic arsenal

(intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and bomber weapons of intercontinental range), theoretically capable of hitting any target in China with great precision. Chinese have roughly 20 ICBMs, known as the Dong Feng-5, capable of reaching the United States. This is a ration of 350 to 1.

Qualitatively, there is no comparison. The DF-5s are similar to U.S. Titan II missiles, first deployed in the early 1960s and retired in the early '80s. Chinese missiles take 24 hours to fuel and prepare for firing, carry one warhead, may not be reliable and are not that accurate. China has one ballistic-missile submarine; the U.S. has 18. China's submarine has never ventured beyond its regional waters and is basically too unsafe to operate. As for aircraft, China has no long-range aviation; its bombers are reverse-engineered Soviet planes from the 1950s.

To suggest, as the Cox report does, that Chinese weapons are mere copies ("on a par with our own") of U.S. weapons is absurd. There are no Chinese MX missiles, no B-2 bombers and no Trident submarines. As for copying the W-88 warhead, "It is a fact, " says Harold Agnew, director of Los Alamos in the 1970s, when the warhead was tested, "that scientists, especially those involved with the design of nuclear weapons, have always been reluctant to make 'Dutch' copies of other laboratories' designs. Ideas are welcome, but copying seldom, if ever, occurs."

Early on, China decided to have a modest arsenal of a few hundred warheads, even during the most difficult days of the Cold War, when it had both the Soviet Union and the United States as adversaries. While the two superpowers together built some 125,000 nuclear warheads, thousands of missiles, scores of bombers and dozens of submarines, China decided not to waste money in joining the race.

What about tomorrow? There is no evidence there are any Chinese crash programs underway or that Beijing intends to increase the size of its stockpile. Interestingly, the CIA notes in its damage assessment, "China has had the technical capability to develop a multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) system for its large, currently deployed ICBM for many years, but has not done so."

The natural desire of every military is to want improved weapons, and China has pursued gradual modernization for more than a decade. In this endeavor, resources have been limited. The total annual Chinese military budget is about one-eighth the size of the U.S. military budget. Traditionally, it has taken the Chinese decades to research, develop, test and fully field their weapon systems. The first DF-5 was deployed in 1981, after a first successful test flight a decade earlier. The Cox report says the DF-31 ballistic missile is about to be flight-tested for the first time. The missile has a single warhead and is incapable of reaching the continental United States. What it does not tell us is that the missile began development 15 years ago, and that virtually each year since the U.S. intelligence community has predicted the DF-31 was about to start tests. If the missile is not canceled first, one year that prediction may come true. The longer-range DF-41, a replacement for the DF-5, and a missile that has been the subject of much speculation regarding Chinese intentions vis-a-vis the United States, has been canceled.

We should recall that China was initially spurred to obtain nuclear weapons after several atomic threats by the United States during the Korean War and other Asian crises in the 1950s. Washington has not been exactly passive. In 1964, as China was on the verge of becoming a nuclear power, President Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisors considered bombing key facilities to prevent this. Throughout the Cold War and continuing today, the nuclear threat has remained a fundamental element of regional and international policy. Once China tested a device in 1964, a deterrent relationship was established between Washington and Beijing. In the future, whether China has 20 missiles or 200, that will not change.

The lurid headlines about China as a dangerous nuclear threat are ammunition for some initial salvos of the 2000 campaign, as evidenced by Texas Gov. George W. Bush's criticism of the Clinton administration. But as long as the U.S. and Russia continue to value nuclear weapons and believe they are centrally important, it is hardly surprising that China believes the same.

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