

China's nukes in the 1960s: lessons for today's Iran

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The conventional wisdom among hawks in the United States and other Western countries is that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose an existential threat to global peace, and, therefore, Tehran must be stopped at all costs - even if preemptive military force is needed - from acquiring such a capability. Richard Grenell, at one time spokesman of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney on foreign affairs, epitomized the attitude of fellow hawks when he asserted that if Iran possessed nuclear weapons, "it would surely use" them. Former US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton argues that Israel should have conducted air strikes against Tehran's nuclear sites "years ago."

Such belligerence on the nuclear issue is not unprecedented, though. During the early and mid-1960s, there were similar panicked warnings about China's nuclear ambitions. *National Review*, the flagship conservative magazine of that era, published an editorial in January 1965 with the provocative title "Should We Bomb Red China's Bomb?" The answer, according to the editors, seemed to be in the affirmative. "There is something to do now," the editors wrote. "We can destroy - destroy literally, physically - the present Chinese nuclear capability, and thereby guarantee, since their underlying industrial recovery power is meager, that they cannot become a nuclear power for a good many years ahead." *National Review* returned to the theme in June 1965 with another editorial, "Bomb the Bang."

The assumption that the leaders of Maoist China were so reckless that they might well turn East Asia into a pile of radioactive rubble came through clearly in those editorials. Even though China did not at that time have intercontinental ballistic missiles, the *National Review* editors were not reassured. They warned that China already had planes that could drop bombs anywhere in Asia, and that "a ship can carry a Chinese bomb into the harbors of New Orleans, San Francisco, New York, or London." Given that danger, the United States could not sit passively "like a man who merely watches and waits while the guillotine is constructed to chop his head off."

That logic is eerily similar to the arguments invoked about Iran and the alleged impossibility to live with its nuclear weapons. The hawks of that earlier era actually had better evidence that China would use such weapons than current hawks have about Iran's intentions. Some of the comments that Mao Zedong and his colleagues made were truly blood curdling. In a speech to the Eighth Party Congress in May 1958, Mao urged his colleagues: "Do not be alarmed either if there should be war. It would merely mean getting people killed, and we've seen people killed in war. Eliminating half the population occurred several times in China's history."

And he did not flinch from the prospect of nuclear war. "We have no experience in atomic war. So, how many people will be killed cannot be known. The best outcome is that only half the population is left, and the second best may be only one third." Either outcome would lead to plans for "the total elimination of capitalism and for permanent peace. It is not a bad thing."

General Lo Jui-ching, writing in *Red Flag*, the main ideological publication of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s, argued that "psychological preparation" of the Chinese masses for conventional and even nuclear war "must be given first priority." He added that while a nuclear war will "cause sacrifices and destruction, it will also educate people." That comment led *Life Magazine* correspondent Ralph Lapp to observe that Chinese leaders "may not be rationally deterred from starting a nuclear war." For them, he argued, "the unthinkable conflict is thinkable."

One would be hard-pressed to find comments among Iran's clerical elite comparable to extraordinarily scary comments of Mao and other Chinese leaders. And jittery US officials during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations seriously considered taking preemptive military action to eliminate China's nuclear program. William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson noted, in their important article in the Winter 2000-2001 issue of the journal *International Security*, that Kennedy's national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, once described the President's fear that a nuclear China would "so upset the world political scene" that "it would be intolerable."

In 1963 the Joint Chiefs of Staff responded to Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy's request to develop a contingency plan for a conventional attack to "retard" Chinese nuclear development. The plan, completed in December, contemplated a "multi-sortie" attack with conventional weapons. However, the large number of sorties required also impelled the JCS to look into the possibility of using nuclear weapons on the sites instead.

The fears about China were perhaps understandable. But once it joined the exclusive global nuclear weapons club, China did not behave in a reckless fashion. The world learned to live with a nuclear-armed China, and Beijing's international behavior actually moderated, even when the country descended into the maelstrom of Mao's Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and 1970s. Barely seven years after *National Review's* initial apocalyptic editorial about Chinese nukes, President Richard Nixon visited China, and a new, far less confrontational relationship commenced between Washington and Beijing.

One shudders to think how different US-China relations would have been if the hawks of the 1960s had prevailed and the United States had attacked Chinese nuclear installations. It is a lesson that should be kept ever-present when we consider similar proposals for drastic action against Iran.