

The Washington Times

April 09, 2001, Monday, Final Edition

Spy photos show Beijing set for underground nuclear test

BYLINE: Bill Gertz; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

SECTION: PART A; Pg. A1

LENGTH: 1045 words

China is preparing to conduct a small, underground nuclear test in the midst of a standoff with the United States over the detention of 24 American military personnel, The Washington Times has learned.

U.S. intelligence officials said the EP-3E surveillance aircraft that collided with a Chinese interceptor jet April 1 was gathering electronic intelligence related to the impending test, along with other intelligence targets.

The test preparations were detected two weeks ago at China's Lop Nur testing facility in western Xinjiang province. They were based on U.S. spy satellite photographs that showed activity related to nuclear testing at one location of the testing site.

One official said the underground blast could be another in a series of "subcritical" nuclear tests - small explosions that do not produce an actual nuclear yield but are useful in weapons development and maintenance.

However, other officials familiar with intelligence reports said the Chinese are known to have a covert testing program that relies on small, or low-yield, nuclear explosions.

In 1996, China became a signatory to an international treaty banning all underground nuclear blasts.

U.S. intelligence officials said suspicions about the secret Chinese nuclear testing program were confirmed after agents from Beijing purchased special nuclear containment equipment from Russia several years ago.

The special equipment is known to be used in masking the seismic signatures of nuclear explosions - like the small blast China set off June 1999, days before a senior U.S. diplomat delivered an apology to Beijing for the mistaken bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, during the air war there.

The timing of that test, which took place at Lop Nur, was viewed as an intentional signal from Beijing, which had cut off all military contacts with the United States and had begun vitriolic attacks on the United States in the government-controlled media.

Although the test preparations were spotted before the showdown between China and the United States began, officials did not rule out a connection to China's stepped-up aggressive harassment of U.S. intelligence and plans for the test.

China is opposing Bush administration plans for U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and plans for deployment of a national missile defense, and it has been engaged in a concerted effort to influence U.S. policies, said defense and intelligence officials.

A test during the current standoff would signal China's growing nuclear power, said the officials.

A U.S. defense official said the testing activity at the current time is a sign that China's leader, President Jiang Zemin, may not be fully in control.

"Some say Jiang is a moderate who wants good relations with the United States," the official said. "If that's the case, this test during a difficult period with the United States indicates he is not in control of China."

The EP-3E conducts signals intelligence operations that are aimed at collecting large amounts of communications and other electric signals. The aircraft left from Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, Japan, and flew south along the Chinese coast until its encounter with two Chinese interceptor jets near Hainan Island.

The aircraft's sensitive listening equipment is capable of picking up communications thousands of miles inland, including any signals from Lop Nur, the main Chinese nuclear testing facility, intelligence officials said.

The U.S. intelligence community also uses RC-135 reconnaissance flights and spy satellites to collect intelligence from Lop Nur. It also has "sniffer" aircraft that can detect any nuclear particles produced from nuclear tests after they take place.

China in the past has used tests of its missiles and nuclear weapons as political signals to the United States.

China is currently engaged in a major strategic weapons buildup. Last year, it conducted two flight tests of a new road-mobile long-range missile known as the DF-31.

China also is building a longer-range missile known as the DF-41 and a new class of ballistic missile submarine that will be equipped with a naval version of the DF-31.

China last conducted large-scale nuclear tests in 1996. It announced later that year it was agreeing to the international nuclear test ban known as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

U.S. intelligence agencies assessed the 1996 tests to be the first blasts of a new small warhead - believed based on the design of the W-88, the United States' most advanced small nuclear warhead, obtained through espionage.

Although China signed the test ban treaty, it has not ratified it.

The U.S. Senate rejected the pact in 1999. The State Department said at the time of the Senate debate that U.S. ratification of the treaty would "constrain" China's nuclear weapons modernization because any information on U.S. nuclear testing obtained by Chinese spies could not be used without first conducting nuclear tests.

"China is not likely to rely on weapons incorporating information obtained through espionage without first conducting nuclear explosive tests," the department said in a 1999 fact sheet.

The fact sheet also stated that China said when it signed the test ban treaty in 1996 that "it would continue to evaluate the safety and reliability of its nuclear weapons. . . . We believe that China has initiated such a program at its Lop Nur test site."

China has refused to permit international monitoring at its nuclear weapons test facilities - a key reason Senate Republicans rejected the test ban treaty as unverifiable.

Negotiators failed to include provisions in the treaty that would allow precise monitoring near Lop Nur.

Despite the Senate's rejection of the treaty, the Bush administration is seeking \$21 million for international monitoring of the defunct treaty, a sign treaty proponents are operating outside the control of administration political appointees.

"It's the Clinton bureaucracy doing this, and it shows the Bush administration hasn't reined them in," said one U.S. official.

The continued nuclear test efforts by China show "China could never be a reliable treaty partner" since it announced in 1996 that it would no longer test, this official said.

The Washington Times

May 11, 2001, Friday, Final Edition

Chinese believed preparing for a nuclear weapons test; Controlled underground explosion likely in a few days

BYLINE: Bill Gertz; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

SECTION: PART A; NATION; Pg. A5

LENGTH: 716 words

China is stepping up preparations for an underground test at its Lop Nur nuclear weapons testing facility, according to U.S. intelligence officials. A test could be carried out in the next several days, they said.

Vehicle activity at the test site in the remote western province of Xinjiang was detected by spy satellites last week, said officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Intelligence reports of the upcoming test coincide with the resumption Monday of U.S. reconnaissance flights near China, which could be used to detect intelligence related to the test, the officials said.

The officials said they did not know if the RC-135 Rivet Joint flight on Monday was looking for electronic signals in eastern China that may be related to the test, but RC-135s have collected nuclear testing information from the Chinese in the past.

China is believed to be working on development of a new small warhead based on the design of the U.S. W-88 nuclear warhead. China obtained secret design information on the W-88 through espionage in the United States, according to U.S. intelligence reports.

Asked about the upcoming test, Sen. Richard C. Shelby, Alabama Republican and chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, would not comment directly.

"It's my judgment the Chinese will benefit immensely from what went on at Los Alamos and Livermore," Mr. Shelby said of Chinese espionage activities at U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories.

"In the years to come, you will see a modernization of their nuclear weapons and a lot of it will be based on our models, including the W-88," he said, noting that when the Chinese succeed in developing their nuclear arms it will be a "quantum leap" in their strategic power.

Test preparations at Lop Nur were first reported by The Washington Times on April 9, after U.S. intelligence agencies detected the first signs of an impending nuclear test in March.

Officials said the upcoming test, which could take place before the end of the month, may be a "subcritical" nuclear test - a small explosion designed to simulate a nuclear blast.

Other officials suspect the Chinese will carry out a small nuclear test despite their pledge to have stopped all nuclear testing in 1996.

U.S. intelligence agencies suspect China is engaged in covert nuclear testing that relies on small, low-yield underground blasts. The suspicions are based on intelligence reports indicating Beijing's agents purchased special containment equipment from Russia several years ago that masks the effects of underground nuclear tests.

The last Chinese nuclear-related test took place in 1999, shortly before a senior State Department official delivered an apology to Beijing for the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, during the NATO aerial bombing campaign.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government yesterday defended its use of aircraft to intercept U.S. surveillance flights near its coast and said they threaten its security.

The surveillance is "a grave threat to China's security," Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi told reporters in Beijing.

Chinese jet fighters did not challenge the RC-135 flight Monday, but Mr. Sun said sending jets to monitor the planes is "necessary and very reasonable." He said the United States should "learn from the past" to avoid further incidents.

U.S. surveillance flights were halted after the April 1 collision between a U.S. EP-3E aircraft and a Chinese F-8 interceptor. The F-8 crashed and its pilot was killed after the collision. The EP-3E made an emergency landing on China's Hainan island and the crew was held 12 days before being released.

Mr. Sun said again yesterday that China will not allow the U.S. aircraft to be repaired and flown off.

"Due to the nature of the plane, it will not be allowed to fly back from Hainan to the United States," he said. "The specific means of transporting the plane will be talked about by the sides."

China's Deputy Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said Wednesday that returning the aircraft by allowing it to fly out of China would "further hurt the dignity and sentiments of the Chinese people" and cause "strong indignation and opposition from the Chinese people."

The Washington Times

July 06, 2001, Friday, Final Edition

BYLINE: Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

SECTION: PART A; NATION; INSIDE THE RING; Pg. A8

LENGTH: 1204 words

CHINA NUKE EXPERIMENT

U.S. intelligence officials said China conducted some type of nuclear weapons-related experiment recently. The test was carried out at the remote Lop Nur nuclear testing facility in western Xinjiang province.

Another test is expected soon, we are told.

Intelligence agencies remain in the dark about what kind of test took place because the blast gave off no seismic readings. Also, U.S. "sniffer" aircraft capable of detecting venting of radioactive material from the site came up empty. The key indicator of the test was an increase in vehicle activity.

Officials said the test may have been a "subcritical" nuclear test - a blast that simulates a nuclear explosion but falls short of reaching an actual nuclear chain reaction. China is developing a small nuclear warhead that U.S. intelligence agencies believe is based on stolen U.S. warhead design information.

Preparations for the test were first reported May 11 by The Washington Times.

Intelligence officials said China recently purchased special nuclear containment vessels from Russia that were used by Moscow to mask its underground nuclear tests.

The Washington Times

July 20, 2001, Friday, Final Edition

BYLINE: Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

SECTION: PART A; NATION; INSIDE THE RING; Pg. A11

LENGTH: 1331 words

MORE NUKE EXPERIMENTS

U.S. intelligence agencies have uncovered more evidence of Chinese nuclear weapons testing.

Officials tell us that Chinese nuclear testing officials carried out three nuclear weapons-related "experiments" over the past two months at Lop Nur, the remote test area in western Xinjiang province where China has conducted its underground nuclear blasts in the past. A fourth test is expected soon, intelligence officials said.

Satellite photographs taken within the past several weeks showed Chinese workers at Lop Nur filling in a test hole with concrete. "That's a sign this was a nuclear weapons-related test," one official told us.

U.S. intelligence agencies, however, still lack hard evidence that the Chinese set off an underground nuclear blast. Officials said no seismic shock waves have been detected from monitoring stations around the world. And special "sniffer" U.S. reconnaissance aircraft flying near China have not detected any signs of radioactivity venting from the tests.

Intelligence officials believe the tests are part of China's ongoing program to develop small nuclear warheads - like the U.S. W-88 warhead. The CIA has concluded China obtained W-88 warhead secrets from the United States through espionage.

The Washington Times

December 07, 2001, Friday, Final Edition

BYLINE: Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

SECTION: PART A; NATION; INSIDE THE RING; Pg. A9

LENGTH: 1270 words

CHINESE NUCLEAR 'EVENT'

U.S. intelligence agencies have detected new efforts by China on strategic nuclear weapons. The latest evidence comes in intelligence reports that China conducted a nuclear weapons-related experiment at the remote Lop Nur test facility in western Xinjiang province.

The latest nuclear weapons test was an "event" last month that produced no detectable nuclear yield or blast, officials said. It followed several similar tests that were reported in classified intelligence reports in July.

The Chinese conducted three nuclear weapons-related tests at Lop Nur in June and July. Preparations were spotted by U.S. intelligence imagery.

The tests are part of China's aggressive strategic nuclear weapons buildup that includes two new road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles, the DF-31 and the DF-41, and a new class of ballistic missile submarines outfitted with JL-2 missiles - a naval version of the DF-31.