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The Washington Times

Report: China building electromagnetic pulse weapons for use against U.S. carriers

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The Washington Times

Updated: 10:10 a.m. on Friday, July 22, 2011



China's military is developing electromagnetic pulse weapons that Beijing plans to use against U.S. aircraft carriers in any future conflict over Taiwan, according to an intelligence report made public on Thursday.

Portions of a National Ground Intelligence Center study on the lethal effects of electromagnetic pulse (EMP) and high-powered microwave (HPM) weapons revealed that the arms are part of China's so-called "assassin's mace" arsenal - weapons that allow a technologically inferior China to defeat U.S. military forces.

EMP weapons mimic the gamma-ray pulse caused by a nuclear blast that knocks out all electronics, including computers and automobiles, over wide areas. The phenomenon was discovered in 1962 after an aboveground nuclear test in the Pacific disabled electronics in Hawaii.

The declassified intelligence report, obtained by the private National Security Archive, provides details on China's EMP weapons and plans for their use. Annual Pentagon reports on China's military in the past made only passing references to the arms.

"For use against Taiwan, China could detonate at a much lower altitude (30 to 40 kilometers) ... to confine the EMP effects to Taiwan and its immediate vicinity and minimize damage to electronics on the mainland," the report said.

The report, produced in 2005 and once labeled "secret," stated that Chinese military writings have discussed building low-yield EMP warheads, but "it is not known whether [the Chinese] have actually done so."

The report said that in addition to EMP weapons, "any low-yield strategic nuclear warhead (or tactical nuclear warheads) could be used with similar effects."

"The DF-21 medium-range ballistic missile has been mentioned as a platform for the EMP attack against Taiwan," the report said.

According to the report, China's electronic weapons are part of what are called "trump card" or "assassin's mace" weapons that "are based on new technology that has been developed in high secrecy."

"Trump card would be applicable if the Chinese have developed new low-yield, possibly enhanced, EMP warheads, while assassin's mace would apply if older warheads are employed," the report said.

According to the report, China conducted EMP tests on mice, rats, rabbits, dogs and monkeys that produced eye, brain, bone marrow and other organ injuries. It stated that "it is clear the real purpose of the Chinese medical experiments is to learn the potential human effects of exposure to powerful EMP and [high-powered microwave] radiation."

The tests did not appear designed for "anti-personnel [radio frequency] weapons" because of the limited amounts of radiation used.

However, the report said another explanation is that the Chinese tests may have been research "intended primarily for torturing prisoners," or the tests may have been conducted to determine safety or shielding standards for military personnel or weapons.

The medical research also appeared useful for China's military in making sure that EMP weapons used against Taiwan and "any vulnerable U.S. [aircraft carrier] would not push the U.S. across the nuclear-response threshold," the report said.

"China's [high-altitude] EMP capability could be used in two different ways: as a surprise measure after China's initial strike against Taiwan and other U.S. [aircraft carrier strike group] assets have moved into a vulnerable position, and as a bluff intended to dissuade the United States from defending Taiwan with a CVBG," the Pentagon acronym for carrier strike groups.

The bluff scenario would include China's announcement of a resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing and warn of tests during a specified period and then attacking Taiwan's infrastructure with conventional forces.

China then would wait and see whether the U.S. carriers were deployed to defend Taiwan.

The report concluded that China could consider using EMP weapons against Taiwan's electronic infrastructure or against U.S. carriers if a conflict breaks out in the Taiwan Strait.

"The minimization of military casualties on CVBG assets is calculated to lessen the likelihood of a U.S. nuclear response to a Taiwan strike employing nuclear EMP," the report said. "The minimization of casualties on Taiwan is calculated to lessen the animosity among Taiwan's population over forced reunification."

Taiwan broke with mainland China after nationalist forces fled to the island when communists seized power in 1949.

The United States is bound by a 1979 law to prevent the forcible reunification of the island with the mainland, and China has said it is prepared to use force to claim the island.

Peter Pry, a former congressional aide who helped direct a commission on EMP several years ago, said the commission found that China plans for nuclear EMP strikes against the United States, as well as Taiwan and carrier forces, are part of its military doctrine and exercises.

"There is also evidence that China is developing, or has already developed, super-EMP nuclear weapons that generate extraordinarily powerful EMP fields, based partly on design information stolen from the United States," Mr. Pry, president of the group EMPact America, said in an email.

Mark Stokes, a former Pentagon specialist on China's military, said the report's details on high-powered microwave are new.

The same state-run institute, the China Academy of Engineering Physics, that makes China's nuclear warheads is also a center of microwave weapons research, he said.

Microwave weapons would be used to shut down enemy radar, communications, computers and other electronics in an opening salvo. The weapons also could jam electronics of attacking aircraft and anti-radiation missiles, and as an anti-satellite weapon, degrade sensitive satellite electronic systems, he said.

Richard Fisher, a China military analyst, said EMP warheads are likely to be an option for China's new DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile for the purpose of attacking large U.S. Navy ships without inflicting immediate massive casualties.

"Less is known about the longer-term effects on personnel of this kind of radiation attack," said Mr. Fisher, who is with the International Assessment and Strategy Center. "The more powerful nuclear-propelled neutron bomb was designed specifically for killing personnel without a massive blast."