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U.S. Intelligence on Asia, 1945-1991



The purpose of this unique online collection is to provide students and researchers with the declassified documentary record about the successes and failures of the U.S. intelligence community in the Far East during the Cold War (1945-1991). Particular emphasis is given to America's principal antagonists in Asia during the Cold War era: the People's Republic of China, North Korea and North Vietnam. However, countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia are covered as well.

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By Matthew M. Aid

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THE US INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY AND THE COLD WAR IN ASIA: 1945-1991

The purpose of this document collection is to give the reader the declassified documentary record, such as it exists today, about the successes and failures of the U.S. intelligence community in the Far East during the Cold War (1945-1991). Particular emphasis is paid to America's principal protagonists in Asia during the Cold War era - the People's Republic of China, North Korea and North Vietnam, although Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia are covered as well.

Scholars and researchers using this collection should bear in mind that while the U.S. government and the American intelligence community have declassified hundreds of thousands of pages of formerly classified documents concerning its Cold War espionage efforts, most of the materials pertain to the secret intelligence war waged against the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. With the exception of the Vietnam War, far less attention has been given by the US government's declassification staffs to the activities of the US intelligence community in the Far East, in part because these efforts were less glamorous, but also far less successful than those that were focused on the USSR.

It is a sad fact of life that while not admitted publicly, the “embarrassment factor” plays an important part in what materials the US government decides to declassify. All one has to do is look at the CIA's furious efforts to suppress the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the torturing of Al Qaeda captives after the 9/11 terrorist attacks for proof of this assertion. My personal experience is slightly more mundane. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks the CIA and the US Army have fought me tooth-and-nail to try to prevent the declassification of documents related to human intelligence (HUMINT) and covert action efforts directed against mainland China and North Korea during the early stages of the Cold War, and these two agencies continue to use their powers to prevent the National Declassification Center (NDC), which is part of the US National Archives, from declassifying materials on these, and a host of other intelligence-related subjects which do not reflect well on the CIA's work in the past.

But on the other hand, the National Security Agency (NSA), America's giant electronic eavesdropping agency, and the State Department have generally been far more amenable to declassifying historical materials, which explains why the majority of the 260+ documents obtained through the use of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) that are contained in this collection, come from these two agencies. In other words, it is getting harder and harder to conduct scholarly research on intelligence topics because of the obstruction of certain elements of the US intelligence community. And I fear that this process will become even more difficult during the tenure of the Trump administration, whose commitment, or lack of it, to transparency and declassification is not encouraging.

KEY POINTS

Using the failures of the US intelligence community in the events leading up to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) intelligence failure in 2002-2003 as a reference point, a close review of the documents contained in this collection revealed a number of systemic problems which have plagued the US intelligence community since time immemorial.

Over and over again in the documents contained in this collection we run into the serious problem that the U.S. intelligence community has never been involved in a war in Asia (or anywhere else for that matter) that it was actually prepared for. When North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, the US intelligence community had virtually no intelligence assets in Korea, no databases of information about the North Korean government or military, and no Korean linguists. There were not even any Korean-English dictionaries to help translate captured documents or interrogate prisoners.^[1] Sadly, the lessons from the Korean War were not learned, resulting in many of the same mistakes being committed during the early stages of America's involvement in the Vietnam War in the early 1960s. For example, even as the administration of President John F. Kennedy was in the process of rashly committing American forces to the wars in Vietnam and Laos in 1961, US intelligence officials were warning that they knew very little about the enemies that they were about to face, and that the US intelligence community had few resources available in the region that were needed to rectify this problem.

Nonetheless, the Kennedy administration pushed forward with its plans (which looked great on paper) to counter the Communist threat in Southeast Asia.^[2]

Readers will note the heavy emphasis by the US intelligence community on intelligence reporting of a military nature on China, North Korea and North Vietnam from the time the Korean War ended in July 1953 right up until the Nixon administration took office in January 1969. To a certain degree this is understandable given the near-constant state of war or military crisis that existed in the Far East during this timeframe. But the principal reasons for so little focus on political and economic intelligence reporting on America's three principal communist protagonist in the Far East is that there was much of this sort of analysis taking place (China was rated far below the USSR as a focus area by the CIA's intelligence analysts), and what political analysis that was being produced during this timeframe was honestly not very good. It was only after President Nixon and Henry Kissinger took their steps to restore relations with Beijing in 1970 that the CIA finally began putting resources into this area and producing a higher quality analytic product for the White House.

Some of the conclusions reached in these classified CIA studies were so far off the mark that they bordered on the humorous, although they were not meant to be so at the time they were written.

·In April 1962 the CIA's top Chinese political analysts produced a lengthy study confidently predicting that Mao's health was rapidly failing and that he was not long for this world. In fact, the CIA analysts botched this report rather badly. Mao lived another 15 years, dying in his bed in Beijing on September 9, 1976, and in the process, probably outliving some of the CIA analysts who had predicted his demise back in 1962.^[3]

·A lengthy June 1968 CIA report detailing the political machinations of Mao Tse-tung's wife, Chiang Ching (a/k/a Madame Mao), was classified as Top Secret despite the fact that there was only one single use of intelligence derived from SIGINT in the entire 68-page report, which otherwise should have been classified no higher than Confidential. This was a rather cynical use of classified information by the report's authors, who knew that the more highly classified the report was, the more high-level officials in Washington who would read it.^[4]

·Another CIA analytic report, dated January 21, 1970, confidently predicted that Chinese defense minister Lin Biao, who the report characterized as a "devoted Maoist" and one of Mao Tse-tung's closest confidants and friends, would become the next leader of China after Mao's death.^[5] But eighteen months later, on the night of September 12-13, 1971, Lin Biao mounted a coup d'etat against Mao Tse-tung. When the coup failed, Lin Biao and his family fled Peking to Peitaiho airfield outside the capital, where they boarded a British-made Trident VIP aircraft and hastily took off for the city of Irkutsk in the Soviet Union. Three hours later, at 0300 on the morning of September 13, 1971, NSA SIGINT intercepts confirmed that Chinese air defense forces had shot the plane down near the village of Khentai in Chinese Outer Mongolia, killing Lin and his family, along with six other aides, before they could reach Russia.^[6]

CIA historians are fond of pointing to the small number of important spies who volunteered to provide the Agency with intelligence from behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, the two most important of whom were Oleg Penkovskiy in the Soviet Union and Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski in Poland. By contrast, all available evidence indicates that not one Chinese, North Korean, or North Vietnamese government official or senior military officer ever volunteered to spy for the CIA or any other US intelligence agency during the Cold War. Sadly, the CIA still refuses to declassify any materials concerning this massive Cold War intelligence failure, and has redacted all mention of these failures from its official histories of the period. As mentioned above, the "embarrassment factor" remains an important determinant in what the US intelligence community chooses to declassify about its past.

Thousands of Russians, ranging from mid-level diplomats and KGB spies down to low-ranking soldiers and ballet dancers defected from the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The number of defectors from the Eastern European countries was even higher. By contrast, the documents in this collection confirm that very few people of any significance ever managed to defect from China, North Korea or North Vietnam during the Cold War years.^[7] During the 1950s, the CIA spent millions of dollars on a wide array of defection inducement programs aimed getting Chinese and North Korean officials and soldiers to defect, none of which worked. A handful of Chinese and North Korean pilots flew their antique fighters over in order to collect the reward money, but the information they brought with them was not very impressive.^[8] And to make matters worse, many of the Chinese, North Korean or North Vietnamese defectors who did come over were later deemed to be false defectors, Communist double agents, or more usually, intelligence fabricators trying to make a quick buck at the expense of the American taxpayers.^[9]

Over and over again, one finds evidence in the declassified documents that the intelligence components of the U.S. military have been since the end of World War II, and remain to this day, poorly organized and resistant to efforts to coordinate their efforts with other agencies. This was true in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, where US Army, Navy and US Air Force intelligence components openly competed with one another and with the CIA for sources and the privilege of being able to claim an “exclusive” intelligence discovery.^[10] Since the early 1960s, much of the criticism of US military intelligence has been directed at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), which, rightly or wrongly, has for decades been referred to within the US intelligence community as the “poor man” of the community, particularly on matters involving the Far East. There are a number of documents in this collection with support this contention.^[11]

US dependence on foreign intelligence services in the Far East during the Cold War was, at times, extremely high, as was the case with the Chinese Nationalist intelligence and security services on the island of Taiwan, who throughout the 1950s provided upwards of 80% of the intelligence information on mainland China that was reaching Washington.^[12] This heavy dependence on information received from foreign intelligence services oftentimes created an unhealthy situation whereby US intelligence analysts came to adopt the assessments of the foreign services, as was the case in French Indochina between 1950 and 1954, where American dependence on the French intelligence services was almost 100%. This led the CIA to issue a number of faulty intelligence estimates and estimates which adopted the French viewpoint on the military situation in Indochina that were at variance with the facts-on-the-ground.^[13]

The US intelligence community's dependence on the South Vietnamese intelligence community (if it can be called such) during the early stages of the Vietnam War prior to the entry of the U.S. military into the ground war in 1965, particularly in the area of human intelligence (HUMINT), was extraordinarily high. Unfortunately, the half-dozen South Vietnamese intelligence and security agencies were so badly disorganized and mismanaged, in large part because they were run by incompetent officials chosen for their loyalty to Prime Minister Diem instead of their professionalism, that the declassified documents reveal that Washington had little, if any, confidence in the information they were producing.^[14] Problems with the reliability of the South Vietnamese intelligence and security services, as well as unerring inability of South Vietnamese officials to effectively use the intelligence they were given, remained a systemic problem right until the day Saigon fell to the communists in 1975. It did not matter how many millions of dollars the CIA and the U.S. military poured into trying to improve the South Vietnamese intelligence community, which is a situation comparable to the frustration felt by the CIA and the US military over their inability to build a professional and effective Afghan intelligence service since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.^[15]

The declassified documents in this collection reveal that, in many instances, the intelligence services of America's communist protagonists were just as good, if not better in many cases, than their American counterparts. This collection contains a number of declassified reports concerning the capabilities of enemy intelligence services in Asia, particularly the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong intelligence organizations, whose skill at agent penetration operations inside the South Vietnamese government far surpassed anything the CIA ever accomplished during the Vietnam War.^[16] For instance, declassified documents indicate that the North Koreans ran a large and very sophisticated agent network in Japan during the Korean War, which US and Japanese counterintelligence agents did not root out until near the end of the war.^[17] A number of declassified documents in this collection indicate that the Soviet and Chinese intelligence services almost certainly had a number of high-level agents reporting from inside Chiang Kai-shek's government on Taiwan, who were providing Beijing with timely information about Taipei's planning for an invasion of China in the early 1960s.^[18]

The most talented and toughest of the enemy intelligence services that the CIA had to contend with probably belonged to North Vietnam, who were so effective that they made North Vietnam the hardest "denied area target" that the CIA had to deal with in the 1960s and 1970s. And the North Vietnamese spies were very good at their jobs. In February 1966 the CIA had to inform President Lyndon Johnson that SIGINT showed that the North Vietnamese air defense system was being informed within minutes about the takeoff of American bombers and fighter aircraft from air bases in Thailand and South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese agents were reporting in near-realtime the numbers and types of planes taking off and what direction they were headed. Within minutes of this information being radioed to Hanoi, the entire North Vietnamese air defense system was placed on alert. Later in the war, Viet Cong captives admitted they knew in some cases a day in advance about the location of B-52 ARC LIGHT air strikes in South Vietnam.^[19] A 1968 report based on the interrogation of a captured enemy officer revealed that Viet Cong forces usually got several days of advance warning of planned American and South Vietnamese attacks from their intelligence people, almost certainly from sources inside the South Vietnamese government or military.^[20] Even NSA admits that the combined North Vietnamese-Viet Cong SIGINT organizations were very efficient and capable, taking full advantage of the propensity of chatty American commanders to disclose secret information over unenciphered radio channels, allowing the enemy to gather high-grade intelligence on current and/or forthcoming operations.^[21]

The declassified documents reveal that as time went by, more and more US intelligence community analytic reporting was marked "NOFORN," meaning that it could not be seen, much less shared with America's foreign allies and intelligence partners, including but not limited to Great Britain. By the 1970s, even most of the more mundane intelligence products being produced by the CIA and other US intelligence agencies were being routinely stamped NOFORN. The import of this fact is that hundreds of the documents contained in this collection were never meant to be read by anyone outside of the US government or military in perpetuity. The CIA continues to try to hide this fact, routinely deleting the "NOFORN" handling restrictions found on the cover of each of its declassified reports in an effort to try to hide the fact that in the past, very little of the finished intelligence product it produces is shared with its allies.

A big gap in our knowledge is that we still know relatively little about the intelligence reporting coming out of the U.S. military intelligence components, particularly the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), since the early 1960s. The reason for this is simple - getting DIA to declassify information requires something akin to an "Act of God." DIA is infamous for having one of the worst record keeping systems in the US intelligence community, which makes it nigh on impossible for the DIA's vastly undermanned and underfunded FOIA staff to find and process documents in a timely manner that are responsive to declassification requests from outside researchers.

INTELLIGENCE SUCCESS STORIES

Intelligence performance during the three Taiwan Strait crises in 1954-1955, 1958 and 1962 was generally good, despite the fact that the US intelligence community had no high-level agent sources inside the Chinese government and military, nor was there any high level SIGINT penetration of high-level Chinese government or military communications. The NSC Briefings contained in this collection show that whatever intelligence was available to the CIA's analysts, most of which came from low-level SIGINT intercepts and photo reconnaissance overflights, was diligently sifted and reported in a sober, facts-only style that you don't find any more in US intelligence reporting.^[22] There was, however, occasionally a tendency on the part of the CIA's consumers, to misread the data they were getting and panic. For example, in February 1955 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told the NSC that the Chinese military buildup opposite Taiwan had reached the point that the island was indefensible, asking President Eisenhower for permission to let the Chinese Nationalist military to strike military targets on the Chinese mainland. The Pentagon wanted President to authorize the use of nuclear weapons to defend Taiwan if the Chinese attacked.^[23]

War between Indonesia and the Netherlands in July-August 1962 over the disputed Dutch colony of Netherlands New Guinea (or West New Guinea) was averted at the last moment only by the outstanding performance of the US intelligence community, which provided the US government with high-grade intelligence information that allowed the US mediator to head off war. The now forgotten 1962 Netherlands New Guinea crisis was highlighted by the fact that the CIA had agents high up inside the Indonesian government, and the highest-level codes and ciphers of the Indonesian military had been broken by NSA, allowing the US government unparalleled access to the plans and intentions of the Indonesian government. The information produced was so good that the US government knew weeks in advance what day in early August 1962 the Indonesian government had set for the invasion of Netherlands New Guinea and what forces the Indonesian military had assembled for the attack.^[24] What is not known is how much of the information contained in the CIA intelligence reporting going to President Kennedy came from the Dutch foreign intelligence, which was running at the time a stable of high-levels inside the Indonesian government, including the Indonesian foreign minister, Ruslan Abdulgani^[25]

The CIA and US military intelligence spent a great deal of time and resources spying on the leaders of friendly governments in the Far East. For instance, spying on the mercurial South Korean president Syngman Rhee was a fulltime preoccupation of the US intelligence community even before Rhee became the leader of South Korea in 1948. The US Army began intercepting all of his incoming and outgoing international cables in late 1946 while he was still a right-wing political leader in Seoul.^[26] The antagonism between Rhee and the US military governor in South Korea, General Hodge, became so bad that the US Army almost ordered Rhee's arrest for subversive activities in July 1947.^[27] Shortly after the Korean War began, the CIA recruited a number of his top aides to report on his activities, which sometimes bordered on the bizarre. For example, in January 1952 the CIA reported for the first time that Rhee, who was unhappy about not being consulted by the US government about the ongoing ceasefire talks being held at Panmunjon, told a meeting of his closest advisors that he intended to release all Chinese prisoners of war to the Chinese Nationalist government on Taiwan. If Rhee had followed through on his threat, this singular action would have destroyed any chance of obtaining a cessation of the Korean War. In 1953 and 1954, the CIA's sources inside the South Korean government reported that Rhee was threatening to destroy the July 1953 Panmunjon armistice agreement by invading North Korea just with his own army. Fortunately, the top generals of South Korea's armed forces somehow managed to scotch this idea, but Rhee's threats badly scared the Eisenhower administration in Washington. The spying on Rhee only ceased on April 26, 1960, when Rhee was forced to resign from office after several days of bloody rioting in the port city of Masan, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. Rhee died in exile in Hawaii on July 19, 1965.^[28]

Thanks to a number of high-level agent sources inside the Chinese Nationalist government and military, and especially an important source within the Chinese Nationalist military intelligence service, the CIA's Taipei station was able to closely monitor all Chinese Nationalist maritime commando raids and agent airdrops into mainland China during the early to mid-1960s. All of these operations were so-called 'unilateral missions', conducted by the Chinese Nationalist government without the consent of the CIA. The CIA agents confirmed the radio broadcasts from Beijing which reported that the Chinese military and security services had captured or killed almost all of these Chinese Nationalist commando or agent teams. One October 11, 1962 report confirmed that the Chinese Nationalists had lost 85% of all personnel that had tried to infiltrate onto the Chinese mainland earlier that year.^[29] Despite these horrific losses, Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, refused to concede defeat, sending even more commando teams to conduct pinprick raids on the Chinese coastline and airdropping agents teams into China throughout the 1960s. The results, however, were exactly the same. Virtually none of these commandos or agents ever returned from their missions.^[30] The U.S. tried to stall Chiang Kai-shek's "Return to Mainland" program of commando and guerrilla attacks on China through a Joint U.S.-Chinese Nationalist planning body called the Blue Lion Committee, whose purpose was try to teach the Chinese Nationalists that no large-scale invasion of mainland China was feasible with the forces available on Taiwan. But Chiang and his top commanders did not learn this lesson, instead choosing to believe that the far-fetched invasion scenarios cook up by the committee were actually within the realm of possibility.^[31]

The declassified documents in this collection confirm that by far, the best and most reliable source of intelligence about military developments taking place inside China for most of the 1950s and 1960s were hundreds of top secret aerial reconnaissance overflights of the mainland, almost all of which were conducted by Chinese Nationalist Air Force aircrews working for the CIA or the US Air Force.^[32] The first USAF-sponsored psychological warfare overflights of mainland China by B-26 aircraft modified for leaflet drops were conducted from Taiwan in July 1954, and the first ELINT overflight of China by specially configured PB4Y-2 patrol planes and B-17 bombers were flown by Chinese Nationalist aircrews in August 1955.^[33] From this point onwards, overflights of mainland China became a large-scale operation, albeit a very secret one. Between 1958 and late 1966, Chinese Nationalist B-17 and P2V planes flew 585 STPOLLY ELINT collection and agent airdrop missions over the Chinese mainland China for the CIA to keep the Agency abreast of the latest developments in the Chinese air defense system.^[34] As detailed below, CIA U-2 reconnaissance planes flown by Chinese Nationalist pilots conducted 104 spectacularly successful overflights of mainland China between 1962 and 1968.^[35] It is a testament to the skill and courage of the Chinese Nationalist flight crews and the CIA and USAF mission planners that these missions were so successful. But by the mid-1960s the Chinese air defense system had matured to the point that they were able to shoot down an increasing number of the Chinese Nationalist reconnaissance aircraft, forcing the CIA and the State Department to cancel these operations because the death toll exceeded the imagery these missions were bringing back.^[36]

The U-2 overflights of China, known within the intelligence community by the codename TACKLE, which were conducted jointly by the CIA and the Chinese Nationalist Air Force, produced spectacular results concerning China's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs at a time when America's first generation of KEYHOLE spy satellites could not produce imagery with the level of detail or clarity as the CIA spy planes could..^[37] One 1963 CIA memo admitted that photo intelligence from U-2 overflights of mainland China were the only reliable source of information available concerning China's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs that were then available.^[38] The U-2's also produced crystal clear pictures of China's military airfields, army and naval bases and arms factories. But unfortunately, outside of these specific military subjects the U-2 overflights

produced only limited amounts of hard intelligence information about what was going on inside China before the TACKLE overflight program was abruptly cancelled by Secretary of State Dean Rusk in 1968. ^[39]

A recently declassified CIA history of the U-2 program shows that the ROCAF U-2s alone conducted 104 Project TACKLE overflights of mainland China between 1962 and 1968. ^[40]

CIA-Chinese Nationalist U-2 Overflights of China: 1962-1968

[...]

INTELLIGENCE FAILURES

In the early morning hours of June 25, 1950, over 100,000 North Korean troops invaded South Korea. The invasion came as a complete surprise to both the U.S. and South Korean governments and intelligence communities. The declassified documents reveal that the State Department and virtually every member of the U.S. intelligence community, including the CIA, to one degree or another, lied about what (if anything) they knew about North Korea's intentions to invade South Korea for fear that they would be raked over the coals by Congress, as had happened after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941. ^[50] In secret behind closed doors testimony before Congress, CIA director Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter said the CIA did report to Washington indications that a North Korean invasion of South Korea was 'imminent.' But a review of the declassified CIA HUMINT reports from Korea shows that Hillenkoetter was less than honest with Congress. The handful of CIA reports revealed nothing substantively about North Korea's intentions to invade the South, nor was there ever any report from the CIA indicating that an invasion was 'imminent.' ^[51] To make matters worse, the CIA had not reported to consumers in Washington what little information they did have about North Korea's military intentions until days, and in some cases months, after the invasion had begun, probably because someone in charge at CIA headquarters went through the files and discovered that these low-grade intelligence reports had been lying around gathering dust and had not been sent to consumers in Washington. ^[52] The only branch of the US intelligence community that did not apparently lie about its performance were the SIGINTers of the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA), who with great embarrassment had to admit that they had not been covering North Korea at all prior to June 25, 1950, and therefore they had no materials in their files about the subject. ^[53] Fortunately for the American spies, Congress chose not to hold any hearings into the matter, nor was any investigation ever conducted to determine how such a massive intelligence failure could have occurred less than ten years after the tragedy of Pearl Harbor.

Then there was the massive failure of the US intelligence community to foresee China's military intervention in the Korean War in October-November 1950. The declassified documents reveal that the White House, the Pentagon, State Department and General MacArthur's headquarters staff in Tokyo all suffered from a calamitous bout of "group think," unanimously believing that China would not dare intervene in the Korean War in the face of America's nuclear might. Declassified documents show that this underlying belief pervaded all CIA and Pentagon intelligence estimates of the time, and all intelligence reporting that ran contrary to this basic precept was discounted or rejected outright because it did not conform to the consensus opinion of the U.S. intelligence community and General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of U.S. forces in the Far East at the time. ^[54] Even after Chinese troops entered the war, the U.S. intelligence community and General MacArthur moved en masse into a collective state of denial, refusing to accept the fact that the Chinese military was in Korea despite the plethora of evidence to the contrary. When CIA officers in Korea had the temerity to cable Washington with the results of the interrogations of the Chinese prisoners, General MacArthur's intelligence chief, General Charles A. Willoughby, barred CIA personnel from further access to the POW cages, telling the Eighth Army's G-2 to "Keep him [the CIA station chief in Korea] clear of interrogation." It was the

prototypical case of shooting the messenger because you did not like what he said. But as it turned out, General MacArthur's staff need not have bothered, because the CIA's intelligence analysts back in Washington did not believe what the Chinese POWs were saying anyway, with one CIA report concluding that the Chinese POWs had been "sent to North Korea to plant misleading reports in the hope of slowing the UN advance."^[55]

The US intelligence community was not alone in failing to predict that China would intervene in the Korean War. The British intelligence community, and the intelligence services of all of America's foreign partners had all concluded that China would not intervene in the fighting in Korea. The only exception was the Dutch government, which told the US ambassador in The Hague in mid-October 1950 that reporting from their embassy in Beijing indicated that China would, in fact, intervene militarily in Korea. Not surprisingly, the State Department and the US intelligence community ignored the reports coming from The Hague.^[56]

The performance of the CIA's Clandestine Service during the Korean War was nothing short of abysmal, with the Agency's human intelligence and covert action operations in Korea achieving very little by the time the war ended in July 1953.^[57] A number of formerly classified memos in this collection confirm that despite claims to the contrary, neither the CIA nor the U.S. military ever succeeded in operating agent networks inside North Korea during the war. Moreover, this failed effort was very costly in terms of human lives lost, with CIA post-mortem histories confirming that dozens of agents were either captured or killed by the Chinese or North Korean security services. There were even instances of agents being killed by US troops as they tried to cross the frontlines to report their intelligence to their handlers because the soldiers did not know the friend/foe recognition signals used by the agents. Efforts by the CIA's covert action arm, the OPC, to organize a guerrilla army behind enemy lines came to naught, with North Korea security forces destroying the last organized CIA-controlled guerrilla bands during the winter of 1951-1952. The US Army and the CIA never managed to organize a system to coordinate the HUMINT gathering operations, and the bureaucratic mechanisms that were created only made matters worse. As a result, many of the US Army and CIA's agent networks were penetrated by the Chinese and/or the North Korean intelligence service, resulting in catastrophic personnel losses and the submission to consumers of information that was fabricated by the enemy. So not surprisingly, the CIA's Korean Mission, on orders from Washington, secretly withheld the identities of its sensitive sources and the intelligence they produced from the US Army's intelligence organization, and vice-a-versa.^[58]

Arguably the CIA's largest failure in Asia during the Cold War was the inability of the Agency's Clandestine Service to penetrate Communist China to any measurable degree between 1949 and 1991. Those efforts to infiltrate agents into mainland China overland from Hong Kong, by parachute, or by landing them by boat on the China coastline all ended in failure. Hundreds of agents, most of them Chinese Nationalist personnel recruited on Taiwan, perished or were captured by the near omnipresent Chinese security services. As far as can be told from the declassified documents currently available, the CIA nor any of its partners in the Far East, including Great Britain's MI6 and the intelligence services of Nationalist China, were ever able to recruit any high-level Chinese agents inside China, nor was the CIA and its allies ever able to operate any lower-level agent networks inside China for any period of time before the CIA cut its losses and terminated its agent penetration operations in 1966.^[59] The situation was so bad that in March 1963, CIA director John McCone told President John F. Kennedy that "Despite contrary claims, it is my opinion that intelligence sources from the mainland of China are very inadequate.... It should be further noted that as of now no major political character of the Chicom Party has defected. Similarly no highly placed officer in the Chicom armed forces has defected."^[60]

Not far behind was the inability of the US intelligence community to develop sources inside mainland China was the failure of the America's spies to penetrate North Korea and North Vietnam. Although the CIA has declassified nothing on the subject, former CIA and South Korean intelligence officials have confirmed in interviews over the past decade that their respective intelligence services repeatedly tried to infiltrate agents into North Korea by air, land and sea, but all these operations failed. The casualty rate among the CIA and ROK agents sent into North Korea was catastrophic. In 2002, South Korean government officials admitted that between 1953 and 1972, 300 South Korean agents were killed, 203 wounded, and 130 were arrested by the North Koreans, and that an additional 4,849 South Korean agents sent north during this time period were still listed as missing in action and were presumed dead. SIGINT was also producing very little about what was going on inside North Korea other than sketchy details about North Korean military exercises and North Korean air force flight activity and ship movements.^[61] Only the sporadic reconnaissance overflights of North Korea between 1962 and 1971 provided the US intelligence community with any level of high-grade intelligence about what was transpiring north of the DMZ. A complete list of all known CIA and USAF overflights of North Korea are contained in Appendix I to this essay.

The exact same set of circumstances occurred during the Vietnam War. The CIA's Clandestine Service was never able to build and maintain any agent networks inside North Vietnam for any period of time because of the efficiency of North Vietnam's security services and counterintelligence organizations. George Carver, the CIA's top intelligence official on Vietnamese affairs, later admitted to an interviewer that the CIA's HUMINT collection program inside North Vietnam had been "a very perplexing problem, which we never really resolved." This a polite way of saying the CIA just could not figure out a way to insert agents into North Vietnam.^[62]

With no high-level agents or SIGINT intercepts available about what was transpiring in mainland China, North Korea or North Vietnam, and no American embassies in any of these countries to provide on-the-ground political reporting, the CIA's analytic efforts to try to understand the behavior and intentions of the Chinese, North Vietnamese and North Korean governments were reduced essentially to educated guesswork, with the analysts forced to subsist on the very thin gruel of what they were able to learn from press reports and radio broadcasts from Beijing, Hanoi and Pyongyang. Not surprisingly, when you read these reports today one cannot help but be struck by how little in the way of insights these reports provided on the inner workings of America's main protagonists in the Far East at the height of the Cold War.^[63]

The CIA's intelligence collectors and analysts spent most of the Cold War searching for the "Holy Grail," i.e. any reliable sources of intelligence about what was going on inside China, North Korea and North Vietnam.^[64] The result was that the US intelligence community was essentially deaf, dumb, and blind as to what our enemy's capabilities and intentions were for much of the Cold War. For example, an April 1964 postmortem evaluation of a recent CIA intelligence estimate on North Vietnam revealed that the CIA's Clandestine Service was producing "unspectacular results" because of what were described as "Hanoi's isolation and tight security."^[65] As of the early 1970s, with the war in Vietnam winding down, the CIA still had not developed any meaningful or trustworthy sources on the Chinese leadership or Chinese foreign policy, with one State Department intelligence report stating "such clandestine reporting as we get is generally either unreliable or unilluminating."^[66] And this was the state of the CIA's analytic competency by the time the Cold War came to an end in 1990-1991, with the CIA's analysts still being reduced to trying to divine Chinese, North Korean and North Vietnamese domestic issues and foreign policy matters from open-source newspaper reports and transcripts of radio broadcasts and propaganda materials. There was some hope that the intelligence picture would improve with the increased number of Western travelers to China and the new pipeline of Chinese students attending universities in the U.S. beginning in the early 1970s, but everyone in the intelligence

community doubted that these low-grade sources would produce the kind of high-level intelligence the U.S. government desperately wanted.^[67]

Though the CIA continues to resolutely refuse to declassify any meaningful documentary materials about its covert action operations in Asia during the Cold War, a small number of documents have slipped through the dragnet of Langley's censors over the years. These documents confirm that these operations, which involved virtually every country, both friendly and unfriendly, in East Asia, were almost entirely unmitigated failures. And in some cases, these operations had the opposite desired effect - they angered the countries the US government said they were trying to protect, and in some cases were dragged into the public light and caused huge amounts of diplomatic humiliation.

For example, during the Korean War the US Army recruited close to 40,000 guerrillas to fight behind-the-lines against Chinese and North Korean forces. But these partisans, most of whom were recruited using press-gang tactics on the streets of major South Korean cities, accomplished very little despite their impressive numbers. Rather than use them in a guerrilla warfare mode, the unimaginative US Army officers running the program formed them into regular army units and tried to use them as conventional infantry against the far larger and better equipped Chinese and North Korean forces. After experiencing a series a of bloody defeats, the Korean partisans, perhaps feeling that discretion was the better part of valor, opted to limit their losses by remaining safe and warm on their island bases off the west coast of North Korea for the rest of the war, becoming nothing more than garrison troops for these desolate islands.^[68]

Then there were the joint efforts by the CIA and the Chinese Nationalist intelligence services to build an anticommunist guerrilla army inside mainland China, all of which came to naught. The CIA did not know that Chinese military wiped out all the pro-Chiang Kai-shek guerrilla forces operating since China by the time that Beijing intervened in the Korean War in October-November 1950. Over the next decade, the Chinese security services easily destroyed all of the CIA-backed Chinese Nationalist agents teams that were covertly sent into China by air and sea to try to form new anticommunist guerrilla units. Few, if any, of the agents sent into China to kick-start these guerrilla operations ever returned. By 1958, even the CIA and the State Department knew that these operations were hopeless endeavors and urged Chiang Kai-shek to stop advocating more of these operations.^[69]

Then there is the CIA's Tibetan covert action program, which lasted from 1957 until the program mercifully died of benign neglect in the early 1970s. The Tibet operation was a prototypical example of a program that began as a small-scale, low budget project meant to gather intelligence inside Chinese-occupied Tibet, which beginning in 1959 morphed into a full-blown covert action program with a multi-million dollar budget involving the creation of a huge Tibetan resistance army in India and Nepal. The problem was that Desmond Fitzgerald, the CIA official who pushed the Tibet program within the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, paid no attention to those Agency officials who said that it was impossible for a lightly equipped guerrilla army to beat the Chinese army. He also ignored the fact that many of the Tibetans who joined the guerrilla army in India and Nepal were little more than crass opportunists who were more than willing to take the CIA's money and weapons, but showed little enthusiasm for actually crossing back into Tibet and waging war on the Chinese military.^[70] Of the 49 CIA agents parachuted into Tibet between 1957 and 1960, only 12 survived. Of the remainder, 37 were killed or committed suicide, one surrendered, and one was captured by the Chinese.^[71] Recognition in Washington that the Tibet program was a failure came too late, in large part because the State Department and the American intelligence bureaucracy was committed to the continuation of the program because it did not want to admit defeat. Those few American officials, like the US ambassador to India, John

Kenneth Galbraith, who saw the Tibet operation for what it was - a giant waste of money that was achieving nothing - were ignored, bypassed, or secretly written out of the program entirely. ^[72]

The joint CIA-Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) OPLAN 34A covert action operations against North Vietnam from 1963 onwards, involving agent airdrops, commando raids, sabotage operations and psychological warfare activities, was also a complete disaster. The operation, from its inception until it died a few years later, was marked by one failure after another, including the embarrassing public exposure of the operation after the Gulf of Tonkin incidents in July and August 1964. ^[73] Once again, the CIA and the Pentagon launched OPLAN 34A despite warnings from the CIA's intelligence analysts that the OPLAN 34A operation was highly unlikely to impact in any appreciable way Hanoi's strategic intent to prosecute the war in South Vietnam, much less damage North Vietnam's capacity to wage the war. ^[74] The secret CIA and US Army effort to infiltrate agents into North Vietnam was a shambles from the very begin. A number of document contained in this collection, tell the sad story of how the CIA and the US Army air dropped over one hundred agents into North Vietnam between 1961 and 1968, all of whom were captured or killed shortly after landing. Even after it became clear in the mid-1960s that these operations had been thoroughly penetrated by North Vietnamese intelligence and that the operation's security had been blown by news reports and radio broadcasts emanating from Hanoi, for reasons defying explanation the CIA and MACSOG continued to drop dozens of additional agents into North Vietnam, knowing full well that their life expectancy could be measured in minutes from the time they jumped from their transport planes. ^[75]

Despite some important successes after the 1968 Tet Offensive, during the critical early stages of the Vietnam War (1961-1967) the US intelligence community never really had a good idea how many troops North Vietnam was infiltrating every month into South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The main reason was that there was only one viable source for this information - the interrogation of North Vietnamese soldiers captured in South Vietnam. By the time these captives were interrogated, their information was months (or even years) old, so much of the intelligence that the US intelligence community was getting at the time from this source was ancient history, and as such, not much use on the battlefield. ^[76]

Then there was the failure of the U.S. intelligence community to warn of the nationwide North Vietnamese-Viet Cong Tet Offensive in January-February 1968. Despite danger signs everywhere, recently declassified documents show that the U.S. intelligence community, especially the intelligence analysts at the CIA and in Saigon, steadfastly refused to accept mounting indicators appearing in SIGINT reporting and from other sources that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were about to undertake a major nationwide offensive. On January 25, 1968, NSA sent a report to MACV entitled "Coordinated Vietnamese Communist Offensive Evidenced in South Vietnam," the lead conclusion of which was that the North Vietnamese were about to launch a major coordinated offensive in Vietnam. But declassified documents make it clear that nobody in Washington (including President Johnson) or Saigon paid much credence to the messages flowing out of NSA headquarters at Fort Meade warning of a nationwide North Vietnamese offensive being in the offing. Not only did the White House, the CIA and MACV commander General William Westmoreland believe that the North Vietnamese were incapable of mounting a major coordinated nationwide offensive, but they also believed that the real focus of the forthcoming enemy offensive was going to be the Marine combat base at Khe Sanh. ^[77]

The efforts of the CIA's Clandestine Service from 1965 until America forces left Vietnam in 1973 to destroy or neutralize the Viet Cong's base of support and logistics infrastructure in South Vietnam were a complete failure, despite the commitment of millions of dollars and hundreds of CIA operatives to the effort. The goal of this CIA covert action operation, codenamed TUJOCKEY, which was approved by the National Security Council (NSC) in

1966, was to attack by all means available the organization that controlled the Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam, known as the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), and all of its subordinate commands inside South Vietnam. The plan, which was not particularly well conceived, never really got off the ground and achieved very little in the way of tangible results and diverted much needed resources away from the Agency's efforts to build up its agent networks in South Vietnam.^[78]

APPENDIX I

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