Taiwanese ICBMs? Unlikely say experts

Can Nationalist China use MIT training in inertial guidance systems to develop ballistic missiles and other offensive weapons? If it has the capability, will it apply it? Is Taiwan capable of applying MIT's training to development of a high technology guidance industry?

The Tech asked academic China-watchers from all over the country these questions in the context of the MIT-Draper Laboratories Taiwan program. Excerpts from their answers follow:

Professor Ted Greenwood, MIT "I'm not aware of any Taiwanese effort to get missile guidance technology. Do they have the capability to build ICBMs? No, not now, but they could get it if they wanted it. I just can't imagine why they'd want to, unless they had a nuclear weapons program in mind. I don't think so... Taiwan manufactures a lot of high technology things, and there's a growing market for guidance equipment. I think they're on the right track... This program can be explained in a lot of ways. While I'm not ruling out military interests, I tend to have a very non-conspiratorial view. I think they're after industry..."

Jonathan Pollack, Harvard "That kind of stuff is always being bandied about--that Taiwan is getting missiles, nuclear weapons, and so forth. Notwithstanding the potential, there's no evidence that they've diverted plutonium to weapons work. ... The Taiwanese have demonstrated a great deal of competence in high technology with military applications. But this would be a whole new area. They have strong defensive forces, but not much offense. They might be hedging their bets, but in terms of the political scene, I wouldn't expect military uses of this work. ... The manufacturing capabilities are definitely within their grasp... I don't think a decision has been made to go with nuclear weapons or missiles. I just wouldn't put dark interpretations on this program.

Allie Whiting, University of Michigan "There are an awful lot of components in an ICBM, and the Nationalists have no experience with any of them. They just started to build jet aircraft on contract from the US. There's really no utility in it--they had missiles stationed there since 1957 which could have nuclear warheads put on them... Taiwan's a leader in high-technology manufacturing. Labor is cheap but well-educated, very highly-trained and determined. I think they could develop manufacturing. I'd put a pretty low credence in those reports (of missiles and nuclear weapons). They're really in no position to go into a nuclear slugfest...

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