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The Dilemma between Deterrence and Disarmament: Moving beyond the Perception of China as a Nuclear Threat

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Summary

Western politicians and analysts often perceive the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a growing nuclear power whose arsenal presents a threat to world peace. This perception overlooks the substance of Chinese nuclear doctrine and is detached from the technological realities of Beijing's strategic nuclear forces. A closer examination of China's capabilities and strategic posturing could transform "the dragon" into an important partner for global disarmament.

China's nuclear weapons

Statistics compiled by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) indicate that the PRC maintains approximately 200 operational warheads. This is in stark contrast to the estimated 4,000 deployed by the United States and 5,000 by Russia. Even France has more operational warheads than China, with deployed strategic nuclear forces of around 348 warheads. Additionally, Sino warheads attached to intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with the range to strike the continental United States number in the twenties, while nearly 800 American warheads of this variety have the capacity to reach China. The United States also possesses around 1,700 warheads equipped on submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and its strategic bombers carry approximately 1,100 nuclear bombs. The Chinese numbers for these delivery mechanisms are estimated at fewer than twenty and around 100, respectively.¹ The PRC is not known to have any deployed ballistic missile defenses.

A 1999 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Proliferation Brief analyzed China's long-term plans for vertical nuclear weapons proliferation.² The document's conclusion was that in "The Worst Case Scenario" China could develop between 50 to 70 ICBMs by 2010—many of which could be protected by hardened silos. A couple of notable conclusions can be drawn from this paper. First, nine years after the Carnegie Endowment released this policy briefing, China

has deployed only six additional ICBMs. This number is far lower than the worst case scenario enumerated in the report and shows that a fair amount of restraint exists in Chinese nuclear weapons production. In 1999, the PRC maintained 20 Dongfeng-5 (DF-5) ICBMs with an approximate range of 13,000 kilometers (approximately 8,000 miles).³ Today, the country still has its DF-5s deployed, but has also increased the range of its DF-31 ICBM, resulting in the deployment of six of the new DF-31A—which can purportedly hit targets at distances of up to 12,000 kilometers (approximately 7,500 miles). Second, the PRC's plans for protective silos imply that the Chinese leadership views ICBMs as tools of deterrence and retaliatory second-strikes, rather than as offensive weapons.

In recent years, the PRC has preferred to invest its money in enhancing Chinese economic competitiveness. However, a national nuclear strategy based around deterrence and an assured second-strike is prone to shifts in technological development and warhead deployment that correspond with the level of threat perceived by the country's leadership.

A defensive strategic doctrine?

Two important policies compose Beijing's nuclear weapons doctrine: no-first-use (NFU) and strategic sufficiency. After the PRC's first successful nuclear test in 1964, the Chinese government declared a policy of NFU that has remained in place for the last four decades. NFU implies that Sino nuclear weapons exist for defensive functions such as second-strikes and deterrence, rather than for offensive strikes and counterforce targeting—aiming missiles at an adversary's means of retaliation, which implies a first-strike strategy.

Since the policy's inception, there has been much skepticism among Western military writers and intelligence analysts regarding the legitimacy of China's commitment to NFU. These critics usually argue that NFU is the product of the PRC's economic and technological inability to produce first-strike capable nuclear missiles. At first glance, this claim seems fairly plausible; after all, few would doubt the expense involved in nuclear weapons development projects, particularly those aimed at designing missiles able to penetrate hardened underground silos. Economic arguments such as these make sense in the context of China's 1964 economic status, but much has changed since then. Today, the PRC is a burgeoning economic power with the world's second-highest gross domestic product (PPP), military expenditures, and R&D budget.⁴

Based on these statistics, the Chinese would seem to have the capital and technological know-how to make a serious attempt at developing the capacity to support an offensive nuclear weapons strategy. However, the PRC's nuclear arsenal is insufficiently equipped for this task—both quantitatively and qualitatively. With its deployed ICBMs numbering in the twenties, China is hardly capable of executing a first-strike. Additionally, the DF-5, the backbone of China's strategic nuclear forces, has an estimated circular error probability (CEP) of between 500-3,500 meters.⁵ A missile with a 50-percent chance of landing within a 500-3,500 meter radius of its

intended target is unlikely to be effective in a counterforce strike, particularly against a well-armored silo. Examples of ballistic missiles considered to be ideal counterforce weapons include the decommissioned US Pershing-II medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) and Russia's actively-deployed Iskander-E (NATO designation: SS-26, Stone) short-range ballistic missile (SRBM). The Pershing-II had a CEP of approximately 50 meters, while some reports claim that the Iskander-E may be accurate to within three meters.⁶

Though the PRC's leadership has taken steps to modernize the country's nuclear arsenal, the pace of these improvements is not of the rapid speed that would be necessary for China to present an offensive nuclear threat to the West. Nor is it commensurate with the PRC's growing economic status, thus indicating that the Chinese are more focused on industrial, rather than military development.

In a 2006 *Arms Control Wonk* blog entry entitled "China and No First Use," Dr. Jeffrey Lewis of the New America Foundation looks at the possibility of the PRC abandoning its NFU doctrine.⁷ He notes that for over 20 years some analysts at the US DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) have predicted that China would renounce NFU. Lewis provides a link to a now-declassified DIA Special Defense Intelligence Estimate called "China's Evolving Nuclear Strategies."⁸ The document, which is dated May 1985, predicts a shift away from NFU to a more aggressive and flexible nuclear weapons policy. Over 23 years later, NFU is still the centerpiece of Chinese nuclear weapons strategy.

PRC documents and statements by high-ranking Chinese government officials reaffirm the country's commitment to NFU. The government white paper "China's National Defense in 2006" states that the PRC's "fundamental goal is to deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China. China remains firmly committed to the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances."⁹ In 2002, then-Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said that "[c]ountries with nuclear weapons should undertake unconditionally not to be the first to use them, and not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states or nuclear-weapon-free regions."¹⁰

Even with guarantees such as these, it seems improbable that the Chinese government would abide by its expressed NFU policy in the event of an invasion threatening its population and/or sovereignty. In 2005, People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Zhu Chenghu warned that the PRC might use nuclear weapons against the United States in the event of a military clash over Taiwan.¹¹ Officials in Beijing were quick to distance themselves from Chenghu's remarks and to reiterate their NFU pledge.¹² China's official stance on Taiwan is that it is a renegade province, which is still part of the PRC's national territory. It seems as if Beijing is committed to its NFU doctrine, but might make exceptions in the event of an attack on what it considers to be the

Chinese homeland. Despite arguments to the contrary from critics, it would appear that NFU is here to stay—technologically, strategically, and rhetorically.

China's other key nuclear weapons policy, strategic sufficiency, revolves around the notion of maintaining a credible minimum deterrent.¹³ In a 2002 *Strategic Insights* essay, Dr. Yao Yunzhu, a senior colonel in the PLA, discusses Sino nuclear strategy. Yunzhu contends that—in the eyes of Chinese military strategists—the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to serve as a means of self-defense. To assure protection of the country, Yunzhu says that “China has to make [its strategic nuclear forces] survivable to a first nuclear strike, even [if] that strike is overwhelming and devastating.”¹⁴ Yunzhu is talking about Beijing's ability to deliver a retaliatory second-strike, of course.

The dynamics of the Chinese nuclear forces seem to support this contention, as the PRC does not have the capacity to carry out a first-strike. Analysis of the technical specifications of China's ICBMs indicates that they lack silo-busting capabilities and precision CEP ratings, thus suggesting that they would be inadequate counterforce weapons. China maintains some of its arsenal in the form of SLBMs and has begun to harden the silos of an unknown number of its ICBMs.¹⁵ Silo-hardening and the placement of ballistic missiles on submarines are techniques intended to protect nuclear weapons from the impacts of an attempted first-strike by an adversary.

Perception is an integral component of strategic sufficiency and is two-fold, encompassing both the intended deteree's perception of the deterrer's capabilities and the deterrer's own perception of their arsenal. The deteree must be convinced that if they attack first, they will risk punitive retaliation—unacceptable levels of collateral and infrastructural damage. Chinese nuclear weapons seem best equipped for countervalue targeting—aiming missiles at an adversary's population centers—and the PRC has taken efforts to protect segments of its strategic nuclear forces from a potential first-strike. These points should contribute to the credibility of China's strategic deterrent, as a hypothetical aggressor would risk the destruction of one of its major cities if it launched a nuclear attack against the PRC.

Beijing relies on the principle of “quantitative ambiguity” to buttress the credibility of its deterrent. Though foreign intelligence agencies and organizations like FAS track China's arsenal via satellite imagery and other mediums, few outside of the upper echelons of the PRC's government and military are aware of the precise numbers and locations of China's ICBMs. “Quantitative ambiguity” could raise doubts about the viability of executing a successful first-strike against China.

The other side of the coin is the deterrer's perception of their own arsenal, which is of the utmost importance when pursuing a strategy of minimum deterrence. In the foreign policy realm, President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, and their chief advisors are part of a long line

of Chinese practitioners of *Realpolitik*. These leaders understand that the PRC would face certain punitive retaliation if Beijing used nuclear weapons first against an adversary. What is critical is that they believe that China has the capability to deliver that same devastating response if it is the target of a nuclear attack. This is the bedrock of deterrence theory.

When other nuclear weapons states (NWS) increase and/or modernize their strategic nuclear forces, this may trigger feelings of insecurity among China's leaders about the credibility and effectiveness of their deterrent. This could prompt them to take actions designed to preserve the credibility of the PRC's minimum deterrent. Countermeasures against ballistic missiles, namely the various types of ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems, could generate reactions of a similar character.

Chinese strategic doctrine appears defensive in nature and the PRC's government continues to abide by the substance of this doctrine. However, the unknown variable is how Beijing might react if the country were under the serious threat of invasion.

Looking at Beijing's strategic perceptions

In his remarks at the 2005 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, then-US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld posed some questions about Chinese military spending. Rumsfeld asked, "Since no nation threatens China, one wonders: Why this growing investment? Why these continuing large arms purchases?" After the speech, Cui Tiankai, the head of the PRC's delegation and director of Asian affairs for China's Foreign Ministry, rebutted that "[s]ince the U.S. is spending a lot more money than China is doing on defense, the U.S. should understand that every country has its own security concerns and every country is entitled to spend money necessary for its own defense."¹⁶ The Rumsfeld-Tiankai exchange exemplifies the disagreement between the West and Beijing over nuclear weapons issues. Commentators in the West frequently speak of the threat that China presents without attempting to discern the underlying motivations behind the PRC's conduct.

A look back at China's first nuclear weapon test in 1964 provides some insight into Chinese strategic posturing. The country's relations with the United States and the Soviet Union were tenuous at best, causing the government of Mao Zedong to fear blackmail or coercion by the two superpowers—as had happened in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1955.¹⁷ By detonating its first atomic bomb, the PRC provided itself with a means of deterrence, which also assures protection against blackmail and coercion.

In contemporary times, China has the world's largest population and a rapidly growing economy. Consequently, its leaders believe that the PRC should play a greater role in global affairs. The PRC's nuclear deterrent allows China to pursue its interests without intimidation. Action-reaction thinking has become embedded in Chinese strategic culture, oftentimes causing

the PRC to undertake military modernization projects as a response to perceived threats to the credibility of its deterrent.

Beijing's January 2007 anti-satellite (ASAT) missile test received criticism from around the world and is often used as an example of China's hostile military intentions.¹⁸ In 2005, Dr. Hui Zhang, a former Chinese nuclear physicist and current researcher at Harvard, published an article in *Arms Control Today* that discussed the PRC's concern that the United States might begin to weaponize space. Zhang says that "[i]n particular, China is concerned about interceptors and other defenses that the United States would like to position in space."¹⁹ He goes on to clarify that US talk of placing kinetic energy interceptors (KEIs) and space-based lasers (SBLs) in outer space triggers fear among Sino leaders because they believe that the United States is attempting to mitigate the PRC's strategic nuclear deterrent. In fact, the US Air Force has an entire doctrine on "Counterspace Operations" (AFDD 2-2.1), which was published in August 2004. This document advocates "the development of offensive counterspace capabilities" leading to "space superiority."²⁰

The PRC has always supported a treaty banning the weaponization of outer space and jointly proposed one with Russia in 2002. The impetus behind this proposal was China's fear of both the loss of its deterrent and the onset of an arms race in space.²¹ The United States rejected the notion of such a treaty. China's ASAT test was probably an attempt to demonstrate the dangers of space weaponization to the United States. After all, ASAT weapons present states with a means of asymmetrical warfare against a more powerful adversary. Beijing perceives the US drive towards "space superiority" as a threat to its deterrent and the ASAT test was likely a countermeasure against the deployment of future American space-based military assets.

The US reaction to the test was not to come to the bargaining table, but rather, to carry out a successful test of its Aegis missile system in February 2008. Bruce MacDonald, a former White House national security official, and Charles Ferguson of the Council on Foreign Relations, provide some analysis on this Aegis test in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed piece:

The administration has insisted that it was not trying to test the anti-satellite capabilities of the Navy's Aegis missile defense system, but that was exactly the result. The action was similar to China's unwise anti-satellite test in January 2007: An interceptor missile was launched, releasing a warhead meant to destroy the target satellite.²²

Along with a display of its own ASAT capabilities, the Department of Defense (DOD) has surely accelerated its drive for offensive space weapons. Zhang's article is appropriately called "Action/Reaction: U.S. Space Weaponization and China," a title which points to the crux of the disagreement between the PRC and the United States over the military use of outer space.

Another issue labeled as a demonstration of “the China threat” is the Chinese interest in attaching multiple reentry vehicles (MRVs) and multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) to its ICBMs. In a 2007 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, American political commentator Mark Helprin warns of the future danger presented by “China’s MIRV’d silo-based missiles and imminent generations of MIRV’d mobile and sea-based ICBMs.”²³ Though the PRC has active programs to develop MRV and MIRV technology and many of China’s ballistic missiles are MRV or MIRV-capable, China has yet to deploy multiple warheads on any of its ICBMs. There is a difference between having the capability to deploy a weapons system and physically deploying it.

However, the deployment of missiles armed with multiple warheads would make strategic sense when considered in light of the PRC’s nuclear doctrine. MRVs could allow China to minimize the threat to its deterrent that its leadership sees in US plans for National Missile Defense (NMD), the deployment of theater missile defenses (TMD) in Japan, and talk of placing TMD installations in Taiwan. Because MRVs heavily complicate the missile interception process, their use could preserve Beijing’s second-strike capability—even in the face of US NMD deployment.

Some would argue that the PRC’s MRV and MIRV development programs provide evidence of China’s pursuit of offensive nuclear capabilities. Contrary to this assertion, a September 1999 US National Intelligence Estimate concluded that “China has had the technical capability to develop multiple RV payloads for 20 years.”²⁴ In spite of this capability, the PRC’s MRV development programs have been lacking in initiative up until the last few years. Their recent productivity corresponds with the claim that Beijing seeks MRVs and MIRVs to preserve its strategic deterrent, as the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and drive to deploy various types of BMD are both recent developments.

A third example that commentators use to point to aggressive Chinese military posturing is the development of the *Type 094-class* (NATO designation: *Jin-class*) ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). At first glance, this concern seems understandable, as the *Jin-class* SSBN is supposedly equipped with the JL-2 (NATO designation: CSS-NX-4) SLBM, which is MIRV-capable and has a range of up to 8,000 kilometers (approximately 5,000 miles).²⁵ In October 2007, Hans Kristensen from FAS noted that the PRC had deployed at least three *Jin-class* submarines “in the past three to four years.” Kristensen also reported that the US Office of Naval Intelligence estimates that the *Jin-class* could be equipped with up to 12 missiles.²⁶

The *Jin-class* is Beijing’s replacement for the defunct *Type 092-class* (NATO designation: *Xia-class*) SSBN. The *Xia-class* was China’s first nuclear-powered ballistic missile-capable submarine and was a resounding failure. The PRC only produced two of these SSBNs and they did not conduct patrols outside of Chinese territorial waters.²⁷ The *Jin-class* is silent—due to its nuclear

power source—and is virtually invulnerable to a potential first-strike; it ensures that the PRC has a sea-based deterrent to complement its land-based strategic nuclear forces. Since China finds itself in a position of significant numerical warhead inferiority to the United States—possibly facing a first-strike in the event of a confrontation—the *Jin-class* SSBN could give the Sino leadership confidence in their second-strike capability. If this is the case, rather than being viewed as a threat, Chinese deployment of SSBNs could be seen as a confidence-building, stabilizing factor in China’s relationship with the West. While the PRC is known to have three commissioned *Jin-class* SSBNs, the United States, United Kingdom, and France have a total of 22 SSBNs, many of which are armed with MIRV-equipped SLBMs.²⁸

When pointing to China as a hostile military power and nuclear threat to the West, it is common for politicians, commentators, and analysts to utilize the Rumsfeld line of reasoning—that the PRC faces no military threats, thus rendering its weapons modernization projects suspect. Such an argument fails to ask one fundamental question: How would we feel if we were in China’s shoes? Undoubtedly, the West has the most advanced military technology in the world. Developments like KEIs—potentially armed with multiple kill vehicles (MKVs)—and ballistic missiles with precision CEPs can cause great concern in China, which has a large population, growing economy, minimal deterrent, and history of tense relations with the West.

One section of the PRC’s 1995 white paper called “China: Arms Control and Disarmament” points to Sino motivations for possessing nuclear weapons. The document reads as follows:

China has persistently exercised great restraint in the development of nuclear weapons and its nuclear arsenal has been very limited. It has developed nuclear weapons for self-defence, not as a threat to other countries. It has not joined and will not join in the nuclear arms race and has consistently maintained restraint over nuclear testing.²⁹

While Beijing’s nuclear weapons development programs appear to correspond with the first two sentences of this section, the veracity of the final sentence is dubious. Chinese leaders express concerns over future arms races and continuously criticized the US-USSR nuclear rivalry during the Cold War. However, the action-reaction mentality that motivates today’s nuclear weapons projects in the PRC is reminiscent of the strategic logic of arms racing. Even if Western leaders truly believe that their new weapons programs are instruments to preserve world peace, this is not how these programs are perceived in Beijing. China’s leaders appear to believe that the PRC is currently involved in an arms race with the West—especially the United States—to preserve the effectiveness of its strategic nuclear deterrent.

Sino positions on arms control and nonproliferation

If the PRC’s nuclear weapons strategy is truly defensive, focusing on the ability to retaliate rather than the quest for strategic superiority, then China should be a friend of the global

nonproliferation regime. A glance at Chinese statements related to arms control and nonproliferation seems to indicate that China supports nuclear disarmament, but the PRC's actions reveal that its stance on these issues is relatively complex.

The conditions surrounding China's first nuclear test illustrate the Sino position that nuclear weapons are tools of coercion. Further, the Communist Party of China's (CPC) leadership has chosen not to develop formidable offensive nuclear capabilities. In a speech at the 1999 Wilton Park Conference, Ambassador Sha Zukang, then-Director General of Arms Control in the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that "[t]he fundamental way to prevent the proliferation of WMDs lies in the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of such weapons."³⁰ Zukang's rhetoric matches statements made in "China: Arms Control and Disarmament."³¹

Another example of the Chinese position on nonproliferation can be found in Section VI of the aforementioned white paper, which states that "in 1994 China put forward a complete, interrelated proposal for the nuclear disarmament process at the 49th Session of the UN General Assembly."³² Included in this proposal was a call for a convention banning nuclear weapons, which would be similar to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).³³ This proposal was generally ignored by the other NWS.

The PRC is a rhetorical supporter of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime, but actions speak louder than words. Although Beijing has signed several important arms control and nonproliferation treaties and agreements, it has yet to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and has stonewalled international efforts to negotiate a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). China has also consistently demonstrated opposition to proposals calling for greater transparency and confidence-building measures among the NWS. Since China claims to be an ardent supporter of the movement for a nuclear weapons-free world, this seemingly contradictory behavior warrants investigation.

One common argument is that China's ASAT test proves that the country's leadership is not dedicated to arms control. The PRC believes that there are serious problems with the current text of the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, more simply known as the Outer Space Treaty.³⁴ As it stands now, the Outer Space Treaty prohibits the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in outer space. The treaty does not ban the deployment of conventional weapons in space, nor does it bar space-based BMD installations (nuclear-tipped interceptors excepted).

Fearing a new arms race, China has always stood against the weaponization of space and—as previously noted—stood with the Russians in seeking the complete prohibition of space weapons in 2002, via a new international agreement or an amendment to the Outer Space

Treaty. This paper's analysis of PRC perspectives on the ASAT test might provide some insight into why Beijing acted as it did in January 2007.

The PRC ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1992, but many in the West believe that China has acted in manners inconsistent with its treaty obligations. The 1997 annual report of the now-disbanded US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) indicates that “[p]rior to China’s NPT accession, the United States concluded that China had assisted Pakistan in developing nuclear explosives.” The ACDA report also alleges that Beijing “may have continued” this assistance after its NPT accession, which would be a violation of Article I of the treaty.³⁵ This accusation could be accurate, as the CPC leadership would have a definite interest in propping up Pakistan vis-à-vis India, a neighboring country whose relationship with China has been rocky in the past. The PRC has also been more transparently involved in the sale of missile components and conventional weaponry to Pakistan.³⁶ In 1996, China pledged not to provide assistance to the Pakistani nuclear program; the PRC made a similar pledge regarding the Iranian nuclear program in 1997.³⁷ Even with these promises, some Western officials still have lingering concerns that Beijing may be continuing illicit and/or “grey area” nuclear and missile technology transfers.

Aside from these concerns, China appears to be an outspoken advocate of the NPT, a position that matches its governmental rhetoric. At the 2000 NPT Review Conference in New York, the PRC supported calls for global accession to the treaty, but expressed dismay at the lack of progress made toward pursuing nuclear disarmament.³⁸ Chinese leaders have criticized India and Pakistan’s *de facto* status as NWS and their lack of safeguarded facilities. The PRC is an active participant in the Six-Party Talks on North Korea’s Nuclear Program (also involving the United States, Russia, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea) and the P5+1 (five permanent members of the UN Security Council, with the addition of Germany) talks with Iran. In addition, in April 2008 the Associated Press reported that China had provided the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with intelligence on the Iranian nuclear program.³⁹

Yet China’s refusal to ratify the CTBT is another reason why some commentators doubt the sincerity of Beijing’s commitment to nuclear disarmament. China initially linked its participation in the treaty to NFU pledges from the other NWS, as well as commitments to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons—per Article VI of the NPT.⁴⁰ Despite the PRC’s initial reluctance, on September 24, 1996 it became the second state to sign the CTBT—after the United States. To date, neither country has ratified the treaty.⁴¹

The PRC complies with the stipulations of the CTBT, as it conducted its last nuclear test on July 29, 1996, two months before it signed the treaty.⁴² Even with China’s observance of the treaty, the National People’s Congress (China’s parliament) refuses to ratify the CTBT until the US Senate does so. Western analysts would do well to recognize that with inferior weapons

technology, China would have more to lose from CTBT ratification than the United States, in terms of confidence in the reliability and safety of its nuclear arsenal.

Western nuclear negotiators are often frustrated by the PRC's lack of willingness to engage in transparency and confidence-building measures (TCBMs) among the NWS. Chinese physicist Li Bin notes that while "China has declared almost all of its major progress in qualitative nuclear development," the CPC leadership views TCBMs of a quantitative nature with great skepticism.⁴³ These TCBMs could involve mutual disclosure of the number and locations of nuclear weapons, details about fissile material stockpiles, as well as information regarding sites integral to nuclear weapons production. The Chinese rejection of quantitative TCBMs is critical to the maintenance of the Sino strategy of "quantitative ambiguity."⁴⁴ The PRC's arsenal is only a fraction of the size of the US arsenal and China is unable to execute a first-strike, while the West—whose strategic nuclear forces are not threatened by Chinese missiles—would have little to lose from such measures.

The PRC has been unwilling to participate in international negotiations aimed at creating an FMCT, which would be a significant step toward securing fissile materials and preventing their production for use in nuclear weapons. While the current impasse is blamed on Pakistan, the lack of Chinese support for an FMCT has severely hampered progress toward this goal. This has not always been the case, however. China was initially in opposition to a 1993 UN General Assembly Resolution calling for the opening of negotiations on an FMCT, but it reversed its position in 1994, referring to the treaty as "an important step toward nuclear disarmament."⁴⁵

Chinese officials currently link negotiation of an FMCT to US plans to deploy TMD in Asia (Japan and potentially Taiwan), pledges by the other NWS to move towards global disarmament, and a treaty on the Prevention of Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS).⁴⁶ Since other states are not willing to address China's preconditions, Beijing will not come to the bargaining table.

The Sino stance on arms control and nonproliferation is probably best expressed in Ambassador Zukang's speech at the 2002 Wilton Park Conference:

In a nutshell, nonproliferation of nuclear weapons lies in the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. Prior to this end, all countries should strictly comply with existing nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation treaty obligations, and negotiate and conclude new treaties, including a fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT). Since nuclear nonproliferation does not exist alone, we should try to improve [the] international and regional security environment [and] abrogate the practice of double standard[s] so as to create necessary conditions for achieving this objective.⁴⁷

In other words, China sees a potential FMCT as an attempt by its fellow NWS to prevent additional entrants from joining the nuclear club, without engaging in serious disarmament efforts themselves.

The Chinese claim to seek a world free of nuclear weapons, and their major foreign policy documents and statements support this agenda. Nevertheless, PRC officials have shown themselves to be staunch realists; they are unwilling to support arms control and nonproliferation agreements that they believe would weaken their deterrent, without gaining some level of reciprocal concessions from the other NWS. While Beijing believes that the United States presents the most significant threat to its security, China perceives the arsenals of other NWS as risks as well. The PRC's commitment to nonproliferation will only be put to the test if NWS—particularly Russia and the United States—abandon their reluctance to pursue the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. If the two countries with the largest arsenals continue to modernize their strategic nuclear forces and eschew substantial warhead reductions, China will display a similarly recalcitrant attitude towards arms control, let alone nuclear disarmament.

The necessity of Chinese participation in the nonproliferation regime

There are still some ambiguities and unanswered questions regarding the PRC's actions and nuclear program. Despite these uncertainties, China has presented itself as a strong proponent of arms control and nonproliferation—technologically, rhetorically, and diplomatically. This is promising news since Beijing's participation in the nonproliferation regime is essential to any move towards global nuclear disarmament.

China is a key player in the nonproliferation arena not only because of its economic status and population, but also in part due to its status as the major military power in Asia and permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In addition, the PRC has important geopolitical ties that could be instrumental in engaging India and Pakistan—two states which have not signed the NPT—on nuclear weapons issues.

Historically, Sino-Pakistani relations have been strong, as China is one of Pakistan's major arms suppliers and both countries have had strains in their relations with India. The PRC and India fought a war in the 1960s and tension remains in their relationship, despite attempts at economic and diplomatic rapprochement. India's nuclear weapons program began in 1967, just months after China's first hydrogen bomb detonation.⁴⁸ It follows that a major motivation for India's possession of nuclear weapons is China's status as a NWS. With its strategic partnership with Pakistan and connection to the Indian nuclear weapons program, the PRC might be able to play a leading role in nuclear weapons talks involving the Indian subcontinent.

A certain level of international clout comes with China's permanent membership on the UN Security Council and position in Asia. The PRC has been an essential presence at the bargaining table in the P5+1-Iran negotiations. Moreover, in his recent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Christopher Hill, the US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, praised China for its "key role" in the Six-Party Talks.⁴⁹

China's NWS status, population, economy, and role in Asian affairs make its involvement indispensable to the success of all global nuclear disarmament efforts. Fortunately, there are both short and long-term efforts that NWS—particularly the United States—can pursue to gain Beijing's participation in minimizing, and eventually eliminating, the dangers presented by nuclear weapons.

The American presidential election: a historic opportunity

The US presidential election offers both John McCain and Barack Obama—whoever is elected—a historic opportunity to move beyond the perception of China as a nuclear threat and to begin a new phase of action-reaction: confidence-building for nuclear disarmament.

Statements by Chinese leaders attest to the PRC's fear of US nuclear weapons development as the most significant threat to the credibility of its deterrent. This provides a certain amount of leverage to US politicians seeking to tempt Chinese decision-makers into arms control and disarmament negotiations, since China has a lot to gain from these discussions. On the other hand, unrestrained development of US capabilities that could undermine Chinese deterrence will lead to considerable expansion in the Sino arsenal, as CPC leaders attempt to regain confidence in their strategic posture. This cycle is particularly applicable to BMD, or to the robust nuclear earth penetrator (RNEP). Bush administration officials pushed for the funding of the RNEP because they believed that this type of bomb would provide the United States with an unprecedented ability to destroy hardened targets buried deep under the ground. ICBM missile silos would be one of the potential targets of the RNEP, most likely leading China to view the RNEP as a counterforce weapon, requiring significant countermeasures to preserve the credibility of China's strategic nuclear deterrent.

In 2005, Congress cancelled the RNEP project, but the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) received funding to develop enhanced conventional weapon earth-penetrating capabilities.⁵⁰ Supporters of the RNEP have called for the next US president to revive the original project. By refusing to support the development of counterforce technology, a President McCain or Obama could send a strong signal of American intentions to the Chinese.

Another step toward improving Sino-American relations would be to reevaluate the Air Force's "Counterspace Operations" doctrine. Both McCain and Obama have expressed concern with

the notion of space-based weapons. The weaponization of and deployment of BMD in outer space could spark an arms race that endangers US assets located there. America's space-based assets play important roles in the US economy and are the key to US conventional warfighting and geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) capabilities.

The PRC's ASAT test was probably intended as a warning to the United States, which depends upon space-based assets more than any other country. It showed that US plans to weaponize space will provoke reactions that could threaten American satellites. To that end, the next US president should abjure the weaponization of outer space and should seek to engage the world's other space powers in negotiations on a treaty that is stronger and more comprehensive than the Outer Space Treaty. Since the Chinese have linked their participation in FMCT discussions to a ban on space weaponization, this move by the United States would likely have additional benefits for the nonproliferation regime.

In the past, Chinese leaders have sought NFU pledges from the other NWS as conditions to nuclear negotiations and signs of peaceable intentions. US leaders have been resistant to making such a commitment, fearing that it would constrain the nation in wartime, or would merely be an ineffectual promise that could be discarded at the first sign of conflict. However, a shift in this position by a McCain or Obama presidency would send a powerful signal to China, indicating that the United States seeks peace, prosperity, and friendship in Sino-American relations, not conflict and coercion. The next president could even attach a caveat to a US NFU pledge, which might allow the United States to deviate from its expressed policy in the event of an invasion of its national territory. This would mirror the stance that China appears to take in regards to Taiwan, but could still draw the PRC to the nuclear weapons bargaining table.

American ratification of the CTBT could prompt a new initiative for the treaty's ratification in the National People's Congress. The United States and China were the first two countries to sign the CTBT in 1996, but both have yet to ratify it. Barack Obama has announced his intention to seek the CTBT's ratification in the US Senate, while John McCain says that he will revisit the treaty, which he voted against in 1999.

The next US president should seek renewal of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) which expires in December 2009, or the creation of a similarly effective arms control treaty with Russia. Chinese leaders have praised START for its progress in moving toward nuclear disarmament. According to the Arms Control Association, under START "the two countries have reduced their strategic nuclear arsenals by more than 40 percent... decommissioning more than 4,000 strategic warheads since exchanging baseline stockpile information in September 1990."⁵¹ The Chinese are unlikely to begin the discussions necessary to eliminate nuclear weapons until there is some semblance of parity between themselves and the two Cold War superpowers, who maintain over 90-percent of the world's nuclear weapons. START, or its

comprehensive successor, could prove to be the gateway to future bilateral arms control agreements between the United States and Russia that bring about a greater degree of nuclear parity, thereby encouraging Sino participation in the nonproliferation regime.

These are just a few of the important pieces of legislation and diplomacy that could revitalize America's commitment to nonproliferation, while also putting China's commitment to nuclear disarmament to the test. A perceptive understanding of Sino nuclear weapons doctrine and diplomatic linkage could assist the next US administration in making intelligent foreign policy decisions that lead to cooperation between the two nations. If McCain and Obama are serious about reducing, and eventually eliminating, the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, they must begin to consider ways to further involve China in the nonproliferation regime.

Conclusion

It is very easy for politicians, analysts, and commentators in the West to view China as a nuclear threat. After all, the PRC has ballistic missiles capable of reaching targets in Europe and the continental United States, has tested an ASAT weapon that has the potential to harm Western space-based assets, and continues to modernize its strategic nuclear forces. Even with this as the case, explanations of Chinese behavior that label the PRC as a nuclear threat merely scratch at the surface of the problem, but ignore Sino military capabilities and doctrine. China lacks the ICBM numbers and technology to launch a first-strike against any Western NWS without facing retaliation leading to millions of Chinese casualties and tremendous damage to its economic infrastructure. With this in mind, the PRC's policies of minimum deterrence and NFU support the contention that the purpose of the Chinese arsenal is to provide a credible deterrent and assured second-strike capability, not to launch strikes against the West.

The securitization of US relations with China is one of the great paradoxes of our time. American nuclear weapons modernization triggers reactions from the Chinese; these reactions cause many in the West to perceive the PRC as a threat to global peace. This becomes a seemingly endless cycle of action-reaction, with the PRC trying to preserve its second-strike capability and the United States developing countermeasures to what it views as aggressive Chinese strategic posturing. This dynamic is the forgotten arms race of our time.

Minimizing the action-reaction cycle between the United States and China would be conducive to the US fulfillment of its commitment to global nuclear disarmament—as established by Article VI of the NPT. In the short-term, American strategists and politicians need to gain a better understanding of the way the Chinese link security issues together. This would allow the next American president to make serious progress on several international arms control and nonproliferation agreements.

In the long-term, the United States and Russia need to work bilaterally to reduce their Cold War-era stockpiles. This would help these countries to gain the confidence of China, eventually allowing them to test the PRC's expressed commitment to "the complete prohibition and thorough destruction" of nuclear weapons. Since China's conventional weapons capabilities will be inferior to America's for decades, if not the indefinite future, there will undoubtedly be critics in the PRC arguing that global nuclear disarmament would leave the country vulnerable to an attack. As a result, it will be imperative for Western leaders to assure their Sino counterparts that once the vision of a nuclear weapons-free world is realized, that they will not take advantage of the situation by carrying out conventional strikes on China.

If the world is ever to be free of nuclear weapons, then the West must move beyond the perception of China as a nuclear threat, as Chinese support will be an integral component of the international movement to eliminate the dangers posed by these weapons. What is clear is that the Western world needs to make China feel like a partner for global disarmament, rather than a target for coercion.

**-The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of BASIC.*

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