

Will China abandon its 'no first use' nuclear policy?

Recent debate suggests China's nuclear strategists have begun to explore the possibility of a limited nuclear war.

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China's strategic missile force was recently renamed the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), implying an expansion. Last month, China joined the other four nuclear powers in affirming that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Examining the evolution of China's nuclear strategy may help explain the seeming contradiction between China expanding its nuclear force and vowing not to fight a nuclear war.

A critical driver behind China's development of nuclear weapons was the idea that a country must possess nuclear weapons to prevent countries with nuclear weapons from blackmailing it. The concept defined China's nuclear strategy during the 1960s and 70s following its successful nuclear test in 1964. But technological and financial constraints meant that this strategy met only the minimal goal of symbolic deterrence; it did not set out clear requirements for the quantity and quality of nuclear weapons China needed to possess.

But since the 1980s, there has been a shift in China's nuclear strategy to one that allows it to survive a first nuclear strike and to launch retaliatory attacks. Its

nuclear counter-attack capabilities can be limited but must be effective, and should be capable of being launched on command if an enemy attack is detected, a condition similar to the Western notion of launch-on-warning. Such a requirement implies that space surveillance capabilities need to be enhanced to provide sufficient early warning.

This strategy also requires China's nuclear force to acquire survival and protection capabilities so that it can survive a first strike and be able to penetrate the rival's missile defence systems.

This strategy's requirements may account for China's recent efforts to acquire missile early-warning technologies; develop its own strategic missile defence systems; deploy solid-fuel, road and rail-mobile strategic nuclear missiles and quieter strategic nuclear submarines; build nearly 300 strategic missile silos in western China; and test nuclear-capable hypersonic missiles.

A Pentagon report predicts that China may have up to 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027. It says: "The PRC likely intends to have at least 1,000 warheads by 2030, exceeding the pace and size the Department of Defence projected in 2020."

DEBATING 'NO FIRST USE' POLICY

As China modernises its nuclear force, a debate has emerged among military planners on whether to change its nuclear strategy, including abandoning its "no first use (NFU)" policy. Critical views have emerged about NFU remaining the cornerstone of China's nuclear policy.

One such view is that NFU imposes limits on employing PLARF in a crisis. The highly centralised decision-making due to NFU may reduce China's response flexibility.

Some believe NFU lowers the credibility of China's small nuclear force. They are impressed by Russia's abandonment of NFU policy to compensate for its inferiority in conventional military capabilities. Abandoning NFU, they argue, is the most cost-effective way of shifting scarce resources from defending China's strategic targets to developing offensive capabilities to realise China's primary strategic objectives.

Some advocate launching a first nuclear strike under certain scenarios. One such scenario is the inability of the PLA conventional force to defend China against a large-scale foreign invasion. Another refers to situations where the PLA fighting to safeguard national unity faces an "enormous threat" of large-scale foreign military intervention, implying a Taiwan conflict scenario.

It has also been argued that a conventional attack on significant

targets such as the Three Gorges Dam also warrants China's first use of nuclear weapons as such an attack may cause destruction comparable to or larger than that of a nuclear attack.

Supporters of NFU policy offer several rebuttals. They point out that the decision to employ nuclear weapons has always been highly centralised regardless of whether China adheres to NFU. They also note that Russia's abandonment of NFU in 1993 did not deter the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation from its eastward expansion. An additional concern is that if the weaker side abandons NFU when the gap in nuclear capabilities is too large, it may trigger a pre-emptive nuclear strike against it by a superior rival.

They further argue that a large-scale foreign invasion of China is unlikely. Given the destructiveness of modern warfare, major powers now prefer to pursue limited objectives with limited wars. The extraordinary difficulties that superpowers encountered in Vietnam and Afghanistan also demonstrate the futility of such invasions.

Furthermore, as China regards Taiwan as its core interest, its resolve for reunification should dwarf American incentives to intervene. China's build-up of its conventional military capabilities is another deterrent against Taiwan's independence and US intervention. On the other hand, abandoning NFU may have little impact should the United States decide to intervene as it has

"absolute nuclear superiority" over China. Some also point out that it is immensely difficult to determine whether a rival has crossed the nuclear threshold that may justify a pre-emptive nuclear strike.

As for conventional attacks on "life-and-death" high-value targets, NFU supporters argue that recent local wars demonstrate that military attacks meant to cause civilian casualties and economic losses are rare; attacks are mainly aimed at military targets to realise military objectives. And China can deter these attacks as it has long-range, conventional precision-guided strike capabilities.

THE PROSPECT OF LIMITED NUCLEAR WAR

NFU remains, for now, China's nuclear policy despite its recent more assertive nuclear force posture, including increasing its strategic nuclear missiles and adopting a launch-on-warning stance. These changes are still confined to developing second-strike nuclear capabilities for deterrence, which is based on the premise that a nuclear war causes mutually assured destruction and thus is unwinnable.

But the NFU debate suggests that China's nuclear strategists have begun to explore the possibility of a limited nuclear war and developing tactical nuclear weapons, the premise being that such a war can accomplish political objectives and is winnable.

In their internal discussions, these strategists explicitly state that "to effectively deter conventional invasion or armed intervention by a nuclear rival, it is necessary to possess both precision-based tactical nuclear strike and destruction-based strategic nuclear strike capabilities... The former are used to target the rival's forward deployed operational forces, and the latter serve to destroy its military capabilities deployed in-depth".

The statement suggests that enemy military forces should be targeted in a nuclear war. This implies that such a war can be controlled and limited, and thus can be fought and won. It also implies that more sophisticated tactical nuclear weapons and highly coordinated command and control can be deployed to compete for dominance at different levels of escalation in times of crisis and war.

While it is reassuring that NFU supporters have won the debate and there is little evidence that China has deployed tactical nuclear weapons, any change regarding China's nuclear force posture may need to be carefully identified and analysed.

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