

The Future of Chinese Deterrence Strategy

By Michael S. Chase, Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher Yeaw

The development of China's nuclear and conventional missile power has been among the most impressive and most closely watched aspects of Chinese military modernization over the past two decades. During the past 20 years, the Second Artillery Corps (SAC) has been transformed from a small and exclusively nuclear force to a much larger and more powerful force with a variety of roles for a growing and increasingly sophisticated arsenal of nuclear and conventional missiles. The deployment of the road-mobile DF-31 and DF-31A intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) is enhancing the striking power and survivability of China's nuclear forces [1]. Moreover, the deployment of more than 1,000 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) since the SAC was given a conventional role in the 1990s gives China many options for striking targets in the region. The development of an anti-ship ballistic missile capability could deter or otherwise complicate U.S. intervention in the event of a regional crisis or conflict. In addition to these developments, the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) contribution to China's nuclear deterrence posture is also changing with the transition from the PRC's first-generation nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), which was armed with the relatively short-range JL-1 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and never conducted a deterrent patrol, to perhaps as many as five Jin-class SSBNs, each of which will be armed with 12 JL-2 SLBMs. This will diversify China's nuclear deterrent and may further enhance its survivability [2]. Chinese analysts assess that the deployment of SSBNs and land-based mobile missiles will "fundamentally ensure the reliability and credibility of China's nuclear force" [3]. The SAC's growing conventional ballistic missile capabilities, particularly the anti-ship ballistic missile, also suggest a growing deterrence role for these conventional forces.

Recently published Chinese sources that include previously unavailable information on nuclear and conventional missile strategy and campaigns are shedding new light on China's evolving approach toward deterrence and Chinese views on the problems of deterrence and nuclear strategy. By drawing on some of these sources, which include a variety of Chinese language books, academic and technical journal articles, military media reports, newspapers and periodicals, and key sources from the secondary literature on the SAC, it is possible to trace the evolution of China's deterrence strategy toward an approach that some have called "effective deterrence."

THE EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY

In the years following the detonation of China's first atomic bomb in 1964, China's nuclear strategy and doctrine were relatively immature due to the constraints imposed by Mao Zedong's adherence to his military theories, the domestic tumult of the Cultural Revolution, and the limitations of Chinese nuclear warhead and ballistic missile technology. Mao's dogmatic approach made it all but impossible to develop innovative ideas about nuclear strategy and doctrine. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution further inhibited consideration of key issues related to nuclear strategy and doctrine. Finally, according to some analysts, technological developments influenced China's approach to nuclear strategy, rather than strategy driving technological requirements and program decisions [4].

By the mid-1990s, however, Chinese strategists were engaging in debates about nuclear strategy and doctrine along with arms control issues. Some of these discussions centered on a potential shift from the traditional posture of "minimum deterrence" to a doctrine of "limited deterrence," which would require corresponding changes in force modernization if adopted [5]. Chinese nuclear strategists argued that such a shift would require "sufficient counter-force and counter-value tactical, theater, and strategic nuclear forces to deter the escalation of conventional or nuclear war," but China did not have "the operational capabilities to implement this vision of limited deterrence" [6].

By the late 1990s, China was attempting to fill this gap in its operational capabilities at the strategic level and develop its conventional missile forces with an eye toward theater war fighting missions. Indeed, it was not long before China appeared to be on the verge of reconciling the significant divergence between the SAC's once largely ambitious doctrine and its actual capabilities. Whereas Chinese strategists were once severely constrained by technological limitations, but by around 2000, they appeared to have an increasing number of choices regarding the development, deployment and use of PLA missiles. At the time, China was developing an increasingly lethal war-fighting capability for the SAC's short-range conventional ballistic missile forces; a more robust and diversified nuclear and conventional medium-range ballistic missile force at the theater level; and a more formidable and survivable intercontinental force capable of providing China with "credible minimum deterrence" at the strategic nuclear level [7].

THE TRANSITION TO "EFFECTIVE DETERRENCE"

Chinese analysts recognized that a more survivable posture was required to make deterrence credible and effective in

the face of growing challenges posed by improvements in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), missile defense, and conventional precision-strike capabilities. Leaders in Beijing also calculated that more robust nuclear weapons capabilities were required to support China's global political and diplomatic status. According to an article co-authored by General Jing Zhiyuan, the commander of the SAC and General Peng Xiaofeng, the political commissar of the SAC, China has recognized the need to develop "an elite and effective nuclear missile force that is on par with China's position as a major power" [8]. The SAC has clearly recognized that meeting this objective requires not only new hardware, but also improvements in training, institutional reforms that will provide the force with highly capable personnel, and advances in strategic and doctrinal concepts.

Chinese military media reports suggest that SAC training is also growing in realism and complexity. In particular, as part of the PLA's broader program of training reforms, the SAC is making progress in areas such as training under more realistic combat conditions, incorporating "blue forces," electronic warfare, nighttime training, air defense and counter-ISR tactics and more rigorous training evaluations. Building talent has been another key priority. The senior leadership of the SAC has consistently highlighted the importance of cultivating high quality officers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and technical personnel as the cornerstones of missile force modernization. One measure of its success is that 78.2 percent of cadres now hold a bachelor's degree or above [9].

Newly available materials have also revealed some of the SAC's key operational principles and the contemporary doctrinal concepts behind the accompanying transition to "effective deterrence." Among the key doctrinal concepts are the strategic-level emphasis on "gaining mastery by striking after the enemy has struck," and the campaign-level concepts of "self-protection," "key-point counterstrikes," and "counter nuclear deterrence." Overall, Chinese nuclear doctrine is increasingly focused on "sufficiency and effectiveness," meaning that China places a high priority on ensuring its forces are capable of fulfilling deterrence and counter-coercion missions. China's nuclear missile forces are "trying to catch up rapidly with an increasingly explicit strategy and doctrine premised on using nuclear weapons to deter nuclear aggression and to preclude nuclear coercion" [10].

Newly available Chinese language publications also appear to reflect ongoing debates about strategic and doctrinal issues. For example, recent articles in Chinese military journals have discussed the requirements associated with a wide variety of possible nuclear deterrence strategies

[11]. Newly published Chinese books that focus on missile force and deterrence issues also raise the issue of Chinese views on signaling and escalation control. In his recent and extensive treatment of the subject, Zhao Xijun, SAC commander from 1996 to 2003, states that the goal of China's deterrent missile force is to "shake the enemy psychologically, make the enemy's war volition waver, weaken the enemy commander's operational determination, disturb the enemy psyche and public psyche, and achieve [the objective of] 'conquering without fighting'" [12]. Additionally, however, Zhao states, "the goal of wartime deterrence is to prevent conventional war from escalating into nuclear war, and to prevent low-intensity nuclear war from further escalating" [13]. Thus conceived, deterrence imposes stringent requirements on the Chinese nuclear posture, including an adequate force size and composition, survivability, and highly reliable nuclear command and control. Moreover, Zhao states that a "flexible application" of deterrence across all levels of war, from the strategic down to the tactical, is "indispensable [for] effective and credible deterrence" [14].

Among the other issues reportedly under discussion are the merits of continuing to adhere to the "no first use" (NFU) policy. Some Chinese strategists appear to view the NFU policy as an unnecessary self-imposed strategic constraint. At least some analysts who influence the debate have already considered at least three scenarios under which Beijing would discard the traditional NFU policy. The first is retaliation for conventional strikes on strategic and/or nuclear targets and facilities. According to Zhao, "In a conventional war, when the enemy threatens to implement conventional strikes against one's major strategic targets, such as the nuclear facilities; in order to protect the nuclear facilities, prevent nuclear leakage, and to arrest the escalation of conventional war to nuclear war, one should employ nuclear weapons to initiate active nuclear deterrence against the enemy" [15].

The second possibility is a crisis-driven change in China's declaratory nuclear policy. Specifically, Chinese authors have suggested that Beijing could lower the nuclear threshold to deter intervention in a Taiwan crisis or conflict. According to Zhang Peimin's article in *Military Art*, a Chinese military journal, "When we are under the pressure of circumstances to use military force to reunify the motherland's territory, we may even lower the threshold of using nuclear weapons to deter intervention by external enemies" [16]. The third scenario is when Chinese leaders believe that territorial integrity is at stake. Some Chinese strategists seem to hint at the possibility of first use under particularly dire circumstances, such as a scenario in which the PLA is on the verge of suffering a politically catastrophic defeat in a conventional military conflict over Taiwan.

CONCLUSION

China's nuclear modernization is focused on improving the ability of its forces to survive an adversary's first strike and making its nuclear deterrence posture more credible, tasks that have taken on increased urgency as a result of growing concerns regarding U.S. nuclear preeminence, missile defense plans and conventional precision strike capabilities [17]. China is moving toward a much more survivable and thus more credible, strategic nuclear posture with the development of the road-mobile DF-31 and DF-31A ICBMs and the JL-2 SLBM. Beijing is also expanding its conventional missile capabilities, to include not only an increasingly potent SRBM force but also medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) that could threaten U.S. aircraft carriers. According to General Jing Zhiyuan and General Peng Xiaofeng, the SAC has "achieved the great leap in development from a single core unit to a nuclear and conventional entity which gives equal attention to both" [18]. Further improvements are still required, according to General Jing and General Peng, but as a result of the advances that have already been made, China's "strategic deterrence and actual combat capabilities have been vastly improved" [19].

Indeed, the introduction of road-mobile strategic missiles and SSBNs will allow China to achieve a posture of "effective deterrence." The modernization of Chinese nuclear forces and the transition from silo-based to road-mobile nuclear missiles and SSBNs might thus enhance strategic deterrence stability. Indeed, deterrence theory suggests that a more secure second-strike capability should enhance stability by causing both the United States and China to behave much more cautiously.

There are a number of reasons, however, to be concerned that the transition to a more secure second strike capability will not necessarily translate immediately or automatically into greater strategic stability. Indeed, it is entirely possible that these developments could in fact decrease crisis stability under certain circumstances, particularly if China's growing nuclear and missile capability tempts Beijing to behave more assertively or planners and decision-makers in either country fail to consider the potential implications of certain actions. Instability may also result if the undersea environment becomes a place of uncomfortably close approach between U.S. attack submarines and Chinese SSBNs, changes in force posture or technological developments result in heightened insecurity, or the alerting and de-alerting of strategic forces creates a temporary state of increased vulnerability.

Consequently, as China continues to modernize its nuclear and missile forces, problems of strategic stability appear

poised to become much more important aspects of the U.S.-China security relationship in the coming years. Although China's nuclear and missile force modernization may contribute to greater strategic stability in the long run, neither China nor the United States should assume that this outcome will result automatically from China's deployment of a relatively secure second strike capability. Indeed, successfully managing what could become a potentially dangerous balancing act will require much of both parties. The United States will need to exercise considerable self-restraint given the asymmetries that will continue to characterize the U.S.-China nuclear balance despite China's recent enhancement of its nuclear and conventional missile capabilities. Planners and decision-makers in the United States will also need to have an in-depth understanding of Chinese views on strategic signaling, crisis management and escalation control, particularly in the context of a conflict over Taiwan. In addition, Chinese planners and decision-makers will need to have a similarly realistic understanding of U.S. views and motivations.

This emerging dynamic underscores the need for greater U.S.-China dialogue and engagement on strategic issues, which in turn will require Beijing to deal with a dilemma in which continued lack of Chinese transparency of nuclear weapons and missile developments may complicate China's own deterrence strategy. Indeed, as China continues to improve its conventional and nuclear missile capabilities, it will almost certainly need to become at least somewhat more transparent in order to help safeguard shared interests in regional security and strategic stability.

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NOTES

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China's Palestine Policy

By Chris Zambelis

The geopolitics of China's rise and its implications for the Arab world and wider Middle East is a topic for serious debate. Currently, China's Middle East strategy revolves around shoring up its energy security and tapping consumer markets and investment opportunities for Chinese businesses. Given China's status as the world's fastest growing energy consumer and third-largest net importer of oil coupled with the global financial crisis, energy and commercial concerns will continue to dominate China's interaction with the Middle East in the foreseeable future [1]. Yet as China's economic clout grows, Beijing is also keen on leveraging its economic power to enhance its diplomatic influence on the international stage. To bolster its great-power aspirations and its position in the Middle East—a region where it played a peripheral role throughout the Cold War—Beijing's diplomacy is forging closer relations with key players in the region and, in doing so, is challenging the status quo.

China's efforts to engage the region in recent years have been welcomed with open arms on both the state and popular levels. Regional governments, for instance, look to China as a potential check on what they see as unrestrained American dominance in the region, a feeling shared by many staunch U.S. allies (*China Brief*, October 24, 2008; *China Brief*, May 24, 2006). Furthermore, public sentiment in the region tends to be harshly critical of many aspects of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. China's growing inroads into the Middle East, therefore, are also viewed in a positive light, as many Arabs and Muslims see China as a brotherly state (*China Brief*, May 18, 2007). Geopolitical considerations and cultural affinities, however, are not sufficient to explain the emerging China factor in Middle Eastern affairs. China's successful engagement strategy also derives from the general lack of enmity between China and Arab countries on key global issues and its effective use of soft power in its dealings with Arab partners (*China Brief*, May 18, 2007).

China's historic role in supporting Third World revolutionary movements and anti-colonial struggles in the Middle East and Africa, to include its advocacy on behalf of the Palestinians during the Cold War until the present, has also led many in the region to see China as a potential partner that can help further the Palestinian national cause [2]. It was not until 1992 that China and Israel established formal diplomatic ties, ties that have since flourished despite Beijing's previous characterization of Israel as an imperial aggressor acting at the behest of the United States [3]. Nevertheless, widespread popular opposition to U.S.