

Why China Won't Abandon Its Nuclear Strategy of Assured Retaliation

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- **A RENEWED U.S. THREAT TO CHINA'S NUCLEAR DETERRENT.**
 Chinese analysts worry that advances in U.S. strategic capabilities could undermine China's ability to retaliate against a U.S. nuclear attack, the primary goal of its "assured retaliation" nuclear strategy that requires it to maintain a "second-strike capability" only.
- **CONTINUATION OF CHINA'S STRATEGY OF ASSURED RETALIATION.**
 China is unlikely to dramatically increase its relatively small nuclear force or abandon its second-strike posture. Instead, China will modestly expand its arsenal, increase the sophistication of its forces, and allow limited ambiguity over its pledge not to use nuclear weapons first.
- **POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF AMBIGUITY OVER NO-FIRST-USE.**
 Limited ambiguity over a no-first-use policy allows China to avoid an arms race, but it could increase risks of nuclear escalation in a U.S.–China crisis. Limited ambiguity might also energize U.S. pursuit of strategic superiority, if Washington sees it as a broad exception to China's no-first-use policy.

By Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel

A Renewed U.S. Threat to China's Nuclear Deterrent

China's strategists perceive missile defense as the most serious future threat to China's nuclear arsenal. They worry that the current, limited U.S. development and deployment of a missile defense system could be expanded in scope and effectiveness to give the United States an effective shield against Chinese nuclear missiles. Even if the system cannot reliably intercept ballistic missiles after they are launched, Chinese analysts are concerned that missile defense deployments could trigger a regional arms race if other countries see the U.S. commitment to the system as proof that it may be effective.

Chinese assessments of the threat posed by conventional long-range strike capabilities are more mixed. Some Chinese analysts do not think that a U.S. conventional attack on China's nuclear arsenal would be very likely or effective. They believe that China's efforts to protect its arsenal from a nuclear attack—including hardening, dispersal, and mobility—would be sufficient to protect China from a conventional attack as well. At the same time, analysts worry that the United States may be more likely to use conventional weapons than nuclear weapons against China's nuclear arsenal. Further, some analysts are concerned that U.S. conventional long-range strike capabilities, if paired with improvements in U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems, could reduce the amount of strategic warning that China would receive of an incoming attack. These capabilities could, therefore, undermine China's deterrent.

Continuation of China's Strategy of Assured Retaliation

China will not abandon its nuclear strategy of assured retaliation in response to an increasingly clear U.S. commitment to strategic primacy. Instead, to avoid Cold War-style nuclear competition and the risk of arms racing, China is altering how it implements assured retaliation.

First, China is allowing limited ambiguity over the application of its no-first-use policy, its pledge to not use nuclear weapons unless first attacked with nuclear weapons by another state. Debate among Chinese strategists over the definition of "first use" has created uncertainty over how China would respond to "counterforce" attacks, or attacks by an adversary using conventional weapons against Chinese nuclear forces and infrastructure. The main purpose of this limited ambiguity is to deter the United States from conducting such conventional attacks. Chinese strategists are also debating whether a launch-on-warning posture—launching its own nuclear weapons as soon as China receives warning of incoming enemy nuclear missiles, but before they reach their Chinese targets—would be desirable and consistent with China's no-first-use policy.

Second, China seeks to maintain the smallest nuclear arsenal capable of assuring retaliation against a nuclear-armed adversary. In response to U.S. capabilities developments, Beijing is making qualitative and limited quantitative improvements in its force structure. China is modestly increasing the size and survivability of its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force as well as its ability to penetrate missile defenses. It is

equipping some of its ICBMs with multiple, independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), developing glide technology, and improving its strategic warning and command and control systems. To counter future advances in U.S. strategic capabilities, China is researching and developing missile defenses and hypersonic weapons technology, as well as continuing to improve its ballistic missile submarine force.

Potential Pitfalls of Ambiguity over No-First-Use

Limited ambiguity over how China may define a “nuclear attack” for its no-first-use policy allows Beijing to maintain a smaller arsenal than it would need if it adhered to a strict no-first-use policy. Yet limited ambiguity also raises the risk of nuclear escalation in a crisis, as it increases the likelihood that the United States could mistake Chinese nuclear signaling for preparations to use nuclear weapons. China’s decision implies that it views the economic, diplomatic, and strategic costs of arms racing as a bigger threat to its national security than the risk of nuclear escalation in a crisis.

China is also relatively optimistic about the risk of nuclear escalation in any future U.S.–China crisis. A U.S.–China crisis would most likely arise because of a dispute between a U.S. ally and China. Few Chinese strategists believe that the stakes in any U.S.–China crisis would prove sufficient for either China or the United States to risk nuclear escalation. Chinese analysts also regard Beijing’s no-first-use policy as contributing to a clear firebreak between nuclear and conventional conflict. They believe that the United States would not be tempted to cross that threshold by attacking China’s nuclear arsenal with conventional capabilities, given the limited ambiguity over China’s no-first-use policy. Most Chinese strategists do not acknowledge the risk of unintentional escalation in a U.S.–China crisis.

The United States does not share China’s relative optimism about the risk of nuclear escalation in a future U.S.–China crisis. Western experts worry that escalation could occur if the United States were to implement an AirSea Battle-style campaign—one that involved joint naval and air operations—to destroy China’s conventional capabilities that simultaneously degraded Chinese nuclear capabilities and their supporting infrastructure. One reason for this divergence of opinion may be that Western analysts believe that China’s nuclear and conventional missile forces share facilities, increasing the likelihood that a U.S. attack on Chinese conventional land-based missiles could degrade its nuclear capabilities. Many Chinese analysts dismiss this risk, however, arguing that China’s conventional and nuclear capabilities do not share facilities.

Open-source information about China’s strategic missile forces, the Second Artillery, indicates that China’s nuclear missile brigades are, in fact, not deployed to the same locations as conventional ones. Within the Second Artillery, missile launch brigades are organized based on either conventional or nuclear armaments. Conventional and nuclear missile brigades do share some infrastructure, but Chinese military texts describe steps that have been taken to ensure redundancy in China’s command and control structures. Thus, any U.S. conventional attack on a Chinese conventional missile brigade would probably not substantially degrade China’s nuclear capabilities. It could, however, still significantly escalate a crisis because of the message such an attack would commu-

nicate about U.S. willingness and capabilities to conduct a similar attack on a Chinese nuclear brigade. China would likely respond by signaling its resolve to retaliate if its nuclear weapons were attacked, which could be misread by the United States as preparations for use.

China’s decision to pair limited ambiguity over no-first-use with an otherwise restrained nuclear posture could backfire. China likely underestimates the U.S. willingness to run the risk of nuclear escalation in a crisis. In addition, if the United States views China’s limited ambiguity as a bluff because China otherwise adheres to its no-first-use policy, it might ignore the risk of nuclear escalation in conventional campaign planning, resulting in a deterrence failure in a conventional conflict. Alternatively, if the United States views China’s limited ambiguity as a sign that China may abandon its no-first-use policy in circumstances other than a conventional attack on its nuclear forces and infrastructure or on non-nuclear strategic targets, it may pursue strategic primacy more energetically, drawing China into the very arms race it seeks to avoid.

China’s continuing commitment to a nuclear strategy of assured retaliation indicates that it will prioritize avoiding a nuclear arms race with the United States over reducing the risk of nuclear escalation in a crisis. But even if the United States and China avoid an arms race, leaders and militaries in both countries will need to be exceptionally careful to avoid nuclear escalation in a crisis. ♦

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