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U.S. Nuclear Policy and Posture: Bending Toward Asia?

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SUMMARY

As long as China and North Korea are potential U.S. nuclear adversaries, the United States will plan for the possible use of nuclear weapons against both. Presumably the same is true for China and North Korea. While the U.S.-Asia nuclear dynamic is perhaps still years away from achieving co-equal status with the U.S.-Russia dynamic as a driver of U.S. nuclear weapons employment policy, plans, and deployments, it could evolve to where China in particular becomes much more important—cemented in place by the Trump administration’s more expansive nuclear policy and posture. The result may not be “stable deterrence” but rather both sides dug in more precariously on the nuclear ledge, with increasing risks of an accident, mistake, or miscalculation precipitating a dangerous fall into the precipice.

There are, however, concrete nuclear threat reduction steps by Washington and Beijing that would help shape the Asian strategic terrain in ways that would moderate or even mitigate a Cold War nuclear revival between the U.S. and China in Asia. Those steps include: exchanging data on nuclear forces; abiding by their declared moratoria on nuclear explosive testing and working together to bring the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force; adopting a bilateral “No First Use” policy; and commitments by the U.S. not to deploy—and by China not to increase—intermediate-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific region.

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U.S. NUCLEAR POLICY AND POSTURE, PRE-TRUMP

1945-1992: Europe at the center, Asia at the periphery, of nuclear policy and arms control

While the U.S.-Soviet political and economic competition was global, the Euro-Atlantic region was at the center, including a possible military conflict. The massive deployment of Soviet conventional forces throughout Russia west of the Urals and Eastern and Central Europe, and the threat of a Warsaw Pact attack into Western Europe, drove U.S. and NATO defense policies and planning.

Throughout the Cold War, America's nuclear policy and posture was orientated toward the Euro-Atlantic. In addition to Soviet conventional forces, much of Russia's nuclear firepower and war-supporting industry was similarly located in the Euro-Atlantic area. In response, the United States deployed thousands of U.S. "tactical" nuclear weapons, adopted a policy of "flexible response" underscoring their most likely use in the European theater, and adopted nuclear employment guidance, operational plans, and deployments that prioritized the Euro-Atlantic region.

Reductions of East-West tensions and the conclusion of arms control agreements on both conventional and nuclear forces led to changes in U.S. nuclear employment policy, plans and deployments. Most notably, under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, an entire class of U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range dual-capable ballistic and cruise missiles were banned; under the "Presidential Nuclear Initiatives" (PNIs) in 1991 and 1992, thousands of "tactical" nuclear weapons—including nuclear artillery and short-range missiles and warheads—were withdrawn from Europe and dismantled and destroyed by both the United States and Soviet Union/Russia; and under the 1991 START I Treaty, U.S. and Soviet/Russian strategic nuclear forces were cut by about 50-percent.

Much of Asia's nuclear relevance during this time related to the geography of Soviet

military power and strategic nuclear force deployments, which stretched through central Asia, the Russia-China border, Vladivostok and Pacific Ocean. The Asia-Pacific region, however, was not irrelevant to U.S. nuclear policy, plans and deployments.

There were occasions when China was considered a possible target of U.S. nuclear strikes, such as during the Korean War and numerous crises over Taiwan. After testing a nuclear weapon in 1964, China reportedly appeared in the Single Integrated Operations Plan (SIOP) in the 1960s, and was explicitly discussed in nuclear weapons employment policy and related guidance in both the Nixon and Carter administrations in 1974 and 1980, respectively.¹ The U.S. stored thousands of nuclear warheads throughout bases in Asia and deployed SSBNs in the Pacific in support of the SIOP.² But China was never on a par with the Soviet Union as a driver of U.S. nuclear employment policy, plans or posture, and was often dealt with through so-called "reserve" forces.

Throughout the Cold War, nuclear threat reduction in Asia was largely a byproduct of U.S./Soviet initiatives focused on Europe. The INF agreement to eliminate globally all ballistic and cruise missiles, conventional and nuclear, with a range between 500-5,500 kilometers precluded their redeployment by the Soviets and Americans from the European theater to Asia. The 1991-92 PNIs also led to the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from navy surface ships, attack submarines and

¹ See National Security Decision Memorandum 242 (January 17, 1974), Available at: https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdm-nixon/nsdm_242.pdf, Policy Guidance for the Employment of Nuclear Weapons (April 3, 1974), Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/SIO P-25.pdf>, and Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (July 25, 1980), Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb390/docs/7-25-80%20PD%2059.pdf>

² For a comprehensive discussion of the history, see Kristensen, Hans M., Norris, Robert S., and McKinzie, Matthew G., "Chinese Nuclear Forces and U.S. Nuclear War Planning," The Federation of American Scientists and Natural Resources Defense Council, November 2006. Available at: <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/Book2006.pdf>

land-based naval aircraft, as well as all ground- and air-launched nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula. Russian reductions in tactical nuclear weapons were also substantial, but a sizable force remained.

1993-2016: Asia comes into sharper focus

From 1993 to 2016, the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama saw a further evolution in U.S. nuclear policy and posture, with a sharper focus on Asia—in terms of planning and capabilities for possible employment, but also in nuclear threat reduction.

In 1997, President Clinton signed a new presidential decision directive on nuclear weapons employment policy guidance (PDD-60³), which reportedly provided greater specificity with respect to China than existed in President Reagan's 1981 employment policy guidance (NSDD-13⁴), which had included only a brief paragraph relating to "Non-Warsaw Pact Employment Objectives." That said, the Clinton guidance continued to be driven in large part by planning with respect to Russia.

With respect to China, in the wake of President George H. W. Bush's 1991-92 PNIs, the deterrence mission was carried out largely by SSBNs on patrol in the Pacific as part of the reserve force. Since 2001 under Bush and Obama, a larger portion of the total SSBN force has been relocated from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

For the first time China became a major focus of a multilateral nuclear negotiation. In 1993, the Clinton administration began a determined pursuit of a CTBT. China was a key participant in the negotiations that took place in the Conference on Disarmament, and was the second country, after the United States, to sign the CTBT in 1996; it has publicly declared a

moratorium on nuclear explosive testing since.

As the "Clinton-Bush-Obama" era unfolded, North Korea's nuclear program developed from a handful of weapons and uncertain delivery capability to tens of nuclear warheads deployable on missiles that could reach North Korea and Japan. While less of a driver of U.S. nuclear policy and force posture than China, during this time, there were demonstrations of U.S. nuclear capability designed to send a message to Pyongyang—including exercises involving long-range nuclear-capable strategic B-2 and B-52 bombers.

North Korea's nuclear program also became a focus for nuclear threat reduction. The 1994 Agreed Framework negotiated during the Clinton-era to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula failed to achieve its stated objective. It was followed by successive diplomatic efforts of various levels of intensity by the Bush and Obama administrations, also unsuccessful.

THE TRUMP ERA, 2017-2020

As the Trump administration entered office in 2017, it inherited a U.S. nuclear policy and posture that had been slowly sharpening its focus on Asia over the course of at least the three previous U.S. administrations (Clinton-Bush-Obama); along with a modest set of prior accomplishments and ongoing initiatives relating to nuclear threat reduction with respect to China and North Korea. Moreover, the Asia-Pacific region had been the indirect beneficiary of a reduction in geo-political tensions and agreements on nuclear threat reduction in the Euro-Atlantic region over the past three decades.

Three years later, the Trump administration's nuclear policies and approach to nuclear threat reduction are feeding what could be a perfect nuclear storm in Asia, one that would cement changes in U.S. nuclear policy and posture with lasting and negative implications for strategic and nuclear stability in the region.

Normally, changes in U.S. nuclear policy and posture take place gradually—and are rarely if ever divorced from precedents. There are

³ Smith, R. Jeffrey, "Clinton Directive Changes Strategy on Nuclear Arms," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1997. Available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/12/07/clinton-directive-changes-strategy-on-nuclear-arms/96b6788f-d7a1-47ec-a654-7ab368d15edf/>

⁴ National Security Decision Directive 13, Available at: <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-13.pdf>

times, however, when new nuclear policy guidance is underlined more sharply, with resulting changes in plans, operations, force structure and force posture.

One example is the 1981 Reagan-era nuclear weapons employment policy guidance, NSDD-13. Written after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and new tensions in Eastern Europe, and with Soviet military power at its zenith, NSDD-13 underlined the objective of having the capability to fight and win a protracted nuclear war. The Reagan nuclear buildup followed, adding the B-1 bomber and Peacekeeper missile to America's strategic nuclear forces, along with air-and sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles on B-52 bombers and attack submarines; supporting Command, Control Communications and Intelligence systems (C3I); and deployment of the Pershing II and Ground-Launched Cruise Missile to Europe. During this period Moscow believed the U.S. and NATO were poised to initiate a surprise nuclear strike against the Soviet Union, leading Moscow to consider pre-empting such a strike.⁵

Today, it is the Asia-Pacific region—and the increasingly negative and even hostile U.S.-China dynamic specifically—that could prompt a similarly strong underlining of the need for enhanced U.S. nuclear capabilities against China. Indeed, the argument that “the United States will have no choice but to reassess and adjust its own nuclear force requirements” in light of developments in China is now being made by the Pentagon.⁶

The forces driving Washington in this direction are strong—and not all of Trump's making. China's substantial military and nuclear modernization program—underway before

⁵ Fischer, Benjamin B., “A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare,” Central Intelligence Agency Library, March 19, 2007. Available at:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/a-cold-war-conundrum/source.htm#HEADING1-13>

⁶ Anderson, James, “China's Arms Buildup Threatens the Nuclear Balance,” The New York Times, July 29, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/opinion/russia-china-nuclear-weapons.html?smid=em-share>

Trump took office and with an eye towards not only Washington but also Moscow, New Delhi, Tokyo and of course Taipei—and assertive military posture in the East and South China Seas are concerning to U.S. military planners. In particular, Beijing's deployment of hundreds of ground-launched ballistic missiles provides China with a regional prompt-strike capability that worries the Pentagon, and reportedly was a major reason behind the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty with Russia.

While China's total nuclear force of around 300 warheads continues to be dwarfed by that of the U.S. (and Russia) at around 4,000 warheads each, it is steadily developing a more survivable and capable nuclear force with the ability to strike U.S. allies, friends and forces in the region and the U.S. mainland.⁷ Next door, recent missile tests suggest North Korea is striving to at least improve its capability to strike targets in the South, and may have already achieved the level of miniaturization required to fit a nuclear device on short- to intercontinental-range ballistic missiles.⁸

The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy⁹ and, more specifically, 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)¹⁰ provide a template for what presidential guidance on nuclear weapons employment policy probably

⁷ Kristensen, Hans M., and Korda, Matt, “Status of World Nuclear Forces,” Federation of American Scientists, April 2020. Available at: <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

⁸ See Van Diepen, Vann H., and Depetris, Daniel R., “Putting North Korea's New Short-Range Missiles Into Perspective,” 38 North, September 5, 2019, Available at: <https://www.38north.org/2019/09/vvandiependdepetris090519/>, and Nikitin, Mary Beth D., and Ryder, Samuel D., “North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs,” Congressional Research Service, July 14, 2020. Available at: <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6989295/North-Korea-s-Nuclear-Weapons-and-Missile.pdf>

⁹ “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

¹⁰ Department of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review,” February 2018. Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872877/-1/-1/1/EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY.PDF>

looks like under Trump.¹¹ The Trump NPR reverses Obama’s policy of seeking to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security strategy, citing both Russia and China as potential “great power” nuclear competitors. The purpose of nuclear weapons in U.S. deterrence strategy is expanded to include a broader range of non-nuclear scenarios, including cyber-attacks.¹²

Consistent with this expanded nuclear emphasis, the Trump NPR supports new nuclear capabilities, including a low-yield Trident SLBM nuclear warhead and a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile, to deal in part with China’s “modernizing and expanding” nuclear forces and “assertive military initiatives” in the East and South China Seas. North Korea’s current and emerging nuclear capabilities are also cited as an “urgent and unpredictable threat”—perhaps a driver in the Trump administration’s reported unwillingness to reaffirm the 1985 Reagan-Gorbachev agreement that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.¹³

Further complicating the Asia nuclear dynamic is the possible removal of the one significant nuclear constraint involving both Washington and Beijing: CTBT. In June of 2020, the *Washington Post* reported that U.S. officials discussed resuming nuclear tests for the first time since 1992—pointing to possible violations of the testing moratorium by both Moscow and Beijing.¹⁴ Should the U.S. go down this road in a second Trump term,

China—and Russia—would certainly follow. This could lead to the development and deployment of more destructive nuclear capabilities in all three nations.¹⁵

An Asia-focused U.S. nuclear buildup—combined with enhanced conventional prompt-strike capabilities, possibly including basing U.S. INF-range missiles in the Pacific region¹⁶—would be viewed in Beijing as a significant enhancement of America’s ability to strike with little or no warning and in minutes. China’s leadership, nuclear and military forces, war supporting industry and economic infrastructure, reminiscent of the U.S.-Soviet nuclear standoff throughout much of the Cold War. As was the case then, here too, an accident, mistake or miscalculation, or a military exercise perceived as a prelude to war, could lead to catastrophe.

There appear to be no “easy wins” on the horizon with respect to nuclear threat reduction in Asia—and certainly nothing that would replicate the geopolitical import of the agreements reached over the past three decades in the Euro-Atlantic region. The Trump administration is unlikely to be satisfied in its attempt—perhaps genuine, though more likely a ruse to cover for U.S. withdrawal from New START next February—to woo China into a “trilateral” arms control deal with the U.S. and Russia. Add to this the failure of Trump’s diplomacy to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear capabilities—which during the Trump era appear increasingly capable of striking U.S. allies and forces in the region and perhaps the

¹¹ Department of Defense, “Nuclear Operations,” June 11, 2019. Available at:

https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_72.pdf

¹² “U.S. Negative Security Assurances at a Glance,” Arms Control Association, March 2018. Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/negsec>

¹³ Dunn, Lewis, and Potter, William, “Time to Renew the Reagan-Gorbachev Principle,” Arms Control Today, March 2020. Available at:

<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-03/features/time-renew-reagan-gorbachev-principle>

¹⁴ Hudson, John, and Sonne, Paul, “Trump administration discussed conducting first U.S. nuclear test in decades,” The Washington Post, May 22, 2020. Available at:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-administration-discussed-conducting-first-us-nuclear-test-in-decades/2020/05/22/a805c904-9c5b-11ea-b60c-3be060a4f8e1_story.html

¹⁵ Clarke, Richard A., and Andreasen, Steven, “Trump is playing a reckless game with the global nuclear arsenal,” The Los Angeles Times, June 16, 2020. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-06-16/fonald-trump-open-skies-treaty-arms-control-dwight-eisenhower>

¹⁶ Bowers, Samantha, “Where Could the US Put Its Post-INF Missiles?,” Defense One, February 11, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2020/02/where-could-us-put-its-post-inf-missiles/163004/>, and Cloud, David S., “U.S. seeks to house missiles in the Pacific. Some allies don’t want them,” The Los Angeles Times, June 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-06-10/pentagon-to-build-up-missiles-in-western-pacific-to-combat-chinas-expansion>

U.S. mainland—and you have the makings of an Asian nuclear competition with very few guardrails or constraints, fueled by actions in Beijing, Pyongyang and Washington.

Coincident with all of this, the fridity of U.S./NATO-Russia relations following Moscow's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine, substantial nuclear modernization programs in Russia and the U.S., and U.S. withdrawal from the INF and Open Skies Treaties and possibly New START, has reignited competition in the Euro-Atlantic theater and the nuclear arms race between the two nuclear superpowers. In short, there is unlikely to be a nuclear peace dividend that again spills over into Asia as a result of an early U.S.-Russia return to détente.

LOOKING AHEAD: AVOIDING A COLD WAR NUCLEAR REVIVAL IN ASIA

While the U.S.-China/Asia nuclear dynamic is perhaps still years away from achieving co-equal status with the U.S.-Russia/Euro-Atlantic dynamic as a driver of U.S. nuclear weapons employment policy, plans, and deployments, it could evolve to where China in particular becomes a much more important factor, based first and foremost on a severe deterioration in political and diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing, coupled with China's growing economic and military (including nuclear) potential and the Trump administration's more expansive nuclear policy and posture. The result may not be "stable deterrence" but rather a state of affairs where both sides are dug in more precariously on the nuclear ledge, with increasing risks of an accident, mistake, or miscalculation precipitating a dangerous fall into the precipice.

Can this be avoided? As long as China and North Korea are potential nuclear adversaries, the U.S. will continue to plan for the possible employment of nuclear weapons against both. Presumably the same is true for China and North Korea. And the forces driving increased

political, economic and military tensions between the U.S. and China in particular are considerable, and perhaps unlikely to be ameliorated for years, perhaps decades.

That said, in the next four years, there are four concrete, specific steps that should be taken that would help shape the strategic terrain in ways that would moderate or even mitigate a Cold War nuclear revival between the U.S. and China in Asia—and also allow scarce post-pandemic defense resources in the U.S. to be devoted to other priorities to strengthen Washington's capacity to deter China at all levels of conflict.¹⁷

- **First**, preferably with—but even in the absence of—New START extension, as a voluntary confidence-building measure, China should provide data consistent with certain specific data exchanged between the United States and Russia under the New START treaty ("shadow" declarations). The United States and Russia should also provide certain specific data they exchange under New START to China. China should also consider broader declarations with respect to future plans for their nuclear forces. Including China in a data exchange on strategic forces (also with France and the United Kingdom) would be an important step towards building increased transparency, cooperation, and trust among all nuclear-weapon states in the Asia-Pacific region.
- **Second**, the U.S. and China should make clear their commitment to the CTBT's ban on nuclear explosive testing, discuss ways to build confidence that such tests are not happening, move together to ratify the CTBT, and work together to secure signature and ratification of three key CTBT holdouts—India, Pakistan, and North Korea—whose ratifications are also necessary to bring CTBT into force. The con-

¹⁷ Flournoy, Michele A., "How to Prevent a War in Asia," Foreign Affairs, June 18, 2020. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-06-18/how-prevent-war-asia?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=on_the_ballot&utm_campaign=on_the_ballot_2020_prospects&utm_content=20200812&utm_term=prospects-OTB-021020

tinuation of the testing moratorium would continue an important nuclear constraint between the U.S. and China, and joint work by Washington and Beijing to bring CTBT into force would strengthen the global nonproliferation regime, as well as improve the regional-nuclear dynamic between CTBT hold-outs.

- Third, the U.S. and China should adopt a bilateral “No First Use” policy, and work to broaden its application to all nuclear weapon states, including Russia, the UK and France. Such a policy would then be written into U.S. presidential guidance on nuclear weapons employment policy. As was the case with Clinton-era presidential guidance which reaffirmed that deterrence could be maintained at roughly 25% of deployed strategic nuclear warheads maintained in the Reagan era, this could be a significant factor (with other steps relating to nuclear threat reduction) in reducing the requirements for and scope of U.S. nuclear deployments in Asia and globally.

While China is publicly committed to a No First Use policy, a bilateral U.S.-China agreement could help keep Beijing on the No First Use side of the ledger at a time when there is speculation regarding China’s true “motives and intent”¹⁸—and would align Washington and Beijing on this issue working to influence Moscow. As a first step, the U.S. should consult with Asia-Pacific allies, focusing on reas-

¹⁸ “Statement of Charles A. Richard, Commander, United States Strategic Command, Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 13 February, 2020.” Available at: https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Richard_02-13-20.pdf

suring allies of America’s continuing commitment to their defense against the full range of security threats, and the continuing role U.S. nuclear weapons will play alongside enhanced conventional capabilities in their defense.

- Fourth, as a voluntary confidence building measure, the United States should commit not to deploy INF-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific region. China should reciprocate by capping (and eventually reducing) its current force. While commitments relating to these systems would, for different reasons, be a stretch for Washington and Beijing, this would address a capability that is of primary concerns to both countries.

With these steps, the U.S.-China nuclear dynamic in particular—and U.S. nuclear policy and posture in the region—would unfold in ways that help to reduce rather than accentuate nuclear risks in East Asia. Yet even if all four steps are implemented, there will be many wild cards, including both the scope of China’s nuclear modernization and further evolution of North Korea’s nuclear program. Another wild card is “who” is sitting in the Oval Office. In the United States, anything nuclear is inherently presidential. One could expect President Trump to continue with the nuclear policies and approach to nuclear threat reduction unfurled in his first term. A new president, however, will have the opportunity to look anew at U.S. nuclear employment policy, and the forces driving that policy, including nuclear arms control.

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is an advocacy group that aims to inform and energize public opinion, especially high-level policymakers, to take seriously the very real threat posed by nuclear weapons, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and eventually eliminated.