China’s Nuclear Policy: Change and Continuity

Fan Jishe

Summary

China takes a philosophically unique approach in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. China’s nuclear policy is substantially different from other nuclear powers’ in terms of declaratory policy, acquisition policy, deployment policy and employment policy. Moreover, this has remained largely unchanged for several decades regardless of the changes in the international security environment and of China’s economic and technological progress. China is improving its nuclear transparency in a subtle and gradual way, and is making some limited efforts to improve the survivability of its small nuclear forces. China learned the right lessons from the Cold War arms race. If China is confident about the survivability of its nuclear forces, it will be comfortable with asymmetrical deterrence and vulnerability.

1. Five decades have passed since China conducted its first nuclear test in 1964. Significant changes have taken place in the landscape of interstate relations over that period. Once isolated from the international community, China has now become a pillar of the international order and a full-fledged player. Meanwhile, China has developed from being an economically weak country into the second largest economy in the world. One might have supposed that China would have made similarly dramatic changes in its nuclear policy matching these changes in its national status and the international situation. However, the reality is that the policy has displayed far more continuity than change.

2. This raises several questions. Why has China taken a very different route from the other four nuclear weapons states (NWS) as defined by the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)? What is the underlying logic of the continuity? What kind of change in China’s nuclear policy has taken place? And, what trajectory is China’s nuclear posture likely to take in the foreseeable future?

China Is Substantially Different from Other Nuclear Powers

3. Is China’s nuclear policy substantially different from other nuclear powers, especially the United States, and the former Soviet Union/Russia? The answer is yes. China is very different from other nuclear powers in terms of declaratory policy, acquisition policy, deployment policy and employment policy.

4. Immediately after the first nuclear test, Beijing declared that under no circumstance and at no time would China be the first to use nuclear weapons. China gave negative security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states and to members of nuclear-weapon-free zones that it would not use nuclear weapons against them, and also called for comprehensive and complete elimination of nuclear weapons. There is no significant change with regard to China’s declaratory policy ever since, regardless of the dramatic transformations in the international security environment.

5. The number of nuclear tests China conducted before signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) pales in comparison with the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia. China did not disclose the number of nuclear weapons, but it is estimated that China maintains a total stockpile of about 260 nuclear warheads, a number that has remained relatively stable over many years. This is a substantially smaller nuclear arsenal than that of Russia and the United States. During

---

the Cold War, the two nuclear superpowers developed and deployed many types of nuclear weapons, but China chose not to do business in this way. Five decades after the first nuclear test, China still does not have an operational triad of land, sea and air-based nuclear weapons. Most of China’s nuclear ballistic missiles are land-based, and a few might have been assigned to its limited fleet of bombers. According to the latest US Pentagon report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* 2016, “China will probably conduct its first SSBN nuclear deterrence patrol sometime in 2016.”3 This indicates that in the US view, China has not conducted a deterrence patrol yet. With the Cold War ended for more than two decades, the United States and Russia still maintain a “hair trigger alert” level by keeping large numbers of their nuclear weapons ready to be launched within minutes. In the case of China, it is believed that China keeps nuclear warheads de-mated from delivery vehicles, and the very low alert level has been there for several decades.

**China’s View of the Role of Nuclear Weapons**

6. Chairman Mao Zedong and his colleagues developed their views of nuclear weapons between the 1940s and 1960s, and their concept of the role of nuclear weapons laid down the philosophical basis of China’s nuclear policy. Chairman Mao once said in his conversation with American journalist Anna Louise Strong that the atomic bomb was only a paper tiger which the United States reactionaries used to scare people, and it looked scary, but in fact it was not.4 He believed that the inhumane nature of the nuclear weapon, its indiscriminative mass killing, and worldwide opposition to its use, would make nuclear weapons unusable in the future.

7. History has shaped China’s view of nuclear weapons from the Japanese invasion of China and China’s protracted anti-Japanese war, to the overall lessons learned from World War Two (WWII). China firmly believes that an unjust war will be met with both domestic and international opposition, and that no country could win an unjust war. What is more, the outcome of war is determined not by one or two types of weapons but rather by the will of the people. These views were repeatedly articulated in Chairman Mao’s remarks and official documents in the early years of the People’s Republic of China.

8. Why was China not frightened by nuclear weapons? It is because of the way China fought the war with Japan in WWII, and maybe its experience with the United States in the Korean War as well. In China’s view, any war involving China will be fought in a way similar to those of WWII, mostly a protracted ground war, and China has confidence in fighting and winning such a war. China has a large population, vast territory and abundant resources, which would enable it to win even a large scale war. It could mobilize its large population, make full use of its resources, fight a long war, accept a temporary retreat if necessary, and finally drown the enemy in “the sea of the people’s war.” In these circumstances, conventional weapons are more important than nuclear weapons.

9. On the one hand, China genuinely believes that nuclear weapons are paper tigers. On the other hand, China also recognized that atomic bombs “are real tigers, iron tigers and tigers that can devour people when others have them and you don’t.” 5 China had felt the pain of attempted blackmail by the United States during the Korean War and in the Taiwan Strait Crisis. Chairman Mao once said: “In today’s world, if we do not want to be bullied by others, we cannot do without those things.”6 It is those threats and the attempted nuclear blackmail that strengthened China’s determination to develop its own nuclear capability. As pointed out by Premier Zhou Enlai, “We are doing this [making nuclear weapons] to break the nuclear monopoly and nuclear blackmail, as well as to restrict the two superpowers.”7

10. For China, nuclear weapons are for defensive purpose only. Because China believes they are not usable, it did not follow American and Soviet examples of building up a large nuclear arsenal, to develop the triad of delivery systems, to diversify weapons deployment or of creating a war fighting plan involving nuclear weapons. Thus, China is comfortable with the minimum means of reprisal “to stop the superpowers from using (nuclear weapons against China).”8

---


11. China developed its nuclear policy in accordance with this philosophical thinking. Since nuclear weapons are not usable, and any use will be met with worldwide opposition, China adopted the basic principles of a no-first-use policy and the provision of negative security assurances, and simultaneously called for their comprehensive and complete elimination. For China, nuclear weapons are political weapons, not military tools; they can neither be used to win a war on the battlefield, nor be used to win the arms race in peace time. Nuclear weapons are developed for the sole purpose of preventing other countries from using nuclear weapons against China.

12. "Few but good" is the key principle for China's acquisition policy. Since nuclear weapons are to deter or to retaliate against other countries' use, China did not invest much on larger numbers of nuclear weapons. Chairman Mao Zedong illustrated this in abstract terms in the mid-1960s: "As long as China has a few atomic bombs, for example six atomic bombs, no one would dare to bomb cities in China." For him, numerical superiority or inferiority in nuclear weapons did not make much difference. Premier Zhou Enlai repeatedly stressed that the development of nuclear weapons should be "few but good," and money should not be wasted on the unnecessary development of excessive numbers of nuclear weapons. China never based its nuclear acquisition policy on the so-called scientific calculus of being able to inflict "unacceptable damage" on the adversary.

13. "Few" is one of the two principles, and "good" is the other. "A certain quantity, quality and variety" paraphrased the key principle. Without a large nuclear arsenal, China has devoted considerable effort to improve the quality of its nuclear force, to make sure its retaliatory capability is safe, secure, survivable and reliable. For this purpose, China invested first in developing survivable ballistic missiles, and secondly, at a very slow pace, in submarines. Not much investment was put into the vulnerable bombers.

14. Its small nuclear arsenal means that China is vulnerable to any large scale nuclear strikes. How to make the small nuclear arsenal survivable? Keeping China's nuclear force secret and opaque is the early answer to this question. Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia, China has never disclosed the size of its nuclear arsenal. Meanwhile, starting from late 1970s, China began to implement the "Great Wall Project." A network of hardened tunnels that stretch into the depths of huge mountains was dug to store nuclear weapons. This underground Great Wall Project was used to hide China's nuclear weapons, and by so doing China could improve the survivability of its small nuclear force.

15. Obviously, China takes a philosophically different approach in its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and history has proven that China's top leaders were reasonably pragmatic, and rationally visionary. For China, nuclear weapons are for defensive and retaliatory purpose only, and China achieved deterrence with a very limited nuclear force.

**China's Nuclear Policy: Continuity and Change**

16. Over the past several decades, China's nuclear policy has been reasonably consistent and stable, with very minor adjustments. Occasionally, there are debates about China's nuclear policy, mostly initiated by foreign scholars and experts. Some argue that China exercised strategic restraint in nuclear development because of the limitation of resources and its technological capability, but that China will change its nuclear policy when it is economically and technically capable of doing so. These commentators believe that "if China is like past rising great powers, it will not accept decisive nuclear inferiority in perpetuity."10

17. This kind of analysis has been advanced for quite a while, and the underlying logic is that China would follow the US and Soviet examples by dramatically changing its nuclear posture when economically able to do so. Some worry that China might build up its nuclear arsenal, even sprint to parity matching the two nuclear superpowers in numbers, at a time when both the United States and Russia are trying to downsize their nuclear arsenals. Others have deep suspicions whether the no-first-use policy is still to be trusted. Why did China not change its nuclear policy in the way those commentators predicted? It is not because China did not do the right thing, but because those scholars and experts applied a wrong paradigm to diagnose China's policy.

18. Thus the basic philosophy (nuclear weapons are unusable and China's nuclear weapons are for

---


defensive and retaliatory purpose only) and principles (no first use, negative security assurances for non-nuclear weapon states and members of nuclear-weapon-free zones) guiding China’s nuclear policy remain unchanged, and it is unlikely that they will change any time soon. Because China believes that nuclear weapons are more a political weapon than a military instrument to be used on the battlefield, its nuclear policy takes the form of vague political guidance rather than an implementable operation plan. China does not view its relations with other countries through the nuclear lens and tries to downplay the nuclear dimension in its foreign policy. Unlike the United States, China does not review its nuclear policy regularly.

19. Occasionally some Chinese scholars may purport to describe China’s nuclear policy in different terms, but none of those speakers represent China’s official policy. The only authoritative source of China’s nuclear policy comes from the publicly released official documents, not from the remarks of one or two civilian or uninformed experts.

20. Sometimes, people may wonder whether China is changing its declaratory policy, such as the no-first-use policy. An interesting example of this was the reaction to the release in 2013 of the State Council of China’s white paper, The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces.11 In almost all of China’s white papers on national defence, no-first-use policy is a ‘must-include’ item. However, many foreign officials and experts like to challenge the credibility of China’s no-first-use pledge. The 2013 white paper contained no explicit mention of China’s long-standing no-first-use pledge, which caused a stir and debates over the question whether China was shifting away from that policy.12 In fact, there was no such policy shift at all. First, that white paper was not about China’s national defence policy or strategy, but a document explaining how China employs its armed forces. Secondly, if one reads between the lines of the white paper it is not difficult to find some lines that imply that China held fast to its commitment not to use nuclear weapons first.

21. Sometimes, experts speculate that China is dramatically building up its small nuclear arsenal.

Because China has never declared the exact number of nuclear weapons it owns, it is subjected to wild, and sometimes imaginative, guesswork by experts. Dr. Phillip A. Karber from Georgetown University did research on China’s “Great Wall Project” with his colleagues and students. He concluded that China might have built about 3000 nuclear warheads, ten times the average estimates.13 Some Russian experts and former military officers made similar, though lower, estimates of China’s nuclear force as well – such as Russian retired Colonel-General Viktor Yesin’s estimate of 1800 warheads.14 These alarmist and implausible – not to say amusing – findings indicate that if China does not officially disclose the size of its nuclear arsenal, the room for imagination is boundless, especially amongst those “experts” who have little expertise on China.

22. The overall consistency of China’s nuclear policy is not in conflict with the minor changes that have taken place in the past several decades. Initially the People’s Republic of China was excluded from most international forums, institutions and regimes, but now China is fully integrated into the international community. China has signed all the universally accepted international instruments on nuclear issues, and China is playing a big, and increasing, role in nonproliferation issues. Even though China only conducted 45 nuclear tests, it signed the CTBT and observes the nuclear test moratorium. China participated in the discussions on a fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT), and dedicated itself to maintaining and enhancing the universality, effectiveness and authority of the NPT.

23. Secondly, China improved its nuclear transparency in a subtle and gradual way, starting from the first white paper on nuclear issues in 1995. From 1998 onwards, China has published white papers on national defence every two years, and nuclear issues are addressed in these official documents. For example, in the State Council’s white paper China’s National Defense in 2006, China again confirmed the principles of a self-defensive nuclear strategy, limited development of nuclear weapons, a lean and effective nuclear force, non-involvement in arms race, and a robust command and control system, etc.15 And in the above mentioned white paper The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces, China explained the mission of the Second Artillery, how

---

China develops its nuclear force, its alert level, and how China reacts to nuclear threats and nuclear attacks, etc.  

24. The military parade is the other way to improve nuclear transparency. Every five or ten years, China holds a military parade, and some of its new military capability including nuclear capabilities are showcased. Last year, China displayed several types of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles that are not really new for most China watchers. China’s missile capability has also developed very much in line with the policy articulated in China’s national defence white papers. These military parades could confirm China watchers’ speculations of China’s nuclear capability. However, they may not get the message right. When China displays its old or newly gained military capability, China is not aiming to show muscle, but to take pride in its achievements. The military parade is in essence a parade of national pride. What is equally important, the military capability displayed in parades is not meant to threaten other countries, nor to conduct an arms race with other countries, but to send a message to other countries that a more developed and stronger China is not to be pushed around like it had been several decades ago.

25. China emphasizes transparency in strategic intent over transparency in strategic capability. China might not be as transparent as others might like it to be, but that does not mean that its military is more powerful than that of the United States or that China intends to destabilize the regional security architecture.

26. Additionally, China is making efforts to improve the credibility of its nuclear deterrence. In the past several decades, China has had confidence in its small nuclear arsenal. China can be comfortable with an asymmetrical deterrence posture and vulnerability to other nuclear powers, but the precondition for this is that China ensures its deterrence is credible. In the past China made efforts to improve the safety, security, survivability and reliability of its small nuclear force. Actions to diversify the deployment, and to improve the command and control system and the early warning capability, are designed to ensure China will not be coerced or attacked by nuclear weapons. By improving the survivability of its nuclear forces, China could maintain its no-first-use pledge with confidence. These multipronged efforts do not necessarily mean that China will build up its nuclear arsenal. If China was obsessed with numerical parity with other nuclear powers, it would have expanded its arsenal in the early years instead of doing it now.

**China’s Future Nuclear Policy Directions**

27. It is not likely China will make a substantial change to its nuclear policy in the foreseeable future, for two reasons. First, China learned the right lessons from the Cold War arms race immediately after the Soviet Union’s collapse. One of the key features of the Cold War was the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both countries built up a large nuclear arsenal and wasted a large portion of their military budget, but nuclear weapons have never been used after the end of WWII. Fierce nuclear competition in quantity and quality brought no positive change in either’s security environment, and sometimes it made the competition and confrontation potentially catastrophic as happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis and as a result of the NATO exercise Able Archer 83. A large nuclear arsenal is also a big budgetary burden, and it may come at the expense of people’s welfare. Both the United States and Soviet Union first built up their nuclear arsenals, and then built them down through arms control and disarmament agreements. This process proves China’s top leaders’ vision that nuclear weapons are not usable. That there has been no nuclear war in the past seven decades is a matter of good luck; there was no inevitability about the maintenance of nuclear peace. More nuclear weapons could mean more chances of accidental or unauthorized use.

28. Secondly, China and the world are getting more and more interdependent economically and politically. China benefits from its economic and trade relations with other countries, official communications, and people-to-people exchanges. Thus China has more at stake now than in the past in a less stable international environment. What is more important, China has developed good relationships with all nuclear powers, and a strategically stable relationship has been maintained for several decades. China might have disputes with other major powers, but most of those disputes are either solvable or manageable. The chance of a dramatic deterioration of China’s relationship with the outside world is remote. There

---


is no justification for China to drastically change its nuclear posture.

29. That said, there are some factors that might have an impact on China’s future nuclear policy. The most important one is whether the role of nuclear weapons could be further reduced. Since the end of the Cold War, almost all nuclear states have tried to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their national security and military strategy. Some even push hard to further narrow the role of nuclear weapons to its sole purpose, that is, nuclear weapons are to deter nuclear attack only. There once were some very positive developments in this regard, however, there exists a real danger of the reversal of this tide. If more and more importance is attached to nuclear weapons once again, that will have some influence on how China views the dynamics among major nuclear powers.

30. A second factor is the trend of nuclear disarmament. The reason why China maintains such a moderate nuclear posture lies in its belief in the final comprehensive and complete elimination of nuclear weapons. China has witnessed and learned from the ups and downs of the role of nuclear weapons, the development of international norms against nuclear weapons, and the arms control and disarmament process between the two nuclear superpowers. China once was very much encouraged by the international trend of nuclear disarmament immediately after the end of Cold War, and it was even prepared to get involved in this process when the time was ready. However, the real nuclear disarmament process came to a pause in late 1990s. It is true that the United States and Russia signed two more disarmament agreements in the last two decades, but those agreements are mostly political and symbolic with the absence of provisions for the destruction of nuclear warheads and delivery means. Those nuclear disarmament efforts are very much reversible. If the two nuclear superpowers which own more than 95 per cent of world nuclear weapons are getting reluctant to do more, how can they ask China to do more?

31. A third factor is the future development of missile defence and its impact on nuclear deterrence. China firmly opposes the development of missile defence systems which may negate China’s nuclear deterrence by reducing the vulnerability of enemy forces to retaliatory attacks by China’s nuclear weapons. That has been manifested in China’s defence of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in late 1990s, and nowadays in China’s strong opposition of the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. By now, the ABM Treaty has long gone, while among major nuclear powers there is neither agreement in, nor consensus on, missile defence. The architecture and potential capacity of missile defence systems are open questions, and their impact on nuclear deterrence could be far-reaching. When China has confidence in its very moderate nuclear capability, it can live with asymmetrical deterrence posture and vulnerability. Once China’s confidence is reduced by the introduction of the missile defence factor, and it is challenged by the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons, that will be the time for China to rethink its long-standing nuclear policy.
The Author

FAN JISHE is Director for Strategic Studies, and Deputy Director of the Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation Studies at the Institute of American Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing.

APLN/CNND Policy Briefs

These express the views of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of APLN members or the CNND, or other organizations with which the authors may be associated. They are published to encourage debate on topics of policy interest and relevance regarding the existence and role of nuclear weapons.

APLN and CNND

The Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (CNND) contributes to worldwide efforts to minimize the risk of nuclear-weapons use, stop their spread and ultimately achieve their complete elimination. The director of the Centre is Professor Ramesh Thakur. See further http://cnnd.anu.edu.au.

The Asia Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) comprises over seventy former senior political, diplomatic, military and other opinion leaders from fifteen countries around the region, including nuclear-weapons possessing states China, India and Pakistan. The objective of the group, founded by former Australian Foreign Minister and President Emeritus of the International Crisis Group Gareth Evans, is to inform and energize public opinion, and especially high-level policy-makers, to take seriously the very real threats posed by nuclear weapons, and do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and ultimately eliminated. The co-Convenors are Professors Chung-in Moon and Ramesh Thakur. The Secretariat is located at the East Asia Foundation in Seoul, Republic of Korea. See further www.a-pln.org.

Funding Support

APLN gratefully acknowledge the generous support of Nuclear Threat Initiative, Washington DC.

Contact Us

APLN, East Asia Foundation
4F, 116 Pirundae-ro
Jongno-gu, Seoul 03535
Republic of Korea
Email:apln@keaf.org
Tel: +82 2 325 2604-6