

PLA's Modernisation of its Strategic Forces and Implications for India

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Introduction

To the uninitiated, China and India are similar when it comes to nuclear weapons and the manner in which they view these weapons. China maintains that it detests nuclear weapons and that they are inhumane. It argues that because the US and the former Soviet Union were both building large nuclear arsenals during the Cold War and because, or so the argument goes in the Chinese perceptive, these two former super powers used nuclear weapons to coerce non-nuclear states, it was argued that China had no choice but to pursue nuclear weapons itself.

China maintained that it would prefer to see nuclear weapons abolished rather than maintain its own arsenal. India too, it is argued, is a reluctant nuclear power and has been compelled to become a nuclear power because of powerful and compelling security considerations. This article examines if this is indeed true and, if not, what is the underlying logic of the nuclear weapons of China. Why has China embarked on an ambitious modernisation programme of its strategic forces and more importantly, what does this portend for India?

Layout

This article is laid out as under:-

- (a) Examining the Moral High Ground of Chinese Nuclear Programme in light of the Modernisation of Chinese Strategic Forces and Force Posture.
- (b) External and Internal Factors driving the Changes in China's Nuclear Modernisation and Force Posture
- (c) Implications for India.

The Modernisation of PLA's Strategic Forces and Force Posture

Prior to analysing the modernisation of the PLA's Strategic Forces and its force structure, it is important to first examine the reality behind the moral high ground argument and rationale of its nuclear weapons.

The Moral High Ground of Chinese Nuclear Programme

Having established itself as a nuclear power in the mid-1960s, China declared that:-

- (a) It had adopted a "No First Use" policy.
- (b) Strategic weapons would only be used in retaliatory counter attacks.
- (c) It also promised never to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.

In addition, China has long maintained a doctrine of minimum deterrence. This posture required that China maintain a small force of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), only a few of which are needed to survive a nuclear attack. For minimum deterrence to be effective, all that was needed was a small, survivable arsenal, which is essentially what China has maintained all along.

However, from the declassification of the US documents which are now available, coupled with the confessions of the now disgraced Pakistani scientist AQ Khan, it is clear that China played a pivotal role in the Pakistani and Iranian nuclear programmes. It appears that China sees a use for these weapons other than simple self-defence. Though China appears to have halted its proliferation activities, these past activities suggest a more well thought out strategy towards nuclear weapons than one of moral abhorrence.

The Modernisation of Strategic Forces and Posture

China's movement towards an increased reliance on nuclear weapons and shifts in its nuclear doctrine are not surprising but potentially of great concern. While China has been adding more weapons to its nuclear arsenal and fielding new ballistic missiles and ballistic missile submarines, Chinese strategists have been engaged in doctrinal debates over how these weapons should be used. As a younger generation of military thinkers has come to the fore, the long-held tenets of China's nuclear doctrine as originally set forth under Mao; namely, the "No First Use" policy and minimum deterrence are increasingly coming under scrutiny. Indeed, some strategists argue that China should cast these policies aside and adopt a new nuclear doctrine that will grant strategic forces a more prominent role in the country's defence.

Though officially China appears to adhere to a doctrine of minimum deterrence, there is evidence to suggest that, in recent decades, China has moved or is moving to a limited deterrence nuclear doctrine. In 1995, Alastair Iain Johnston argued that in post-Cold War China, there had been "more comprehensive and consistent doctrinal arguments in favor of developing a limited flexible response capability.¹" In limited deterrence, nuclear weapons play a critical role in the deterrence of both conventional and nuclear wars as well as in escalation control (intrawar deterrence), if deterrence fails. In other words, nuclear weapons have a wider utility than proponents of minimum deterrence would suggest². If China has adopted a doctrine of limited deterrence, then, this implies that China would use its nuclear weapons not only to deter nuclear attack on itself but, if necessary, to fight and win a nuclear war or, if not win, to at least deny victory to an adversary.

For the first few decades of the PRC's existence, the PLA maintained a doctrine of "People's War." The PLA

would make use of China's greatest resources; its large population and strategic depth to defeat a superior enemy on Chinese territory. The PLA now plans to fight "localised wars under conditions of informationisation". Given the Chinese government assertions that its nuclear capability "is solely for self-defence with a view to maintaining independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity,"³ it is quite possible that China may be tempted to use nuclear weapons to prevent an adversary from seizing territory, which the Chinese claim, is their own.

External Factors

The US Threat

From China's point of view, the US is the number one threat. China perceives that the US can challenge all of its three core interests: regime survival, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and continued economic growth.

- (a) **Regime Survival.** It is no secret that the US would like to see political liberalisation in China. Indeed, this has long been used as a justification for trading with the PRC.
- (b) **Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity.** There are historical reasons for this concern, as the CIA supported separatists in Tibet during the Cold War. In the present day, the US provides a home for Rebiya Kadeer, Xinjiang's leading activist, and has honoured the Dalai Lama.
- (c) **Economic Prosperity.** The US is China's largest trading partner and the US dominates the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). Should Sino-US tensions spike or conflict breakout, the US is able to not only cut-off its own trade with China, but can also impede the flow of oil and other natural resources to China by blocking the SLOCs.

China's growing medium-range ballistic missile threat to America's Pacific bases may force the US to rely on long-range assets for conventional deterrence. China may find this destabilising and may rely on its nuclear arsenal to deter America's use of long-range weaponry. China's fears that its second strike capability would be threatened and thus its deterrent capabilities would get undermined.⁴

Emerging Nuclear Weapon States

Japan, Taiwan and South Korea are "emerging" or "threshold" states. All have previously had nuclear weapons development programmes in the past and can resume them relatively easily should they feel threatened.⁵

Japan.

- (a) Today, Japan's nuclear energy infrastructure makes it eminently capable of constructing nuclear weapons at will.
- (b) De-militarisation of Japan and the US nuclear umbrella have led to a policy of non-weaponisation of nuclear technology, but in the face of nuclear weapons testing by North Korea, some politicians and retired military officers in Japan are calling for a reversal of this policy.⁶
- (c) As China's military continues to grow, Japan will find it increasingly difficult to defend itself with conventional forces, especially if the US drawdowns its own forces in the region.
- (d) A China that is prepared to use nuclear weapons against US forces in Japan or a China that poses an overwhelming conventional threat to the islands will make nuclear forces a much more attractive option for Tokyo.

Taiwan.

- (a) Taiwan does not have nuclear weapons. However, Taiwan had made attempts to organise production of plutonium on an experimental basis.
- (b) Taiwan had launched a nuclear weapons programme after the first Chinese nuclear test in October 1964. By 1974, the US Central Intelligence Agency concluded that "Taipei conducts its small nuclear programme with a weapon option clearly in mind, and it will be in a position to fabricate a nuclear device after five years or so."
- (c) The US intelligence believed that Taiwan also had designed devices suitable for nuclear testing.⁷ With tensions in PRC - Taiwan relations, the possibility that Taiwan could make another attempt to breakout of the nonproliferation regime remains a concern.

South Korea.

- (a) South Korea is said to have first begun its nuclear weapons programme in 1970, in response to the Nixon Doctrine's emphasis on self defence for Asian allies.⁸
- (b) South Korea may have had plans in the 1980s to develop nuclear weapons to deter an attack by the North.⁹ The plans were reported to have been dropped under US pressure.
- (c) Though it was reported in August 2004 that South Korea had conducted highly secretive and sensitive nuclear research programmes over a twenty year period, the IAEA, in a report issued on 11 November 2004, described the South Korean government's failure to report its nuclear activities a matter of 'serious concern', but accepted that these experiments never produced more than very small amounts of weapon grade fissile material.¹⁰
- (d) The US maintains a ban on plutonium being supplied to the South Korea.¹¹

Internal Factors

Economic Challenges.

- (a) In early March 2012, China released its defence budget. Chinese military expenditure will increase by 11.2 per cent over 2011 figures, and it breached the symbolic 100 billion mark for the first time.
- (b) China's defence budget, on an average, has risen by 13 per cent per annum over the last fifteen years and it has grown over 500 times the expenditure it incurred in 1997¹².
- (c) However, internally, the growth has been skewed with large parts of China's hinterland remaining still grossly underdeveloped and neglected, with the attention focused primarily on areas close to the coast.

Demographic Challenges. A number of demographic trends are interacting to create an unfavorable environment for the PLA. Some of these are :-

- (a) The labour force (aged 15-64) will peak around 2015 and then begin to shrink. Meanwhile, the population of people aged 0-14 and 15-24 is already shrinking.¹³
- (b) First of all, the 4-2-1 population structure (four grandparents, two parents, one child) in combination with the under-funded pension system will make PLA volunteers harder to come by and retention more difficult, as the single child will feel pressure to adequately care for his/her elders.
- (c) Twenty three per cent of the Chinese population will be elderly in 2050, at which point the official dependency ratio (the number of elders per 100 individuals 15-64 years of age) will be thirty eight.¹⁴
- (d) The shrinking population of people aged 0-14 and 15-24 means that the PLA's recruitment pool is shrinking as well.

Possible Response to External Factors

- (a) First, China may respond to the external factors by attempting to give further impetus to its nuclear modernisation programme because of what it perceives are real security threats.
- (b) China's build-up of short and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles may also, inadvertently, impact its nuclear doctrine. These missiles threaten the US air bases in South Korea, Japan, and on Guam as well as aircraft carriers at sea.

Possible Response to Internal Factors

- (a) It may respond to the internal challenges much in the way Russia did when it was faced with a demographic challenge. It may abandon NFU policy.
- (b) China may come to rely more heavily on its nuclear arsenal in order to deal with the increasing budgetary pressures.

Implications for India

Military Implications

An analysis of the implications of China's strategic modernisation and force posture for India must also analyse the PLA's nuclear arsenal and weapons deployment. Some relevant pointers are :-

- (a) Consider the Second Artillery's nuclear-capable medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs). Some of these are located in southern and central China within striking range of India (and Southeast Asia). Others, however, are deployed to East and northeast China, within range of South Korea and Japan, both non-nuclear states.
- (b) If China is prepared to launch nuclear-tipped missiles at these targets, this would suggest something other than a minimum deterrence posture, which relies on counter-value rather than counter-force targeting.
- (c) Though China certainly does not want a war with India at this time, it seems that China does not necessarily shy from one either.

Other Implications

- (a) India needs to respond to China's nuclear modernisation. For far too long has it been mistakenly believed that military capacity building and diplomatic parleys/ talks are not mutually compatible. Whereas the reverse is true; nothing helps talks better than a strong and competent military.
- (b) Such a step might have a domino effect on Pakistan's nuclear forces as well.
- (c) It is not illogical to presume that China may well be viewing India as presenting a threat to the Chinese economy also, given that it dominates key shipping lanes.

Conclusion

It is, of course, impossible to predict precisely how China's nuclear weapons policy and strategic arsenal will develop in the coming decades. There are, fortunately, a few aspects that appear encouraging. First, there is an ongoing debate

among China's military thinkers about how and when to use nuclear weapons, notwithstanding the impending demographic crunch and pension crisis that may occur later. Hence, there is hope that China will seriously contemplate all facets of the nuclear policy before affecting any radical changes. It appears unlikely that it will increase its reliance on nuclear weapons, at least in the near to medium term. However, the modernisation of China's nuclear weapons is a worrying prospect for China's neighbours as well as for the US, and it is a prospect that India should factor into its security calculus.

Endnotes

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIII, No. 592, April-June 2013.