

China's Ambiguous Nuclear Doctrine – Concerns for the US ?

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"We must have what others have, and anyone who wants to destroy us will be subject to retaliation."

- Deng Xiaoping

Introduction

China's no first use doctrine is based not only on the concept of "superpower parity but on the doctrine of mutual assured destruction".¹ Over the years, the Chinese military doctrines have remained '*neibu*' (restricted). Chinese political leaders, diplomats and security and strategic thinkers announced that China would adhere to a 'no first use' of nuclear weapons which has continued to be an integral part of Beijing's foreign policy. However, there was no authentic military information available on how China would use its nuclear weapons in case of real time of war. China's nuclear doctrine had been based on the principles of *youxiaoxing* (effectiveness), *zugou* (sufficiency) and *fanweishe* (counter deterrence). This paper aims to analyse the complexities and apprehensions of the United States concerning China's nuclear doctrine and also analyses the reason as to why China is likely to adhere to a no first use policy.

A Transitional Change?

There have been three stages of development in China's Nuclear Strategy and Forces. The first stage relied on existential deterrence or *cunzaixing* *weishe*, where China possessed nuclear weapons but lacked effective delivery systems, the second stage was minimal deterrence or *zuidi* *weishe* where China can cause unacceptable damage to adversaries assuming that a humble number of arsenal would survive the first strike. The present stage of development is credible minimum deterrence or *zuidi kexin weishe* to confuse adversary on exact location of missile forces.

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A Change in Doctrine?

Many Chinese analysts have felt that China should make its nuclear doctrine more flexible, that is shift from a defensive oriented nuclear doctrine to a more offensive oriented nuclear doctrine. It has been said that the fluid nature of high tech wars often “blurs” the distinction between offence and defence. The National Defence University in China is led to believe that only *jiji de gongshi* (active offensive) can “seize and maintain initiative on battlefield”. It claims that defence is only important to save important strategic points during an offensive. Hence, ‘no first use doctrine’ should be conditional and that the use of nuclear weapons in the first strike by Beijing should be a justified action when its national interests would be at stake.

Weaponisation

It is a known fact that nuclear weapons need to be operationalised, which can only be done by fitting them into effective delivery systems. For the purpose of achieving “limited deterrence”, China’s Second Artillery Corps which the Chinese call as ‘Strategic Rocket Forces’ became the backbone of dragon’s nuclear forces. According to Bulletin of Atomic Scientists report on “China’s Nuclear Forces, 2010”, it was estimated that China possessed approximately 175 active nuclear warheads and 65 warheads which waited to be dismantled bringing the total stockpile to 240 warheads. It has been estimated that by 2020, the warhead numbers would become “more than double”.

According to Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, China’s land based nuclear capable ballistic missiles are DF-3A, DF-4, DF-5A, DF-21, DF-31, DF-31A. Only DF-5A is silo based while the rest of them are all mobile. Out of these, the DF-3A is already in its phase out stage and hence, China is replacing them with the DF-21As. Even the DF-4 missiles are being replaced by DF-21 and DF-31. China’s sea based nuclear deterrent would include the Julang class submarine launch ballistic missiles to be fitted with the Jin class SSBN. However, the Julang class missiles are not yet operational and would be restricted by its ranges while the SSBNs are yet to prove their credibility in any deterrent patrol. China’s cruise missile arsenal include the DH-10 is suspected to be either conventional or nuclear.

Apart from missiles, PLA Air Force (PLAAF) also possesses the capability to deliver nuclear weapons. China's H-6 bombers, though old, are capable of carrying nuclear weapons. A limited number of Q-5As updated versions of MiG 19 have been modified to carry nuclear weapons.

China's Apprehensions about the United States

China strictly perceives America as a viable threat to its security due to Washington's growing relations with other Asian countries by increasing its influence in the Asia-Pacific region and also through unwanted interference in its 'one China' policy.

China has not forgotten its apprehensions during the Korean War of a nuclear blackmail by the Americans. China has been building-up on strategic missile forces in order to achieve a "credible survivable nuclear deterrent" and counter strike capability. Over the years, China has been keenly studying Operation Iraqi Freedom which has led into a belief amongst the Chinese that future wars would be 'local wars under high tech conditions'. Hence, China's military modernisation has laid a lot of stress on *zhengti zouzhan* (integrated operations), *zhongdian daiji* (to launch crucial point strikes) against the opponent's key vulnerabilities.

China has been worrisome of an attack on China's Second Artillery Corps by the US; in particular, about destruction of its strategic nuclear forces. This had resulted in several Chinese military leaders and strategic thinkers to review its policy of 'no first use'. This has left the world especially the US befuddled over Chinese intentions of first strike options. China also fears a nuclear first strike from the US which could result in decapitation and hence, consistently tries to make the Americans agree to a 'no first use' policy too. Some of the Chinese analysts worry about an attack, even a conventional one, on China's command and control centres.

USA's Concerns

In a remark, General Zhu Chenghu mentioned that if the USA targetted their missiles towards China, they would have to face the consequences of nuclear retaliation. China has been apprehensive of missile deployments by the US in East Asia and had been strongly opposing the US National Missile Defence and Theatre Missile Defence as a threat to their nuclear deterrence.

China has also vehemently opposed the US policy of extended deterrence.

Doctrines are susceptible to changes, and in case of a real time war, it is feared that the Chinese might renounce their 'no first use' policy even against conventional attacks.

Chinese are developing counter measures through their ballistic missiles to evade the US ballistic missile defence system. These include multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles, manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles, decoys, chaffs. Chinese aircrafts are being made stealthy in order to escape any air defence system. These could negate USA's defensive postures. The US could be worried that since Chinese are developing counter measures to negate their ballistic missile defence, they could use their ballistic missiles for a first strike and destroy some of the US arsenal, even though such things are unlikely to happen.

While China mentions it would not go against its nuclear doctrine to attack foreign territories, the question of Taiwan still remains uncertain since China considers Taiwan as a part of its own territory and could thereby justify the use of nuclear weapons in its own territory. Unification of Taiwan has been one of the major agendas in China's national security objectives. If not unification, China at least would make an attempt to prevent Taiwan from achieving "*de jure*" independence.

China's Actions to Strengthen its Stand on Nuclear No First Use

China has not only been committed to adhering to a "no first use policy" for itself, but also believe that nuclear weapon states across the world should be giving up nuclear deterrent which is based on first use policy.² There have been reports which confirmed that the Chinese would be committed to a "no first use", which is being proved by the way they have been enhancing their nuclear arsenal for retaliatory strikes. Characterised as "anti nuclear blackmail", China follows a counter value second strike deterrence strategy. Nuclear weapons would be used for strategic retaliation and conventional weapons would be used for precision counter strikes. Chinese leaders have followed – what may be termed as limited nuclear deterrence. Liu Huaqiu mentions that if China launches a

first strike, the adversaries would retaliate with “many more nuclear weapons” which would be destructive for China’s national interest.

China’s apprehension of a US pre-emptive strike on the liquid fuelled missiles was further reduced when China started to develop solid propelled ballistic missiles and slowly replacing the liquid fuelled ones with the solid fuelled ones. China’s move from silo based missiles to road mobile missiles strengthens the fact that China has long term plans of adhering to its “no first use” of nuclear weapons. This is because road mobile missiles are developed to enhance survivability of the missiles for a counter strike. It must also be taken into account that road mobile missiles are usually the choice for counter strike or second strike while silo based missiles are generally the choice for first strike as their chances of being destroyed are high. Hence, China plans to strengthen its stand on “no first use” of nuclear weapons by developing road mobile missiles which are more suited for counter strike.³

China’s SLBMs like the Julang 1 and 2 is expected to enhance China’s counter strike and second strike capability further. Submarine launched ballistic missiles are also used for counter strike or second strike capability rather than for first strike capability. Hence, SLBMs on SSBNs could further strengthen China’s stand on “no first use” of nuclear weapons.

China’s perseverance towards building a capable ballistic missile defence is to deter the US from attacking China with nuclear capable ballistic missiles. Given China’s claims that the nuclear weapons are solely for defensive purposes, China is likely to use its ballistic missile defence to intercept any incoming ballistic missile, and then use its own arsenal to counter attack.

Chinese leaders and strategic thinkers have always viewed nuclear weapons as *guoji diwei* (increase nation’s status in international politics) and contribute towards the *zonghe guoli* (national power) and are *yizhong zhengzhi wuqi* (political weapons). China is believed to not only take interest in increasing counter strike retaliatory capabilities but also that the strategic missile forces should be able to operate for a prolonged period of time. China’s attempts at building “hardened and deep” tunnels near the Hebei Mountains further strengthens China’s stand on a “no first use” policy. Hard and deeply buried targets would require several bunker

busting weapons to destroy them, thereby; enhancing China's counter strike capability. This would also prevent an adversary from striking first, since he would know that China would have some retaliatory capabilities. An advantage of having these hard and deeply buried targets is that even if the ballistic missile defence is unable to save the counter force targets, China would still have the tunnels to do so.⁴

China's efforts in developing capabilities for information warfare would include cyber warfare, anti-access area denial strategies and development of directed energy weapons in their effort to deter the Americans through means other than nuclear weapons. Hence, if the Chinese successfully develop information warfare capabilities, they could rely less on nuclear weapons and thereby adhere to its "no first use policy" – hence, they would use them only when they are attacked with the same.

There are apprehensions that in case the US developed a Conventional Prompt Global Strike capability, it could become a destabilising factor as the Chinese could misconstrue the missiles to be nuclear armed and launch a nuclear first strike. However, such apprehensions of a nuclear first use could only be attributed towards countries which have 'first use policy', not with a country which has no first use policy.⁵

Another reason, why China is likely to adhere to its "no first use policy" is that it would prevent a nuclear attack from the US. Despite the apprehensions, China's strict adherence to a no first use does give the US a reason to breathe a sigh of relief. In case China used nuclear weapons first, it would have to destroy all the counter force targets of the USA which are widely dispersed not only inside their homeland but also in forward bases. This could be an impossible task. China is developing multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). However, such MIRVs face technical limitations since miniaturisation of these nuclear weapons have not yet been mastered by the Chinese.

China follows a counter-value counter-strike strategy. This means China would hold the US counter value targets at risk in case it is coerced to launch a nuclear attack. To hit a counter value target even when the US has not hit the Chinese, either with nuclear weapons or with conventional weapons, the Chinese could do that with conventional weapons itself.

The fear of a nuclear first strike against the US could be viewed as credible threat by Washington because of their conventional power superiority which could tempt the Chinese to launch a first nuclear strike to weaken the conventional advantage of the US, in case of a conflict over the Taiwan issue. However, that would not happen since China's no first use "gives a great deal of political capital within the international capitals".⁶ Moreover, China has been threatening to use nuclear weapons to solve the issue of Taiwan only, if the US resorts to use of force. To counter the US threats, China is befriending the US adversaries like Russia, Iran, Turkey and many more. In case China adopts a "first use policy" it could make the US adversaries, whom China is trying to befriend, suspicious of the Dragon's motives.

Conclusion

There could be positive outcomes from crisis situations. The tussle between offensive capabilities of the Chinese and defensive capabilities of the US could escalate into such crisis situations that both countries could be coerced to rethink on arms control dialogues or treaties for both countries' national interests. Nevertheless, amidst the growing threat perceptions, the nuclear weapons might be able to act as the best weapons of peace between the US and China and enable them to move towards enhanced strategic stability. At the same time, China's "no first use" policy has allowed Beijing to be accepted as a "non-threatening international player, even as it builds-up its conventional forces and modernises its military".⁷

Endnotes

1. Kim R Holmes, "U.S.- SOVIET-CHINA RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC DEFENSE", *International Conference on The SDI: Implications for the Asian Community*, July-29,31, 1986.
2. "China sticks to no-first-use of nuclear weapons: white paper", *Xinhua News*, March 3, 2011
3. Note: Road mobile missile could also be used for first strike. However, given a choice between silo based missiles and road mobile missiles to be used for first strike, it is advisable to use silo based missiles first for first strike since they are likely to be more prone to destruction.

4. Debalina Chatterjee, "The Mystery Behind China's Hebei Mountains", *South Asia Analysis Group*, June, 2012, Also republished in *The Srilankan Guardian*.
5. The clarification was given by Air Commodore Jasjit Singh (Retd) in a discussion on conventional and nuclear warheads on missiles and their impact at the Centre for air Power studies, New Delhi.
6. Joanne Tompkins, "How U.S. Strategic Policy is Changing China's Nuclear Plans"?, *Arms Control Association*, 2003.
7. Stephanie Lieggi, "Going Beyond the Stir: The Strategic Realities of China's No-First-Use Policy", *NTI*, January 1, 1995.