

# Chinese Nuclear Policy in the Post-Cold War Age

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### Offer a Brief Analysis of Chinese Nuclear Policy During the Post-Cold War Age

#### Introduction:

##### *Basic political context:*

A policy is the means to an end, not an end in itself. Before a meaningful analysis of Chinese nuclear policy can be undertaken a summary of the context it operates in is vital.

In many respects, China's post-Cold War period began in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping. China in 1978 was a mess; a half-century of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers followed by a quarter-century of Mao's disastrous reforms had seen to that. [1] Xiaoping, something of a radical, identified Marxist economics as the single greatest cause and reformed the Chinese economy around market principles, imported technology and partially integrated the Chinese economy into the global system.[2] However, there was no comparable restructuring in politics. Totalitarian Maoism was quietly replaced with an authoritarian nationalism. Deng wanted to rebuild China's damaged society and international standing, not transform it along the lines of a liberal democracy.[3]

##### *Long-term goals:*

China's most basic long-term goals can be adequately formulated from the above. Chinese leaders since 1978 have sought to

1. Reform and consolidate China's economic and social structures.
2. Rebuild Chinese national power.

An analysis of these tasks is beyond the scope of this essay, but it suffices to say that policymakers believe that fulfilling them will require intense effort. As a corollary, the conclusion has been drawn that Chinese foreign policy must be to cultivate a benign international environment to ensure maximum concentration on these goals.[4]

##### *Post-Cold War:*

There has been a remarkable degree of continuity between China's post-Maoist and post-Cold War goals; Chinese grand strategy simply hasn't changed very much.[5] This said, the fall of the USSR did change elements of Chinese strategic calculations; economic development and nuclear proliferation in Southern Asia altered these further. Today, Chinese "high" security policy with a relevant nuclear dimension is largely concerned with:

1. The informal US/Taiwanese alliance.
2. A more assertive Japan.
3. Potential nuclear proliferation, primarily North Korean.
4. Nuclear-armed southern Asia, primarily India.[6]

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## *Structure:*

The importance of linking policies to ends has already been touched upon – indeed, it has been insisted upon by every successful strategist from Sun Tzu to George Kennan. Machiavelli's rejoinder to the cardinal of Rouen – that "...[if] Italians understood little about warfare... the French understood little about statecraft" captures the point nicely.[7]

In analysing Chinese nuclear policy the general principles and attitudes taken will be explained. These principles will then be applied to Chinese grand strategy and the more specific elements of the Chinese strategic calculus. From here policy implications and the degree to which nuclear policy and security concerns shape each other can be discussed, followed by an overall judgement of Chinese policy and some suggestions as to its possible evolution.

## **Nuclear Policy:**

One noticeable aspect of Chinese nuclear policy is the areas of shift and continuity. Strategic nuclear policy – who China will deploy its nuclear arsenal against, under what circumstances and how it threatens to do so – shows little change from 1978 to the present day. This is likely a product of sound strategic thinking; if neither Chinese grand strategy nor its relationship to China's nuclear arsenal have undergone any major shifts, the basics of Chinese nuclear policy should stay the same. This aspect of Chinese policy has been labelled unilateral Chinese policy, in the sense that it is non-collaborative and largely generated from internally determined political ends.

However, the way in which China has interacted with the rest of the world vis-à-vis nuclear weapons regarding arms limitations treaties, non-proliferation regimes and shifts in regional power balances has proved more changeable. This aspect of Chinese policy has been labelled multilateral Chinese policy due to the inherently collaborative and multi-party nature of these issues.

It should be kept in mind that this separation of policy is somewhat artificial and a tool to make analysis more coherent; in reality the two areas are interlinked.

## *Unilateral Chinese nuclear policy:*

China conducted its first successful atomic explosion in 1964[8] and shortly afterwards articulated elements of its nuclear policy; the important elements of continuity can be characterised as:

- "We must have this thing." [9]
- Minimum deterrence.
- No first use.

Some corollaries follow. These include

- An emphasis on survivability.
- Countervalue, second-strike capability as opposed to counterforce, first-strike capability.
- Strategic as opposed to tactical use.[10]

## *"We must have this thing":*

The single simplest element of Chinese nuclear policy is the fear of being subject to atomic coercion. Very simply, China decided to acquire the atomic bomb due to fears of "atomic blackmail"[11] and continues to view its arsenal as a barrier to it.

## *Minimum Deterrence:*

It should be noted that classifying China's deterrence policy as being one of limited deterrence is questionable. China

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maintains an arsenal of fewer than 200 warheads[12] and declaratory policy is the maintenance of a minimum deterrent. This said, high-level Chinese officials have begun making ambiguous comments about potentially expanding the role of Chinese nuclear policy to include counterforce and denial deterrent roles.[13] Classification thus remains ambiguous, but considering that declared policy and consistent state practice, accepting minimum deterrence seems reasonable.[14]

Minimum deterrence was initially the result of material and economic necessity. China began attempting to acquire an atomic deterrent in the late 1950's in response to American military pressure.[15] However, minimum deterrence meshes very tightly with Chinese grand strategy. Firstly, the entire point of deterrence is to keep China out of expensive or long wars (see above.) Minimum deterrence minimises the costs of maintaining an arsenal and thus doesn't undermine the ends of the policy. Secondly, Chinese policy makers appear to have a largely existential view of nuclear deterrence, [16] further undercutting the rationale for a larger arsenal.

## *No First Use (NFU):*

China is the only declared nuclear weapons state with a NFU policy.[17] NFU is a logical outgrowth of minimum deterrence; a Chinese first strike would have little utility as a counter (nuclear) force option, leaving Chinese military and civilian targets open to a counter strike; coupled with an existential view of deterrence, first use would be absurd. Further, the Chinese nuclear arsenal was (initially) aimed at deterring the US then the USSR;[18] both nations had and have massively larger nuclear arsenals than the PRC. First use makes no sense.

With the Indian and Pakistani acquisition of nuclear weapons, the strategic calculus has been somewhat complicated (further analysis below.) For current purposes it is sufficient to say that NFU has survived these developments.

China often portrays its NFU policy in moralistic terms, and NFU is certainly a reassuring nuclear policy. A somewhat less benevolent explanation can be found in the concept of the security dilemma.[19] China can make potential nuclear adversaries more secure by adhering to NFU, reducing the likelihood of a nuclear exchange. Given the extreme disutility of a Chinese first strike, NFU can be seen not as a courageous moral decision but a rational policy choice with real propaganda and security benefits accruing at a minimal cost.

## *Survivability, Second strike and Strategic use:*

That these three elements of Chinese nuclear policy are made necessary by NFU and minimal deterrence should be obvious; logically, if one has an NFU policy and a very limited arsenal, a second strike is the only method of response, thus making survivability of ones nuclear arsenal vital. A limited arsenal and the chaotic situation following a nuclear strike the Chinese nuclear forces would have to operate under seriously limit counterforce potential; coupled with the existential deterrent culture, strategic and not tactical use is an inevitable conclusion.[20]

## *Multilateral Chinese nuclear policy:*

Elements of Chinese nuclear policy have evolved in the post-cold war era due to the collapse of the US-USSR rivalry, nuclear proliferation to China's neighbours and the prospect of further proliferation. Important elements of Chinese nuclear policy that have arisen more recently are:

- Participation in nuclear non-proliferation and arms control regimes, especially
- Opposition to Ballistic Missile Defence.[21]

However, there have been elements of relative continuity. These include

- Stance on disarmament
- Guarantees to non-nuclear nations.[22]

## *Stance on disarmament/arms control:*

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There is a disconnect between China's declaratory disarmament policies and the actions it takes. Immediately prior to and again after conducting successful atomic weapons tests China called for global nuclear disarmament,[23] portraying its acquisition of nuclear weapons as a choice forced upon it by the "century of humiliation"[24] and US-USSR nuclear rivalry. China continues to call global nuclear disarmament.[25]

There is a good measure of truth in the above portrayal, even if it is somewhat idealised. However, China has proven reluctant to involve itself in the arms reductions talks following the end of the cold war to the extent that it has refused to put in writing the levels to which US and USSR arsenals would have to fall before China began to cut its arsenal (the phrase "drastic cuts" took its place.)[26] Instead, it prefers to argue that the US and USSR have special responsibilities to uphold the nuclear powers end of the NPT by virtue of their much larger arsenals.[27]

## *Non-proliferation:*

China initially resisted the NPT treaty, taking nearly twenty years to sign up to it while claiming to support its principles.[28] China's approach to arms limitation, nuclear trade and non-proliferation contains significant cross tensions. On the one hand, it seems China would genuinely support an entirely non-nuclear world; (see guarantees, below.) On the other, China hasn't been above transferring sensitive nuclear arms-related data and material, violating the spirit and probably letter of the NPT, in order to achieve geopolitical advantages or regional goodwill[29] (more analysis below.) China has typically taken a sceptical attitude to the aims of the NPT and arms controls treaties, perhaps seeing them as a way for Great Powers to crystallise the status quo at the expense of others.[30]

As such, China's approach to arms control and non-proliferation is at times difficult to fathom.

## *Guarantees*

China extends numerous unilateral guarantees to non-nuclear weapons states, including underscoring it's obligations under the NPT to assist peaceful development of nuclear power, a pledge never to use nuclear weapons on a non-nuclear weapons state regardless of circumstances and strong support for the creation of nuclear-free areas.[31] China has also guaranteed not to target Russia (1994) and the USA (1998) with its nuclear arsenal on the basis of reciprocity.[32]

China's guarantees policy with regard to non-nuclear states is fairly enlightened and, while good for PR, unlikely lead to substantial political advantage. It also constitutes an area of secondary importance in Chinese nuclear policy. As regards the guarantees given to the USSR and US, such guarantees are conducive to international security but will only last as long as a relatively friendly relationship between China and the reciprocating party.

## **Applying Policy:**

Chinese nuclear policy is of course tailored to, affects and is affected by global politics. Areas of concern include:

### *US/Taiwanese "alliance" and BMD*

The nature of the Chinese/Taiwanese relationship coupled with the nature of Chinese deterrence strategy makes potential US deployment of BMD systems China's top nuclear-related security concern.

China considers Taiwan an integral part of China and has publicly committed itself to reunification, with or without the use of force. The US is currently (informally) committed to defending the Taiwan straits[33] and has transferred Patriot missile systems, which have an antiballistic missile capacity, to the Taiwanese military.[34]

China is resolute in its opposition of US BMD research, development and deployment. Attempts by the US to develop antiballistic missile capabilities have always generated controversy but China, with its minimal deterrence and second-strike emphasis, is particularly unhappy at the potential for the US to completely or partially neutralise its nuclear deterrent. China is extremely hostile to real or perceived atomic blackmail and sees deployment of ABM

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technology in northeast Asia as a necessary step in making such a policy feasible.[35]

## *Russia*

For most of the Cold War, the USSR was the main target of Chinese deterrence strategies.[36] Following the collapse of the USSR and subsequent treaties regarding the disputed Ussuri river area, Russia is now considered China's main ally on the UN security council and highly unlikely to need deterring. China and Russia agreed not to target each other with nuclear weapons in 1994.[37]

## *India*

The Chinese/Indian relationship has historically not been good. India has the potential military and economic resources to challenge China for regional leadership of South-East Asia, something Chinese policymakers are aware of.

China and India fought a border war in 1962, with China gaining the upper hand. Other sources of tension include Chinese and Indian support for Sikkim and Tibetan independence respectively, although these stances have been recently reversed.[38] Indian acquisitions of nuclear weapons for the declaratory purpose of deterring China, and China's support for the Pakistani nuclear weapons programme have furthered these tensions.[39]

## *Proliferation – Pakistan/India.*

Traditional Sino-Indian rivalries, coupled with a potential Pakistani nuclear weapons programme, led India to resume nuclear testing in 1998 and emerge with a small weapons programme.[40] Pakistan had been gaining significant aid from China in the form of missile technology, warhead blueprints, highly enriched uranium and the infrastructure necessary to sustain a nuclear weapons programme since 1983.[41] Though China has never accepted that the role it played in Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons breached its NPT obligations, it is difficult to see how this can be the case.

The Chinese desire to create nuclear-free areas and move towards universal nuclear disarmament is undoubtedly genuine. However, there can also be little doubt as to China's willingness to facilitate nuclear proliferation when geostrategic requirements (such as restraining India) make it profitable enough.

## *Proliferation – Korea/Japan*

If China encouraged nuclear proliferation to Southern Asia, it is certainly discouraging it in North-East Asia.

The leadership of North Korea appears to have come to the conclusion that the only way to become entirely secure is to acquire reliable nuclear warheads and delivery systems:[42] at time of writing, the North is estimated to have a handful of warheads but no missile-delivery system.[43]

Beyond a genuine desire to prevent nuclear proliferation where not positively advantageous, China has several good reasons for wanting North Korea to disarm. If North Korea continues to arm itself US military deployments, especially BMD systems, will likely rise in response. China is concerned with the existing deployments (Taiwan, above) and likely views further deployments as undesirable.

Further, should the US *not* get involved it is likely that both South Korea and Japan would build up higher levels of conventional and potentially nuclear forces.[44] Both Japan and South Korea are capable – lacking only the political will that a nuclear North Korea could supply- of crossing the nuclear threshold in months if not weeks.[45]

China has ambitions to become the dominant regional power in East Asia.[46] A nuclear-armed Korea and a re-armed Japan would be major bars to such ambitions while US pacific deployments are the biggest bar to Chinese-Taiwanese reunification. These three factors will to a degree be determined by the size of North Korea's weapons

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programme. As such, China genuinely wants to see North Korea disarm.

## Conclusions:

To conclude, we should first note that China's nuclear policy isn't a prominent aspect of contemporary Chinese policy. Books and sources discussing China without a specifically nuclear focus don't so much play down the importance of nuclear policy as treat this as a given, while specialist books use speak of "the decline of nuclear weapons as a predominant strategic consideration."<sup>[47]</sup>

Chinese nuclear policy serves Chinese strategic posturing, which in turn serves Chinese grand strategy. As mentioned at the start of the essay, Chinese grand strategy is to maintain a calm international strategic environment within which to pursue internal economic reforms. Chinese nuclear policy hinges around minimum deterrence and no first use to avoid nuclear blackmail; these three core principles are entirely consistent with Chinese grand strategy.

In other areas – arms control, non-proliferation and the like – China appears to decide whether to comply with international treaties and norms on the basis of strategic utility (in fairness, this kind of behaviour is not unique to China.) This does, however, undercut the often moralistic tenor of other elements of its policies.

To conclude, China's nuclear policy is inherently defensive and, excluding proliferation concerns, practically benign. However, one should remember that this does not mean it isn't based on self-interest.

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