



China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control

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Key Findings

Force Modernization

1. China is modernizing its strategic forces in ways that could lead to major departures in the scale, scope, purpose, and function of those forces. Beijing aims at an across-the-board improvement of its forces and during the last two decades has invested substantially in infrastructure and technology.

2. This modernization will continue regardless of what Washington chooses to do, but the ultimate shape of the force remains an open question. The final determination will depend upon ongoing Chinese assessments of a wide range of political, military, technological, and strategic factors.

3. Chinese modernization decisions are driven substantially by long-standing concerns about the survivability of its retaliatory force. China views its new ICBM, the DF-31, as providing a survivable second-strike capacity. Chinese concerns intensified as Washington deployed long-distance, precision, conventional strike capabilities and demonstrated their effectiveness in the Gulf War and in Yugoslavia.

4. Although China is widely reported to have deployed about twenty ballistic missiles capable of reaching the continental United States, the actual number may well be different – whether higher or lower we cannot judge. But it is clear that Beijing will field a new generation of long-range mobile missiles that have such capability.

5. Beijing can deploy multiple warheads atop its current long-range missiles, although it has chosen not to do so. However, its ability to MIRV its new missiles is uncertain. Collapse of the CTBT could remove a significant obstacle in this area.

Strategy

6. Minimum deterrence apparently remains the foundation of Beijing's intercontinental doctrine at this time. However, there are multiple signs of an increasingly vigorous debate on nuclear strategy. Moreover, new technical possibilities and perceived changes in China's external environment may lead to a more differentiated strategy, including limited deterrence and nuclear counterforce missions.

7. Beijing's marked lack of transparency stands in sharp contrast to the four other de jure nuclear weapons states. It is almost certainly an integral facet of its nuclear strategy.

8. China appears to have begun a mirror-image process of worst-case military planning in response to U.S. plans and discussion of missile defense deployments. Concerns about the credibility of Beijing's nuclear deterrent in the event of U.S. deployment of national missile defenses are a significant element in China's nuclear planning.

Missile Defense

9. The prospect of missile defense deployments by the United States, both in theater and at the national level, intensifies Chinese concerns about force capability and effectiveness. The prospect also fuels Beijing's concerns about Taiwanese independence and especially about potential longer-term U.S. containment objectives.

10. It is worth emphasizing that the Taiwan issue is central to Beijing's strategic worldview, influencing Chinese views on virtually all issues, including missile defense. For example, Chinese concerns about U.S. deployment of theater and national ballistic missile defenses are intensified by the possibility of military confrontation over Taiwan.

11. BMD decisions could have unintended consequences. Possible Russian reactions to possible U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty are especially disconcerting to Beijing. A major buildup by Moscow would clearly not be in Beijing's interest. On the other hand, rhetoric in Beijing and Moscow is strongly opposed to U.S. missile defense plans that have already been announced, and there are indications of growing strategic cooperation between the two. Such cooperation does not serve U.S. interests and could provoke the transfer to China of advanced Russian defense countermeasures.

12. It is not clear what Beijing's response will be. It might seek to restore the status quo ante by increasing the size of the force to the point at which U.S. missile defense would be overwhelmed. Or it might deploy a much larger force capable of implementing strategies beyond minimum deterrence. Whatever the decision, U.S. deployments will be used as a rationalization of China's actions.

U.S. Policy

13. The United States has an interest in not seeing China emerge as a major nuclear competitor. A political understanding may make this possible, whether an arms control agreement or something less formal.

14. There has been insufficient recognition of the importance of China's modernization choices to the United States.

15. Policy on nuclear weapons and arms control has remained largely bipolar in nature, focusing on the U.S.-Russian relationship. The bipolar paradigm has obscured the emerging triangular strategic offense/defense relationship among the United States, China, and Russia. This is intellectual terra incognita.

16. There is increasingly a need to link – both conceptually and structurally – the trajectories of the U.S.-Russian nuclear build-down and of China's nuclear modernization. Over time, the trajectories will move closer together. This requires exploration of the consequences of this convergence.

17. Stovepiping is a serious problem in the U.S. policy process. Policies on nuclear weapons, missile defense, and China tend to operate on three separate tracks, making it difficult to take into account and balance interests that sometimes compete or conflict.

18. The United States and China today have a window of opportunity to address these issues. Opportunities will narrow as Washington makes decisions on theater and national missile defenses and on a START III negotiating position vis-a-vis Russia.

19. It may not be possible to achieve meaningful arms control with China that satisfactorily accommodates both U.S. and Chinese interests. In light of the stakes and consequences it is imperative to fully and fairly test that proposition before arriving at such a conclusion.

Recommendations

1. Come to terms with core issues. Before engaging China on arms control issues, the United States needs to address such questions as: What is the role of nuclear weapons in its post-Cold War defense strategy? For what post-Cold War missions are nuclear forces relevant? What force levels are required at what state of alert? What is the desired mix of offense and defense in the U.S. posture? Whatever the process – whether high-level commission or a renewed nuclear posture review – answers to these questions must be informed by a clear view of China.

2. Work out the appropriate tripolar paradigm for nuclear arms control. The conceptual framework for determining the end-state of the U.S.-Russia build-down should be adjusted to fully reflect the emerging strategic triangle and the interaction of decisions in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Because China is the only declared nuclear weapon state that is increasing both qualitatively and quantitatively its nuclear forces, its modernization trajectory will, over time, move into closer proximity with the U.S.-Russian build-down trajectory.

3. Recognize that strategic issues are an important component in U.S.-PRC relations. The United States and China need to exchange assessments of factors favoring and undercutting international stability in the coming decades and allow arms control implications to follow logically from this process. Beijing's strong reaction to ballistic missile defense offers an excellent opportunity to begin such high-level discussions.

4. Move aggressively to deal with the negative consequences of stovepiping by creating mechanisms for coordinating different bureaucratic perspectives and priorities. This should be overseen by the National Security Council. The NGO community also has a role to play in generating crosscutting approaches. Its ability to contribute would be improved if there were stronger cooperation within the community as well as enhanced coordination with official efforts. This can also be extended to the Chinese arms control and foreign policy communities.

5. Enhance cooperation with China on arms control and nonproliferation where there appear to be overlapping interests, both global and regional. But keep expectations modest.

6. Work with the other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, as well as in regional venues, to persuade Beijing that increased transparency is in its national interest.

7. Incorporate a considered understanding of possible Chinese responses into plans for ballistic missile defenses, both theater and strategic. Certain deployment plans may achieve U.S. objectives without generating unwelcome Chinese responses.

8. Incorporate a considered understanding of interactions between Russian and Chinese force planning and preparations into follow-on strategic arms control proposals to Russia. START III provisions on MIRVs and up-loads may have to account for possible Chinese reactions.

9. Begin to test China's intentions by exploring what restraint it is prepared to demonstrate in exchange for certain forms of U.S. restraint. This discussion should begin at a policy planning level between governments and perhaps at a track one-and-a-half, officially sanctioned, officially deniable NGO level.

10. In considering an arms control approach to China, we should seek to understand how such engagement and any agreements that might be reached would affect U.S. nuclear strategy and the linkage to U.S. forward-deployed forces in various scenarios. We also need to anticipate the impact of such engagement on U.S. allies in the region, given their dependence on U.S. extended deterrence. This requires examining in greater analytical detail Chinese modernization options, the objectives they may serve, and the potential impact of each on the regional security environment.

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