

## **Nuclear Disinformation, or Reassuring Policy?**

by Larry M. Wortzel

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As a former military attaché in China and Army intelligence officer, I only very rarely managed to get my hands on “Top Secret” Chinese documents. Today, around the Washington, DC area alone, there are by my count some eight original copies of *The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* in the hands of China specialists at universities, think tanks, and policy institutes.

The document, labeled “Top Secret,” is somewhat comforting to the community involved in thinking about nuclear weapons doctrine, escalation control, and crisis management. Embodied in Chinese policy, as set out in this PLA publication, is a confirmation that China will maintain a minimal nuclear deterrent of a few weapons able to effect a response to a first strike by another power, an affirmation that China will never be the first to use nuclear weapons, and an explanation of the alert levels and rough response times for the PLA Second Artillery force in the event of nuclear war.

The number of original documents in the hands of US specialists on China stimulated me to think about why so many highly classified documents managed to leak out of one of its most secretive arms of the PLA. As a former intelligence collector, it is clear that losing one document like this is a major security breach, but losing a trove is a rare thing. And outside the Washington-based China-watching community, there are more copies. Some are on the US west coast, others are in Taiwan.

One explanation for this seeming breach is that although the PLA is not willing to sit down in government-to-government exchanges on nuclear doctrine and escalation control, PLA leaders decided to provide some sort of reassurance to the Western policy community. The implications of the underlying policy in *The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* is that China is a “responsible nuclear power” that will not engage in an arms race. Stated nuclear doctrine is, indeed, embodied in what should be tightly controlled PLA doctrinal writings. And, to reinforce this interpretation, the discussion of nuclear force levels, “no first use” policy, and readiness levels contained in the Second Artillery Force publication is consistent with the contents of the unclassified PLA publication, *The Science of Campaigns*. If that is the case, why bother classifying the Second

Artillery’s publication so highly? Taken together, these two publications affirm everything that the arms control community would advocate about building down US nuclear forces toward “nuclear zero.”

There is at least one alternative explanation, however. Inside the nuclear policy community in China we know there is some debate about the utility of the “no first use” policy. A minority of younger PLA officers and scholars argue that China needs to increase the size of its nuclear forces and leave open the question of how China might respond to conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. Also, there is the suggestion by analysts like Phillip Karber that the United States may have seriously underestimated the size of China’s nuclear force, which is now mobile and may be hidden in a complex of tunnels. A few Russian scholars, and Karber’s work, suggest that China may have considerably more than the 400 or so US documents credit the PLA with having. One Russian specialist, Alexei Arbatov, estimates that China may have between 1,000 and 3,500 reserve warheads stockpiled based on his analysis of Beijing’s fissile material production capabilities. Victor Yesin, a retired Russian general, estimates that China has between 1,600 and 1,800 warheads. Certainly the Chinese nuclear infrastructure is capable of producing the fissile material for more than 400 warheads.

An alternative explanation to the existence of so many highly classified documents leaking out to the West in so short a time is that the PLA is involved in a major perception management and disinformation campaign. Could what many of us have accepted, this writer included, as established PLA doctrine because of these books be part of a more nuanced effort designed to reinforce the effort in the United States to reduce the size of our nuclear forces and to rethink the scope and deployment of US efforts on ballistic missile defenses?

It would be one thing if one or two highly classified documents out of China somehow leaked out into the policy community and then copies made their way into the hands of interested scholars and policy analysts. But that is not the case. Instead, a large number of highly classified original documents have found their way out of China. It is as though a case or two of documents from a Chinese publishing house, which heretofore has managed to control its classified inventory, was shipped to bookstores in Taiwan and Hong Kong. My experience as an intelligence officer is that such a massive breach is a very rare thing. Intelligence collectors can labor for years to get their hands on one copy of a document at this level of classification.

If US policy-makers accept the force levels and doctrines in *The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* as established policy in China, then US (as well as Russian and Indian) force levels can be safely reduced. Ballistic missile defense programs can be scaled in a way to counter a limited nuclear

threat, not only from China, but other nascent nuclear powers like North Korea. But if the Karber thesis is closer to the truth, and China has a significantly larger nuclear force that we believe to be true, the US, and its allies that depend on extended deterrence, could be in for a shocking strategic surprise.

The manifestation of so many copies of this document in so many hands makes it all the more urgent that the US continue to pursue a direct, government-to-government strategic dialogue with China. The Second Artillery Force has avoided such exchanges to date; even if there have been limited track-two dialogues. [Editor's note: The Pacific Forum manages two such dialogues annually, which help set the stage for, and would complement, but are no substitute for official exchanges.] The existence of so many PLA publications outside China on this heretofore carefully protected area of policy makes it unwise to base future US force and defensive postures on what may be a managed perception management campaign.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*

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