



China Will Not Change its Nuclear Policy by Yao Yunzhu

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On April 16th the Information Office in the State Council of the People's Republic of China released the newest edition of its defense white paper. As usual, this document attracted immediate media attention and triggered wide-ranging discussions on the intentions and capabilities of the Chinese armed forces. One speculation has been that China might consider changes to its long-held no first use (NFU) nuclear policy (See James Acton, "Is China Changing Its Position on Nuclear Weapons?"), as the white paper for the first time does not reiterate China's pledge not to use nuclear weapons first.

A careful reading of this year's white paper and a study of all such papers since 1998 might easily explain this conspicuous absence of a key phrase most frequently repeated in Chinese official documents on defense and nuclear policy.

First, unlike previous editions which all bear the same title "China's National Defense", the latest edition has a specific one: "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces", indicating that the white paper's format may have changed from a comprehensive elaboration to a more focused discussion on a specific subject. Major General Chen Zhou, a senior researcher and a key author of the white paper, explained in an interview that this is the first white paper that adopts a thematic approach, so that the subject can be dealt with more thoroughly. Compared with previous editions, this year's white paper has no section on "National Defense Policy" and "Arms Control and Disarmament", which usually carry the nuclear policy and the statement of the NFU commitment.

Second, in the section on the "Building and Development of China's Armed Forces", the force structure, missions and roles of the PLA Second Artillery Force are specified, stating that its nuclear component is "responsible for deterring other countries from using nuclear weapons against China, and carrying out nuclear counterattacks." This is in full conformity with China's NFU policy. In the section on "Defending National Sovereignty, Security and Territorial Integrity", the preparedness of the Second Artillery Force "in peacetime", "under a nuclear threat", and "under a nuclear attack" are respectively described, and the alert posture of the Second Artillery Force is also in full compliance with China's NFU nuclear policy. It is safe to say that the latest white paper provides more detailed information on how the PLA Second Artillery Force carries out the Nation's NFU policy.

In addition, former President Hu Jintao reaffirmed the NFU policy on March 27 2012, at the Nuclear Summit in Seoul. And it has been reiterated in all necessary policy

documents and official statements since, the most recent being on April 22nd, at the Second Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Review Conference when the head of the Chinese delegation Pang Sen stated: "China adheres to the policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances." There is simply no sign that China is going to change a policy it has wisely adopted and persistently upheld for half a century.

However, speculations on a possible change to the NFU policy have not been conjured up without reason. Calls for a policy change on the official NFU pledge are repeatedly heard in the Chinese media (including social media such as weibo). The concerns over the NFU commitment stem from two basic facts:

- 1) The Ballistic Missile Defense systems that the United States and its allies have deployed, or are planning to deploy, are capable of intercepting residue Chinese nuclear weapons launched for retaliation after it has already been attacked, thus potentially negating the deterrence effect of the Chinese nuclear arsenal.
- 2) The United States is developing a series of conventional strategic strike capabilities. Once deployed, they could have the capability to strike China's nuclear arsenal, which, if adopted as an official doctrine, would discredit China's NFU policy.

So far, no nuclear-armed states have made it official policy to strike with strategic conventional capabilities against the nuclear weapons of another nuclear weapon state, although such capabilities are being developed for the declared purpose of neutralizing the WMD capabilities of nuclear proliferators. The cold war position of only using nuclear weapons against nuclear weapons still seems valid. However, the US Congress has passed the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which President Obama signed into law on Jan 2nd. It requests a report from the Commander of US Strategic Command by August 15th; to describe the alleged Chinese underground tunnel networks and to review the US capability to "neutralize" such networks with "conventional and nuclear forces." It seems to imply that a conventional strike against the Chinese nuclear weapon system is an option.

For nearly half a century, China's NFU pledge has served as the cornerstone of its nuclear policy, and any change will require careful review and thorough debate. It is better not only for China, but also for the rest of the world, for China to uphold its NFU policy, rather than discredit such a commitment. To alleviate China's concerns, a constructive approach would be to assure the policy through nuclear policy dialogues, to establish a multilateral NFU agreement among all the nuclear weapon states, and to consider limiting or even prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons in a legally binding international agreement.

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

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