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# Chinese Nuclear Policy: A Commitment to No First Use?

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## **Introduction**

Since 1964, China has maintained a pledge to never be the first country to use nuclear weapons in a conflict. Despite periods of high tension and numerous pressures to proliferate, China has exhibited unwavering commitment to a purely retaliatory nuclear posture. Despite this fact, the Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) signaled a newfound commitment by the United States to aggressively modernize its nuclear force due to fears of Chinese regional aggression. American defense analysts have speculated about the possibility of China altering their nuclear doctrine in response. However, China has thus far signaled no willingness to reverse its declaration of no-first-use or develop first-strike capabilities.<sup>1</sup> This essay examines evidence that indicates China will maintain its no-first-use policy indefinitely. Modernization efforts undertaken in response to the 2018 NPR and Chinese historical emphasis on concepts such as 'minimum deterrence,' 'anti-nuclear blackmail,' and 'limited deterrence' evidence that China will continue to respond to United States nuclear policy changes

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<sup>1</sup> Cunningham, F. S. & Fravel, M. T., "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability," *International Security*, 40(2), 7–50, (2015), doi:10.1162/isec\_a\_00215; Higenbotham, E., "China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States," *Rand Corporation*, (2017), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1628.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1628.html).

defensively.<sup>2</sup> This finding also contravenes predictions of an arms race between the United States and China, an argument extrapolated from the United States-Soviet arms race as a result of increased nuclear aggression during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

### *The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review*

Understanding the nature of United States aggression under the Trump administration is essential to understanding the Chinese perspective and response. The United States currently maintains 6,450 nuclear warheads relative to China's 280.<sup>4</sup> Despite major reductions since the Cold War, the United States still attempts to leverage overwhelming nuclear dominance as its primary means of deterrence. This strategy, known as 'Strategic Primacy,' contends that the United States ought to be able to eliminate another country's retaliatory capability with a first strike, thus discouraging aggressive behavior.<sup>5</sup> This strategy has been a feature of United States nuclear doctrine for decades.<sup>6</sup> The 2018 NPR strengthens this doctrine of 'Strategic Primacy' in two primary ways. Firstly, the 2018 NPR commits to the notion that the threat of nuclear first use deters not only nuclear conflicts, but conventional conflicts.<sup>7</sup> As a result, this position yields an

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<sup>2</sup> Xia, L., "China's Nuclear Doctrine: Debates and Evolution," (2016, June 30), Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/china-s-nuclear-doctrine-debates-and-evolution-pub-63967>.

<sup>3</sup> Cunningham, "Assuring Assured Retaliation."

<sup>4</sup> Kristensen, H.M. & Kile, S.N., "World Nuclear Forces," *SIPRI Yearbook 2018: Armaments, Disarmaments, and International Security*, (Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter 6, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2018/06>.

<sup>5</sup> Lieber, K. & Press, D., "The New Era of Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, and Conflict," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 10(5), 31-42, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26271621>.

<sup>6</sup> Yuan, J., "Effective, Reliable, And Credible: China's Nuclear Modernization," *The Nonproliferation Review*, (2007), 14(2), 275-301, doi:10.1080/10736700701379385.

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review," (United States Department of Defense, February 2018),

omnipresent threat that the United States will respond to, for instance, a Chinese conventional invasion of Taiwan with nuclear weapons. Secondly, Trump's aggressive rhetoric and nuclear threats have increased strategic ambiguity with regards to the likelihood that the United States might conduct a nuclear first strike.<sup>8</sup> It is important to recognize that promoting strategic ambiguity is a component of United States nuclear strategy, not a deviation, because it dissuades risky revisionist behavior by United States adversaries.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside a rhetorical shift with regards to nuclear weapons, the United States has committed to several specific nuclear force modernizations which directly concern Chinese security interests. Underlying this modernization effort is the tenuous assumption that China's military buildup and nuclear force modernization signal an increasingly aggressive Chinese nuclear policy. Firstly, the NPR directs the development of new Submarine-Launched Cruise Missiles (SLCM) armed with low-yield nuclear warheads for deployment in Asia.<sup>10</sup> The purpose and intended use of these cruise missiles has remained ambiguous, but certainly entails a possible first strike against Chinese coastal assets. Secondly, the United States has committed to continue the development of ballistic missile defense systems in East Asia.<sup>11</sup> These systems include the development of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems in South Korea

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<https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872877/-1/-1/1/EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY.PDF>.

<sup>8</sup> Péczeli, A., "The Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review: Back to Great Power Competition," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 1(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1530741>.

<sup>9</sup> Finaud, M., "Why new thinking is needed on negative security assurances." *Arms Control Today*, (2017), 47(8), 12-16, Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1951871252?accountid=7103>.

<sup>10</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review."

<sup>11</sup> Cunningham, "Assuring Assured Retaliation."

and radar systems built to enhance missile defense in Japan.<sup>12</sup> Ballistic missile defenses are designed to undermine the viability of a nuclear strike, which would rely primarily on ballistic missiles.<sup>13</sup> Such developments could undermine Chinese deterrent strategies which the Chinese government view as essential to their security. Lastly, the United States is making progress in developing Conventional Precision Global Strike (CPGS) capabilities.<sup>14</sup> Much attention has been dedicated to CPGS in academic literature because these weapons have a similar strategic effect to nuclear weapons. They are designed to strike targets at great distances with extreme precision. As a result, these systems could successfully strike and neutralize Chinese mobile International Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) launchers, naval assets, and nuclear submarines in port.

### *The Chinese Response*

China has undertaken several modernization efforts in response to these developments by the United States. Firstly, China is rapidly developing its fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), recently adding several to their arsenal.<sup>15</sup> China also has plans to engineer a whole new, quieter class of SSBNs in the next decade.<sup>16</sup> There is no doubt that these technological developments will alter the strategic landscape in East Asia, especially if China's new submarines can avoid United States anti-submarine capabilities and if China elects to put these SSBNs on patrol

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; Kristensen, "World Nuclear Forces."

<sup>14</sup> Xu, W., "China's Security Environment and the Role of Nuclear Weapons," *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), Chapter 1, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking\\_Final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking_Final.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Kristensen, H.M., Norris, R.S, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2018," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 74:4, 289-295, DOI: 10.1080/00963402.2018.1486620.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

while armed with nuclear warheads.<sup>17</sup> In order to effectively arm these new SSBNs, China will need to build its stockpile of Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs).<sup>18</sup> Such a buildup could be considered a first-strike or second-strike capability, but the emphasis on submarines strongly implies a desire for survivability and retaliation rather than counter-forcing capabilities.<sup>19</sup> China's second major modernization effort is developing advanced missile technology. While China has made continual advancements in missile technology, certain details effectively signal China's intent in improving such technology. The first of those is the development of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) for their ICBMs.<sup>20</sup> While these MIRVs could be used in a first-strike, they are specifically designed to counter ballistic missile defenses, such as those belonging to the United States, indicating that China currently places strong emphasis on improving its retaliatory capabilities.<sup>21</sup> China is also investing in its road-mobile ICBM capabilities.<sup>22</sup> If China were truly interested in first-strike capabilities, there would be no reason to invest in improving retaliatory capabilities, such as making missiles more mobile or secret, as opposed to the cheaper option of putting missiles in silos.

### Chinese Strategic Defense

The underlying explanation for China's emphasis on retaliatory capabilities can be traced to the nation's historical logic regarding nuclear weapons. Drawing from the logic behind policies during the Mao Zedong

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<sup>17</sup> Zhao, T., "Tides of Change: China's Nuclear Ballistic Missile Submarines and Strategic Stability," *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center*, (2018), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Zhao\\_SSBN\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Zhao_SSBN_final.pdf); Kristensen, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2018."

<sup>18</sup> Zhao, "Tides of Change."; Kristensen, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2018."

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Cunningham, "Assuring Assured Retaliation."

<sup>20</sup> Kristensen, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2018."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

era, it would seem as though Chinese strategic culture emphasizes offensive war-making.<sup>23</sup> However, it is evident that the international security environment in the 1960s altered Chinese calculations with regards to nuclear weapons. Acquiring their first nuclear warhead amid massive nuclear buildup by the United States and the Soviet Union, Chinese nuclear logic followed a much different path than that of its superpower contemporaries. The term ‘anti-nuclear blackmail’ developed in this context, and refers to China’s goal of undermining the coercive power that nuclear weapons granted the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> Mao Zedong was explicit, stating that “[i]n today’s world, if we do not want to be bullied by others, we cannot do without [nuclear weapons].”<sup>25</sup> Disavowing the offensive use of nuclear weapons, Mao held the belief that conventional forces were the key to victory in conflict, stating he would “still like to place [his] hopes on the infantry in war.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Mao rejected the tripartite nuclear and conventional arms control treaties negotiated by the United States and Soviet Union during this period on the grounds that they were manifestations of imperial blackmail and represented vestiges of China’s Century of Humiliation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Johnston, A.I., “Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China, in Peter Katzenstein,” ed., *The Culture of National Security*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 216-268.

<sup>24</sup> Xia, “China’s Nuclear Doctrine.”

<sup>25</sup> Xu, “China’s Security Environment,” Chapter 1; Mao, Z., “A Conversation with American Journalist Anna Louise Strong,” *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol, 4, (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1991), 1194–1195.

<sup>26</sup> Xu, “China’s Security Environment,” Chapter 1; CCCPC Party Literature Research Office, ed., *Mao Zedong (1949–1976)*, vol, 5, 349.

<sup>27</sup> Xu, “China’s Security Environment,” Chapter 1.

The end of the Cold War brought about differing Chinese perspectives and strategic calculations regarding nuclear weapons than those seen under Mao, with notable deviations among different schools of thought.<sup>28</sup>

### *1. Self-Defense*

The first major school of thought that emerged during this period advocated for use of nuclear weapons in nuclear self-defense, ruling out any situation in which China would use nuclear weapons first in a conflict.<sup>29</sup> In a 1995 white paper, the Chinese government emphasized this strategy of self-defense, saying “[China] has developed nuclear weapons for self-defense, not as a threat to other countries. It has not joined and will not join in the nuclear arms race.”<sup>30</sup> In 2006, China issued an additional white paper that organized the core elements of Chinese nuclear doctrine under a “self-defensive nuclear strategy.”<sup>31</sup> According to the paper, China’s “fundamental goal is to deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China,” and articulates China’s commitment to retaliation, no-first-use, and non-coercion.<sup>32</sup>

### *2. Minimum Deterrence*

The second major school of thought that emerged during this period is that of minimum deterrence. This doctrine also maintains that the primary

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<sup>28</sup> Xia, “China’s Nuclear Doctrine.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Information Office of The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper-- China: Arms Control and Disarmament,” (1995), <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/wparms.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> “China’s National Defense in 2006,” Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, December 29, 2006, 5, <http://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/wp2006.html>.

<sup>32</sup> China’s National Defense in 2006, <http://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/wp2006.html>.

purpose of China's nuclear arsenal is self-defense.<sup>33</sup> However, a 2008 white paper also calls for "the building of a lean and effective deterrent force and the flexible use of different means of deterrence."<sup>34</sup> This doctrine represents an instance where Chinese officials were attempting to articulate their doctrine more legibly for United States policymakers and deterrence theorists. For instance, one Chinese general clarified that China's doctrine is committed to withholding its nuclear umbrella from other countries.<sup>35</sup> As a result, China has clarified it will not develop technologies that extend its nuclear capabilities beyond deterring offensive nuclear use by other nations.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. *Limited Deterrence*

The third and newer school of thought is limited deterrence. This doctrine is a significant deviation from the two other doctrines because it advocates offensive nuclear capabilities.<sup>37</sup> The primary reason cited by Chinese scholars for developing this capability is responding credibly to nuclear threats by the United States over Taiwan.<sup>38</sup> Beyond this, the school accepts the argument made by the 2018 NPR that the threat of a first-strike

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<sup>33</sup> Information Office of The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2008", Compiled by the Federation of American Scientists, [https://fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/2008DefenseWhitePaper\\_Jan2009.pdf](https://fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/2008DefenseWhitePaper_Jan2009.pdf); Xia, "China's Nuclear Doctrine."

<sup>34</sup> Information Office of The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2008."

<sup>35</sup> Xia, "China's Nuclear Doctrine."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.; Gao, Y., "From Local War Under the High-Tech Conditions to the Assured Destruction Under Nuclear Situation—China's Current Military Strategy Should Turn to the Comprehensive Nuclear Deterrence," *Tianya Forum*, (2004), <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-101455-1.shtml>.

deters conventional escalation.<sup>39</sup> The original document advocating limited deterrence (though roughly translated) seems to envision nuclear warfighting capabilities as most useful during a conventional war over Taiwan.<sup>40</sup> The logic here seems to be that China can leverage a credible nuclear threat to stop the United States from ever getting involved in the conflict.<sup>41</sup> However, evidence suggests that, since 2004, the Chinese leadership no longer embrace this logic. It was a fringe opinion when Chinese Major General Zhu Chenghu in 2005 stated that, “If the Americans draw their missiles and position-guided ammunition on to the target zone on China’s territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons.”<sup>42</sup> However, United States strategists appear to have stoked fears that Zhu’s statement represents a shift in Chinese thinking regarding first use.<sup>43</sup> Such speculation about fundamental changes to Chinese nuclear logic is unsupported by recent modernization efforts, as described above.

### *Doctrinal Comparison*

The greatest similarity between a ‘self-defense doctrine’ and ‘minimum deterrence doctrine’ can be found in their mutual reliance on arms control treaties. Such reliance represents a strong deviation from the nuclear logic of Mao Zedong. Both the white papers issued by China in 1995 and 2008 embrace some form of arms control, though in different ways. The 1995 white paper repeatedly advocates arms control with the caveat of protecting Chinese sovereignty:

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<sup>39</sup> Xia, “China’s Nuclear Doctrine.”

<sup>40</sup> Gao, “From Local War.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Xu, “China’s Security Environment,” Chapter 1.; Watts, J., “Chinese general warns of nuclear risk to US,” *The Guardian* (2005, July 15), Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jul/16/china.jonathanwatts>.

<sup>43</sup> Xu, “China’s Security Environment,” Chapter 1.

Only through complete prohibition and thorough destruction of [weapons of mass destruction] can proliferation be effectively prevented. Preventing proliferation should neither present an obstacle to the just rights and interests of all countries in the peaceful use of science and technology nor restrict or harm economic, scientific and technological development in developing countries.<sup>44</sup>

The document highlights China's leading role in international arms control measures and represents an explicit attempt by China to leverage its unilateral reductions in military forces to bring major powers to the table regarding non-proliferation treaties.<sup>45</sup> The 2008 white paper reads similarly, stating:

China holds that all nuclear-weapon states should make an unequivocal commitment to the thorough destruction of nuclear weapons, undertake to stop research into and development of new types of nuclear weapons, and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their national security policy.”<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, China specifically affirms the Central Asian and Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaties. These treaties display a Chinese interest in neutralizing the threat of nuclear conflict in the region. It is important to note that this interest that would also restrict any Chinese ambitions with regards to extending its nuclear umbrella or establishing first-strike capabilities. These white papers offer important insight into Chinese military thinking. Considering that the details of Chinese nuclear modernization efforts are largely secret, it is difficult to know which Chinese statements regarding nuclear weapons should be trusted. However,

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<sup>44</sup> Information Office of The State Council of the People's Republic of China, “White Paper.”

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.

paired with evidence of Chinese military buildup at the time they were written, these white papers likely paint an accurate picture of Chinese nuclear logic because they are produced by Chinese government officials and officials of the People's Liberation Army. As a result, these white papers represent the conclusion of internal dialogues regarding nuclear weapons in China.

Cynicism about China's peaceful rise vis-à-vis nuclear development may also be misplaced. Chinese economic development under the auspices of a 'peaceful Chinese rise' limits the nation's interest in large-scale offensive nuclear capabilities. China embraced the image of a peaceful rise alongside its embrace of globalization and neoliberal institutions in the late 1970s.<sup>47</sup> Since China's adoption of a neoliberal path of development, the nation's interests, such as the expansion of China's role in regional and global trade, have become significantly reliant on a peaceful security environment.<sup>48</sup> As a result, a Chinese nuclear arms buildup might create regional security concerns that would threaten China's interests in the short-term, such as spurring Japanese or South Korean proliferation.<sup>49</sup>

The calculation that China will likely never find it strategic to use nuclear weapons in wartime underscores the Chinese principle of anti-nuclear blackmail, its emphasis on conventional capabilities, and its subscription to minimal deterrence.<sup>50</sup> There is cause, however, for Chinese strategists to reconsider this logic given recent development of tactical nuclear weapons by the United States, which specialize in striking military assets instead of cities. A similar reality applies to United States' CPGS capabilities, which some Chinese analysts argue should be equated to a

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<sup>47</sup> Zheng, B., "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs*, (2005), 84(5), 18, doi:10.2307/20031702.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; Péczeli, "The Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review."

<sup>49</sup> Higenbotham, "China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent"

<sup>50</sup> Xu, "China's Security Environment," Chapter 1.

nuclear launch under China's nuclear doctrine.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, there have been calls to alter China's nuclear policy in response to these capabilities to which there are not clear technological countermeasures. However, CPGS technology has been in development in the United States for years, and, despite these calls within China, little noticeable change has been made to China's nuclear doctrine. As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that Chinese leaders are heavily influenced by China's historical emphasis on arms control and a peaceful Chinese rise; furthermore, that China's greatest hope in neutralizing the threat of a United States counterforce strike lies not in nuclear proliferation, but in strategic countermeasures, such as MIRVs, SLBMs, and diplomatic efforts to curtail the development of destabilizing technologies like tactical nuclear weapons and ballistic missile defenses.

### **The 2018 NPR and Chinese Nuclear Logic**

Based upon my analysis, three aspects of the Chinese canon on nuclear weapons call into question the assumptions of the 2018 NPR. Firstly, China believes that conventional deterrence is credible, challenging the notion in the 2018 NPR that nuclear development is needed to deter Chinese regional aggression.<sup>52</sup> Even if the 2018 NPR is correct that China is seeking aggressive expansion in East Asia, the nuclear strategy adopted by the United States to counteract such actions is perceived as destabilizing by China. Analyzing specific sources of tension between the United States and China demonstrates both how United States conventional forces are sufficient to deter China. For example, responding to a Taiwan strait crisis with nuclear weapons would clearly contravene efforts of reunification by eviscerating the island.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, breaching the nuclear taboo in a conflict over East Asian sea lanes similarly contravenes even the most

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<sup>51</sup> Xia, "China's Nuclear Doctrine."

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Talmadge, C., "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security*, (2017), 41(4), 50-92, doi:10.1162/isec\_a\_00274.

revisionist economic and political goals China could choose to undertake.<sup>54</sup> Despite concerns raised by United States theorists, Chinese analysts appear to view the current United States' conventional strategy, such as AirSea Battle, as non-escalatory and unlikely to provoke nuclear war in these contexts.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, China has embraced the idea that mutually assured destruction is stabilizing. While China may not have the nuclear capabilities to counter the United States in a second-strike, China has maintained an arsenal sufficiently large to create significant uncertainty about the survivability of the United States after a nuclear confrontation.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, considering China also has no means to counteract a full-blown United States second-strike,<sup>57</sup> China's embrace of second-strike capabilities demonstrates that it views offensive nuclear war as an existential threat.<sup>58</sup> This position can also be deduced from Chinese opposition to unequal disarmament during the Mao era and China's 1995 white paper concerning nuclear weapons.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Lu, Y., "Reflections on Strategic Stability," *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, (2016), Chapter 5, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking\\_Final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking_Final.pdf); Tannenwald, N., (2005), Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo, *International Security*, 29(4), 5–49, doi:10.1162/isec.2005.29.4.5.

<sup>55</sup> Cunningham, "Assuring Assured Retaliation."

<sup>56</sup> Kristensen, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2018."; Fravel, M. T., & Medeiros, E. S., (2010), China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure, *International Security*, 35(2), 48–87, doi:10.1162/isec\_a\_00016.

<sup>57</sup> Higenbotham, "China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent"; Kristensen, "Chinese nuclear forces, 2018."

<sup>58</sup> Xia, "China's Nuclear Doctrine."

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.; Information Office of The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper."

Lastly, China faces such an enormous credibility gap that first-strike threats are not rational even in the face of conventional defeat.<sup>60</sup> Fears among scholars that China might escalate a conventional war to nuclear use are misplaced. This reality stems from a strategic gap that needs to be satisfied for a Chinese nuclear threat to be sufficiently credible to the United States. Firstly, the marginal cost of United States nuclear retaliation would have to be low.<sup>61</sup> In other words, the difference in losses of Chinese forces between conventional and nuclear war needs to be small, implying that China would be losing a conventional war at such a scale that the relative casualties would not be significantly exceeded by invoking nuclear use. Secondly, the potential damage done by a Chinese first-strike on the United States must be substantially less than that of a second-strike. If the damage inflicted by a first-strike exceeds that of a second-strike, there would be pressure on the United States to preemptively strike China in response to first-use threats.<sup>62</sup> Further contributing to my conclusion that China sees little benefit in offensive changes to its nuclear doctrine, this bind demonstrates that Chinese modernization of its conventional forces and second-strike capabilities makes first-strike capabilities less strategically valuable.

## Conclusion

It is of significant theoretical importance to understand the development of Chinese nuclear thought in order to accurately assess China's contemporary strategic choices regarding nuclear weapons. Many concepts discussed here, notably 'Minimum Deterrence,' are attempts by Chinese thinkers to improve the intelligibility of Chinese nuclear logic for Western

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<sup>60</sup> Li, B., (2016), Differences Between Chinese and U.S, Nuclear Thinking and Their Origins, Introduction, *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking\\_Final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking_Final.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

observers.<sup>63</sup> Attempting to apply common strategic frameworks of the Western canon, such as the 2018 NPR, to Chinese nuclear logic may mislead United States decision-makers.<sup>64</sup> In this essay, I have demonstrated that Chinese strategists consider it strategically illogical for China to pursue the development of offensive nuclear capabilities or adapt China's nuclear doctrine to allow for nuclear first-strikes. Owing to long-standing Chinese views about the role of nuclear weapons in conflict, the preeminent fear among Chinese thinkers and officials revolves around the United States' attempt to undermine China's retaliatory capabilities. However, evidence suggests that China has exhibited largely unwavering commitment to a purely retaliatory nuclear posture.

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<sup>63</sup> Xia, "China's Nuclear Doctrine.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*; Xu, "China's Security Environment," Chapter 1.

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