

[SE4-CV-2] China's Nuclear Weapons

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Full Summary

The 2011 Asan Plenum session titled “China’s Nuclear Weapons” took place on Tuesday, June 15 from 9:30 – 10:45 in the Cosmos/Violet room at the Westin Chosun hotel. The panel featured Mr. Scott Snyder (Moderator), Council on Foreign Relations, Dr. Jeffrey Lewis, Monterey Institute, Dr. Jingdon Yuan, University of Sydney, and Mr. Wang Jun, formerly of the Chinese delegation to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO).

Dr. Lewis began the panel by offering a condensed version of his dissertation-turned-book, *The Minimum Means of Reprisal*. The work investigates the fundamental question of why China’s nuclear arsenal is “weird” as compared to those of the United States and Russia. China’s arsenal has always been small, approximately 100 nuclear weapons, and very vulnerable. They also keep their missiles and warheads separated, which means they would technically have zero nuclear weapons under the counting rules of the New START Treaty. This approach contrasts sharply with the United States concern for, in Albert Wohlstetter’s words, “the delicate balance of terror.” This perspective, which has not taken root in China, holds that “details” matter a great deal for deterrence. For the Chinese, however, deterrence is achieved easily and early with very low numbers of nuclear weapons. Robert Oppenheimer’s comment about 20,000 nuclear weapons in no way offsetting the Soviet Union’s 2,000 highlights the sharply diminishing returns that can exist after the initial deployments on nuclear weapons.

Many leaders, including President Eisenhower and First Secretary Khrushchev, *talked* about nuclear weapons on this manner. In his book, Dr. Lewis found decent support for the idea that Chinese actions, beyond just their rhetoric, support the conclusion that they do view nuclear weapons in a different way. There appears to be a collective bias in the Chinese planning system toward a less detail oriented nuclear strategy. Some possible reasons for this view include China’s experience in the Korean War when they did not have nuclear weapons, the Maoist idea that people are more important than weapons, and some cultural and linguistic differences in how some words and concepts are understood.

The unanswered question is whether this Chinese bias will continue into the future. China is

starting to field new capabilities resulting from 1980's modernization decisions that include a soft fueled ballistic missile and the real prospect of a ballistic missile submarine. Moreover, China's Second Artillery Corps has become vastly more professional, and there are ongoing efforts to develop plausible concepts of operations within the political guidance of constraints like No First Use (NFU). In the context of the U.S.-China relationship, there are two interesting questions. Americans are very worried about a Chinese "sprint to parity" where, if U.S. forces were to reduce, China would look to increase their forces to match the United States. When you tell the Chinese this theory, however, they seem confused and think it is strange. At the same time, many Chinese think that U.S. missile defense and "Prompt Global Strike" assets will be used coercively against China, but Americans generally find this very odd. These examples highlight two fundamentally different ways of looking at deterrence. There is a possibility for intense crisis stability in these divergent views. For instance, Chinese weapons are currently kept off of alert, but their documents about plausible operational concepts suggest putting weapons on alert in a crisis to show seriousness. This is not how we would likely interpret such an action in the United States. If China started flushing submarines and putting mobile missiles in the field, it would be very difficult to explain to the President of the United States that he or she should not be worried because it is just a Chinese tactic of anti-nuclear deterrence combat to test the psychological will of an opponent.

Dr. Yuan, picking up on Dr. Lewis' remarks, argued that he has also been puzzled by China's small arsenal but to some extent also understands China's view on the role of nuclear weapons in their defense posture. Overall, the Chinese arsenal is characterized by modesty. Their nuclear capabilities have been very vulnerable to first strike. Over the past 25 years, Chinese nuclear modernization has basically been to enhance the survivability and reliability of the arsenal so that China can have assured retaliation to counter any extreme scenarios. This leads to China's No First Use policy, which has prompted a lot of questions, particularly in the last few years. Analysts, including military planners, have been debating about the credibility and practical implications of China's NFU pledge. There are many different scenarios that are not a simple response to a nuclear attack, which is very clear cut. For instance, what if a nuclear target was struck by a conventional weapon? Despite these difficulties, it nonetheless makes sense for China to stick to a NFU policy. If China is threatened by a non-nuclear state, it should be able to adequately respond by conventional retaliation. If it was in reaction to a nuclear weapon, only the United States, and to a much lesser extent Russia, would be doing that. Even if China was subject to a conventional strike, retaliation with nuclear weapons invites the United States to respond with a massive use of nuclear weapons which will lead to very severe consequences. If we understand this rationale, the role of nuclear weapons is basically that if you are a great power then you need to have nuclear weapons. The Korea and Taiwan crises in 1954 and 1958 showed that

China needed to have some nuclear weapons to repel nuclear coercion but those weapons have never been integrated into war-fighting defense doctrine. This is evidenced by the very concentrated command and control system, the lack of a nuclear submarine, and the safety and supply of the nuclear arsenal. The targeting distinction between counterforce and countervalue also has not been spelled out.

Dr. Yuan also highlighted a number of constraints that would undermine a Chinese “sprint to parity.” After ratification of the New START Treaty, the United States has approximately 1,500 warheads whereas China has a little more than 10% of that number. There is still a huge gap between the two arsenals. Moreover, if you believe Chinese doctrine, it really doesn’t make sense to increase the number of nuclear weapons. At a certain point there are diminishing returns, especially if nuclear weapons are considered a political weapon rather than a military instrument. China also stopped production of weapons grade fissile material long ago; they only go up to a certain level. There are many critical variables, however, that could change China’s calculations. The U.S.-China political and strategic relationship will be critical. We talked about China as a vulnerability in the 1970’s and 1980’s, but that was a time when China and the U.S. were quasi-aligned against the Soviet Union. During this time, China was less concerned about a U.S. surprise or strike. Missile defense is also a critical variable. If China believes the U.S. can put up a very robust missile defense, then China will need to retain a certain number of nuclear weapons that can survive a first strike. A very critical element of deterrence is the message conveyed and then believed by the other side. Many Chinese scientists, military planners, and policy analysts are worried about United States intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities which could undermine the whole Chinese posture. These considerations will play a significant role in determining the scope and willingness of Chinese participation in multilateral disarmament discussions.

Mr. Wang Jun’s remarks, consistent with what Dr. Yuan said, emphasized the consistency of China’s nuclear arsenal. He observed that the physical state and the basic elements of China’s nuclear policy are there for all to see. Therefore, he directed his remarks towards introducing and explaining the Chinese perspective of their capabilities. China did not acquire nuclear weapons yesterday or last year, he observed, but rather in 1964. China chose to acquire nuclear weapons in 1964, a few years before the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for some historical and realistic reasons. China did not acquire nuclear weapons to join *the* club, which came later, but from the view of Chinese leadership in the 1950’s and 1960’s, if you do not have nuclear weapons, you will not be counted for. Therefore, from the inception, nuclear weapons for China were very much a political factor or one element that is counted into aggregate national capability. Even from the inception, there was no intention at all to reach parity, qualitatively or quantitatively, except to have the full-range of

capability from, for instance, the nuclear to the thermal to miniaturization. From the very beginning, China adopted a NFU pledge in front of everybody. This policy basically has not changed despite worrisome developments in the security situation in Asia.

These factors influence how China views other strategic developments. While arms control treaties, like START, SORT, and New START all happened, they serve as a background. China's nuclear policy did not change because it is defensive in nature and they are comfortable with it. China does not want to pursue a deterrent that is viewed as if you do not do X, we will do this. They do not view it that way. Instead, China believes that all things can find a solution. China welcomes New START, or anything that brings numbers down, but it clearly does not welcome developments such as the abolition of the ABM treaty. Ultimately, China really does want to see a nuclear free world because it believes that enhances safety and security for all others. Yet despite reductions made over the past couple of decades, China would like to see more, including moving from reduction to destruction and tackling the issue of tactical nuclear weapons. Unless reductions are made irreversible, they could be re-introduced if the situation called for it.

Many like to talk a lot about the transparency of China's stockpile. China has not announced their number of nuclear weapons but transparency should not be viewed in absolute terms. For China, NFU is a cast policy that has been there for all to see for the past 40 years. Moreover, they have not really been physically expanding their nuclear arsenal. If China chose to do so, it would be noticed. Expansion would not be one or two more weapons but rather multiplication that would have something very physical about it. These actions would be detected and seen, which is transparent. Mr. Jun went on to point out that the nuclear "haves" have a long list of issues that they could cooperate on. There should be a consistent pursuit of non-proliferation, not a case by case policy. The biggest issues for the P5 are non-proliferation, peaceful use of nuclear energy, security, and safety.

The moderator, Mr. Snyder, observed that the major themes across the remarks are the distinctiveness, modesty, ambiguity, and consistency of Chinese nuclear policy and force structure. He observed that while the United States and the Soviet Union had a long history of working together on nuclear issues, that dynamic does not exist in the U.S.-China relationship. As a result, he asked the panelists to comment on what the U.S. could do to frame the discussion productively?

Dr. Lewis started by arguing that it is easy to say "talk more" when disconnects about the role of nuclear weapons are identified. The problem, however, is that China and United States talk a lot but past one another. He argued that the two countries need the equivalent for strategic stability of the Shanghai Communiqué on Taiwan where the countries lay out what

they agree on and what are the set of principles that would definite the status quo. This might include statements that the United States does not seek to negate China's deterrent and that China does not seek numerical parity and recognizes the legitimate value of extended deterrence in East Asia. This doesn't solve problems like missile defense, but it at least allows the sides to begin to define a status quo that everyone can live with.

Dr. Yuan, meanwhile, argued that the last 40 years would indicate that China has not been trying to achieve any parity. A lot of people would question China's complete oblivion in the 1970's and 1980's to the vulnerability of their arsenal. Perhaps it could have been due to the lack of resources or technological capability but that cannot be said today. China has not been dramatically increasing its arsenal, but rather ensuring that their limited number can survive a potential first strike. This makes it difficult for China to fully embrace the Western notion of transparency. With regards to U.S.-China strategic dialogue, other political constraints in the relationship, such as Taiwan and the occasional crisis, has derailed whatever little progress was made before the crisis occurred. Somehow, Beijing and Washington need to develop a mechanism to develop a dialogue, not on quantitative but qualitative issues, that will be protected from other political issues.

Mr. Jun pointed out that parity is far more than a game of numbers. Even quantitatively speaking, there is a need for definitions that are shared by both parties. The idea of "parity" runs the risk of simplifying the whole issue. Parity is very relevant to the deterrence factor; it relies not just on quantitative but qualitative strategies and so many other things. If, for instance, we boil everything down to "parity," we oversimplify the whole issue. There is currently a process between the United States and China, at the track 1.5 or track 2 level, where a healthy conversation is happening about issues such as terminology. What do you mean by this? What do I mean by that? That is a healthy effort. We have to start from something. It is true that China is very busy with other things and they really want to see the whole economic problem solved, but at the same time, they also want to see there is more security and safety assurance so we can concentrate even further on our domestic issues. If that is recognized, clearly, it could really help the conversation process.

Due to time limitations, the moderator took a series of questions and had the panelists provide remarks on the set.

Question 1: Why has the U.S. failed to adapt to the fact that the Cold War is over? Our whole nuclear posture is on hair-trigger alert yet we have good relations with Russia and China. The U.S. still has a hair-trigger superpower military kind of expectation that wants to cast China in a Cold War light. China, meanwhile, has been trying to maintain a more consistent posture.

Question 2: Truth can be a dangerous thing in Washington DC. If the U.S. signed a

communiqué similar to the one mentioned, there would be a real backlash on Capitol Hill.

Question 3: If you could neuter a second strike, why shouldn't the U.S. President want to do that?

Question 4: How does Russia play into this equation? When I talk to them, they say that China remains a great partner and then behind closed doors will say "you think we are dumb enough to talk about that with you?"

Dr. Lewis began by noting he does not accept the premise of "hair-trigger alert." He believes, nonetheless, that there are prudent things that could be done to ease the day-to-day readiness of U.S. nuclear forces. Regarding the Congressional backlash to a strategic communiqué with China, Lewis noted that we have to think carefully about the right phrasing. For instance, the wording of mutual vulnerability in the Scowcroft/Perry report could be a place to start. The important thing is that we ask the Chinese for a renunciation of numerical parity and recognition that we have a legitimate extended deterrence role to play in East Asia. In response to the leak proof missile shield question, Lewis said the entire reason that he worries about strategic stability is the effects of arms racing. He can't imagine a scenario in which the United States would be able to build a missile defense system that would provide the American president with that level of confidence.

Dr. Yuan pointed out that China faces a wide range of threats around its periphery (Russia, North Korea, U.S. forces in Japan, India, Pakistan) that have to be considered within the whole range of nuclear arsenal and doctrine. With respect to Russia, China thinks about how to maintain a stable relationship and how to access oil and natural gas. Mr. Jun noted that he can only provide China's view of Russia but that the China/Russia relationship is much different than the U.S./China relationship.

The moderator took one last quick round of questions and gave the panelists one final chance to respond. The questions were:

Question 1: India is developing missiles to strike China and missile defense. China reportedly had a successful missile defense test. What are the odds China sees it in its interest to deploy limited missile defense?

Question 2: Transparency cannot be 100%. China has gotten better in the last 10, and even the last 5, years. Yet there are still concerns. What is the future trend of China's policy and what is their upcoming shopping plan? More focused transparency provides predictability about the future strategic arsenal.

Question 3: Track 1.5 and Track 2 meetings with China always used to be hijacked by Taiwan but that has started to subside. Why is that and how can it translate to Track 1 meetings?

Questions 4: What are big factors that would cause change?

Mr. Jun started by noting that he wishes he knew about China's future trends. There is a strong drive from the public to say no more. China has been unwilling to undertake commitments such as a fissile material moratorium because they take committing to something very seriously. Lastly, Mr. Jun said that the dialogue on Taiwan is moving. Discussions about cleanliness of Taiwanese food and safety of Chinese tourists to Taiwan are two of the major drivers.

Dr. Yuan followed by arguing that a robust Chinese missile defense would cause India some concerns. He noted, however, the both programs are in an experimental stage. With respect to transparency, he observed that other countries, such as the United States and many throughout Europe, would find demands to produce a complete shopping list unacceptable. On Taiwan, there are lots of interactions but arms sales remains a significant impediment. They are very difficult for China to swallow and if you look over time their responses are escalating.

Dr. Lewis closed the session by noting that all of the different bureaucratic, cultural, and ideological drivers mean that change is probably driven by domestic considerations. Despite being someone who thinks details don't matter that much, one exception is the case where you develop large and alert forces that interact with one another. There is not a great history of U.S.-China crisis management.

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