Session 4: China's Nuclear Weapons

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Summary

The panel on China's nuclear weapons featured Scott Snyder (Moderator), Council on Foreign Relations, Jeffrey Lewis, Monterey Institute, Jingdon Yuan, University of Sydney, and Wang Jun, formerly of the Chinese Delegation to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO). Each of the panelists highlighted some of the unique aspects of China's nuclear forces and doctrine which may help inform China's future trajectory and the U.S. response.

Dr. Lewis began by outlining the fundamentally different way in which the Chinese approach nuclear deterrence. Whereas the United States has long been concerned with the "details," such as numbers and operational specifics, Lewis argues this emphasis did not take hold within China due to a wide range of cultural and historical factors. Such interpretational differences have important implications for many of the current issues in the U.S.-China strategic relationship. While there remains uncertainty about the future of Chinese intentions, the U.S and Chinese strategic communities often talk past one another. For instance, many U.S. analysts are concerned about a Chinese "sprint to parity" but many within China are perplexed by such an idea. Conversely, U.S. analysts are befuddled by Chinese concerns that missile defense assets and long-strike strike capabilities will be used coercively against China.

Professor Yuan's remarks underscored the modesty of China's nuclear forces and doctrine but highlighted some of the key challenges in the U.S.-China strategic relationship. China has consistently embraced a small nuclear arsenal with very concentrated command and control that has not been integrated into war fighting doctrine. While analysts increasingly question the credibility of China's No First Use (NFU) pledge, it makes sense

for China to continue to adhere to this commitment. China would not need nuclear weapons to defeat conventional attacks from non-nuclear states and a nuclear response to a U.S. conventional attack would only prompt a U.S. nuclear response. Yuan shared Lewis' skepticism about the "sprint to parity" argument, citing the size of the gap (1,550 versus a force about 10% of that size), the constrained nature of Chinese nuclear policy, and some of the technological hurdles such as fissile material requirements. Despite the constrained nature of China's program, the political dynamics of the US/China strategic relationship, missile defense, and advancing U.S. intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities remain critical vulnerabilities.

Picking up on some of the themes in Yuan's remarks, Jun emphasized the long-standing consistency of China's nuclear arsenal. China acquired nuclear capabilities back in 1964, before the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NFU pledge that China took in 1964 has remained to this day, despite a number of worrisome developments in the East Asian security environment. From the inception, China's decision was very much political, which also serves to undermine the "sprint to parity" argument. Within this context, many of the calls for "transparency" would not be prudent. China welcomes the nuclear reductions of SORT and New START but still would like to see more commitments. They would also like to see P5 efforts to work together non-proliferation, peaceful use of nuclear energy, and disbarment.