



UCS Translations

Chinese nuclear strategy is a significant factor in an ongoing debate among U.S. policy-makers about the upcoming U.S. Nuclear Posture Review. In order to better inform this debate, the China Project of the Union of Concerned Scientists is collecting and translating credible Chinese articles on China’s nuclear strategy, Chinese nuclear weapons and Chinese views on nuclear arms control. There are many different Chinese voices on these issues; some of those voices are more credible than others, and some are not credible at all. We hope these translations can help U.S. decision-makers discriminate between them.

About This Article

“An Investigation of China-U.S. Strategic Stability,” written by Li Bin and Nie Hongyi, examines the strategic nuclear relationship between China and the United States. It was published just before the recent U.S. presidential election in the Chinese-language journal *World Economics & Politics*, which is produced by the World Economics and Politics Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Science.

Summary

The authors examine recent American actions that they see as U.S. attempts to leverage substantial numerical and technical advantages to undermine Chinese confidence in its retaliatory capability, and to dissuade China from modernizing its nuclear arsenal. They conclude these efforts have not succeeded. Chinese leaders remain assured they can counter recent U.S. attempts to alter the strategic relationship in America’s favor without major adjustments in the nuclear modernization program China began in the mid-1980s.

Li and Nie are concerned, however, that some U.S. nuclear programs and policies, particularly the effort to develop “usable” nuclear weapons like the Robust Nuclear Earth

Penetrator (RNEP) and the American refusal to adopt a no-first-use policy, are undermining the confidence of Chinese decision-makers in a key assumption of their strategic calculus: namely, that the chance of nuclear weapons ever being used in war is virtually zero. In addition, the authors argue that Chinese anxieties

about uncertainties in longer-term trends in the development of advanced military technology—particularly space technology—will compel prudent Chinese planners to build greater flexibility into Chinese nuclear options for the future.

The authors discuss three recent trends in America’s nuclear posture that they view as evidence of an aggressive U.S. strategy to change the strategic nuclear relationship between the U.S. and China in America’s favor:

- Shift of U.S. nuclear submarines to the Pacific
- Deployment of missile defenses
- Development of space-based radar.

China’s nuclear modernization program, initiated in the 1980s, is focused on the development of mobile missiles. The only verified new Chinese capability deployed so far is approximately 20 truck-mounted, solid-fueled long-range ballistic missiles that are thought to carry one warhead each. The authors point out that during the past decade the United States has shifted a larger fraction of its submarine-based long-range ballistic missiles—amounting to approximately 1,000 warheads—to bases in the Pacific and therefore much closer to targets in China. The authors

“U.S. strategic weapons policies have put new pressures on China, though China can still adopt some relatively low-cost counter measures to protect the effectiveness of its nuclear retaliatory capability.”

Li Bin & Nie Hongyi

argue the shorter flight times of missiles fired from submarines closer to Chinese territory decrease the effective mobility of China's new missiles, making them somewhat more vulnerable to a U.S. preemptive strike.

The United States has also deployed missile defense interceptors that could be used to attempt to defend against a retaliatory strike from China. The authors argue that given the huge numerical gap between deployed U.S. and Chinese nuclear forces, this defensive capability could, when considered together with the likely outcome of a massive U.S. first strike, sow doubt in the minds of Chinese decision makers about their ability to retaliate.

Finally, the authors note that the U.S. is pursuing the capability to locate, track and target mobile missiles with space-based radar. They point out that should the United States eventually field this technology it would significantly increase the vulnerability of China's mobile missiles to a U.S. first strike.

Taken together these recent U.S. initiatives sound imposing, yet the authors' biggest worry is not that the United States will use it to launch a first strike against China—which is inconceivable—but that U.S. decision-makers will feel these new advantages in the strategic nuclear relationship give the United States leverage to coerce Chinese decision-makers. Indeed, according to the 2002 U.S. Nuclear Policy Review the stated goal of U.S. policy towards China is “dissuasion”—which is seen as the same thing.

Li and Nie point to a number of relatively simple, inexpensive, and non-threatening countermeasures China can take to maintain confidence in its retaliatory capability in the face of these three identified attempts to improve the U.S. position. These countermeasures include camouflage, dummy missiles and penetration aids. The authors also bring up China's January 2007 ASAT test as an example of more aggressive steps China can take to maintain its confidence and stand up to U.S. attempts at coercion.

But the authors are dismayed by the persistent U.S. refusal to relinquish the option of using nuclear weapons first and are concerned that the United States will continue to up the technological ante in search of a decisive advantage, forcing China to hedge against possible technological breakthroughs. The authors are also worried that U.S. decision-makers will place unwarranted faith in missile defense and other technologies, leading them to overestimate the degree to which they can try to exercise coercive military policies against China, and pushing the countries into a crisis.

Li and Nie stress the importance of continuing a multi-level bi-lateral dialog on nuclear weapons, but they also express disappointment with the way their U.S. interlocutors have approached this dialog in the past.

About the Authors

Prof. Li Bin is a leading Chinese expert on arms control and is currently the director of Arms Control Program at the Institute of International Studies, Tsinghua University. He received his Bachelor and Master Degrees in Physics from Peking University before joining China Academy of Engineering Physics (CAEP) to pursue a doctorate in the technical aspects of arms control. He served as a part-time assistant on arms control for the Committee of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND). Upon graduation Dr. Li entered the Institute of Applied Physics and Computational Mathematics (IAPCM) as a research fellow and joined the COSTIND technical group supporting Chinese negotiation team on Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). He attended the final round of CTBT negotiations as a technical advisor to the Chinese negotiating team.

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