

Conference on U.S.-China Strategic Nuclear Dynamics

Jointly Organized by
*the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS),
the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), the RAND Corporation, and
the China Foundation for International & Strategic Studies (CFISS)*

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On June 20 and 21, 2006, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), the RAND Corporation, and the China Foundation for International Strategic Studies (CFISS) jointly convened a unique “track 1.5” conference to discuss strategic nuclear weapons issues in the U.S.-China relationship. This was the third in a series of meetings that CSIS and CFISS initiated in January 2000, which has focused on the questions of strategic stability, nuclear strategy and doctrine, no-first-use (NFU), strategic reassurance, missile defense, and nonproliferation in U.S.-China relations. The aim of this conference series is to provide an unofficial but authoritative channel for discussing such sensitive issues in bilateral security relations. (See Appendix I for the conference agenda.)

The U.S. delegation included former and current U.S. government officials as well as U.S. analysts with deep expertise in both U.S. and Chinese nuclear policy. Many U.S. participants were involved in the drafting of the last two nuclear posture reviews. The U.S. delegation was led by commander of U.S. Pacific Command Admiral (Ret.) Dennis Blair and former commander of U.S. Strategic Command Admiral (Ret.) Richard Mies. The other U.S. participants were drawn from U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations such as: the State Department, U.S. Strategic Command, U.S. Pacific Command, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), the Department of Energy, National Defense University, IDA, the RAND Corporation, and CSIS. The Chinese delegation was led by Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Li Jijun and included participants from the National Defense University, the Academy of Military Sciences, the General Staff Department, the Second Artillery, the Foreign Ministry, the Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics and the Institute for Applied Physics and Computational Mathematics, China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, and Qinghua University.

U.S. participation was sponsored jointly by the Departments of State and Defense. The sponsor in the Department of State was the Regional Affairs Office in the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation. The sponsor in the Department of Defense was the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office in the Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

The conference occurred over two days in Beijing and included substantial time for informal discussions among participants during coffee breaks and meals. In addition to the conference discussions, the U.S. participants also met with other Chinese government officials to discuss issues raised at the bilateral conference. On June 21, the U.S. delegation met with

General Zhang Qinsheng, Assistant Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army, at China's Ministry of Defense building. On June 22, the delegation met with Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo at the Foreign Ministry.

The conference discussions focused on the following six questions:

1. How do the United States and China perceive their nuclear security environments?
2. How and why are the United States and China modernizing their nuclear forces?
3. What are their nuclear doctrines?
4. What role might nuclear weapons play in a war over Taiwan?
5. How can modernization proceed without becoming increasingly competitive and without becoming a problem in the political relationship?
6. How can cooperation on weapons of mass destruction (WMD), nonproliferation, and nuclear energy development be strengthened?

Summary of Key Findings

- Chinese strategists, especially within the People's Liberation Army (PLA), appear to have conducted serious and sustained thinking about nuclear strategy and doctrine in recent years. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, discussions of such issues within the PLA were nascent and largely exploratory. Yet, in the last several years, a critical mass of expertise, experience, and political space on nuclear doctrine issues has emerged within China. This situation has facilitated detailed internal discussions about China's nuclear security environment, China's nuclear doctrine, and required capabilities.
- The Chinese government, and especially the Chinese military, is increasingly willing to discuss nuclear strategy and doctrine with U.S. interlocutors. For the first time ever, a Second Artillery officer formally participated in this conference and regularly offered unsolicited comments. This gradual shift in Chinese behavior is likely the result of relative stability in overall bilateral relations, the recent improvement in U.S.-China military relations, PLA efforts to demonstrate greater transparency, and a creeping Chinese recognition of the dangers of mutual misperceptions on nuclear questions during a crisis.
 - The Chinese delegation was diverse, well prepared, and willing to discuss a range of sensitive issues. Chinese participants delivered pointed messages as well as probes on specific questions about U.S. nuclear policy. These messages included: China's NFU policy will not change, and there is no circumstance in which using nuclear weapons first would serve Chinese interests. Senior PLA officers asked whether the United States would use nuclear weapons in response to the sinking of an aircraft carrier.
- U.S. and Chinese participants articulated some common perceptions of the global nuclear security environment: they agreed that the end of the Cold War has significantly reduced the risk of major nuclear conflict, yet the risks of nuclear proliferation are rising. At the same time, the conference discussions revealed important differences in the U.S. and Chinese views of their regional nuclear security environments. Chinese experts perceive their nuclear security

environment as tense, complex, and highly uncertain. They view U.S. defense policies, such as the “New Triad,” as the most dynamic and potentially threatening element in China’s nuclear security environment. Chinese participants also expressed concerns about Japan’s latent nuclear weapons capabilities as well as India’s gradual nuclear force modernization.

- Many Chinese expressed deep concern that the United States would tailor its “New Triad” to negate China’s second-strike capability, increasing the possibility of U.S. nuclear coercion in a crisis. The combination of U.S. missile defenses and non-nuclear strike capabilities is particularly worrisome to Chinese strategists. Numerous Chinese participants argued that the United States is investing in modernizing its nuclear arsenal, including the development of new “mini” nuclear warheads. Chinese experts regularly referred to U.S. nuclear doctrine as one that prefers the “first use” of nuclear weapons.
 - Chinese participants noted that there is an emerging Chinese concern about nuclear terrorism and that Chinese experts have not devoted much analytical energy to researching the dangers it poses to China’s security interests.
- There was a striking contrast in the U.S. and Chinese visions of their respective future modernization goals. The United States seeks to transform its nuclear forces through the implementation of the “New Triad,” in which the value assigned to nuclear weapons is reduced, and the value of strategic defense and non-nuclear strike capabilities is augmented. China seeks a traditional approach of modernizing its nuclear forces to improve their survivability and ability to penetrate U.S. missile defense capabilities. A core Chinese concern, which is driving their modernization, is that U.S. transformation goals are directed at eliminating or capturing China’s nuclear deterrent capability.
 - Senior Chinese scientists stated at the conference that they had advised China’s leadership to take a “wait and see” approach to changing the size of Chinese nuclear forces in response to U.S. missile defense efforts.
- China seeks a nuclear capability for assured *retaliation*, not assured *destruction*. Chinese nuclear doctrine is to use nuclear weapons primarily to deter nuclear aggression and coercion against China by other nuclear-armed states.
- Chinese participants articulated three general concepts that inform their nuclear doctrine and modernization goals:
 - *Effectiveness*: An effective nuclear force is one that provides China the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on an enemy that strikes China with nuclear weapons *and* to resist efforts by the enemy to coerce China by threatening retaliation. Prompt retaliation is not specifically valued as a measure of effectiveness.
 - *Sufficiency*: A sufficient nuclear force is one that is sized and scaled to survive an enemy’s initial strike, to execute counter-attack and re-attack operations, and to penetrate whatever defenses the enemy may employ. In China’s view, the massive nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold

War grossly exceeded the requirements of “sufficiency.” Accordingly, China seeks to avoid being drawn into the “trap” of a nuclear arms race that wastes limited national resources.

- *Counter-deterrence*: This distinctly Chinese concept is an expression of China’s traditional view of deterrence as a highly coercive practice and, thus, one to be opposed. It conveys China’s core belief that its nuclear weapons exist in order to resist attempts by others to coerce it with nuclear threats. This concept guides the development of doctrine aimed at signaling in a crisis that China will not be intimidated but the enemy’s nuclear forces.
- An internal debate has been ongoing in recent years about whether to eliminate or conditionalize China’s no-first-use (NFU) policy. The occurrence of this debate is not an indication of a major shift in doctrinal orientation, but rather is a reflection of China’s effort to deter a broader range of perceived threats to the credibility of its retaliatory capability. China’s NFU debate was motivated by its concerns about new threats to the survivability of its nuclear forces from the combination of U.S. missile defenses and non-nuclear precision strike capabilities. Chinese policymakers so far do not assess these concerns to be sufficiently compelling for the government to revise its NFU policy and endure the political costs to China’s international image and reputation.
 - Chinese officials and analysts see numerous political benefits associated with China’s NFU policy, including: the policy is a signal of China’s benign intentions as a global actor, and NFU reinforces global nonproliferation norms by devaluing the role of nuclear weapons.
 - Chinese participants argued that the United States’ unwillingness to issue a NFU pledge is consistent with a doctrine that threatens China and seeks to lower the nuclear threshold by developing new, smaller nuclear weapons.
- Chinese participants provided the most detailed views to date on possible nuclear escalation in a Taiwan conflict. Several Chinese military officers and analysts cautioned against too much discussion of “thinking the unthinkable” about nuclear escalation because such talk could lower the psychological threshold for such action in a crisis. They claimed that China, unlike U.S. and Soviet planners during the Cold War, has not conducted highly detailed or theoretical studies of such a nuclear exchange.
 - Chinese strategists see the burden of nuclear escalation falling on the U.S. and not on China in a conflict. Chinese participants insisted that China has few incentives to cross the nuclear threshold first, even in the face of major conventional aggression. China would not need to cross the nuclear threshold because it could fight and prevail in a protracted conventional conflict, and the Chinese people would support the leadership’s pursuit of such an approach.
 - Chinese participants were intentionally ambiguous about whether China would respond to conventional strikes on China’s nuclear assets with nuclear retaliation.

- Chinese participants stressed that China will not fall into the “Star Wars trap” of getting drawn into a resource-intensive arms race with the United States. China will modernize its forces and expand its arsenal in a manner that ensures that China maintains an “effective” and “sufficient” force capable of deterrence and retaliation.
 - Several Chinese called for the United States and China to conclude a bilateral NFU accord to help manage mutual concerns about strategic nuclear relations. One expert proposed an agreement to not use nuclear weapons in the Taiwan Strait if such a conflict were to occur.
- U.S. and Chinese participants both expressed concerns about growing threats to international security from WMD proliferation. Both nations’ participants lauded the gradual but consistent improvements in bilateral nonproliferation cooperation in the last decade. Chinese participants emphasized their desire to continue building on this positive record of coordination so that nonproliferation could become a uniformly positive dimension of U.S.-China ties.
- Chinese participants listed several current challenges to bilateral nonproliferation cooperation. They argued that the United States should exercise restraint when strengthening its nuclear forces because its actions put pressure on China to further expand its nuclear capabilities. Chinese participants argued that the pending U.S.-India civil nuclear energy cooperation agreement would undermine the global nonproliferation regime and could aid India’s nuclear energy programs. Chinese participants added that Japan’s latent capability to become a nuclear weapon state is a source of growing concern and an area of potential U.S.-Chinese cooperation.