

An Update On U.S. Nuclear Policy and Priorities
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Key questions:

1. What are U.S. priorities (for nuclear doctrine and force modernization)?
2. What is the meaning and impact of the new U.S. nuclear employment strategy?
3. How do U.S. specialists characterize China's nuclear doctrine?
4. What are the major perception gaps?

What are U.S. priorities for nuclear doctrine and force modernization?

The Obama administration has two main priorities in this area.

The first priority is to implement the new presidential guidance on nuclear deterrence. This guidance is classified as top secret but was summarized in an unclassified report to Congress of June 19, 2013. Implementation involves updating military operational plans. This is done in a process under full civilian oversight. It is expected to take many months. The planning process is similar to the Chinese planning process, in which high-level strategic principles and operational regulations are applied by military planners to China's war plan in a process guided by the Central Military Commission.

The second priority is to ensure the needed funding for the planned modernization of U.S. forces. Over the last two decades, the United States has lived off the investments of the Cold War in warheads, delivery systems, and command-and-control systems. Looking ahead over the next two decades, this entire set of capabilities will require either replacement or life extension. In some cases, the industrial and technical infrastructure must be re-built to accomplish these tasks. Although this deterrent posture will be vastly smaller than the cold war posture, it will be expensive. This cost comes at a time of high financial difficulty for the United States. It will require renewed and sustained political commitment in both the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government.

What is the meaning and impact of the new U.S. nuclear employment strategy?

Every U.S. President in the nuclear era has issued written instructions to the Department of Defense for nuclear strategy. This is consistent with the general practice whereby the President provides specific instructions to the Department of Defense on the types of contingencies for which he wants to be well prepared. The function of the nuclear guidance is to establish the President's requirements for the operation of the U.S. nuclear

force in peacetime, crisis, and war. It is not primarily about employment; it is primarily about deterrence and creating the conditions to ensure that nuclear weapons are not used by any party to a conflict. The particular function of this guidance is to replace the Bush guidance from a decade ago with the results of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review.

To support the White House's effort to provide this updated guidance, the administration conducted a review of deterrence requirements and alternative deterrence strategies in 2011 and 2012. This included a comprehensive assessment of the impact of changes in the security environment on U.S. deterrence requirements.

One important change for U.S. deterrence strategy is the rise of regional actors newly armed with nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. Accordingly, as the Report to Congress clearly explains, the Obama administration has put a strong emphasis on strengthening deterrence of regional actors such as North Korea and Iran, on strengthening extended nuclear deterrence, and on strengthening the assurance of U.S. allies who face these new threats. The choice of the word "strengthening" (as opposed to simply "maintaining") was purposeful, because this is where the administration sees the main emerging threats requiring more effective deterrence.

The second important change is in the relationships with Russia and China. Relative to the Cold War, relations are much improved and the United States has no need to centralize deterrence in the strategic relationships with these countries as was done in the Cold War. Accordingly, and as the Report again explains, the guidance emphasizes the value of strategic stability with Russia and China. But the report also notes that the fundamentals of America's deterrence strategy are unchanged, in the specific sense that it remains ready to put at risk by nuclear means the most valued assets of nations who might cross our nuclear declaratory policy red lines, with an eye to inducing their restraint and preventing nuclear use of any kind.

Public commentary on the new employment guidance suggests a common misunderstanding of its purpose. Some analysts misperceive that the preplanning of specific kinds of scenarios implies that the President expects to fight those nuclear wars. Certain types of contingencies are "preplanned" in the sense that specific employment options are developed ahead of time because the time available in crisis may be extremely short, with decisions required in a matter of a very few minutes. It would be imprudent not to be able to act quickly if caught by surprise. But the risks of a surprise nuclear attack on the United States are at an all time low and the President has emphasized his desire to maximize his time for decision-making and to maintain a strong capability to adaptively plan nuclear employment in a manner that would support U.S. deterrence objectives in a mounting regional crisis involving questions of U.S. nuclear use in the extreme circumstance in which an enemy has put at risk a vital U.S. interest—or that of a U.S. ally or partner. Similarly, the Second Artillery must be ready to retaliate

with centralized command of strikes on key enemy targets when and if first use occurs against China. But China's preparation for such a contingency does not mean that China's leaders expect to fight such wars.

A key related function of the deterrence requirements review was to identify a possible future pathway for additional reductions in nuclear forces in partnership with Russia. The review concluded that additional reductions in deployed strategic forces are possible in the context of parallel reductions by Russia. The basic composition of the nuclear forces of each country is essentially a function of the basic composition of the forces of the other country, so we ought to be able to continue to reduce deployed forces together without fundamentally eroding the basis of strategic stability. Under both START I and New START, the two sides reduced their deployed strategic forces by about one-third, and another reduction of this scale ought to be possible after full implementation of the New START Treaty (reductions are to be accomplished by 2017 and the treaty expires in 2021).

In the Obama administration's assessment, another bilateral step of this kind is possible without the participation of the other members of the P-5. But there is a strong view in both Washington and Moscow that their further bilateral reductions require more confidence than now exists that China will not continue to increase its nuclear forces as the United States and Russia shrink theirs. Some new transparency from China about the current and future size of its nuclear arsenal would be very helpful in this regard. A clear Chinese commitment to a specific numerical cap would be especially useful.

How do U.S. specialists characterize Chinese nuclear doctrine?

There are two different groups of U.S. specialists, each with a different view.

One group has been engaged with Chinese counterparts for a decade or so in Track 2 and Track 1.5 activities. This group has a grasp of the basic analytical construct of Chinese doctrine and of the specifics of policy. It understands that there are differences between China's basic military strategic guideline, nuclear policy, nuclear strategy, nuclear deterrence theory, and applied strategic principles. It also understands the fundamentals of China's nuclear policy framework, including the emphasis on self defense, the logic of no first use, the opposition to nuclear proliferation, and the acceptance of policy transparency and rejection of capability transparency.

The second group of U.S. specialists consists of people who have not been involved in Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues. They tend to focus on what we can confirm by independent means and not by what Chinese analysts say or write. They emphasize the deception inherent in the "hide and bide" strategy and the "art of the stratagem," and question why we should believe what Chinese analysts say or write. They are concerned about potential future "capability surprises" that might appear at unwelcome moments

from a U.S. perspective, when some hidden Chinese capability is revealed in crisis. They tend to question how China's nuclear strategy, policy, and doctrine could go unchanged when so many other fundamental aspects of China's military strategy, policy, and doctrine have undergone a sea-change over the last two decades.

China's increased policy transparency in recent years has helped to narrow the gap between these two groups. But so long as there is no significant official dialogue that parallels these unofficial ones, there will be no political requirement to address the basic disagreements between these groups.

What are the major perception gaps?

Let me highlight five.

First, there is a gap between Chinese and American analysts on the implications of the rejection of no-first-use by the United States. Chinese analysts tend to see this as confirmation that the United States intends to rely heavily on nuclear deterrence in a regional conflict by using nuclear weapons early and perhaps often. American analysts believe that the United States would only employ nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances when the vital interests of the United States and/or an ally or partner have been put in jeopardy by an aggressor. The intent of American policy is to deter the use by other party, just as is China's intent. But we see a different means to this end.

Second, there is a gap between Chinese and American analysts on the missile defense intentions of the United States. Chinese analysts tend to believe that American missile defenses are "pointed at" China in the sense that they are sized and deployed to negate China's strategic deterrent and to support a strategy of encirclement and containment. American intentions are clear: it does not seek to negate China's strategic deterrent. And it is developing capabilities in a manner consistent with this commitment. We disagree with technical analysis that makes incorrect assumptions about the performance of U.S. sensors and interceptors and concludes China's deterrent will be negated. We understand that China is modernizing its nuclear forces to ensure they remain effective despite the presence of limited U.S. missile defenses, and the U.S. posture has not been adjusted in response. We are pleased to see some recent Chinese analysis that supports the premise of U.S. policy: that it can have a missile defense effective against North Korean missiles but not against China's, and that this should be the foundation of a framework of mutual restraint.

Third, there is a gap between Chinese and American analysts in terms of our understanding why the other country is developing its strategic posture in the way it is. Many Chinese analysts believe that the United States is creating future strategic capabilities for the purpose of exerting stronger pressure on China as part of a broader strategy of encirclement and containment; they tend to dismiss U.S. explanations about

the need to adapt the U.S. deterrent posture to negate the emerging nuclear and missile forces of states like North Korea and Iran. Many American analysts believe that China is moving away from minimum deterrence; we tend to understand China's logic that its nuclear force needs to become a bit bigger but we do not understand how China will know when its nuclear force is big enough. This gap is big. It is also important. If left un-bridged, it seems likely to increase the risks of an action-reaction cycle we both wish to avoid.

Fourth, we have a gap in our concern about the negative stability implications of mixed nuclear and conventional forces. The United States has chosen not to proceed with deployment of the Conventional Trident Missile for the Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) mission because of concern that its launch from a nuclear delivery vehicle (a ballistic missile submarine) would create confusion about whether the attack is with a conventional or nuclear weapon. On the other hand, China has proceeded with the deployment of conventionally-armed ballistic missiles together with nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. Apparently, China has no concerns about the stability implications of this mixed deployment.

Fifth, we have a gap in how we perceive the benefits, costs, and risks of an official level nuclear dialogue. From a U.S. perspective, the benefits are clear: improved mutual understanding of policy, strategy, and capability and also of potential new instabilities. And the costs and risks are modest and can easily be managed, not least because we are confident, based on years of experience, that military secrets can be protected even in such a dialogue. From a PRC perspective, the benefits appear less clear but the risks and costs, especially in terms of new information made available to the United States about capabilities, appear higher.