

China's Nuclear Policy

Rong Yu

Ph.D. Candidate, Institute of Strategic Studies

School of Public Policy and Management

Tsinghua University

Prepared for Workshop on

“Prospects for East Asian Nuclear Disarmament”

Hiroshima Peace Institute

Hiroshima, Japan

March 11-12, 2004

China has stuck to a purely defensive nuclear policy since the very first day when it exploded its first nuclear weapon, which falls into the category of minimum deterrence policy. To the Chinese government, the nuclear policy has always been both part of the foreign policy and part of defense policy. Different and sometimes incompatible missions are assigned to its nuclear policy, which, coupled with the development of U.S. NMD system, pose a challenge to China's nuclear policy. This paper intends to explore the dilemmas facing China's nuclear policy, nuclear modernization as a solution to the dilemma facing it, the effects of DPRK going nuclear, as well as a Northeast Asia Nuclear Reduction Initiative from China's perspective.

China's Nuclear Policy

China has come into possession of nuclear weapons for nearly four decades by now. During these years, China has issued statements over China's nuclear policy at various occasions. However, since 1998 when China began the practice of publishing a whitepaper on China's national defense every two years, the whitepapers have become the most authoritative source of statements on China's defense policy. In the hitherto published three whitepapers, the last two has given a special reference to its nuclear policy in the chapter regarding China's defense policy. The most recent summary of China's current nuclear weapons policy, therefore, is to be found in China's National Defense in 2002, which is worth quoting at length:

“China consistently upholds the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons, and adopts an extremely restrained attitude toward the development of nuclear weapons. China has never participated in any nuclear arms race and never deployed weapons abroad. China’s limited nuclear counterattack is entirely for deterrence against possible nuclear attacks by other countries.”¹

In the same White Paper, there is a section devoted to the nuclear disarmament, which reiterated China’s commitment to complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons.²

Key Elements in China’s Nuclear Policy

For all those who are familiar with China’s nuclear policy, these are the policies that China has consistently endorsed and adhered to. It seems that several key elements can be distinguished about China’s nuclear policy:

First and foremost, it is defensive in nature. As a deterrent against nuclear war, China’s nuclear weapons are a key part of China’s active defense strategy. Indeed, Chinese government and officials has been emphasizing this key feature of China’s nuclear policy. For example, on July 15, 1997, Lt. General Li Jijun, Vice President of the PLA's Academy of Military Science, told his audience in the U. S. Army War College: "China's nuclear strategy is purely defensive in nature. The decision to develop nuclear weapons was a choice China had to make in the face of real nuclear threats. A small arsenal is retained only for the purpose of self-defense. ...China's

¹ Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, December 2002, China’s National Defense in 2002, P14

² Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, December 2002, China’s National Defense in 2002, p79-80

strategy is completely defensive, focused only on deterring the possibility of nuclear blackmail being used against China by other nuclear powers." ³

Often cited as the most telling features of China's defensive nuclear policy is the adoption of NFU, or non-first-use policy. Among all the nuclear powers, China is the only one to have made the promise to do so on the first day when it came into possession of nuclear weapons and have stuck to its promise faithfully till this day. In fact, as the 2002 white paper claimed earlier on the same page about its nuclear policy, China adopts a military strategy of active defense, which implies "a principle featuring defensive operations, self-defense and attack only after being attacked." ⁴ As an important integral part of China's military strategy, China's nuclear policy has been aimed at coercing the outbreak of nuclear war. Indeed, it had been argued that different roles attached to nuclear weapons determine the division between defensive and aggressive nuclear policies. Even when all nuclear powers are following a nuclear deterrence principle, still, the NFU or FU feature distinguishes between the aggressive nuclear deterrence and defensive nuclear deterrence.

Second, its purpose is to defend against the nuclear deterrence from other countries, or as some scholars have put it: China's nuclear policy is anti-nuclear deterrence. China has kept its nuclear forces as a counterforce to nuclear deterrence from other countries. While other nuclear powers have reserved the right to attack

³ "Traditional Military Thinking and the Defensive Strategy of China," An Address at the US Army War College, Letort Paper No. 1, 29 August 1997, p. 7.

⁴ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, December 2002, China's National Defense in 2002, p13

first as a credible deterrent, China has promised NFU. In addition, China has also pledged not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states at all.

Third, the size of China's nuclear force will be limited. Although China has in recent years attached much importance to the modernization of its armed forces, including its nuclear forces, China continues to exercise "utmost restraint on the development of nuclear weapons and its nuclear arsenal is kept at the lowest level necessary for self-defense only."⁵

As has been analyzed by Li Bin(2001), ⁶China's current nuclear policy is the third stage of its nuclear development. In the first stage from 1964 until 1980, when China acquired the capability of launching Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), it had only a symbolic or existential nuclear deterrence.⁷ In the second stage, the Chinese nuclear deterrence is based on the quantitative ambiguity of its nuclear force. Today, Chinese nuclear development is going to enter a third stage, in which China will have credible and visible minimum nuclear deterrence. Although there are talks of China's pursuit of a limited deterrence strategy,⁸ Iain Johnston's argument (1996) ⁹that evidences show China is still far away from limited deterrence seems to be still valid. Therefore, it would be rash to assume a shift to a limited

⁵ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, December 2002, China's National Defense in 2002, p80

⁶ Li Bin, "The Impact of U.S. NMD on Chinese Nuclear Modernization", <http://www.pugwash.org/>

⁷ Xie Guang eds., Contemporary Chinese Science and Technology for National Defense, Contemporary China Publishing House, 1972, Beijing, pp.327-338.

⁸ Bates Gill, James Mulvenon, Mark Stokes. "The Chinese Second Artillery Corps: Transition to Credible Deterrence," in The People's Liberation Army as an Organization: Reference Volume v1.0." Ed: James C. Mulvenon, Andrew N.D. Yang. 2001. Page 516.]

⁹ Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's New 'Old Thinking': The Concept of Limited Deterrence," International Security, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Winter 1995-96), pp. 5-42

nuclear deterrence policy. In this paper, I will discuss China's nuclear policy options within the context of minimum deterrence.

Conflicting Demands Facing China's nuclear policy

In various occasions, Chinese leaders have stated China's task in the new millennium to be: to continue to propel the modernization drive, to achieve national reunification, and to safeguard world peace and promote common development.

¹⁰Although all three tasks require the coordination of China's defense policy and foreign policy, nuclear policy, due to the unique strategic nature of the nuclear weapons, has a special role to play. Nuclear policy is both part of defense policy and part of foreign policy. In China, as the two dimensions of policies pose different requirements, its nuclear policy will have to fulfill double missions, which are not necessarily completely compatible.

Foreign Policy Mission

As China's economy grows, so does its self-confidence. No longer feel isolated or threaten by direct military assault, China is increasingly identifying itself as part of the mainstream international community and becoming more active in various international affairs. These efforts, however, have caused uneasiness among some of its neighbors and stakeholders in the region, who fear that a rising China will upset the current strategic structure, some of which even talked about possibilities of a China "hegemony". In view of these so-called "China threat" theories, Chinese

¹⁰ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, December 2002, China's National Defense in 2002, p1

leaders have decided to pursue a “peaceful rise”¹¹, which means it will tilt its foreign policy more to the demonstration of its peaceful bid and non-hegemony nature. Foreign policy efforts devoted to this purpose include sharing China's economic opportunities with its neighbors and enhanced efforts in promoting regional cooperation and international regime.

In view of these missions, China's nuclear policy has come to be increasingly subject to international norms. In terms of nuclear arms control and disarmament, in addition to its unconditional no-first use policy, China has also committed itself to a series of international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives. As Iain Johnston (2003) has argued¹², these efforts were often at the cost of China's own security or economic interests. For example, in signing the CTBT, China had been willing to allow the freezing of the nuclear asymmetry between China and other nuclear powers to the disadvantage of China. Recent reports on China's intention to join the MCTR and NSG can also be seen as its efforts to convince the international community of its identification with the mainstream value. Evidently, to ensure a peaceful rise, which would entail reducing perceived threats to other powers, China is willing to put a check on its nuclear development and contribute more to the nuclear abolition cause.

¹¹ Lu Hong and He Hongze: Wen Jiabao's Speech at Harvard University,” *Renmin Ribao*, December 11, 2003, p.3.

¹² Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?”, in *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 5–56

Taiwan Issue – Defense Imperative

In a certain sense, China's security environment is at its best since 1840. With no danger of direct military threat to its territory nor imminent risk of military clash with its neighbors, China's only major security concern is Taiwan issue. The separation of Taiwan from Mainland China, an emotional issue for the Chinese, is the relic of China's bloody civil war. It constantly reminds China of its miserable history of the last century, which hurt the nation's pride. As mentioned earlier, Taiwan's reunification with Mainland China is the one of the major tasks Chinese leaders assigned to themselves. China has consistently urged for a peaceful reunification, however, with the rising of separatist sentiments among Taiwanese, the possibility of unification by force is increasing, which calls for the increased military efforts to secure the viability of a military option.

Due to the special relations between Taiwan and U.S., a military solution to Taiwan issue is certain to invoke the possibility of a confrontation between U.S. and China.¹³ In this regard, China's nuclear forces become a prominent figure, not as a means to fight and win a nuclear war, but rather as a means to prevent the U.S. from involving itself into the war. The success or failure of this goal, however, will depend on the perceived credibility of the nuclear deterrence.

The effect of BMD

Dated back to a few years ago, China had been quite confident of the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. As Li Bin (2001) pointed out, the U.S. can never be sure of

¹³ Li Bin, "The Impact of U.S. NMD on Chinese Nuclear Modernization", <http://www.pugwash.org/>

being able to eliminate every single piece of China's nuclear weapons in a preemptive attack, therefore, it is speculated that U.S. dare not to risk a nuclear exchange with China for fear of a nuclear retaliation. China's nuclear forces, small in size and unsophisticated in nature as it might be in comparison with the U.S., was quite enough to sober its adversary up in a potential conflict.

In recent years, when the U.S. abandoned the ABM Treaty and started to develop and deploy its NMD, however, things are becoming quite different for China. With the limited size of China's current long range nuclear force, only a few Chinese ICBMs would survive a first U.S. strike and retain a retaliatory capability. Therefore, even a very limited NMD system with very few interceptors would pose a serious threat to the Chinese retaliatory capability. According to the estimations of a prominent Chinese defense analyst¹⁴, China will need to increase its nuclear arsenal several fold or significantly modernize its nuclear arsenal before it can retain its nuclear deterrence. Or, another choice will be to abandon or at least modify its no-first-use policy. For, if China claims it will consider first use of nuclear weapons in very critical situations, or that when it follows a launch-on-warning policy, the U.S. will again face the uncertainty of a defense against Chinese nuclear attack.

These options, however, all run contrary to China's intention to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons. In sum, on one hand, China's commitment to a peaceful rise has prompted China to limit its nuclear weapons as much as possible; on the other hand, China's national defense imperatives demand that China must develop its nuclear

¹⁴ Li Bin, "The Impact of U.S. NMD on Chinese Nuclear Modernization", <http://www.pugwash.org/>

weapons to a certain extent. Chinese decision-makers are faced with the task of finding the appropriate trade-off between the two competing goals. Their response is nuclear modernization.

China's Nuclear Modernization

Since the late 1990s, concern over China's nuclear modernization has been increasing. Some western scholars are worried that it may mean China's nuclear policy is changing from minimum deterrence to limited deterrence, which requires a much larger nuclear force than the former.¹⁵ However, when we look closely at the reported nuclear modernization efforts China is taking, it seems quite in line with China's current pronounced nuclear policy. I would argue that the modernization efforts is aimed at sustaining the current nuclear policy, rather than changing it.

As a matter of fact, the task facing China's leadership in terms of nuclear policy seems to be rather clear: Maintain the credibility of China's nuclear deterrence capability. The constraints facing China are also evident: First, the nuclear force must be limited; second, China has pledged not to be the first to use nuclear weapons under any conditions; third, the U.S., which is a possible to confront China in the event of a military solution to Taiwan issue, is developing NMD.

If we treat the former two constraints to be constant, that is, we assume that these are the preconditions that will not change. Then, China's only way to maintain its nuclear deterrent capability will have to be nuclear modernization. By mobilizing its

¹⁵ "China's Nuclear Doctrine", <http://www.nti.org/db/china/doctrine.htm>

nuclear weapons, China can improve the survivability of its nuclear arsenal. For example, the road-mobile ICBMs will have a much higher probability of surviving a preemptive nuclear attack than their silo-based counterparts. SSBNs at sea, of course, will have an even greater chance of survival. By MIRVing, China can also improve the chances that its nuclear warhead will be able to reach the U.S. and penetrate U.S. missile defense system. Other efforts may also include various penetration-aids. These modest attempts at nuclear modernization aimed at maintaining the credibility of nuclear deterrence do not run contrary to the nature of minimum nuclear deterrence, rather, they are still in line with the words and spirit of China's pronounced nuclear policy.

I would wish to go one step further in arguing that, China is striving to maintain its minimum nuclear deterrence policy through nuclear modernization efforts. So long as these efforts are successful, so long will China stick faithfully to its current nuclear policy and remain active in nuclear disarmament issues. Had China not decided to modernize its nuclear arsenal, then, its nuclear policy would have been drastically changed. After all, the U.S. NMD is an external factor, which is not subject to China's control. If we follow the line of reasoning of Chinese decision-makers, it will be obvious that to achieve credible nuclear deterrence without nuclear modernization, China will have to change its no-first-use policy, or significantly enlarge its nuclear arsenal. While the former is a direct violation of its current nuclear policy, the second will also be likely to invite criticism of a vertical nuclear proliferation, both of which will be viewed as evidence of a "China threat".

All things considered, nuclear modernization is the most acceptable choice for the Chinese, and also to the world at large.

When will China Change Its Nuclear Policy?

While it would be a misunderstanding to treat China's nuclear modernization as signs of a changing nuclear policy, it would also be naïve to simply believe that China will stick to its nuclear policy under any condition.

For one thing, should any drastic change which is of fundamental importance to China's national security occur, China may consider changing its nuclear policy to suit the new situation.

For another, when taking the historical records of China's decision-making process into consideration, especially with regard to military confrontation, China's decisions seemed to always come as a surprise to the outside world. For example, when China marched into Korea in the early 1950s, the U.S. was taken by surprise, for they had thought China did not have much incentive to get involved in a major warfare with a major power. Similarly, before the outbreak of the wars at the boundaries respectively with India, Soviet Union and Vietnam, China had withstood the friction and gradual erosion of its territories at the boundaries without strong attempts at revenge, so much so that its neighbors took it to mean that a little more irritation would still be safe. When China did respond with force, it always came as a sudden escalation into a war, the timing and intensity of which were almost invariably out of the expectations of its adversaries.

It seems that the characteristics of the Chinese decision-making can trace its roots into China's traditional thinking. Chinese traditional culture, which put a special emphasis on "peace and harmony", stresses "justice" and "righteousness" when it comes to use of force. Therefore, when dealing with security concerns, China will try its best to preserve "peace and harmony" at first, which usually translates into indecision or inability to the foreign eye. While its adversaries believed it safe to go further and further, however, China starts its "justification" process, keeping an account on the injustices it has suffered. When it reaches a point where China considers it justifiable to take action against the situation, it usually comes as a surprisingly radical action, which is a drastic and unexpected escalation of the conflict to the eye of an outside watcher. Maybe the question lies in that the limit of tolerance that China sets for itself is different from the expectations of the outside world and cannot be readily understood by people from another culture. Indeed, in a certain sense, the characteristics of China's decision-making seem to be rather emotional, in which it is hard to find the clear boundary of what it will tolerate and what it will not. In terms of nuclear policy decision-making, it cannot be ruled out that under certain situations China may also be capable of a sudden drastic change, although it would be hard to say when and how.

The Effects of Potential Nuclearization of North Korea and Japan to China's Nuclear Policy – A Hypothetical Question

Northeast Asia is an area where the interests of the world's major powers converge. Countries located here include China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, North Korea. The U.S., although located an ocean apart, is also present in the region in the tangible form of forward-stationed forces in South Korea and Japan as well as intangible form of security commitments to the two countries, including the nuclear umbrella. Among these countries, the U.S., Russia, China all belong to the Big Five Nuclear Club, which make this region the most nuclearized area in the world. To make things worse, North Korea has broken its promise and started the dangerous track towards nuclearization, which make the region the hottest site of nuclear proliferation as well as nuclear confrontation.

From a Chinese perspective, it is definitely undesirable to have one or even two to three newly nuclearized countries along its border line, all the more so because of the potential direct military attack of the U.S. on North Korea over its nuclear program. China is doing all it could to stop this from happening, as is evident from China's active efforts in arranging and hosting the Six-party talks.

However, even with all these joint efforts, things could still gone out of control. What will it mean to China if the bottom finally fell out of the Korean Peninsula, i.e., the nuclear spiral started to roll on?

Nuclearization of DPRK and Japan

Will it be the beginning of a hellish journey to self-destruction for North Korea and this region if DPRK did go nuclear? The answer, it seems to me, depends.

First of all, it will depend upon how the U.S. will respond to the fact.

If, say, the U.S. could not tolerate a nuclear DPRK despite all the diplomatic efforts otherwise and strikes the DPRK nuclear sites, perhaps also accompanied with a direct attempt at a regime change of DPRK. Obviously, this is the worst thing to happen, indicating the total failure of all diplomatic efforts to preserve peace, which may lead to the final outbreak of the Korean Peninsula crisis. Considering China's present attitude to the North Korean nuclear program and its current international relations, it is highly unlikely that China will stand up for DPRK as it did some fifty years ago. Therefore, once that happened, DPRK would be on its own. If the DPRK could not survive the strike, then it will collapse and perhaps disappear into ROK, which will be followed with a painful process of national reunification of Korea, during which the region will suffer from turmoil and economic regression. If, on the other hand, the North Koreans were able to retaliate, then the U.S. NMD system will gain the first experience of being put into actual use. Let's pray it will be effective. Meanwhile, DPRK would still go broke, considering its weak economy and unsophisticated military forces relative to the U.S.. The result for the Koreans and the region would not be much different: Mass suffering and regional turmoil coupled with economic regression for the next decades to come.

From the lessons of the cold war and recent development of the situation in South Asia, however, it seems that nuclear weapons can act as a stabilizer in view of war risks. It is trite lesson that the U.S. and Soviet Union never openly confronted with each other in the form of a major war for fear of escalation into a nuclear war. In South Asia, the newly nuclearized India and Pakistan also seemed to be much more rational when they approached to the brink of another war over Kashmir. While the relationship between the two countries is not improving substantially, it certainly is not deteriorating much further.

If we assume the same logic somehow also worked here, that is, the U.S. chose not to launch a military attack against DPRK. Another nuclear country emerged in Northeast Asia. What will this mean to the region?

To China, it does not pose a threat. As the two countries have always been friendly, North Koreans' nuclear bomb, undesirable as it is, will not have much effect on China's security per se. Similarly, it will also be innocuous to Russia.

The countries that will feel threatened, of course, will be the U.S., South Korea and Japan. The options available to the U.S. have already been discussed above, what remain to be analyzed are the options South Korea and Japan might take.

For the ROK and Japan, they could choose to remain under U.S. nuclear umbrella. If this is the situation, things will be stable unless the DPRK initiated a conflict. As a small country with a nearly broken economy, it seems a suicidal option to choose to wage a war against much stronger opponents without any outside support at all, therefore, the risks of DPRK initiating a war are extremely slim. Chances are, as

DPRK consistently claims, what it wants is a secured peaceful environment, in which it could perhaps also get more economic aid. If the small probability event did happen, then, similar to the scenario mentioned earlier, DPRK would lose the war, resulting in perhaps more suffering to its own people and the region as a whole.

On the other hand, the ROK and Japan might also choose to develop their own nuclear weapons. In taking this option, it would mean the casting off of the U.S. nuclear umbrella with the U.S. assent. Unlikely as it is, what if it does happen like this? What will this mean to China?

The nuclear weapons of ROK will not be a threat to China, for the Korean people and Chinese people have traditionally been friendly with each other, and the two countries have also been on friendly terms.

What might become a threat to China, is the nuclearization of Japan. To China, Japan's nuclearization would mean the final and decisive step in the revival of Japanese militarism, which would lead to a fundamental change in China's evaluation of Japan. As for now, despite the rise of anti-Japanese emotions among Chinese people, the Chinese government has always been proactive in the development of the bilateral relations. However, with nuclearization of Japan, everything will change. Considering the territorial dispute of the Diaoyu Island, as well as the historical memories of Japanese imperialism, China will have to put more emphasis on guarding against the Japanese military recklessness. Things will look especially tough for China, as Japan already has a massive nuclear potential in terms of both fissile material and nuclear weaponization technology.

In this scenario, will China's nuclear policy be affected? Still, the answer is: hardly. Considering Japan's geographical reality and dense population, it seems to be especially vulnerable to nuclear attacks. A nuclearized Japan, to China, will offer China an opportunity to use nuclear weapons on Japan in a major conflict, unlikely as it might be, which could perhaps offset China's relative disadvantage in terms of conventional weaponry. The potential quantitative or qualitative superiority of nuclear weapons above a certain level does not really matter that much for the purpose of nuclear deterrence. Therefore, China may not change its nuclear policy with Japan going nuclear.

In summary, so long as China's core national interest does not face threat or situations do not warrant a significant net gain, China's nuclear policy is not likely to change, not even with DPRK or Japan going nuclear. However, this does not in the least mean that China will accept the nuclearization of the two Koreas or Japan. Rather, even without the disastrous situations that the region would land into with the nuclearization, it is still a dire picture for the region and the world. For with so much more nuclear weapons in countries with such complicated relations, the risk of a nuclear disaster due to mishandling, false information, theft or mechanic failure is extremely high. It is not only a new round of nuclear proliferation in itself, but also a trigger of more nuclear proliferation, which will be a huge setback for the nuclear arms control cause.

Northeast Asia Nuclear Disarmament Initiatives

The ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament in Northeast Asia region should be to establish a nuclear-free zone in this region. The imminent task, however, is to solve the Korean nuclear issue, i.e., to dissuade DPRK from its nuclear program. The Six-party talks are a very good beginning to engage North Koreans. To successfully dissuade DPRK, however, more concrete efforts are also needed.

In addition to raising the costs of nuclearization to DPRK, it will also help to increase its gains from giving up its nuclear program. Addressing its security concerns as well as providing economic assistance will be possible measures to take. However, to convince the North Koreans of the unnecessary of its nuclear program, it would also be very helpful for the other countries in the region to reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons.

Reducing the reliance on nuclear weapons will not only be conducive to the solving of Korean nuclear issue in particular, but also contribute to the nuclear disarmament cause in this region in general. Current nuclear powers of this region, China, Russia and the U.S. should take the lead in reducing reliance on nuclear weapons. A mutual no-first-use pledge of nuclear weapons may be a suitable first step to go. China and Russia already have a mutual no-first-use agreement, but there is currently no such agreements between China and the U.S., or the U.S. and Russia. It is high time now for the three countries to proceed to an agreement of no-first-use. By reaching such a multilateral no-first-use agreement, the major nuclear powers will show to the world and especially other countries in this region their willingness to

reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons, which is the first step towards nuclear disarmament.

Steps to follow may include the withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella over ROK and Japan, withdrawal of nuclear-armed submarines from the waters in this region, ect. While the de-nuclearization may take some time to actualize, it is worth continued efforts to push for it.

Conclusion

China's foreign policy and defense policy put conflicting demands on China's nuclear policy, to which China responded with nuclear modernization efforts, which is a means to maintain its current minimum deterrence nuclear policy rather than changing it. Due to China's traditional thinking, the decision-making regarding China's nuclear policy would be capable of radical changes, though it is hard to say how and when. Although China's nuclear policy is not likely to be affected by DPRK or Japan going nuclear, China does have a strong incentive in promoting a nuclear-free Northeast Asia, to which a no-first-use agreement among the major nuclear powers in this region may be a suitable first step to go.