

# China's Nuclear Threat Perceptions

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## Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, China is believed to have doubled the size of its nuclear arsenal, while the other nuclear powers under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) have cut their forces in half. Many analysts explain China's buildup as a direct response to US missile defense. This article takes a broader view, looking at the threat China perceives from the United States as well as from other nuclear players under the penumbra of US hegemony. A state-by-state analysis provides a multidimensional look at China's nuclear security environment, allowing deeper insight into the motivations behind China's modernization.



In a recent issue of *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Stephen Cimbala analyzed the impact of China's military modernization, including its nuclear buildup, on the balance of power in Asia.<sup>1</sup> His article concludes with an assessment of implications for US policy and the recommendation that the United States include China in triangular dialogues going forward. Engaging China in such a conversation is a legitimate and feasible policy goal—especially since China has shown an increased willingness in recent years to participate in the nuclear nonproliferation regime and it was the first nuclear weapon state to propose a world summit to discuss the global elimination of nuclear weapons. At the same time, consideration must be given to the fact that China is now the only nuclear weapon state under the NPT that continues to increase the size and sophistication of its nuclear arsenal. Consequently, a constructive conversation necessitates a clear understanding of China's present motivations for force modernization.

Despite the fanfare surrounding China's nuclear buildup, relatively few Western scholars have studied the Chinese perspectives behind it. The

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most common analysis distills China's force development to a response to US ballistic missile defense (BMD).<sup>2</sup> Other studies have analyzed the deterrence dynamics of South Asia specifically, discussing China's role in countering India.<sup>3</sup> In reality, China's nuclear threat perception, and thus its nuclear modernization, stems from both bilateral relationships, where the United States is rightfully characterized as the "heavyweight" in China's security calculations, and India is the peripheral aggravator. Though bilateral analyses are beneficial to our overall understanding of China's nuclear strategy, the compartmentalization of China's deterrence relationships does not reflect all aspects of Chinese perceptions. We can no longer afford to analyze the bilateral relations between two nuclear weapon states without embedding the narrative within the modern multidimensional framework of nuclear deterrence, or what Gregory Koblenz refers to as the "new geometry of deterrence."<sup>4</sup> In regard to China, this means presenting a complete picture of China's present threat environment, as China perceives it, and explaining how these perceptions interact to form the basis of China's nuclear deterrence strategy.<sup>5</sup>

China is currently the only nuclear weapon state situated within striking range of all eight nuclear powers.<sup>6</sup> Four of these states share borders with China, and three of the four are actively increasing their nuclear arsenals.<sup>7</sup> In addition, China's long-time adversary and neighbor, Japan, has long had the capacity to join the club. In terms of nuclear deterrence, China's leaders face a multiplayer game. This article analyzes the threat China perceives from each player, including those not presently prominent in China's strategic calculus—those with minimal nuclear capabilities and/or no perceived intent. It analyzes how the shape of security has shifted for China and provides a more complex picture of China's perceived nuclear threats. Such a comprehensive snapshot enables us to take inventory of China's present security calculations while also having the information necessary to see how China's strategy might shift if the conditions of other states change.

The matrix in table 1 shows these threats according to perceived capability as well as perceived intent. In the following analysis, those states absent intent will be discussed first, followed by states China considers as having intent. Even though the United States is not on China's border, it nonetheless features prominently in China's nuclear strategy calculations. While the US–China security dilemma is the primary driver of China's strategic nuclear decisions, this situation involves more than just US BMD.

China perceives US BMD, in conjunction with the US development of prompt long-range conventional missiles to be a part of a larger shift in US nuclear strategy. This shift, according to China, is further demonstrated by US interactions with other nuclear and near-nuclear states on China's periphery. This relationship is discussed at length and contextualized amid the larger nuclear landscape.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1. A complex reality: China's nuclear threat perceptions**

Hi	Russia	US
Med	France UK Pakistan Israel	India
Low	DPRK	
No	Iran	Japan Taiwan
	Absent	Present

**Iran—No Intent, Potential Means**

Despite only having latent nuclear capabilities, Iran is often cast as the most recent transgressor of the norm against nuclear proliferation. The primary narrative, shaped largely by the United States, is that Iran is a defiant nation whose nuclear ambitions, if actualized, would present a prominent threat to world peace. Pres. Barack Obama elaborated upon this point at an address before American University in August 2015. According to the president, Iran's nuclear acquisition "would spark an arms race in the world's most unstable region, and turn every crisis into a potential nuclear showdown . . . embolden terrorist groups . . . and unravel the global commitment to non-proliferation that the world has done so much to defend."<sup>9</sup> Not every nation agrees. In fact, the level of concern over Iran's dereliction depends mostly on the envisioned aim of its nuclear development. China believes it has little to fear. It is also quick to emphasize that Tehran's capabilities are embryonic at best and that Iran is years away from being an official nuclear state. The immediacy of the

situation, some argue, wanes when put into historical perspective and contextualized among larger geopolitical factors.

The origins of Iran's nuclear program began in the 1960s when the United States provided Iran with basic nuclear facilities. After signing the NPT in 1969, Iran further expanded its civilian nuclear program to meet increased demand and offset a spike in oil prices. At this point, the United States and China diverged in their understanding of the Iranian situation. US intelligence indicated that Iran had ambitions of starting a nuclear weapons program. China, by contrast, viewed Iranian intent as benign and supported Tehran's right under the NPT to grow its civilian nuclear capabilities.<sup>10</sup> Iran capitalized on China's benevolence in 1985 when the two countries signed a ten-year nuclear cooperation agreement. This agreement permitted the sale of Chinese nuclear materials and equipment to Iran and allowed for specialized training. It also laid the foundation for future assistance. Shortly following the agreement, for instance, China supplied Iran with several research reactors and related research laboratories. It also sold Iran an electromagnetic device for separating isotopes and exported a metric ton of uranium hexafluoride.

The most controversial of these exchanges occurred in the early 1990s when China agreed to provide Iran with a uranium conversion facility as well as a 20-megawatt research reactor and two 300-megawatt power reactors. Though ostensibly compliant with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) obligations, the United States argued that the uranium conversion facility, in particular, would allow Iran to produce a gas suitable for uranium enrichment. The United States also found the Iranian demand for nuclear energy suspect in light of the country's abundance in natural gas and oil. With mounting pressure from the United States, China ultimately suspended the Iranian agreement. Its acquiescence, however, was less an affirmation of the indictment of Iranian action than it was a calculated shift based upon self-interest. It chose to trade the Iranian deal for a better deal with the United States where it would be on the receiving end of US nuclear technology.

China's shift in partners was strategic and did not indicate a fundamental shift in its beliefs. In fact, while it discontinued most of its cooperation, China still maintained that Iran had a right to nuclear technology, as did every state that met its obligations under the NPT. According to China, Iran's pursuit of peaceful uses of nuclear energy should not be au-

tomatically (and unilaterally) equated with the pursuit of nuclear weapons, a statement it shared in a 2000 Sino–Iranian joint communiqué.

China's empathy for the Iranian position was strengthened in 2002 when Pres. George W. Bush named Iran, alongside North Korea and Iraq, as a part of the “axis of evil” intent on creating weapons of mass destruction. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan immediately spoke out against the “arbitrary” label, and Liu Jianfei, a party school expert, called the statement “irrational.” A *Xinhua* article published the following month even went so far as to (falsely) claim there was no evidence confirming that any of the three states were developing weapons of mass destruction.<sup>11</sup> “Even if they *did* have these kinds of weapons,” the article explained, “who would dare to use them against the United States, the world's number one nuclear nation . . . while risking the danger of being completely annihilated?” The article continued, “These three countries do have one common denominator. . . . Their values and policies do not agree with those of the United States and none of them are on good terms with the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

As time passed, it became more difficult for China to deny that Iran might be pursuing nuclear weapons. At the same time, however, China did not agree with the United States, Germany, France, and Great Britain that economic sanctions or force were appropriate responses. Instead, it continued to advocate for constructive multilateral dialogue. China's divergence from the West on the Iranian nuclear issue stems from several factors. First, Iran and China have a history of “friendly cooperation” in a variety of areas including energy, trade, and military technology, and thus, it is against China's economic interest to speak out or act on unsubstantiated evidence of nuclear weapons production. This is especially true when it comes to oil. China is second only to the United States in oil imports, and China's domestic demand for oil continues to grow. This makes Iran, a country rich in oil and natural gas, a preferable partner. Iran's appeal increases when one considers the competitive pricing brought about by Iran's shrinking customer base. Sanctions against Iran enacted by individual states under United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1929 allow China to purchase Iranian crude oil at a heavy discount. This encourages the \$20–\$30 billion China spends on Iranian oil each year. If China were to fall in line with other countries and foist sanctions against Iran, this would have a significant economic impact. It would also disrupt the two nations' long-standing

bilateral relationship, and while China has expressed its disapproval of Iran's nuclear ambitions, in the end, Beijing has little to fear. After all, even if Iran were developing nuclear weapons and this aspiration came to fruition, the rapport shared by Iran and China leads Chinese leaders to believe that China would not be a target of these forces.

The same cannot be said for the United States. Interestingly, in many Chinese accounts of the Iranian nuclear narrative, the story told is not one of the peril of Iranian nuclearization but the cautionary tale of US hegemony. This began as early as the late 1990s, when US suspicions of Iranian nuclear weapons first emerged and continued after Iran pursued uranium enrichment. In an article entitled "Iran Nuclear Crisis Tests China's Diplomacy," for example, the author announced Iran's debut of a new nuclear facility and the collective request of Britain, France, Germany, and the United States to put the issue to the UNSC for discussion. The author argued that China did not agree with this decision: "The most important thing," he explained, "is that China, as the largest developing country, always upholds multilateralism and non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries. . . . Whether or not China can, together with the peace-loving countries, prevent a repeat of the tragedy of the US attack on Iraq is not only in line with China's interests but is also in line with the general direction of the harmonious development of the world."<sup>13</sup> Here the blame shifts away from the potential proliferator back to the United States. This trend continues with the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter North Korea).

### **North Korea—No Intent, Minimal Means**

North Korea is an interesting case as it relates to China, because it has minimal demonstrated nuclear capabilities and China believes that it has no intent of actually using this capability. North Korea has long had the ability to produce highly enriched uranium and plutonium from its civilian nuclear facilities, but it waited until 2003 to withdraw from the NPT and did not test its first nuclear weapon until 2006. It conducted subsequent tests in 2009, 2013, and 2016. At present, North Korea is presumed to possess between four and eight nuclear warheads that can theoretically be affixed to any of its short-, medium-, or intermediate-range ballistic missiles. This means it can conceivably deliver a nuclear warhead up to 3,000 kilometers (km)—well within reach of China. It is

also developing a newer missile with a range of 6,700 km, enabling it to target all of China.

These facts have not caused alarm in China for multiple reasons. First, there are several technological steps that still need to occur for North Korea's nuclear weapons to present a viable threat to its neighboring states. The foremost of these is miniaturization. Right now, North Korea has nuclear bombs and it has missiles, but it is not believed to have the ability to put these two components together and deliver them to a selected target. A South Korean estimate quoted in a Chinese publication indicates that North Korea's latest test—the one deemed “perfect” by the North Korean government—was only two-thirds of “effective saturation” (the equivalent of 6–7 kilotons of dynamite rather than the ideal 10), indicating that the technology is not yet “mature.” Lastly, outside of actual weapon design, North Korea does not have a sophisticated command and control system. This would be critical if it wished to go up against a more mature nuclear power, such as the United States or even China.

Another factor mitigating Chinese concern, in addition to the perceived inchoate development of North Korean nuclear capabilities, is the perception that North Korea does not intend to use its nuclear weapons for military purposes. This presumption is widespread in China and has manifested into a subtle empathy for the North Korean plight vis-à-vis the United States. One article, for instance, published immediately after North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, claims that while the North Korean government may exhibit irrationality and “not follow the rules of the game,” its nuclear tests and provocations are only pomp concealing the state's desire to engage in meaningful dialogue with the United States. “For this reason,” it argues, “although the peninsula's situation looks tense, the possibility of a military conflict is almost next to nothing.” Ultimately, China perceives little direct threat from the Korean peninsula, and it believes the larger threat is still “under control by big powers.”<sup>14</sup>

In recent years, China has secured a position as one of these *big powers* managing the situation through the Six-Party Talks. This role has led to the gradual dissolution of empathetic undertones toward North Korea in the Chinese press but not to a fundamental change in China's position. If North Korean nuclearization is meant to serve as diplomatic leverage in US–North Korean relations, as some in China claim, then China has limited influence in the situation. A 2009 article appearing in the Chinese newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* reiterates the crux of the issue:

North Korea's ultimate goal is not to have nuclear weapons. What North Korea is doing as it strives to obtain nuclear weapons is to use the nuclear issue to create tension on the Korean Peninsula and to use these conditions to force the United States, which is the dominant hegemon in the contemporary international system, to accept its legitimate status and provide it with sufficient existential and developmental space so that it can preserve the stability of its political power.<sup>15</sup>

The article continues to explain that China's hands are tied in providing an adequate solution, since North Korea's ultimate objective can only be achieved through dialogue with the United States. Ultimately, China operates on the assumption that North Korea does not pose a security threat to China. At the same time, however, China must consider the implications of North Korea's nuclearization on the regional security dynamics, specifically as it relates to Japan and South Korea.

If North Korea were to continue down the road of nuclearization and build deliverable nuclear weapons, then other states in East Asia might feel compelled to do the same, producing a so-called "domino effect" in the region. This kind of cascade would be directly opposed to China's security interests, since it might provide Japan and South Korea with the excuse each needs to acquire its own nuclear deterrent and/or nuclear defense. It could also bolster both states' claims that they need theater missile defense. Another concern is the increased potential for a nuclear accident. Considering China's proximity, any such event would likely lead to radiation contaminating China's atmosphere, underground water, and soil.

### **Pakistan—No Intent, Limited Means**

Another state of close proximity to China is Pakistan, yet despite being within range of over 100 Pakistani nuclear missiles, China does not perceive Pakistan as a threat to its security. The relatively few academic articles and news articles in China exclusively discussing Pakistan's nuclear weapons development and/or its nuclear weapons strategy support this assessment. As far as China is concerned, Pakistan's place in the conversation has to do with its position vis-à-vis India. It is commonly believed that the long-standing strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan took a dangerous turn when both countries acquired nuclear weapons. This fear, which pervaded the global media, fueled speculation that an arms race or escalation of conflict was inevitable in South Asia. Both of these situa-



tions would have serious international ramifications (such as the delegitimization of the NPT) as well as an immediate effect on regional stability.

Though China has a vested interest on both counts, its assessment of the situation seemed more muted than most. Rather than anxiety over nuclear escalation in South Asia, the primary sentiment expressed by Chinese officials and adopted by most others, was a sense of disappointment. For instance, Chinese Foreign Minister Zhu Bangzao publicly expressed “deep regret” over Pakistan’s nuclear tests, and he implored both India and Pakistan “to exercise the utmost restraint” and to immediately cease nuclear weapons production.<sup>16</sup> Another Chinese official repeated this request nearly verbatim a few days later when Pakistan continued with its sixth nuclear test.

These statements and others coupled India’s and Pakistan’s tests together and described them as a direct affront to the international non-proliferation regime. Chinese assessments also noted that the decision to test belied both states’ economic interests. At the sixth meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty shortly following the test, for instance, China’s permanent representative Zhang Yishan remarked that India and Pakistan should fall in line with the global trend of peace and “strive to develop their national economies and raise the living standards of their own peoples. . . . They should not act willfully and arbitrarily, and use their national resources that are inadequate in the first place to facilitate an obsolete nuclear arms race.”<sup>17</sup>

Even in the tensest of circumstances, such as when India and Pakistan were both threatening nuclear use over conflict in the Kashmir region, many in China publicly doubted that a nuclear event would occur. It was like “loud thunder, but little raindrops” said one article.<sup>18</sup> Another article admitted that “contrary to the malicious insinuations of many news media . . . nuclear weapons have had a stabilizing effect on both India and Pakistan.”<sup>19</sup> Another article echoed, “Amid the tense situation between India and Pakistan, public opinion holds that this is a matter for rejoicing that both India and Pakistan have possessed nuclear weapons and have formed a deterrence to each other.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, from the Chinese perspective, the seemingly synchronous weapons development of India and Pakistan following the 1998 tests and the subsequent nuclear parity achieved brought stability to a precarious bilateral situation on its periphery.

The contradiction in these messages and China's earlier messages are apparent. On one hand, China's official statements following Pakistan's nuclearization mimicked the rhetoric of other nations, casting Pakistan's actions as a blow to the NPT and as a potential catalyst for a South Asian nuclear arms race. At the same time, however, the later literature implies that China has accepted Pakistan's nuclear force as a counterweight to India. This acceptance is related to the long-standing cooperation between China and Pakistan.

Pakistani officials often characterize the Sino–Pakistan relationship as “higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans, and sweeter than honey.”<sup>21</sup> This description stems from the long-standing mutual understanding undergirding the two countries' bilateral relations. After all, Pakistan was among the first states to end official diplomatic relations with Taiwan and recognize the legitimacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950. China later provided Pakistan with much-needed military assistance, and the two nations formed a strategic alliance in 1972.

Two years later, India tested its first nuclear device, and Pakistan's desire to keep pace tipped its partnership with China into new territory. China's military assistance was no longer limited to conventional arms, but included weapons-grade uranium, instructions for uranium enrichment, and design information for a uranium bomb. Under the 1986 Comprehensive Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, China also helped Pakistan establish two nuclear power reactors. When China signed the NPT in 1992, these types of actions were ostensibly constrained, but reports of Chinese assistance continued. In 1995, for instance, China sold Pakistan 5,000 ring magnets for its high-speed gas centrifuges. It also sold Pakistan several M-11 short-range ballistic missiles and provided significant assistance in the development of Pakistan's *Shaheen* missile series.<sup>22</sup> In most recent years, the two states' cooperation has also extended to civilian nuclear energy.

Speculation of a bilateral arms race between India and Pakistan exists in China, but such speculation is not generally coupled with recommendations or even discussions of Chinese action. This is partially because Pakistan serves as a convenient counterweight to a nuclear state that could challenge China. The same can be said for Russia.

## **Russia—No Intent, Extensive Means**

Continuing to examine China's nuclear periphery, one cannot fail to mention the neighbor with the largest inventory of nuclear weapons: the Russian Federation. Presently, Russia has eight strategic nuclear weapons for every one of China's nuclear weapons and has a solid diversification of nuclear platforms (land, air, and sea). It also leads the world in tactical nuclear weapons and maintains a limited ballistic missile defense system. Looking solely at capabilities and proximity, Russia appears to present the greatest threat to China's security. When one considers other factors, however, the calculation of China's risk shifts substantially. These mitigating factors include an extended period of Sino-Russian cooperation and the perception in China of a steady decline in Russia's overall national power.

Following the end of the Cold War, both China and Russia felt marginalized by the United States, and it did not take long for the two countries to attempt to counter this situation by strengthening bilateral relations. This resulted in a relationship that advanced from a "constructive partnership" in 1994 to a "strategic partnership" in 1996 to, finally, a "friendship" in 2001. Though a formal Sino-Russian alliance was never established, the 2001 friendship brought mutual benefits, including ongoing military cooperation. One of the regional mechanisms through which this cooperation takes place is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an organization established to enhance security in Central Asia at the same time as the Sino-Russian friendship was formed. The SCO enables Russia and China to join forces with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to have an established platform for regional military exercises. Examples of multilateral military cooperation carried out through the SCO include the five-state exercises in August 2003, the Uzbekistan-led "East Anti-Terror" exercise in 2006, and the "Peace Missions" of 2007, 2010, 2012, and 2014.

While the SCO exercises have increased in frequency and magnitude, they have not altogether displaced traditional bilateral military cooperation. In the "gap years" of 2005, 2009, and 2013 for instance, China and Russia carried out their own Peace Missions, where other SCO members could observe but not participate. In 2012 the two countries also began cooperating in the naval sphere, conducting joint naval exercises. This continued in the subsequent three years.

From a Russian perspective, one of the peripheral benefits provided by the exercises is the opportunity for Russia to showcase its latest military technology to its most valued buyer. Since 1992 Russia has been the primary arms dealer to China, providing China with everything from warships and combat aircraft to missiles and missile launchers. In addition, experts speculate that Russia also provided China with design information and/or the technological expertise to advance China's nuclear weapons production, particularly, the *Julang-2* submarine-launched ballistic missile and the *Dongfeng-31* intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).<sup>23</sup> These exchanges occurred alongside a series of large-scale joint military exercises, at least one of which was reported to mimic a potential joint response to a US nuclear strike.

The idea of China actively preparing for and training to defend against a nuclear strike is supported in its military manuals and People's Liberation Army (PLA) publications. While these sources do not explicitly acknowledge joint exercises to this end, they do make it apparent that China perceives Russia to also be at risk for US preemption. Moreover, Chinese news and journal articles often list China and Russia alongside one another as potential targets of US nuclear aggression, and, as one article states, this justifies "an appropriate expansion of the scope and degree of military and security cooperation between the two countries."<sup>24</sup>

This feeling of shared risk and vulnerability has led not only to military cooperation but also to a history of diplomatic cooperation. Through established venues of bilateral communication and conferral, Beijing and Moscow have been able to show their shared support for issues like state sovereignty (particularly in the cases of Syria, North Korea, and Iran), multipolarity, and strategic stability. Of particular note is China and Russia's shared acrimony regarding US missile defense. This is exemplified by a range of statements from 1999 protesting US missile defense to the more frequent expressions of shared opinions in press releases provided by Chinese and Russian officials. Most recently, for instance, at the eighth round of Russian–Chinese consultations on strategic security, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev stated that China and Russia were mutually concerned about American missile defense and that both countries agreed to coordinate countermeasures.<sup>25</sup>

The history of Sino–Russian cooperation and mutual interest in counterbalancing US hegemony and missile defense strongly reduces China's fear of Russian nuclear forces. Another substantial consideration influenc-

ing this conclusion is the perception in China of the overall decline in Russian power. After all, the volatility of the international environment dictates that state-to-state relationships are subject to change, and the present Sino-Russian rapport is no exception. Not long ago the Soviet Union considered launching a nuclear strike against China. As such, it is prudent to assess the situation absent the condition of mutual cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

According to the Chinese literature, the pattern of the past two decades reveals that "Russia's composite national strength has declined greatly and its international status has fallen."<sup>27</sup> It cannot credibly challenge the United States, and it is not likely to have the strength to challenge China in the future. In the nuclear realm, in particular, China cites Russia's failure at forestalling US missile defense as an example of its waning influence. America has the upper hand according to one *Renmin Ribao* article: "Russia's all-round national strength is not what it was, . . . and [Russia] requires a great deal of US technical and fund support in order to develop its economy and achieve the goal of 'a rich country and a strong people.'"<sup>28</sup> This was followed in 2002 by a speech by Pang Zhongying, professor of international relations, to an audience at Qinghua University, where he stated matter-of-factly that "Russia is now a second rate country. It is a declined country."<sup>29</sup>

The portended consequences of this perceived weakness is a reduction in Russia's military strength. More specifically, many believe Russia will soon be incapable of maintaining its oversized nuclear stockpile. One article claims that this condition enables the United States to pursue a shift in nuclear strategy. Wang Guosheng and Li Wei explain:

Past US nuclear strategy was mainly aimed at Russia and its nuclear buildup was to counter nuclear attacks from Russia and from other nuclear powers. The United States made a unilateral adjustment of its nuclear strategy, and the reduction of the number of its nuclear warheads were not based on the reduction of Russian nuclear forces. . . . This shows that the United States . . . no longer recognizes Russia's parity with it in the nuclear area, and no longer cares about Russia's opposition.<sup>30</sup>

The Sino-Russian dynamic is unique in that it presents a situation where intent offsets hard capabilities. The extended cooperation between China and Russia and the joint positioning of the two countries against what they see as American hegemony provides China with confidence that, despite its sizable nuclear arsenal, Russia does not present an immediate threat to Chinese security. This calculation of risk is compounded

by the ongoing perception in China that Russia's power is declining and that it will not be able to sustain its large inventory of nuclear weapons, much less invest in advanced technology (a perception heavily influenced by the United States). While Power Transition Theory might portend that the Sino–Russian rapport will have an expiration date (with a declining power expected to act aggressively toward a secondary rising power), this possibility is less concerning to China when viewed in light of Russia's declining capabilities. A strategic pivot of this magnitude would take time—something China sees as not necessarily on Russia's side.

### **Taiwan—Intent without Means**

While the present strategy of Russia is to use China to balance against the United States, the inverse is true in the case of Taiwan—another nuclear-capable neighbor of China. According to the United Nations (UN), Taiwan is not a sovereign state but rather a territory subsumed under the PRC. This understanding traces back to 1971, when a two-thirds majority of the organization voted to give Taiwan's UN seat to the PRC.<sup>31</sup> Shortly thereafter, the United States and China signed the Shanghai Communiqué in 1972, in which China unequivocally reiterated its position—and now the UN's position—regarding the so-called One-China policy. This policy recognizes the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China. Under this arrangement, Taiwan is viewed as a province of the PRC and not an independent state. The United States did not entirely concur with this characterization, and thus chose to insert its own understanding of the situation in the communiqué. According to the United States, “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China.” This delicate wording and the United States's earlier concession to the UN expulsion of Taiwan appeased the PRC, while also keeping open-ended the question of who has ultimate authority.

Taiwan, which calls itself the Republic of China (ROC), disputes both characterizations, and this disagreement has led to half a century of cross-strait tensions. These tensions have varied depending upon the ruling party and the respective leader of the ROC. From the time of China's civil war until 2000, the Kuomintang (KMT) was the ruling party in Taiwan. From 2000 to 2008, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) replaced the KMT leadership. The KMT returned to power in 2008, but lost again to the DPP in 2016. Leaders from each party have taken different

positions on Taiwanese independence/Chinese rapprochement, but since the late 1970s, both parties have agreed that Taiwan will not seek its own nuclear deterrent.

US opposition heavily influenced this decision. In the early 1970s, the US government collected sufficient evidence to indicate that Taiwan had surreptitiously started its own nuclear weapons program. This evidence was outlined in a 1972 National Intelligence Estimate, which predicted that Taiwan could conduct a nuclear weapons test as early as 1976. This assessment spurred the involvement of the IAEA, which sent inspectors to Taiwan's Institute for Nuclear Energy Research. Demands from the IAEA and United States following the inspection caused Taiwan to shut down its research reactor and reprocessing center.

There is no evidence to indicate Taiwan resumed the pursuit of nuclear weapons after its 1976 shutdown. Though it has the technological expertise, it no longer has the infrastructure. Its three nuclear power reactors use low-enriched uranium provided by other countries, and the country does not have the capability to make highly enriched uranium. As a result, experts estimate that it would take Taiwan somewhere between one to eight years to develop a nuclear warhead and even longer to miniaturize this warhead to fit on a missile.<sup>32</sup> This timeframe, along with the lack of evidence that Taiwan is pursuing a nuclear option, leaves many in China dismissing Taiwan as a nuclear threat. In fact, when participants at the US–China Strategic Dialogues mention Taiwan, it is always in relation to speculation of US intervention. Taiwan, without the consideration of the United States, is not a threat. Another state which cannot be viewed in isolation is Japan.

### **Japan—Intent with Potential Means**

Japan does not have nuclear weapons, and it has promised not to produce, procure, or store them in the future. The Japanese parliament passed a resolution to this effect in 1967. This resolution parallels Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution, which forbids Japan from having offensive military capabilities. From the Chinese perspective, however, these promises represent no real constraint on Japanese nuclearization. This is because Japan has the largest civilian stockpile of separated plutonium of all nonnuclear weapon states, including a stockpile of approximately 300 kilograms of plutonium acquired from the United States and Great Britain in the 1960s and an additional 45 tons of separated plutonium

produced by its civilian nuclear program. With its technological expertise, this is enough for Japan to produce thousands of nuclear weapons. Japanese leaders admit that the state has such expertise. In fact, a declassified 1969 document reveals that the Japanese government viewed this capability as leverage, mentioning that Japan will maintain its nonnuclear status, while also possessing the economic and technical means to “go nuclear” at any time. According to the document, this potential is what ensures Japan’s security.

This strategy continues today, though doubt lingers regarding the durability of Japan’s self-restraint. Some of Japan’s top-level officials have already challenged the status quo, including Foreign Affairs Minister Taro Aso and Liberal Democratic Party Policy Research Council leader Shoichi Nakagawa. Others, like former Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara have gone a step further and actually recommended that Japan take tangible steps toward nuclearization: “If we don’t show more military force, we’ll definitely lose our presence on the world stage.”<sup>33</sup> Such public statements are even more unsettling when placed in the context of the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s administration’s nationalist agenda and the cabinet’s 2014 resolution to reinterpret Article Nine of the Constitution to allow for collective self-defense.

Japan’s latent nuclear weapons capability and select Japanese officials’ support of nuclearization is enough for China to perceive Japan as a potential nuclear threat. Yet these are not the only factors in the equation. China’s perception of a Japanese threat increases exponentially when one considers the tumultuous history between the two countries. China has not forgotten the devastation caused by the Sino–Japanese War, and China’s wounds are reopened each time a Japanese official attempts to rewrite history or visits the Yasukuni Shrine—a Shinto shrine honoring the war dead who served under the emperors of Japan. Even today, the Chinese Party uses historical references to Japanese colonialism and aggression to remind Chinese citizens and other nations of Japan’s untrustworthy nature. One article states, “For a sovereign and independent nation to develop an appropriate degree of military strength is both understandable and justified, but development on this scale has to surpass the goals of peace and defense.” This consideration is especially pertinent in Japan’s case, claims the article, since Japan has a “history of numerous brutal invasions of the nations on its periphery . . . [and] which to date has shown no deep introspection as a nation.”<sup>34</sup> The characterization of



present-day Japan through a historical lens heightens China's perception of the Japanese nuclear threat. This is not to say, however, that there are not legitimate contemporary concerns.

In addition to Japan's available fissile material, its technological capabilities, and its signals about considering nuclear weapons acquisition, Japanese leaders have also justified, over the past two decades, an expansion of the state's military power. This has led to an increased military budget and expanded scope of military service. In 1999 this took the form of a Japanese official stating that preemptive attacks on enemy targets were within the realm of Japan's constitutional rights. In the case of China, the most immediate threat is Japan's claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Again, governor Ishihara weighs in on the subject. According to him, if Japan had nuclear weapons, "China wouldn't have dared lay a hand on the Senkakus."<sup>35</sup> The possibility of Japan using nuclear coercion to gain leverage in this situation is all too real for the Chinese, and several Chinese participants mentioned the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as a distinct concern in the US–China Strategic Dialogues. Another scholar warned, "If Japan possesses nuclear weapons, it will be just like adding wings to a tiger and seriously threaten peace and stability in East Asia."<sup>36</sup>

The article continues by asking all East Asian states to retain "a high degree of vigilance" in the situation. A similar request is proffered by Zhao Xijun, the editor of the military publication *She Zhan*: "When there is a need, Japan can quickly manufacture true combat nuclear missiles. Therefore, people of the world should be highly watchful of the quiet rise of the Japanese nuclear deterrence capability."<sup>37</sup> Another article, published in Hong Kong's *Ta Kung Pao*, advises the international community to "express strong concern over Japan's keenness in recent years to develop nuclear weapons."<sup>38</sup>

But is China truly expected to sit and wait alongside other states for Japanese nuclearization? Is it enough to simply express strong concern? In most cases, the answer seems to be yes, but there are also subtle hints that China may be taking protective measures. One measure is to clearly communicate to Japan the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent. In a 2006 article in *Ta Kung Pao*, for instance, Wang Chi-Wen reminds readers that "Japan is surrounded by seas on all sides and its territory is small. Its people are concentrated in cities with a dense population. It cannot resist nuclear retaliation."<sup>39</sup> Another measure that China can take is to build up its nuclear weapons "just in case." A recent *Renmin Ribao*

article, for instance, explains that while China “promotes anti-nuclear proliferation and arms control . . . the complete reunification of China is yet to wrap up.” The article goes on to specify that certain “disputes between China and some neighboring countries over the territorial sovereignty, the sovereign right over territorial waters as well as over the maritime rights and interests are yet to be settled, and accordingly that too requires proper handling.”<sup>40</sup> China fears that Japan may soon shift its nuclear strategy to lay claim over disputed territory. This anticipated strategy shift is causing China to reconsider its own nuclear strategy and shift its force structure to accommodate it.

### **India—Intent with Limited Means**

Like Japan, India shares a tumultuous past with China. As such, it might be expected that China would fear Indian nuclearization. In reality, however, while many Western texts initially presented the Sino–Indian relationship as precarious and as a possible pretext for a regional arms race, China has made it clear that it does not consider India an acute threat to its national security. This position was evident even in 1998 when India conducted its first aboveground nuclear test and declared itself a nuclear weapon state. Rather than alarm or fear, the sentiment most expressed by the Chinese press was regret. A Sino–Indian nuclear conflict was never seriously considered in China. Instead, the majority of attention went toward assessing the implications of Indian action on the global movement toward nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. This was demonstrated immediately after India announced its tests, with the remarks of Chinese spokesperson Zhu Bangzao, who read aloud the Chinese government’s official response to Indian action, stating that the tests demonstrated “outrageous contempt for the international community” and represented “a blow to international efforts to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation.”<sup>41</sup> China’s Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, China’s UN representatives Shen Guofang and Qin Huasun, and China’s Disarmament Ambassador Li Changhe expressed similar concerns.

China’s domestic press provides further evidence in support of China’s disappointment, emphasizing India’s abrogation of international law and its self-imposed isolation from the international community. The press also noted that the limited resources India diverted to achieve its nuclear weapon status harmed the state’s potential for growth and economic viability. An article appearing in *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, for ex-

ample, claimed that India's nuclear tests had "fundamentally poisoned its environment for peaceful development" and significantly hampered India's potential for economic growth. In this way, it claimed, "India is acting like a person who lifts a rock only to drop it on his own feet."<sup>42</sup> The article did not express fear that an intrepid India would one day throw this "rock" at China. A similar ambivalence appears in China's academic literature.

In China's academic journals, the primary question explored immediately after the tests was not the impact of India's actions on China but the implications of India's actions on the international disarmament and nonproliferation movement more broadly. Moreover, some articles explored why India found nuclearization necessary in the first place, since it was not evident that such a move was necessary for Indian security. After the test, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee explained that his country pursued the nuclear route in response to the threat posed by the arms buildup of its neighbors, namely China and Pakistan. Yet, Chinese officials thoroughly denounced this claim, explaining that the Sino-Indian border dispute, the primary point of contention between the two countries, was a thing of the past: "Let bygones be bygones and look to the future," advised *Chinese Radio International*.<sup>43</sup> In most cases, outsiders reached the conclusion that India, or the Bharatiya Janata Party government more specifically, justified its actions by conjuring up the perception that China's nuclear status threatened Indian security but that this was a guise hiding its true intentions: the increase of party viability and state prestige.

Over time, China began to accept the reality of a nuclear India, and China's initial concern eventually dissipated into apathy. The buildup of Indian nuclear weapons over the past 15 years has been treated with similar insouciance. Today, experts believe India possesses approximately 80-100 nuclear weapons deployed across short-, medium- and long-range ballistic missiles. Though it predominantly relies on its land-based capabilities, it can be said to have a credible nuclear triad.

Of most concern to China is India's indigenously developed *Agni*-series. The *Agni-III*, for example, has a range up to 5,000 km, allowing it to target most of China's major cities. The *Agni-V*, currently in production, has an even broader range, allowing India to strike anywhere within China and beyond. The technology demonstrated by the *Agni-V* ICBM and in India's indigenous launch vehicles enables the state to pursue space

weaponization, most notably, the development of antisatellite weapons. According to the chief of India's Defense Research and Development Organization, these are the necessary components for India to protect itself from China and maintain a "credible deterrence capability."<sup>44</sup>

Despite China's apparent vulnerability to India's strategic nuclear forces and the future possibility of its strengthened space defenses, many in China show little overall concern. Part of this stems from the fact that India's ICBMs are still new and their abilities have not yet been confirmed outside preliminary tests. Expert Shih Chun-Yu explains, "Strictly speaking, India's 'Agni-V' is not really an intercontinental missile. Its launch was successful, but its accuracy and stability remain to be observed, and it is not sure to what extent it can threaten China."<sup>45</sup>

This type of downplayed assessment, while notable in the particular incidence of the *Agni-V*, is displayed quite often in Chinese commentaries on Indian nuclear capabilities. Chinese experts admit that the Indian government likely factors China into its nuclear weapons decisions, but those same experts emphasize that this consideration is not reciprocal. One expert at a strategic dialogue claimed, "China is not worried about India at all from a nuclear standpoint."<sup>46</sup> Another participant at a more recent conference opined, "China knows for certain that nuclear deterrence works well between China and India."<sup>47</sup> In other words, China is confident that its nuclear capabilities (as well as those of Pakistan) will likely keep India in check. As a consequence, it can afford to consider India among the less significant "small countries" on its periphery—unless this dynamic is disrupted by the United States.<sup>48</sup>

### **The United States—Intent and Extensive Means**

As the world hegemon, the United States can influence the actions of other countries via its pocketbook and/or its promise of military protection. This means that the United States can significantly amplify the threat facing China. If the US intent is truly to contain China, then the United States can recruit assistance across the globe to help it achieve this objective. This is the luxury of a superpower, and it is precisely why China perceives the United States as its primary security threat.

In the nuclear realm in particular, this threat is heightened by America's development of BMD. The US government has repeatedly stressed that the purpose of this system is to defend the US homeland against an attack by a limited number of ballistic missiles launched from regional

adversaries like Iran and North Korea and it is not meant to protect against larger attacks from states like China and Russia. Yet this has done little to assuage the latter countries' concerns. China, in particular, repeatedly claims that the US BMD system threatens its state security and the stability of the world. The rationale behind this belief is equally part capability and part intent.

Though testing continues, the intent of US BMD is to provide the United States with the capability to detect and destroy incoming ballistic missiles. Currently, America's BMD system is structured to protect the US homeland against a limited missile attack from North Korea and Iran, but this design inevitably also thwarts a limited attack from China, since China's missiles are likely to take a similar trajectory over the Arctic.<sup>49</sup> This means that if China sends a ballistic missile to the United States, it most likely will be detected. A single missile will also likely be destroyed.<sup>50</sup> This likelihood diminishes as the number of incoming missiles increases, though the numbers are not yet in China's favor. At present, China has approximately 35 missiles that can deliver a nuclear warhead to the continental United States, including 20 DF-5s and fifteen DF-31As. By fitting a portion of its DF-5s with multiple independent reentry vehicles, China increases the total number of its deliverable warheads to approximately 55. Theoretically, this outnumbers America's 44 planned interceptors, but it also assumes China will have all 55 of its warheads after a first strike—an assumption China is not likely to include in its strategic analysis. To ensure a second strike, it must guarantee there are enough remaining missiles and warheads to outnumber US interceptors.<sup>51</sup>

The numbers game between the United States and China stands in stark contrast to the US position vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea. Neither of these countries currently has the capability to send a missile to the United States, much less one armed with a nuclear warhead. The United States argues that it cannot wait for these nations to develop this technology before it protects against them. Nuclear weapons inflict indiscriminate violence of unprecedented scope and the United States is not willing to risk an attack of this magnitude. Its defenses, it claims, are built with this in mind. China has difficulty accepting this explanation. In particular, it questions America's need for more interceptors. If Iran and North Korea are the primary threats, why are so many interceptors necessary? This increase and the continual enhancement of US intelligence, surveillance,

and reconnaissance, China claims, speak louder than the “seemingly pale and powerless soothing political statements” America provides.<sup>52</sup>

Chinese scientists point out the peril of the present situation, but they also warn that the situation could get worse. As professor of international relations Shi Yinhong points out, there is no guarantee that the United States will remain satisfied with only 30 or 40 ground-based interceptors.<sup>53</sup> Who is to say they will not build more? A Chinese scholar attending the 2011 US–China Strategic Dialogue made a similar point, arguing that the United States could easily and quickly advance from having 30 interceptors to having up to 300 interceptors as a part of its BMD system.<sup>54</sup> This, in addition to US nuclear superiority, leads many to believe “the United States poses a far greater threat to the world than ‘the world poses to the United States.’”<sup>10</sup> So why does the United States find it necessary to invest in defensive capabilities? The answer, many argue, has to do with intent.

The majority of policy makers, academics, and military personnel in China believe that America’s pursuit of missile defense technology is driven more by a desire to expand the range of offensive military action it can pursue with impunity than by a desire to protect the US homeland from so-called “rogue nations.” Tian Yuan claims, “The intentions of ‘Uncle Sam’ are very clear, . . . to do the same old thing in a new guise and, on the basis of absolute superiority, to build a missile defense system to ensure that it is equipped with both spear and shield, thus reaching its aim of ‘winning without fighting.’”<sup>55</sup> The analogy of the United States having both *spear* and *shield* is common in China. It means the United States is able to strike while blocking blows from an opponent. As it pertains to missile defense, possession of both a spear and a shield means that the United States is able to launch a preemptive attack without fearing nuclear retaliation.

In China’s view, this does not just impact rogue nations; it impacts all nuclear weapon states—just consider the volatility of US enmity. While the United States may today be focused on Iran and North Korea, there are no guarantees that this focus will not one day shift to other states. Others push past the theoretical and argue that the United States has already shifted its focus and that its rhetoric on Iran and North Korea represents an impuissant attempt at diversion. A military panelist at a recent US–China Strategic Dialogue put it bluntly, “We’re not idiots in China who think you are transparent in your BMD intentions. It is

incredulous to assume that the US BMD efforts are solely targeted at Iran and North Korea.”<sup>56</sup> Other scholars agree, arguing that the amount of money America has invested to develop and deploy its BMD system (now close to \$10 billion) is disproportionate to the aim of destroying missiles from small nations.<sup>57</sup>

National Defense University professor Zhang Zhaozhong elaborates upon this point. Zhang explains that while the United States claims that its BMD system is intended to deter states like North Korea, Iran, and Iraq, little empirical evidence exists to support the assertion that these states present a direct threat to American security. Writing in 2000, Zhang argued that the available evidence did not support the conclusion that North Korea possessed ballistic missiles or nuclear weapons. Moreover, Zhang stated that while Iran and Iraq might have tactical nuclear weapons, these weapons should be considered moot from the US perspective, because they can only strike targets within several hundred kilometers. Even if these capabilities were expected to increase, Zhang said, why would America propose a BMD system as the solution when other more economical solutions are available? He continued:

Americans have always been impetuous; once they discover the evidence that these nations have missiles or nuclear weapons developmental capabilities, the Americans quickly use the methods of nuclear sanctions, and armed force to destroy such capabilities, so how is it that in this case they have the patience to wait. . . ? The American's development of the NMD [National Missile Defense] primarily is to target Russia and China since the United States knows that these two countries alone have the capabilities to threaten the American mainland.<sup>58</sup>

Zhang's words proved prescient in the case of Iraq, but his primary point was aimed at China and Russia.

Zhang is not alone in his convictions. It appears that the “true” intent of US BMD, countering Chinese and Russian nuclear forces, is either becoming increasingly apparent to those across China or such individuals are becoming decreasingly reserved in expressing this perspective. In fact, even China's Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan openly questioned US motives with BMD, asking, “Is [US BMD] really to defend against the missile threat from the few so-called ‘problem states,’ or for greater military advantage over other big countries?”<sup>59</sup> Tang and others think the answer is self-evident. As a consequence, an opposite strategy for China entails nuclear force modernization and buildup.<sup>60</sup> The US missile defense system, though, is only one aspect of what China perceives to be a grander

shift in US military strategy. Another less-explored component includes advancements in US conventional capabilities—the *spear* in the *spear-and-shield* metaphor.

Traditionally in China, the threat presented by an adversary's conventional military capabilities does not influence the state's nuclear strategy decisions. This is because, in general, statesmen in China have assumed that conventional weapons and nuclear weapons operate in different military spheres and serve different purposes. One type of weapon is not used to deter the use of another. However, this perception of categorical separation, a former mainstay of Chinese nuclear strategy, may be changing due to recent advancements in US conventional military capabilities and expressions of intent surrounding these capabilities.

The United States has consistently maintained the most advanced conventional military in the world. It has also developed and deployed one of the largest nuclear arsenals. The line between conventional and nuclear weapons has never been as clear in the United States as it has been in China due to the transition of the US nuclear strategy to limited deterrence in the 1970s. With the Schlesinger doctrine, the United States abandoned the belief that the threat of massive retaliation was sufficient to deter a nuclear first strike. Instead, the government sought to implement a policy that allowed the president to evaluate and deliberate options of scale. This strategy, which later evolved into the “countervailing strategy” outlined in Presidential Directive 59, stressed the importance of force mobility and the necessity of preplanned targets. It was also more open-ended on what type of attack (nuclear or conventional) precipitated such action. Today, the United States reserves the right to use nuclear force in response to a large-scale conventional attack and chemical or biological weapon attack. It is more flexible in its response and uses strategic uncertainty regarding first use to its advantage.

While clearly distinguished from China's No First Use policy, the US policy has traditionally still delineated between nuclear and conventional weapons. A nuclear response to a conventional attack, for instance, is only warranted if the destruction is of a sufficient scale. Recent developments in US nuclear strategy go one step further in diminishing the demarcation between nuclear and conventional weapons. With technological advancements in prompt long-range missiles, the United States can use conventional missiles to strike nuclear targets. In the 2001 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, for instance, US Secretary of Defense



Donald Rumsfeld mentioned the necessity of a “new triad” complete with “new nonnuclear strategic capabilities” that will bolster the offensive capabilities of US military forces. In May 2003 the US Air Force officially requested funding for this mission, labeled Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS). As envisioned, the mission of CPGS is to shorten the launch-to-strike time of America’s high-precision conventional missiles and to distend their reach, enabling the United States to strike any target in the world in less than an hour.

One of the methods of achieving this aim is to suit nuclear-capable high-precision ICBMs or submarine-launched ballistic missiles with conventional warheads. More favorable methods include fielding advanced hypersonic weapons, hypersonic cruise missiles, and hypersonic gliders. These weapons would travel through the atmosphere, rather than above it, at a pace five times the speed of sound. To date, the United States has tested three such systems, including a boost glide vehicle, an Advanced Hypersonic Weapon, and a hypersonic cruise missile called the X-51 Waverider. The success of these tests varied, and the United States has not yet determined whether these weapons will be acquired and deployed as a part of CPGS. Presently, the entire program is in the embryonic stage of development, with the technology and the targets are still being decided. The target that appears most frequently in official discourse is an adversary’s fortified, buried, or mobile nuclear forces. This description is sometimes left alone and sometimes contextualized in terms of the forces of “new proliferators” like Iran and North Korea.

The ambiguity surrounding CPGS has led to several misconceptions in China. First, there are those who overestimate America’s current CPGS capabilities, portraying CPGS not as a concept but as a fully operational system or a system that will soon expand to include “tens of thousands of high-precision weapons.”<sup>61</sup> Second, many in China seem to question US intent, arguing that the acquisition and deployment of high-precision, long-range, rapid launch weapons by the United States poses a distinct threat to China’s nuclear forces and the nuclear forces of other nuclear weapon states.<sup>22</sup> Like with missile defense, these analysts do not believe the United States designed the CPGS system solely to target Iran and North Korea. As such, the broader argument has become that the American CPGS system threatens to disrupt the international strategic balance by allowing the United States “absolute security.” One *PLA Daily* article warns, “People of the world should think about the

changes that will happen at that time [CPGS deployment] in terms of the United States' actions and methods of handling affairs."<sup>62</sup> Exactly what could happen? Many in China think US preemptive action is not out of the question. This is why they believe that other states, including China, may want to respond by developing their own hypersonic weapons and/or advanced nuclear weapons. Another response would be reconsidering No First Use.

### **United States—Supplying Means and Intent**

In addition to the ability of the United States to develop missile defense and conventional counterforce capabilities to further its security, the United States also has the material means and the influence to supply specific states with nuclear capabilities and/or to implant the idea or exacerbate the idea of a "China threat." From the Chinese perspective, US "hegemonism and power politics" are responsible for creating most of the "nuclear storms" in the world today, including those situated on China's periphery. While each state has its own story, these stories are embedded within the larger narrative of US supremacy. China's relationships with its nuclear and nuclear-capable neighbors are situated in this larger context and, as a consequence, China must consider and anticipate US action when managing its bilateral regional deterrence relationships. Evidence of this consideration appears across all cases.

In the case of Indian nuclearization, for instance, though US officials were very vocal in expressing their opposition to India's nuclear tests, many in China doubted the sincerity of the US response considering the US provision of nuclear technology to India in the 1950s. Other Chinese reports and articles question US complicity after Indian testing and the short turnover the George W. Bush administration displayed in later agreeing to openly trade civilian nuclear technology with India. Many in China believe that the US actually supports India's nuclear weapons development because it provides a counterweight to China's rise. Any semblance of an arms race in the region can thus, from the Chinese perspective, be traced back to the United States. An article appearing in *Ta Kung Pao*, for instance, claims that while it may be difficult "to judge who should be held responsible for promoting conventional and nuclear arms races in South Asia, [the United States] will have a hard time 'escaping its connection'" to the buildup.<sup>63</sup> After all, the race began after the United States signed the nuclear technology-cooperation agreement

and the 10-year National Defense Agreement with India. Chen Xulong, deputy director of the China Institute of International Studies, Department of International Strategic Studies, provides a similar assessment, though his viewpoint is obviously influenced by his position: “In playing these nuclear cards with countries on China’s periphery, the United States leaves the most good-willed of people with no choice but to question its motives and ambitions.”<sup>64</sup>

This statement implies that the United States is “playing” India to check China and Pakistan, but it could also hold true for other states in the region—particularly Taiwan and North Korea. Though the United States officially accepts the international community’s recognition of the PRC as the legitimate representative of China, it also helps Taiwan balance the mainland’s military power by providing it with a steady supply of arms. China argues that the weapon systems provided by the United States could be used by Taiwan in a war of independence, especially if Taiwan’s defense is aided by US theater missile defense (TMD). According to one PRC official, this “would be tantamount to the restoration of a quasi-military alliance between the US and Taiwan.”<sup>65</sup>

At present, Taiwan does not participate in the US TMD program, and there is certainly not a military or quasimilitary alliance between the two countries. This is not to say, however, that their relationship is not precarious as far as China is concerned. China has consistently opposed US arms sales to Taiwan, maintaining that such exchanges threaten China’s national security. An accidental shipment of nuclear fuses in 2006 did not help matters. Though the fuses were returned, the incident seemingly lent credence to China’s ongoing suspicion of a US containment policy. To some, America’s interactions with North Korea further stoke this suspicion.

North Korea may be acting irresponsibly and in complete disregard of international law, but many in China feel as though it is doing so because the United States is forcing its hand. The dealer has provided the Kim regime with few options. As a result, to stay in the game, North Korea chooses to cheat. When North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003, for instance, Chinese reports depicted North Korea not as an iniquitous nation but more as a victim of US coercion. “With its most important national interests seriously threatened,” claims *Xinhua* news reporter Ji Xinlong, “North Korea had no choice but to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to protect its national sovereignty,

survival, and dignity.”<sup>66</sup> Wang Xinjun, a research fellow from the Academy of Military Science, takes a similar tone, explaining that North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is a likely consequence of US power politics. “The main reasons for the nuclear crises,” he explains, “are the hegemonic aspirations of some nations and the interventionism and double standards they practice.”<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, Ji and Wang argue that the North Korean decision to construct a nuclear deterrent is a consequence of US coercion. While the situation is clearly more complex, their simplistic rendering of the situation conveniently serves to further the characterization of the United States as a malevolent hegemon. Even more acrimonious are those who argue that North Korea’s nuclearization is an *intended* consequence of US action. According to this account, the United States does not actually fear North Korea’s nuclear weapons development but only uses this fear to justify an increasing American presence in Asia. After all, such development is likely to remain limited, and any launch is likely to be intercepted by US missile defense. As a result, Shih Chun-yu concludes that North Korean nuclear weapons development is “exactly what the United States wants, since it provides a pretext for legitimizing the US military presence on the Korean peninsula and seizing the opportunity to check China’s rise.”<sup>68</sup>

While Shih’s point is extreme, he is not alone in reaching this conclusion. The majority opinion presents a more subtle interpretation of the situation, characterizing the United States not necessarily as an orchestrator but as a strategic opportunist who sees North Korean nuclearization as an excuse to exert greater military power in the Asia–Pacific and ultimately check the power of an ascending state. A prime example many cite is US TMD cooperation with Japan and South Korea. This began with the US provision of radar bases and Patriot missiles to South Korea in 1994 and continued with Japanese–US TMD cooperation in 1998. In this regard, the story of South Korea is that it serves as a conduit of US power and a means for the United States to encircle both North Korea and China. This is particularly the case when the United States conducts joint military exercises with South Korea on China’s periphery. In the same vein, the majority of scholars and state officials in China see it as “entirely unnecessary” for Japan to be protected by TMD. Yet with America as its exemplar and abettor, Japan has manipulated the North Korean situation so that it appears to be a legitimate excuse

for Japanese–American cooperation as well as for Japan’s overall military buildup. The blame here is more equally distributed, as both the United States and Japan are cast as offensive actors, but the threat China perceives from Japan would be undoubtedly less were the United States not involved. In fact, in many ways, South Korea and Japan are seen together in China as a collective front “by which the US can control the Asia–Pacific region.”<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, a similar argument is made in the case of Iran. While Iran is not situated next to China, its story is viewed as similar to North Korea’s, with many in China claiming that the United States is exaggerating the Iranian nuclear threat to exert US authority. In this case though, military force is eschewed for economic sanctions. Yu Chia-Hou claims that the true intent of US action in Iran is to wage an “economic war” with China, since China relies upon Iran for fuel. This, he says, is a strategic, underhanded move made by the United States “to eliminate the China threat” without the direct use of military force against China.<sup>70</sup>

Less extreme interpretations see the US–Iran conflict less as a direct threat to Chinese security than as a stark example of the overall insecurity brought by US hegemony. “There is still some country trampling on the norms of international relations with its military superiority,” says one article, and “This practice has forced a couple of countries to regard possession of nuclear weapons as a strategic pillar of safeguarding the national security and supporting the international status.”<sup>71</sup> These statements highlight how China perceives US hegemony to be an anathema—and how it justifies its nuclear buildup.

## **Conclusion**

For the most part, the gradual pace of China’s nuclear buildup has allowed it to avoid the international limelight. It has carefully timed the rollout of new weapon systems and slowly added to its numbers—all while maintaining minimum transparency. Some analysts have even argued that China has become the “forgotten nuclear power.”<sup>72</sup> However, it is worth remembering that China is the fourth-largest nuclear weapon state, and if it continues on its present trajectory, China might soon surpass France to be the third-largest nuclear weapon state in the world. This growth goes against the expressed interest of all NPT nuclear weapon states and is against the interest of other states, like India and Japan that consider a nuclear China to be a serious security threat.

At the same time, however, as this article demonstrates, the majority of nuclear weapon states lack either the means or the intent to present a clear threat to China, and those that have means and intent are perceived by China to have been abetted in some way by the United States. Consequently, a change in China's nuclear strategy and force structure will likely require US action.

While the most direct solution to stopping Chinese buildup may be a trilateral agreement between the United States, Russia, and China, placing mutual restrictions on all states' hard capabilities, this is not likely to happen soon, since the idea of a numeric threshold has become less and less relevant to China owing to the modernization of the remaining US and Russian nuclear forces. This has caused many in China to claim that a strict quantitative approach to nuclear disarmament is no longer sufficient. After all, what does it matter if there are fewer nuclear weapons if these weapons are upgraded to increase the likelihood of their use? Is this a true step toward global disarmament or simply a shift onto a different path in the same direction? Can one claim, as some have in China that "the nuclear arms race has changed from one based on quantity to one based on quality?"<sup>73</sup> If this is the case, then a treaty focusing on or at least incorporating qualitative restrictions might be more successful. In either case, though, since the focus is on hard capabilities, more transparency will be necessary.

From the US point of view, the security dilemma between it and China is exasperated by the United States not knowing exactly the extent of China's nuclear capabilities. According to the United States, without such a priori knowledge, any bilateral or trilateral agreement—whether focusing on quantitative or qualitative restrictions—will be futile. Of course, China could argue the same in terms of the nonstrategic nuclear weapons held by the United States and Russia, since these weapons have never officially been counted. Of more importance to China is the transparency of US intent. The logic in this case is that even if China reveals the structure and scope of its nuclear arsenal and the United States and Russia reveal the extent of their remaining nonstrategic nuclear force, China, before any agreement is signed, needs reassurance that the United States, in particular, will not use its knowledge of China's nuclear force to employ its strategic nuclear weapons or its advanced conventional weapons in a preemptive strike. Chinese leaders would want to have knowledge of and confidence in US nuclear intent. Ideally, for China

this means that the United States would sign a formal no-first-use agreement. In fact, China has repeatedly requested that all nuclear weapon states employ this policy. No other state has taken this step. A logical antecedent might be a statement clarifying US conditions of nuclear use.

To date, the United States has preferred to pursue a policy of first-strike ambiguity, with even the most recent *Nuclear Posture Report*, which is thought to be the most restrictive, leaving open the option of preemptive nuclear use in “the most extreme circumstances.” This ambiguity, in conjunction with the superiority of US hard capabilities, amounts to a clear threat to Chinese security. The United States could mitigate this threat by issuing a statement specifying the circumstances under which it would consider a preemptive nuclear attack. A similar statement clarifying the intent of the US CPGS system would also lessen the threat China perceives from the United States.

Presently, there is not an equivalent document to the US *Nuclear Posture Review* outlining the US mission for CPGS. Instead, other states have had to rely on statements released by US administrations—statements, which, thus far, have not been reassuring. Both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations have stated that the United States reserves the right to use its CPGS missiles to attack another state’s nuclear force. In most cases, these statements have been accompanied by a clarifier that the intended target would be a rogue state or a US “regional adversary.” Without clarification, China is likely to assume—and prepare for—the worst. According to the 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, “Once it [US CPGS] has functional capabilities, it will be used to implement conventional strikes against our nuclear missile forces and will force us into a disadvantaged, passive position.”<sup>74</sup> It is in the best interests of the United States to not make China feel as if it is backed into a corner. The same can be said for Russia.

An explicit statement excluding Chinese and Russian nuclear forces from the US CPGS mission would go a long way in achieving this aim. It would also be beneficial if the United States made it clear that it will not suit its ICBMs with conventional warheads. China could match this move by providing clarification of its own. Currently, a few Chinese bases hold both conventional and nuclear missiles. Additionally, some of China’s missiles, like the DF-21, can be loaded with nuclear warheads. This duality is problematic for multiple reasons. First, the coupling of China’s conventional and nuclear forces can make it difficult to distin-

guish whether an incoming Chinese missile is conventional or nuclear. Second, if a state attempted to strike China's conventional weapons, the nature of their position would make it such that a state would also be attacking China's nuclear weapons—an offense that some in China have said warrants nuclear retaliation. These gray areas have the potential to inadvertently increase escalation. As a result, the United States would welcome a Chinese statement identifying which bases have which type of force, or, as an alternative, a promise that China will work toward force separation.

The key in this case and others is the perceived credibility of any promise proffered. This is particularly important in statements of intent, but even in cases where verification mechanisms are in place (such as in agreements limiting hard capabilities), cheating remains an option. For an agreement to work, the parties involved must have confidence that defection is unlikely. This kind of confidence results from trust, and trust requires mutual understanding formed through iterative interaction. Even when the United States and Soviet Union were rivals during the Cold War, they shared the experience of emerging into and managing through the nuclear age together, and thus, they had a mutual understanding of their responsibilities as superpowers. They sharpened this understanding with multiple high-level talks. These talks led to the establishment of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and served as precursors to subsequent arms control treaties.

China and the United States do not maintain the rapport that the United States and Soviet Union did during the Cold War, but efforts are being made to move in this direction. Official nuclear dialogues between China and the United States have long been stymied, but unofficial conversations present progress, especially the Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues organized by the Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Center for Contemporary Conflict, Naval Postgraduate School, and Defense Threat Reduction Agency. These dialogues have occurred once a year every year for the past seven years, and in that time, the participant list has doubled in size. Moreover, while the first dialogue included only individuals from China's academic community, later dialogues have included active Chinese military personnel and state officials. In fact, the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association cohosted the past two conferences. As these conversations include more individuals of greater influence, the opportunity for mutual understand-



ing and trust is likely to increase. This increase in understanding and trust makes transparency possible, which, in turn, can allow bilateral and multilateral treaties to become a reality.

A similar process can occur through established multilateral forums, such as nuclear dialogues among the UN Security Council's five permanent members, which are also the five NPT nuclear weapon states. These dialogues have taken place annually for the past five years and have advanced the conversation regarding how the NPT nuclear weapon states foresee fulfilling their NPT obligations of disarmament, nonproliferation, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. While still in its nascent stages, this group shows promise for pushing the disarmament agenda forward and for unveiling and actualizing the conditions for Chinese cooperation.

In his keynote speech before the 2009 UN Security Council Summit on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament, Chinese president Hu Jintao said that China would consider pursuing nuclear arms reductions along with the other powers when the time and conditions were right. He did not elaborate on this point, but given the evidence presented in this article, one can make the case for when such action might be more likely. China's present nuclear buildup and modernization is spurred by the perception that the United States is shifting to a more aggressive nuclear strategy, complete with advanced military technology. To the extent that the United States can convince China that its intentions with US missile defense and CPGS are benign and not directed at constraining China's rise, the likelihood of Chinese cooperation in disarmament increases. This transition is not likely to be immediate but will be the product of prolonged cooperation and patience.

As the perceived threat of the United States increases and this threat manifests into China's periphery, the pressure accumulates for China to take specific countermeasures, including the buildup and diversification of its nuclear force. From this perspective, if the United States is to engage China in a dialogue toward future multilateral disarmament, it will need to convince China that its intentions with US missile defense and CPGS are benign and not directed at constraining China's rise. The United States will also have to understand that the dilemma facing China is not one-dimensional, but multidimensional, with China having to contend with security threats at both the international and regional level. With this in mind, discussions of restricting US nuclear assistance and TMD participation might also have a place in negotiations and could increase

Chinese cooperation. Ultimately, as this analysis shows, a future triangular dialogue, as suggested by Cimbala, will need to look very different than the previous bilateral disarmament dialogues between the United States and Russia. The sooner this can be acknowledged and appreciated, the sooner its actualization becomes a possibility. **SSQ**

## Notes

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3. Lowell Dittmer, *South Asia's Nuclear Security Dilemma: India, Pakistan, and China* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Lora Saalman, *The China–India Nuclear Crossroads* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

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5. A large caveat is necessary whenever one attempts to conduct primary source research on a subject with national security implications. This is especially true in particularly opaque countries like China, where one must be aware of the possibility of strategic misinformation. In fact, an explicit admission of such practices is contained within China's classified People's Liberation Army Second Artillery Force manual. It is beyond the parameters of this article (or the author's abilities) to distinguish with certainty, which information has been falsified and which information is authentic. Rather, the aim of this study is to illuminate the Chinese perspective as seen through the lens of the state. An example in favor of direct interpretation comes from the Sovietologists of the 1970s and 1980s who predicted that the Soviet nuclear strategy was based upon winning a nuclear war. With the benefit of hindsight, scholars now see that these analysts overestimated the aggressiveness of the Soviet Union and too readily dismissed the reassurances issued by the Soviet government as propaganda. While certainly not everything that was said was true, more of it was true than US experts wanted to believe. It is easy to see how a similar mistake could be made today in regards to China, especially considering the present context of mutual distrust.

6. This analysis includes Israel, which has not admitted to having nuclear weapons but is known to have its own nuclear arsenal. Available information indicates Israel's *Jericho* III intercontinental ballistic missile has a minimum range of 5,000 kilometers.

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8. The information presented is based upon data collected from over 1,000 primary sources, including Chinese newspaper articles, academic journal articles, public speeches, military manuals, and Track 2 dialogue notes from 1991 to 2013.

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11. The Chinese government's claim of ignorance in this regard strains credulity when one considers declassified reports confirming the use of chemical weapons in the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s and China's reported role in selling dual-use chemical and chemical weapons-related production equipment to Iran in the early 1990s. Earlier Chinese reports also acknowledge North Korea's possession of chemical and biological weapons. Since not all of this information was available to the public at the time of this statement, the government's assertion of these countries' "innocence" can be seen as strictly propagandistic—serving to persuade the Chinese public of the peril of US hegemony.

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