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Implications of Russian Strategic Changes on China

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

Implications of Russian Strategic Changes on China

Report Date: 12/24/2019 Project Number (IREF ID): NPS-19-N260-A

Naval Postgraduate School, School of International Graduate Studies



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CHANGES ON CHINA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Summary

This project addressed the following research question: how has China perceived and responded to Russia's recent strategic modernization? This project employed a qualitative social science methodology and examined Chinese-language books and articles published by military officers, government officials, scientists, government think-tank analysts, and university scholars, supplemented by a research trip to Beijing and Shanghai for discussions with experts. The findings show that China characterizes Russian nuclear strategy as defensive, and that Russia's increased emphasis on nuclear weapons is designed to deter the West. Overall, the findings showed that China does not see Russian nuclear modernization as a concern or threat, because the two countries have a positive bilateral relationship. Further, China can understand the rationale of a weak Russia in putting more emphasis on nuclear weapons, given threats from NATO and the United States. In short, this research found little evidence that China is adjusting its nuclear doctrine, nuclear strategy, or nuclear modernization efforts in response to Russia.

Keywords: *China, Russia, nuclear, strategic, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, INF Treaty, Sino-Russian relations, great power competition, missile defense, nuclear strategy, nuclear doctrine, strategic weapons, strategic modernization*

Background

In an era of "great power competition" in which the United States is dealing with the challenges of revisionist Russia and China, the triangular relationship has become more important. There is vast and developing literature on each of these three powers, their respective bilateral relations, and the strategic nuclear modernization efforts of each country. Many scholars have examined the U.S.-Russia nuclear relationship and the U.S.-China nuclear relationship, but there has been very little analysis of the Sino-Russia nuclear relationship. Moreover, analysis of China's nuclear modernization has emphasized threats from U.S. modernization and domestic political actors as the most important drivers, without consideration of the effects of Russia's nuclear modernization on China. This project analyzed Chinese perceptions and responses to Russia's recent strategic modernization. As one of the first projects to examine this important and understudied issue, our main hypothesis was that China does not perceive Russian modernization as much of a threat, and therefore, in response, China has not made adjustments to its nuclear capabilities, doctrine, or deployments.

The purpose of the study is to fill a knowledge gap, which is significant to OPNAV N-5, the broader US Navy, and the broader academic study of international security affairs. The main

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objective was to collect data from Chinese-language sources to better understand and analyze how strategic changes in Russia have affected Chinese nuclear thinking, nuclear doctrine, and nuclear capabilities. Studying China's perceptions and response to Russian modernization can help us understand the current and likely future direction of China's own modernization, and potential changes in development and deployment of Chinese assets, especially naval platforms. Moreover, examining Chinese views on Russia's provocative behavior provides insight into the possibility of driving a wedge between Russia and China, and working together with China to pressure Russia on nuclear and arms control issues.

Findings and Conclusions

To best analyze and explain Chinese assessments and strategic responses to Russian modernization, this project employed a qualitative social science methodology and utilized existing social scientific theories of threat perception and strategic force postures. The work began by analyzing the limited English-language literature on this topic, but the main source material and value-added of this project came from a thorough and systematic analysis of Chinese-language sources, in order to provide new information and perspectives that are currently unknown to the US Navy, the US government, and the broader academic world. In this research effort, I collected, examined, and analyzed Chinese-language books and articles published by military officers, government officials, scientists, government think-tank analysts, and university scholars on two main literatures: 1) Chinese assessments and analysis of its strategic nuclear environment; and 2) Chinese analysis of Russia's security policy and broader Sino-Russian relations. To supplement these written sources, and discuss Chinese strategic thinking and assessments of changes in Russia, I also conducted a research trip to Beijing and Shanghai to meet with military officers, scientists, government think-tank analysts, and university scholars.

This research showed that Chinese experts clearly recognize that Russia's nuclear strategy and doctrine have evolved since the end of the Cold War, including an increasing emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons, but they do not view this evolution as particularly provocative or dangerous. U.S. government officials and experts, most clearly in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, have expressed strong concerns about the destabilizing impact of Russia's recent moves to develop new nuclear capabilities, emphasize tactical nuclear weapons and limited use of such weapons, conduct more aggressive nuclear exercises, and adopt a risky and offensive doctrine of "escalate to de-escalate" and an approach of using nuclear weapons to support limited offensive conventional operations. Chinese experts argue that "escalate to de-escalate" is an American term, they are not sure it is a proper characterization of Russian nuclear doctrine, and there has been no official government policy document endorsing or reflecting such a strategy. They note

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that what the Americans describe is risky and escalatory, and Chinese experts argue that Russia is too prudent to adopt such an approach. Further, in terms of capabilities, they argue that most of Russia's modernization efforts are on replacement rather than new modernization, and Russia is too poor to field new weapons in large numbers.

Although Chinese experts notice some troubling recent speeches and behavior from Russia on the nuclear front, they emphasize that Russia's increased emphasis on nuclear weapons is defensive and purely to enhance deterrence against the United States, which itself is trying to undermine the nuclear balance and strategic stability. Chinese experts also adopt a different position than the United States on the Russian violation of the INF Treaty, which forced the U.S. to withdraw from it. As China is not a party to the INF Treaty, officials and experts maintain that it was not their place to offer a position as to whether or not Russia's missile violated the range restrictions in the treaty. Most Chinese experts argue that this was a small technical violation, which often occur in arms control, and did not need to lead to the U.S. withdrawal. Moreover, they argue that Russia was transparent and attempted to be very accommodating by inviting U.S. officials to come to Russia to inspect the missile range themselves, but US experts refused and unilaterally abandoned the treaty.

Chinese experts also understand the rationale for why a weak Russia, facing increasing threats would need to increase its emphasis on nuclear weapons. This finding also confirmed our initial hypothesis, and revealed a much deeper and more nuanced analysis by Chinese experts. In the post-Cold War era, Russia's economic power declined and its conventional capabilities are much weaker than NATO. Chinese experts argue that Russia has no choice but to increase the reliance on nuclear weapons and modernize because it faces threats from NATO expansion and the U.S. missile defense programs and nuclear modernization. Moreover, Chinese experts emphasize that new changes in U.S. capabilities, such as developing low-yield tactical nuclear weapons and new platforms, have destroyed Russia's strategic stability.

Overall, China does not see Russian nuclear modernization as a concern or threat because the countries have a positive bilateral relationship and do not see Russia's nuclear forces as targeting China. This confirmed my original hypothesis, but provided much greater supporting evidence than was previously known. Chinese experts argue that the definition of the overall political relationship is most important and influences Chinese views on all aspects of the relationship. In a series of political documents, the two countries have reaffirmed their close relationship and comprehensive strategic partnership. Both sides have mutual trust, respect each other's sovereignty and core interests, and share similar perspective and concerns about the West. Additionally, unlike the U.S. and China, Russia and China have a consistent official dialogue on

NPS NRP Executive Summary

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Report Date: 12/24/2019 Project Number (IREF ID): NPS-19-N260-A

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nuclear and strategic stability issues, which rarely criticizes or questions the other party—they usually spend more time discussing how U.S. behavior has undermined strategic stability and how it can be restored. The countries also have a “no first use” nuclear relations commitment and a stable mutual deterrence relationship. Therefore, China’s perception of Russia’s non-threatening intentions has resulted in China’s relaxed and confident position on Russia’s nuclear modernization. Chinese experts also do not accept or endorse arguments that the indirect and second-order effects of Russian modernization represent a threat and/or negative development for China.

While the dominant Chinese view is that Russian modernization is not a direct threat, experts note some concern regarding in terms of arms control and potential crises. In analyzing the overall nuclear environment, Chinese experts observe that increasing the emphasis on nuclear weapons, lowering the nuclear threshold, and developing more usable tactical nuclear weapons are negative developments and challenges for arms control and strategic stability. They observe an “action-reaction cycle” in modernization between the U.S. and Russia that leads to more obstacles for arms control and more challenges for strategic stability; yet experts place more blame on the United States than on Russia for these dynamics. Chinese experts also express a general concern that crises in regional hot spots could become even more dangerous in a context if the nuclear threshold is lowered, and countries are developing and deploying tactical nuclear weapons.

In summary, Russian nuclear modernization has not greatly impacted China’s nuclear doctrine or nuclear capabilities. Chinese experts argue that the country’s nuclear approach and nuclear doctrine have maintained continuity, and China has continued its “lean and effective” defensive nuclear policy. When analyzing the international nuclear threat environment, Chinese experts usually do not consider Russia as an important factor or driver. In terms of regional nuclear capabilities, Chinese experts discuss improved missile defense capabilities in Japan and South Korea, other regional nuclear powers such as India, and more recently the need to deter Taiwan independence. It is certainly possible that China feels threatened by Russia, and is using these other countries as excuses for a modernization that also has a Russia element, but there is no evidence to support this and it would be speculation.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this project have uncovered several areas of further research that will be useful for the US Navy and the broader academic community. First, it is important to develop a deeper understanding of how Russia and China perceive a “post-INF world,” what concerns they have about potential U.S. actions, and how they are likely to respond. Second, research analyzing

NPS NRP Executive Summary

Implications of Russian Strategic Changes on China

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similarities and differences in Chinese and Russian threat assessments from current and future U.S. missile defense capabilities should be explored. Third, it is critical to assess the prospects for maintaining existing arms control treaties, developing new arms control regimes, and how success or failure in arms control will likely shape great power competition with China and Russia.

Acronyms

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty INF