

The US in China's Nuclear Threat Perception

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Abstract

China's nuclear threat perception, of which its nuclear weapons program is the by-product, is driven by the external strategic environment where the United States (US) is a key player. Chairman Mao Zedong, after the US nuclear intimidation during the Korean War and the Cross-Strait Crises, considered that nuclear weapons were central not only to deter their potential use against China but also to counter the nuclear threat. The geostrategic location of the country makes it vulnerable to a few nuclear powers. However, not all of these states constitute a key concern in Beijing's nuclear threat perception. In this regard, an analysis of the US nuclear weapons program and capabilities would help understand China's nuclear threat perception. The paper aims to explore the threat that China perceives from the US given the latter's growing focus against it, including through its nuclear arsenal. The study, after a brief historical background, begins with a cursory discussion on theoretical underpinnings for threat perception. The next section outlines the US nuclear weapon policy and capability that has a bearing on China's nuclear threat perception. The paper argues that with its intentions and excessive capability, the US is a primary actor in shaping China's nuclear threat perception and altering its long-standing nuclear weapons policy and modernization of its nuclear forces.

Keywords: Nuclear Weapons, United States, China, Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS), Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD).

Introduction

According to *The Science of Military Strategy (SMS) 2013*, nuclear weapons have an essential role in achieving and sustaining China's great power status. *The 2013 SMS* notes, 'we must fully recognize that nuclear forces are not ensuring the status of great power to broadcast and safeguard national core interests without infringements and to create a peaceful and safe development environment.'¹ On December 31, 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the restructuring of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). He termed the establishment of the PLA Army general command, the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), formerly known as PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF), and the PLA Strategic Support Force

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(PLASSF) as a significant step towards building a strong modern military with Chinese characteristics. While emphasizing the role of PLARF, Xi stated that the PLARF is a 'core force of strategic deterrence, a strategic buttress to the country's position as a major power, and an important building block in upholding national security.'²

The reforms introduced by President Xi Jinping towards the end of 2015 led to the elevation of the status of the PLASAF from a branch to service. These reforms were not explicitly related to nuclear and conventional missile forces. Many analysts have overlooked other simultaneous developments, like the creation of the Strategic Support Force (SSF) that 'centralizes most PLA space, cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare capabilities.'³ According to one RAND study, the PLASAF had been arguing for years for a 'separate space component within the PLA' however, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) had tried to keep it under its domain.⁴ The creation of the SSF shows that the PLASSF narrative has prevailed over that of the PLAAF. In addition to that, the top leadership of the newly built SSF included former officers of the PLASAF, who are likely to align the PLASSF with the PLARF.⁵ According to some analysts, 'PLARF will command all three legs of China's nuclear triad-ballistic missiles, nuclear-capable bombers, and submarines.'⁶ If this transformation happened successfully, the PLARF would be the only military service in the world controlling the nuclear triad of China. Moreover, one can speculate that PLARF might also gain command over China's BMD system and counter-space force as both domains require and employ modified ballistic missiles.

Brief Historical Background

China was estimated to possess 350 nuclear warheads in 2020.⁷ It is believed to have six types of nuclear warheads assemblies: 'a 15-40 kiloton(kt) fission bomb; a 20 kt missile warhead; a three megaton (mt) thermonuclear missile warhead; a 3 mt thermonuclear gravity bomb; a 4-5 mt missile warhead; and a 200-300 kt missile warhead.'⁸ China, in one year (June 2018 - June 2019) has fielded a new version of a mid-range nuclear-capable ballistic missile, dual-capable intermediate-range mobile ballistic missile, and upgraded transporter erector launcher (TEL) mobile launcher of DF-31AG Inter Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). In December 2019, China carried out a test of a new nuclear-capable JL-3 Submarine-Launch Ballistic Missile (SLBM).⁹ Moreover, China continues to develop multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV)-capable ICBMs, an air-launched dual-capable ballistic missile.¹⁰

For China, nuclear weapons had less utility than the conventional means of warfare until the end of the Cold War. Therefore, China's nuclear weapons program initially escaped the issues concerning international security, such as nuclear proliferation. There are several reasons for this including a weak and slow-developing nuclear weapons program in China and the Cold War bipolar competition between the US and the Soviet Union. The immense relative advantage in the nuclear capacity of the two competing superpowers kept China out from a potential threat matrix. The latter's commitment to a restrained nuclear weapons policy and No-First-Use (NFU), its isolationist/selective engagement policy also factored in. With the end of the Cold War, the role of nuclear weapons has generally become less significant in international politics, however, its role in the US and Russia's security policies has remained unchanged. Contrary to this, the role of nuclear weapons became more significant for Beijing. Major powers are reducing the arsenal in numbers but not because of any genuine approach towards elimination of the weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) but to reduce the costs and burden of maintaining the outdated and less sophisticated weapons stocks. They are increasingly relying on modernization and the sophistication of weapons. Among the permanent five (P5) members of the United Nations (UN)—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US—China is the only state that has increased its nuclear stockpile since the end of the Cold War. According to some estimates, by 2029, China would significantly increase the size of its nuclear stockpiles, making it approximately 600 warheads.¹¹

China also continues the modernization of its nuclear forces. Among its several state-of-the-art weapons and delivery systems, notable were Dongfeng-41 (DF-41), DF-31AG, JL-2, DF-26, DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV), DF-100 cruise missile, and the WZ-8 supersonic reconnaissance drone.¹² Recent reports indicate that China is constructing almost 250 new silos.¹³ It is unclear whether it will load these silos with single-warhead missiles or with the new MIRVed-DF-41, which would require a significant increase in the number of new warheads.

China's Nuclear Threat Perception

Threat perception is a significant factor in making and guiding a state's security policymaking process. An acute sense of external threat can lead to strong internal cohesion, leading to aggressive responses to perceived or real foreign threats and hard balances.¹⁴ The realist school of international relations and realist conflict theorists tend to associate *perception* to the security threat based on power asymmetries.¹⁵ The greater the power asymmetry, the higher the level of perceived threat. In the 1980s, *intention* as a variable became the

other source of the threat when international relations scholars began to understand the psychological factors behind threat perception. Waltz writes that military threats are assessed as comprising a range of factors that include the adversary's military power, offensive capabilities, physical or geographical proximity, and hostile intentions.¹⁶

According to Robert Jervis and others, threat perception is defined in terms of capability and intent to inflict harm.¹⁷ The mainstream international relations literature has many studies explaining the threats that the world perceives from China's growing military and economic clout.¹⁸ However, why China perceives the threat from other states is relatively less explored. Therefore, to contribute more to the existing literature, the following section analyzes the nuclear capabilities and intentions of the US, which might impact China's nuclear threat perception and consequently shape its nuclear strategy.

Framing the US in China's Threat Perception

Being the only superpower, the US has potent and large means to influence the policies of other states. Due to its relative power advantage and Washington's recent gestures regarding China, the latter perceives the former to be its primary security threat.¹⁹ The US has an overwhelming nuclear capability as compared to China. According to the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 2020 report, the US maintains a stockpile of 3,800 nuclear weapons: approximately 1,750 are deployed, and the remaining 2,050 are kept in storage. Out of the total deployed, 800 warheads are assigned to 400 ICBMs—200 warheads for 200 Mk-21/SERV ICBMs and the remaining 600 warheads for 200 Mk-12A ICBMs having MIRV capability— 1,920 SLBMs are assigned to the US Navy, and 850 warheads are kept for bombers. The remaining 230 are non-strategic nuclear warheads.²⁰

Non-strategic nuclear warheads are further divided into three versions: the B61-3, the B61-4, and the B61-10. Approximately 80 warheads of the B61-10 version retired in 2016, and the remaining 150 are deployed at different airbases in Europe.²¹ Moreover, approximately 2,385 nuclear warheads are retired from service and awaiting dismantlement. The US nuclear inventory is *more than twelve times greater* than China's nuclear forces. According to the 1972 US Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), approximately 600 nuclear warheads at that time were designated for China to destroy approximately 70 percent of its industry and 70 percent of the urban population. The Plan would have also destroyed most of the military infrastructure and targets.²²

Since 1994, the US administrations have published Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), a primary document outlining US nuclear threat perception, its nuclear weapons policy doctrine, and nuclear forces to achieve policy goals. A nuclear contingency over Taiwan involving China was explicitly discussed in the 1994 NPR. The 2002 US NPR, concerning China, notes that 'due to the combination of China's still developing strategic objectives and the ongoing modernization of its nuclear and non-nuclear forces, China is a country that could be involved in an immediate or potential contingency.'²³ One of the three nuclear contingencies discussed in the 2002 NPR also refers to a potential military confrontation with China over Taiwan.²⁴

Compared to the 2002 NPR, the 2010 Obama administration's NPR places China alongside Russia as a key nuclear weapons state in Washington's calculus. In the 2010 NPR, US' desire to enhance 'strategic stability' with China is expressed. However, at the same time, the NPR expresses concerns about the modernization of the latter's nuclear arsenal, the lack of transparency, and its future intentions.²⁵ The premium of strategic stability shows that Washington accepts mutual deterrence with Beijing and will respond to changes and new developments in the latter's nuclear weapons policy and capabilities.²⁶

The 2018 NPR, under the Trump administration, takes an assertive stance towards 'great power competition.'²⁷ The NPR further emphasizes that 'effective U.S. deterrence of nuclear attack and non-nuclear strategic attack requires ensuring that potential adversaries do not miscalculate regarding the consequences of nuclear first use, either regionally or against the United States itself.'²⁸ The NPR highlights new changes; nuclear weapons might be used in retaliation to a non-nuclear attack. This may be related to China's NFU policy as the US is developing precision missiles, which can target strategic assets with conventional warheads. The 2018 NPR removed the call for 'strategic stability' and proposed new nuclear capabilities which could lead to nuclear escalation with new nuclear options. According to Li Bin, a Chinese nuclear expert, the 2018 NPR is an attempt aimed at the use of nuclear weapons' advantage to pursue regional and global hegemony.²⁹ Another Chinese expert views 2018 NPR as a failure. He views that accusation that China might be 'mistakenly concluding that it could secure an advantage through the limited use of its theater nuclear capabilities or that any use of nuclear weapons, however limited, is acceptable'³⁰ cannot be justified as China has NFU policy and does not have low-yield nuclear weapons.

In short, the 1994 and 2002 NPRs view China vis-à-vis Taiwan, and its gradually growing nuclear weapons capabilities. The 2010 NPR sees China as a nuclear weapons state and emerging challenge which

needs to be addressed. However, the 2018 NPR deems China a serious challenge and threat to US-led regional security architecture and necessitates new policy changes and capabilities to maintain regional balance in US' favor.

US BMD System and China

China's perception of the US threat in the nuclear realm is exacerbated by US Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems. In January 2019, while unveiling the US missile defense strategy, the former US President Donald Trump declared, 'our goal is simple: To ensure we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States—anywhere, anytime, anyplace.'³¹ This is a major shift from the previous US administrations who constantly said they sought BMD to defend against rogue states.³² Consequently, China sees US BMD capabilities as a threat to its security and general strategic stability. Chinese perception of the US is based on both material capability and intent.³³ Furthermore, the BMD system's operational deployments by the US against North Korea, for instance, cover the same trajectory as required for China's missiles.³⁴ Therefore, it is likely that Washington would seek to intercept missiles fired from China by its BMD systems—it is simply implausible to believe that a state would not use a defensive system to defend against a nuclear attack if they had defensive systems in place.

On the other hand, China's nuclear-capable missile force is significantly smaller than the US and Russian forces. According to Pentagon's 2019 Missile Defense Review, China is estimated to have one hundred and twenty-five nuclear missiles, which can potentially pose a threat to the US.³⁵ According to Kristensen and Korda, approximately eighty out of one hundred and twenty-five can reach the US mainland (the rest can threaten other US territories).³⁶ In 2020, according to *Defense News*, the US had forty-four ground-based interceptors (GBI) in place at 'Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Air Force Base, California, with plans to add twenty-two additional missile silos at Fort Greely to support twenty more GBIs' by 2025.³⁷

Theoretically, to ensure a retaliatory strike, China needs to have more than forty-four nuclear warheads and missiles—a number more than the US interceptors—that could reach the continental US. Alternatively, the former can lose only forty-eight missiles to Washington in a first-strike to ensure a secure second-strike can take place.³⁸

Apart from GBI, by the end of FY 2021, the US aims to increase the number of BMD-capable Navy Aegis ships to 48, and it is further planning to increase the number up to 65 by FY 2025.³⁹ The BMD-capable

Navy Aegis ships are capable of 'defending against short, medium, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles during their midcourse phase with an emphasis on the ascent stage.'⁴⁰ Additionally, the US also operates seven batteries of Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile defense system, and each can carry 48-72 interceptors. Three batteries with six launchers each (eight interceptors per launcher as per standard) are deployed in Hawaii, Guam, and South Korea.⁴¹ THAAD is designed to counter short and medium-range ballistic missiles, however, there is a potential to increase the range of its interceptors and connect it with other BMD systems such as Patriot.⁴²

In a conference report on the *Sixth China-US Strategic Dialogue on Strategic Nuclear Dynamics 2011*, a technical expert from China concluded, 'when we have technical exchanges with Russian experts, they think the US is exaggerating the threat of missiles launched from North Korea and Iran, and in fact, the trajectories [of US missile interceptors] seem to be designed for Russia and China.'⁴³ The report quotes another Chinese representative saying that the US could advance from 30 (in 2011, the US had 30 interceptors, according to the report) to 300 interceptors in the future, broadening its BMD program.⁴⁴ Though the number of GBIs will be 64 by 2023, the sum of BMD interceptors, including Aegis and THAAD, is estimated to grow to be greater than 300.⁴⁵

For many in China, including academics and policymakers in the government and the PLA believe that the US BMD system has weakened China's strategic and tactical nuclear retaliatory capabilities, and it could also intercept its conventional missiles in the event of a conflict.⁴⁶ Moreover, these analysts consider that the system is solely driven by the determination to enhance the outreach of its offensive military capabilities and strategies with impunity—what Jeffery Knop calls 'unidirectional deterrence.'⁴⁷ In short, the Chinese view is that the US wants to be equipped with a 'spear and shield' to attack without the fear of being attacked. Arguably, such offensive and defensive capabilities favor pre-emptive and first-use strategies, leaving adversaries with fewer means of reprisal—in turn, it requires them to strengthen their nuclear weapons program to restore deterrence vis-à-vis Washington.⁴⁸ The US BMD system, however, is just one factor where Beijing identifies a major shift in the US grand strategy towards enhanced competition that occurred under Donald Trump.

Another emerging concern in Beijing is related to the US nuclear submarines carrying Submarine Launch Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs). Under President Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' policy, also known as the rebalancing strategy, the US announced the intention to rebalance global military deployments towards the Indo-Pacific. The former US Secretary

of Defense Leon Panetta while speaking at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue conference in June 2012 had stated,

By 2020, the [US] navy will reposture its forces from today's roughly 50-50% split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60-40 split between those [the Pacific] oceans. That will include six aircraft carriers in this region, a majority of our cruisers, destroyers, combat ships and submarines.⁴⁹

Later in September 2014, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, in an address at the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) in Washington, D.C., said, 'sixty percent of U.S. Navy and Air Force will be based in the Pacific by 2020.'⁵⁰ According to Li Bin, the US has planned to deploy most of the ballistic missile submarines to the Pacific to increase the number of targets that can hit China.⁵¹ The US submarines in the Pacific are capable of carrying more than 1,000 nuclear warheads collectively. The degree of readjustment shows that the Indo-Pacific is the new center of international political gravity. Furthermore, nuclear submarines are better at dispersion, mobility, and concealment compared to air or land-based nuclear forces. China does not and may never have the capability to destroy every US submarine, and thus US SLBMs secure the second-strike capability of the US, hence preserving deterrence. Due to their low detectability, quick mobility, and concealment, SLBMs can also contribute to the US first-strike capabilities.

Unlike other delivery means, nuclear submarines with SLBMs bypass the 'use it or lose it' pressure—a condition often associated with the use of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs). This pressure suggests a state may feel the need to launch its warheads in a crisis or conflict rather than lose them all to an adversary during a first or disarming strike. In other cases, a state might lose connectivity from the command and control for authorization to use its arsenal, or a state might use them accidentally, hence losing them. The SLBMs launched from close proximity reduce the time to reach the target, improve the accuracy of strikes, and diminish chances for an adversary to relocate ground-based movable assets such as land-based ICBMs. The US Pacific fleet of submarines can, theoretically, carry out disarming strikes against the small numbers of North Korea and China's land-based ICBMs, strategic bases, and command and control systems with a conventional missile strike.

Moreover, the development of space-based systems by the US is also a factor that would provide it with real-time intelligence, surveillance,

and reconnaissance regardless of the weather conditions. The US 2019 Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR) states that:

Given the significant advantages of space-basing for sensors, and potentially interceptors, particularly for boost-phase defense, MDA [Missile Defense Agency] will study development and fielding of a space-based missile intercept layer capable of boost-phase defense...⁵²

In this regard, for the fiscal year 2020, the White House requested USD 34 million 'to develop and test by 2023 a prototype space-based directed-energy (laser) weapon for ICBMs during their boost phase. The program is expected to cost USD 380 million over five years.'⁵³ The program will boost the BMD interceptor capability and help in tracing mobile targets, including mobile ICBMs, in all weather conditions with greater accuracy. The mobility factor of nuclear and missile inventory is central to China's retaliatory capability.⁵⁴ In addition, such surveillance and precision technology of the US might undermine strategic stability.

A less considered factor in the literature but one that informs China's nuclear threat perception is US conventional military capabilities. The US has the most advanced and reliable conventional military capability in the world. In recent years, it has improved its conventional military technologies relevant to strategic capabilities, such as Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) and advanced Early Warning Systems (EWS), which would permit the US to strike around the globe in an hour. With these military capabilities, Chinese policymakers are eliminating the distinction between the nuclear and conventional domains, which was long a key element informing China's nuclear posture.⁵⁵

US Conventional Strike Capabilities and China

Precision munitions first demonstrated their utility, operationally during the Vietnam War and gained prominence in Operation Desert Storm in 1991. The idea of CPGS first showed up in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which notes that the US defense strategy 'rests on the assumption that U.S. forces have the ability to project power worldwide.'⁵⁶ The Bush administration in 2002 NPR called for 'the integration of precision conventional weapons with strategic nuclear forces in a new category of 'offensive strike' weapons.'⁵⁷ In 2003, the US Air Force and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) launched a program to develop 'a launch vehicle similar to a ballistic missile and a hypersonic reentry vehicle, known as the common aero vehicle (CAV)' that would provide the US ability of prompt global strike.⁵⁸

After two years in 2004, the US National Military Strategy (NMS) set out a new global strike mission for carrying out the effective global strike,

... to damage, neutralize or destroy any objective results from a combination of precision and manoeuvre, and the integration of new technologies, doctrine and organizations. Defeating the most dangerous threats will require persistence in force application that allows strikes against time-sensitive and time-critical targets. Ensuring capabilities are positioned and ready to conduct strikes against these targets requires the ability to sustain operations over time and across significant distances.⁵⁹

The 2006 QDR emphasized the need and ability of CPGS 'to attack fixed, hard and deeply buried, mobile and relocatable targets with improved accuracy anywhere in the world promptly upon the President's order.'⁶⁰ The 2010 QDR, while dwelling upon the significance of the global strike, notes that global strike could be a solution to 'growing threats to forward-deployed forces and bases and ensuring U.S. power projection capabilities.'⁶¹ Similarly, US Air Force specified that it could 'modify both Minuteman II missiles and Peacekeeper missiles to carry conventional warheads.'⁶² DARPA also sought to design ArcLight, an alternative delivery vehicle for the PGS mission.⁶³

Moreover, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review viewed PGS in line with US regional deterrence strategy, noting 'these capabilities may be particularly valuable for the defeat of time-urgent regional threats.'⁶⁴ Though the review mentions the intention not to affect 'the stability of our nuclear relationships with Russia or China,' one can understand the underlying impact of CPGS capability on the US first-strike against Chinese nuclear command and control and limited nuclear forces.⁶⁵

The CPGS intensified China's threat perception. It arguably increased strategic instability and exacerbated the security dilemma between the US and China as Yao Yunzhu, former Major General of the PLA, wrote in 2013, 'the United States is developing a series of conventional strategic strike capabilities. Once deployed, they could have the capability to strike China's nuclear arsenal and make China's NFU policy redundant.'⁶⁶ Some Chinese experts viewed that the US might perceive that China will not respond to former's conventional strike against its nuclear installations. To them, it weakens the latter's nuclear deterrence.⁶⁷ Another view is that the description of targets given in *Congressional Research Report*—for instance, 'deeply buried' and 'hardened' or 'fleeting' and 'time-critical' targets—clearly fit in Chinese missile sites and command and control facilities.⁶⁸

Further, China's evolving anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) and A2/AD capabilities are considered a major concern in the official US discourse.⁶⁹ The Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS), formerly CPGS in Congressional Research Report (CSR), therefore, could have a crucial role in the emerging US military strategies such as by striking deep inside adversary's territory to destroy A2/AD capabilities and could be used to threaten critical non-strategic infrastructure and targets in China.⁷⁰ Theoretically, the CPS capability could give the US an edge to target China's nuclear forces without resorting to a nuclear first-strike as the Obama administration's National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2013 requested the commander of the US Strategic Command to review US capabilities to 'neutralize' underground tunnels using 'conventional and nuclear forces.'⁷¹

The pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons against an imminent attack for escalation control has always been an option for the US. Moreover, for several reasons, such as the growing awareness of the impact of nuclear war, its outcome, and available alternative means such as CPS, the first use by the US of nuclear weapons is politically unfeasible, albeit not impossible in extremis.⁷² Therefore, CPS appears to be a better alternative to a first-strike and a viable option for the US policymakers to disarm, disrupt and destroy Chinese assets if necessary. It also gives an impression that the US policymakers believe China would be less likely to retaliate with nuclear weapons if the US used CPS to target its strategic assets with conventional payloads. The CPS system, once fully operationalized, may enhance US deterrence and offensive capabilities by letting the US attack fleeting targets (mobile, time-sensitive, and hard to track) in the initial or later stages of the conflict. The CPS weapons would add value to America's existing nuclear capabilities as US officials have argued that such weaponry could provide niche capabilities, allowing it to strike nuclear targets with conventional missiles in a short time. However, such a scenario may prompt China to reconsider security and nuclear policies, such as giving up its NFU policy in the future.

The military modernization by the US is the most important external factor that has shaped China's threat perception, and potentially induced change in domestic security policies by influencing the internal factors. For instance, the US pivot to Asia announced in 2011 made China feel vulnerable to the former and generated a series of responses. China's comprehensive military modernization, led by President Xi announced in late 2015, was the manifestation of China's threat perception from the US. The 2018 NPR is yet another response from the US. Such measures from both sides exacerbate the security dilemma between both states and the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

The US has an overwhelming nuclear capability that can outrightly challenge China, and potentially eliminate its ability to deliver a credible second-strike against the former. In other words, the US nuclear triad and ongoing technological developments undermine China's nuclear deterrent. A change in the US nuclear weapons program will likely breed change in China's nuclear weapons policy and force structure. According to the 2018 NPR, the US maintains that it preserves the option of pre-emptive nuclear weapons strike in 'the most extreme circumstances to protect our vital interests and those of our allies.'⁷³ This kind of deliberately maintained strategic ambiguity coupled with the capability to carry out the first-strike against China and superior conventional capabilities results in the US being the biggest threat in the former's threat perception. *The Science of Military Strategy 2013* notes that 'the US is implementing routine called the 'Fast Global Strike' program, and once formed into actual combat capability, will carry nuclear missile power implementing conventional strikes will put us in a passive position, greatly affecting our nuclear counterattack ability and weakening our nuclear deterrence effectiveness.'⁷⁴ China's current nuclear force modernization, which started towards the end of 2015, is mainly driven by the perception that the US is advancing towards a more hostile nuclear weapons policy and advancing nuclear and conventional military capabilities. As the threat perception intensifies and manifests across China's periphery, the pressure increases for it to adopt countermeasures, which would intensify the security dilemma and nuclear arms race. However, it is also interesting to note that China's nuclear force modernization started years before the 2018 NPR which discusses flexible capabilities and tailored strategies. This reflects how the US may approach any conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

Notes

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