

## Section II: Opinion

# **Sino-American Nuclear Relations: The Need for Calm as China Becomes A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nuclear State**

By Jarrod Fraser

*ABSTRACT: The re-emergence of China as an economic powerhouse has given it new levels of boldness in claiming what it sees as its rightful territory in the South and East China Seas. China's claims have been seen by many in the United States and Asia as a policy of expansionism, comparable to Imperialist Japan in 1932-45. These disputes have coincided with the modernisation of China's nuclear forces. However Sino-American relations can be managed despite ongoing tensions in Asia. This article will make a number of recommendations to build Sino-American relations whilst China undergoes its nuclear modernisation and mutually fuelled Sino-American security fears.*

### **Chinese Nuclear Doctrine and Modernisation**

China has been modernising its nuclear forces to catch up to the other nuclear weapon states. China perceives modernisation as allowing it to safeguard its economic growth. The US has perceived China's modernisation and territorial disputes as trying to create a Soviet Union-style buffer between it and the West. The US has been trying to counter this by re-engaging in the region to defend the rules-based global order which is nested in US primacy. China has subsequently perceived the US as a foreign power trying to interfere with Asian affairs, similar to nineteenth-century European colonial powers.

China's past nuclear doctrine has been governed by a No-First-Use policy. China's force was designed to be strong enough to ensure that it could prevent another state from using its nuclear weapons to coerce it as occurred during the first Taiwan Straits Crisis. The US was able to threaten the use of nuclear weapons to discourage China from invading Taiwan. China's nuclear forces needed to be large enough to inflict an unacceptable level of damage. This would prevent coercion while utilising the fewest number of weapons possible, a strategy known as minimum deterrence. Minimum deterrence suited the perception held by Chinese leaders, such as Mao Zedong, who believed that nuclear

weapons were predominantly suitable for preventing nuclear coercion. China has omitted the No-First-Use principle from its recent Defence White Paper, creating a concern its nuclear posture will become more offensive.

As China modernises its forces, other Asian states are unsure if China will maintain a minimum deterrence posture, or evolve its policy to support its perceived expansionism. A change in nuclear doctrine will require a change in China's force composition. China's nuclear forces had been predominantly land-based, consisting mostly of de-mated warheads for medium and long-range missile systems. A new force composition would dissipate deployment of nuclear weapons across aircraft and submarines to ensure they could survive an attempted disarming first strike by China's adversaries. It is unknown, however who will have the authority to launch a retaliatory strike if the Chinese government has been destroyed. Mutual stability is lost as it relies on both parties understanding what could start a nuclear conflict and therefore what must be avoided.

There has been an ongoing review of Chinese nuclear doctrine to increase mobility, reliability, readiness, accuracy and the size of the force. The new doctrine would be facilitated by new missile technology, guidance systems and delivery platforms like submarines. Given the current Sino-American tensions over disputes in Asia, managing the relationship to prevent the escalation of an arms race becomes important to avoid further straining the relationship. Managing the perceptions of the other therefore becomes crucial.

### **Current Climate**

The modernisation of China's nuclear forces may have less to do with the US and more with China's need to modernise. Political scientist Jeffrey Lewis stated, 'if China's modernization seems unusual, perhaps it is because China is only now completing the deployment capabilities that other countries have possessed for decades' (Lewis 204). Though the timing of these events makes developments look offensive, China's nuclear forces have been playing catch-up with the US. Instead of China trying to prepare itself for expansion, a more realistic interpretation is that it is trying to not be left behind amongst major nuclear powers. Although this modernisation coincides with Chinese President Xi

Jinping's 'period of strategic opportunity' of 2000–20, China is aware a Sino-American war would be disastrous for its economy population and national development.

In the past, nuclear relations have been guided by the mutual assurance of retaliation. Even if one side can cripple most of its adversary's nuclear weapons, it will still be able to inflict disproportionate casualties on the other through retaliatory nuclear strikes. Strategic stability is created as no side wishes to suffer a nuclear attack; this exists despite the distinct US nuclear superiority with 7,100 nuclear weapons to China's 260 (Arms Control Assoc.). States have cemented strategic stability by introducing arms limitation and non-proliferation treaties to develop trust and mutually reduce nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems. If a state can limit the damage that the other can inflict, for example through an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defence system to shoot down incoming nuclear missiles, that state develops an advantage and strategic stability lessens. The reinvigoration of the US ABM system creates fear within China that the US will no longer be held back by the fear of China's strike capabilities. China fears that without its retaliatory capabilities, the US will coerce China to prevent it from claiming its perceived rightful territory in Asia.

Nuclear proliferation academic Dingli Shen states that, 'As proliferation *per se* is a response to threat perception, to render non-proliferation successful it has to address national security without nuclear weaponry' (Shen 2008, 651). Thus, to prevent Sino-American disputes from escalating to nuclear levels in a potential fourth Taiwan Straits Crisis, mutual security fears need to be solved. The author will make a number of recommendations to help manage the Sino-American nuclear relations.

### **Recommendations**

Both China and the US need to acknowledge the necessity of addressing mutual security concerns. The US and China need to recognise the escalating tension between them and engage diplomatically on issues such as the South and East China Sea. China has often refused to recognise the authority of international arbitration for territorial disputes in areas such as the Spratly/Nansha Islands. If both sides are not able to develop meaningful diplomatic engagement over these issues, the two sides could continue down a path of continued escalation, or enter into a stability/instability paradox. The Sino-American

stability/instability paradox might be similar to the India-Pakistan paradox that would likely see an increase in low-level conflict without nuclear escalation. There has already been low-level conflict during US Freedom-of-Navigation Operations and Chinese land reclamation projects. A miscalculation in resolving a Sino-American crisis could, unlike the India-Pakistan relationship, lead to a major conflict carrying the high risk of nuclear weapons devastation. Continued Sino-American engagement does not need to involve large deals or treaties immediately however the two states need to increase bilateral conferences, talks, and visits for mutual issues. This would develop a cooperative diplomatic environment where the two states could begin resolving political disputes.

The establishment of a Sino-American presidential hotline, similar to the Russo-American presidential hotline, would be crucial for facilitating crisis management. There is currently a hotline between the US Department of Defence and Chinese Ministry of National Defence, as well as a number of cross-military engagements. Though Sino-American bilateral military exchanges are significant, the relations built to facilitate crisis management may not be enough. The creation of this hotline is a public gesture for the commitment of addressing mutual security concerns and facilitates direct communication between leaders. This direct communication becomes particularly important as withdrawing embassy staff and ambassadors has long been a diplomatic tool for escalation to signal resolve during a crisis. The hotline would allow direct communication to be maintained even while crisis tensions are at their highest.

#### Negotiations

The final recommendation would be development of a Sino-American led Nuclear Arms Limitation Treaty Both the US and China have made their commitment to Asia public. Sino-American cooperation is therefore going to be needed to decrease tensions and limit the potential for nuclear escalation. If diplomatic momentum can be created and maintained through bilateral engagement, nuclear cooperation and trust-building, the two states can move towards an arms limitation treaty which should be supported by non-proliferation organisations. As states have broader security concerns, the success of a Sino-American treaty would rest upon either contributing towards resolving regional disputes prior to the treaty or the creation of a 'grand bargain'

A 'grand bargain' might be similar to that struck in the late 1970s where the US recognised the authority the government of mainland China instead of the Republic of China (known as Taiwan). In exchange, China agreed to not challenge US primacy in Asia. A future 'grand bargain' would need to address both China's fear of a potential limitation to its economic growth and the US fears of Chinese development undermining US primacy in Asia. A treaty otherwise may require the US to permanently abolish its ABM defence system in exchange for limitations on Chinese nuclear stockpile size.

## **Conclusion**

If the Sino-American relationship can adapt its bilateral engagement by recognising mutual security issues, the relationship may be able to transition towards strategic stability. Though this may seem like a short-sighted goal, it is focused on real-world feasibility and is fundamental if the relationship is to move towards anything resembling cooperation or peace. The previously mentioned recommendations have highlighted the need for Sino-American engagement. Sino-American nuclear relations can be managed despite the current environment, where neither side trusts the other. Three means of managing this are creating a cooperative non-proliferation environment, creating a Sino-American presidential hotline and establishing a Sino-American led Nuclear Arms Limitation Treaty that also addresses mutual security concerns.

## **References**

Arms Control Association, 'Nuclear Weapons: Who has what at a glance', posted 23/06/2014, revised 13/10/2015

Cura Saunders, Emily, Ariana Rowberry, and Bryan L. Fearey, 'Obstacles and Opportunities for a Tactical Nuclear Weapons Treaty between Russia and the United States', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 1, (2014)

Gibbons-Neffs, Thomas, 'Chinese Ballistic Missiles Dubbed 'Guam Killer' Power Increasing Threat to US Island Report Says', *The Washington Post*, 11 May, 2016

Horsburgh, *China and Global Nuclear Order: From Estrangement to Active Engagement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015

Kirstensen, Hans, and Norris, Robert, 'Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 68, No. 5 (2012)

Lamothe, Dan, 'Pentagon chief postpones visit to China as Tensions Simmer in South China Sea', *The Washington Post*, 8 April, 2016

Lamothe, Dan, 'These are the bases the US will use near the South China Sea. China isn't impressed', *The Washington Post*, 21 March, 2016

Lewis, Jeffrey G., 'Chinese Nuclear Posture and Force Modernization', *The Non-proliferation Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2009)

Nakamura, David, and Lamothe, Dan, 'China Testing Obama as it expands its influence in Southeast Asia', *The Washington Power*, 1 March 2016

Shen, Dingli, 'China's Nuclear Perspective: Deterrence Reduction Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Disarmament', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2008)

United States of America Office of the Secretary of Defence, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, United States of America: Department of Defence, 2015

Xinhua, 'Commentary Who is the troublemaker in the South China Sea?', *Xinhuanet News*, 11 March 2016

Zhang, Baohui, *China's Assertive Nuclear Posture: State Security in an Anarchic International Order*, Oxon: Routledge, 2015