



## INFORMATION SERIES

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### **Nuclear Weapons in Chinese Military Strategy**

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#### **Introduction – The Chinese Quest for Hegemony**

The most serious long-term national security threat to the U.S. comes from The People's Republic of China. Its military forces are being built for information driven high intensity conflict against its neighbors and possibly the United States.<sup>1</sup> China does not assume or plan for a "peaceful rise," as its actions in the South China Sea demonstrate.<sup>2</sup> At a minimum, China seeks hegemony in the Far East and claims sovereignty over Taiwan, and shifting the balance of nuclear power is an important element of China's drive to regional hegemony.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Nuclear Weapons and the Chinese Quest for Hegemony**

To establish hegemony in Asia, China is building an expanding nuclear force. China appears to see nuclear weapons as a critical tool in its quest for hegemony. The political role of China's nuclear doctrine is to force its neighbors to acquiesce to China's hegemony because they fear China's military power and are uncertain about the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent.

In the event of a conventional war in Asia, China expects its strategic and theater nuclear capabilities to deter a U.S. effort to defend Taiwan, Japan and its other Pacific allies from a Chinese attack. In short, China is attempting to exploit the U.S. and allied fear of nuclear war to support its goal of hegemony.



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China is concerned about U.S. conventional capabilities and sees Chinese nuclear weapons as a means of countering them. China would prefer to deter war with the United States or to defeat the U.S. with conventional weapons in the event of a conflict in Asia. But in the event of conflict, if China needs to employ nuclear weapons it will likely do so if the stakes are high.<sup>4</sup> As one Chinese general citing Mao stated, “As to whether we will use nuclear weapons first, the above principle can also be followed. If we have been repeatedly ‘attacked,’ then there should not be a limit for our counter-attack.”<sup>5</sup> A number of Chinese generals have made nuclear first-use threats.<sup>6</sup>

The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* report pointed out, “no first use” remains Chinese declaratory policy, but “its lack of transparency regarding the scope and scale of its nuclear modernization program raises questions regarding its future intent.”<sup>7</sup> The Japanese *Kyodo News Agency* reported that it has obtained classified Chinese documents which say that China “will adjust the nuclear threat policy if a nuclear missile-possessing country carries out a series of air strikes.”<sup>8</sup>

China’s Maoist legacy is reflected in its 2004 military White Paper which said China will pay “any cost” to prevent the “independence” of Taiwan,<sup>9</sup> implying nuclear war. Mao’s China belittled the consequences of nuclear warfare and saw nuclear war as survivable.<sup>10</sup> Even after the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping continued the Maoist line that, “It is impossible to exterminate the human race by using nuclear weapons....More than two billion people would live on the globe just the same.”<sup>11</sup>

Since the 1980s, China’s nuclear doctrine has been evolving toward more emphasis on nuclear “counterforce and warfighting capabilities to deter conventional, theater, and strategic nuclear war, and to control and suppress escalation during a nuclear war.”<sup>12</sup> In 1995, Professor Alastair Johnson wrote China has “a deeply rooted *realpolitik* world view that nuclear weapons buy soft power (international status and influence) and hard power (military operational power).”<sup>13</sup>

### **Nuclear Weapons, “Active Defense” and China’s Goal of Hegemony**

According to China’s 2006 defense White Paper (which supposedly announced Chinese nuclear strategy<sup>14</sup>), its strategy is called “active defense,” and included “nuclear counter attacks” and the “second Artillery Force [now the Strategic Missile Force]” which “aims at progressively improving its force structure of having both nuclear and conventional missiles, and raising its capabilities in strategic deterrence and conventional strike under conditions of informationization.”<sup>15</sup> China appears to believe that limited nuclear strikes are an “assassin’s mace...to contain the enemy” because nuclear weapons can defeat the strongest conventional forces.<sup>16</sup>



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The 2019 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report on “China Military Power” says China characterizes its “active defense” strategy “as strategically defensive but operationally offensive.”<sup>17</sup> Keep in mind that this is declaratory policy and China is not likely to admit that its strategy is “strategically offensive.” This report stated that “active defense” takes “advantage of longer range, precision-guided munitions (primarily ballistic and cruise missiles) to keep a potential enemy as far as possible from the economically fast-developing Chinese coastal areas by fighting a ‘noncontact,’ short, sharp conflict like the Persian Gulf War.”<sup>18</sup> China’s new dual capable missiles clearly have the capability to carry out these strikes if this is necessary. This could include strikes in support of offensive Chinese action. The 2019 DIA report also says that China’s depiction of its “active defense” strategy allows conduct of these strikes even if the adversary has not yet conducted offensive military operations.<sup>19</sup>

### **China’s Growing Nuclear Capability and Chinese Regional Hegemony**

China practices extreme secrecy with regard to its nuclear forces.<sup>20</sup> In 1982, Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, famously stated that China should “...hide our capabilities and bide our time.” China wants the world to believe that its nuclear strategy is defensive, that its forces are small and that they abide by a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. Yet, according to the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, “China, too, is modernizing and expanding its already considerable nuclear forces....China is pursuing entirely new nuclear capabilities tailored to achieve particular national security objectives while also modernizing its conventional military, challenging traditional U.S. military superiority in the Western Pacific.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the report says China has added “...new types of nuclear capabilities to their arsenals, increased the salience of nuclear forces in their strategies and plans, and engaged in increasingly aggressive behavior, including in outer space and cyber space.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The greatest long-term national security threat to the United States comes from China because it seeks hegemony in Asia and assumes it will likely be in conflict with the United States. China is building military forces for information-driven high intensity conflict against its neighbors and is modernizing and expanding its strategic and theater nuclear forces. Nuclear weapons play a major role in Chinese strategy. China sees the political role of its nuclear weapons as coercing its neighbors to accept Chinese hegemony because they fear China’s military power and are uncertain about the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. China also sees nuclear forces as an “assassin’s mace” able to defeat superior conventional forces if necessary.

In light of the Chinese drive for hegemony in Asia, its Taiwan policy, and its incremental seizure by threat of force of the South China Sea, the growth of its nuclear potential and its overall military capability pose a very serious threat to U.S. and allied security.



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