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This is a quarterly series of reviews focusing on recently published books dealing with topical and noteworthy national security issues. Authors and publishers interested in submitting their books on national security for review may contact the Editor at informationseries@nipp.org.

James M. Smith and Paul J. Bolt, eds., *China's Strategic Arsenal: Worldview, Doctrine, and Systems* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 269 pp.

Reviewed By: Matthew R. Costlow
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Despite reportedly having the third largest, and likely the fastest growing, nuclear arsenal in the world, China does not receive nearly the amount of study among nuclear scholars that it should. A number of factors might contribute to this relative neglect, not the least of which is the “great wall of secrecy” that China has built around its nuclear arsenal – at once a realist move to deny valuable information to perceived adversaries, as well as another manifestation of the Chinese leadership’s constant need to control information. Yet the spotlight of international attention has begun to focus ever more on China, a consequence of the United



States perceiving a “return to great power competition,” the COVID-19 pandemic, and China’s treatment of the Uyghur minority group, among other factors.

This renewed focus on China is a welcome chance for scholars and defense officials to familiarize themselves with the latest literature and perhaps revise their assumptions about China’s grand strategy, worldview, and military development. An excellent place to start is a new book out of Georgetown University Press, *China’s Strategic Arsenal: Worldview, Doctrine, and Systems*. Editors James M. Smith and Paul J. Bolt, both associated with the U.S. Air Force Academy, have assembled a broad group of experts – ranging from “hawks” to “doves” – to explain the evolution of Chinese activities in their specialty fields, with an eye towards the future as well.

The chapters are arranged sensibly from the macro to the micro, beginning with a broad discussion of Chinese self-perception about where it stands in the world and what it hopes to achieve. Interestingly, despite developing a reputation for its insular focus, China’s stated ambitions almost always refer to comparisons between itself and the broader region, or between itself and the world. By 2049, for example, the centenary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), China’s President Xi Jinping wants his state to be recognized as a world-class power, economically and militarily.

A particularly useful examination of this goal is contained in Dr. Andrew Scobell’s chapter on China’s “nested worldview.” Scobell explains how Chinese officials generally see four rings of security around China, “nested” within one another, with the smallest ring being within the borders of China itself where the greatest perceived threat is U.S. subversion of Chinese Communist Party rule. The second and third rings of security extend outward to the bordering lands and seas around China and then the broader Asia-Pacific region respectively, while the fourth ring encompasses the rest of the world. In each ring, Chinese leaders perceive the United States as its primary threat – a point geopolitical analysts should find especially interesting given that China and Russia are both predominantly land-based powers that border each other and even have a history of conflict. Despite this, Chinese officials still believe the United States is the primary existential threat – a topic that deserves further study.

Other chapters provide further details on how China intends to achieve its political and security goals, with Dr. Christopher Twomey contributing a very useful chapter on the topic of China’s definition of, and discourse on, the concept of deterrence. The chapter only reinforces the point that more analysts in the field of strategic studies need to familiarize themselves with Chinese thinking on deterrence because in many important respects, it is very different from the predominantly Western definition and discourse surrounding its utility. If the United States is going to develop a “tailored” deterrence strategy for China, as the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* states, then senior defense officials and diplomats must better understand what military tools



China believes are credible, what its regional goals are, and how it intends to use those military means to achieve its regional (and global) ends.

The chapters that focus on China's nuclear forces, and their attendant implications for China's military strategy, by Mr. Sugio Takahashi and Mr. Hans Kristensen, are useful snapshots in time – but suffer from the unavoidable problem of potentially becoming obsolete within a few years. China's military forces in general, and its nuclear forces in particular, are developing and growing so rapidly that the data from 2019 that most authors relied on to write their respective chapters had changed – for the worse from the U.S. perspective – by 2020, when this book was in its final stages. Whereas 10 years ago, many China analysts could hold up the Chinese nuclear arsenal as the paragon of minimum deterrence, today even “dovish” analysts are forced to wonder how regional Chinese nuclear systems with precision strike capabilities and the emphasis on rapid response times fit within the Chinese self-proclaimed “restrained” nuclear strategy.

Another chapter by Dr. Philip Saunders and Mr. David Logan examines China's growing strategic non-nuclear forces, such as conventional precision strike missiles, cyber power, and pursuit of artificial intelligence. While it is clear that China is interested in developing the ability to integrate these different military tools for joint strike effectiveness, it faces enormous bureaucratic obstacles as evidenced by its recent organizational reforms across its military. Dr. Bates Gill rounds out this discussion with his chapter on the organization of China's nuclear forces and the implications for China's broader military strategy.

Dr. Nancy Gallagher examines China's views on arms control, nonproliferation, and strategic stability in her chapter, where she provides a useful overview of China's history in those areas. Regrettably, the chapter tries to focus on areas where China has sought to cooperate (largely unsuccessfully) while glossing over China's malign proliferation activities. More discussion of this important contradiction would have been very useful.

The book concludes with a chapter by Dr. Brad Roberts that summarizes the main points of the preceding chapters and contains a useful consolidation of pertinent principles for China analysts. Roberts also seeks to hazard a guess as to what it all means for China's future, a fraught endeavor where analysts have previously projected too rosy a picture; but he manages to avoid this trap by asking pertinent questions about the impacts of broader trends both in China and the United States.

Since China views the United States as its number one security threat, the future of the Indo-Pacific region is unquestionably linked to how U.S. and Chinese officials seek to manage their competition. Books like *China's Strategic Arsenal* are required reading for both those who hope China and the United States find ways to cooperate and those who believe they may be doomed to compete – in both cases, it is necessary for U.S. analysts to gain a better understanding of



China's worldview, military capabilities, and how it intends to achieve its increasingly globally-defined goals.

Fred Kaplan, *The Bomb. Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster Paperbacks, 2020), 301 pp.

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Since the dawn of the nuclear age, the state of technology has informed nuclear weapons policy, perhaps as much as policy drove nuclear weapons technology. Technology necessarily limited policy and force posture options for Democratic and Republican administrations alike. It was pursued and developed to address and solve problems, like survivability, reliability, and command and control. Some force posture decisions in the past were limited by the unavailability of technologies that could lead to better options. Consequently, it does not make sense to judge past decisions in the context of today's technological availabilities.

In *The Bomb*, Kaplan tells the story of the U.S. nuclear weapons program through the eyes of political and military leaders while downplaying the technological context in which U.S. nuclear weapons programs unfold. Regrettably, the author's ideological tilt to the left is unmistakable and his attempts to explain different points of view and legitimate disagreements on policy issues in this most complex topic fall short, particularly when addressing decisions made by Republican administrations.

For example, Kaplan describes the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty as "a significant accomplishment, which, for the next thirty years, blocked what would otherwise have been an unending arms race, with each side building more offensive weapons to penetrate the other side's defenses, then more defensive weapons to block the other side's offense." In reality, the treaty left a generation of Americans hostage to an adversary and encouraged the Soviet leadership to channel their military investments into long-range ballistic missiles; in fact, the greatest growth in Soviet strategic nuclear offensive forces came after the United States signed the ABM Treaty.¹ Recognizing this, President Ronald Reagan saw it as his moral responsibility to protect Americans from the "evil empire"; hence his motivation for the Strategic Defense Initiative program. Nearly four decades later, Democrats and Republicans agree that it would not be wise to allow for U.S. vulnerability to missiles in the hands of rogue adversaries like Iran

¹ For a detailed discussion of this point, see David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.



or North Korea, even though U.S. policy continues to eschew defending the nation against near-peer missile threats from Russia or China.

Kaplan perpetuates another misconception about U.S. nuclear weapons policy: that related to the U.S. refusal to adopt a “no first use” nuclear posture. No administration on a bipartisan basis since the dawn of the nuclear age has ever concluded the United States would be safer with a “no first use” policy. But then Kaplan writes, “In reality, though, American policy has always been to strike first preemptively, or in response to a conventional invasion of allied territory, or to a biological or large-scale cyber attack: in any case, not *just* as an answer to a nuclear attack.” This statement is misleading at best. In the 1970s, the United States deliberately slowed down the development of hard target kill capabilities that would threaten Soviet intercontinental-range ballistic missiles—to dissuade the Soviets from believing the United States intended to strike first. It was not until the late 1970s, when it was apparent that Soviet programs threatened the survivability of the U.S. land-based deterrent force that the United States pursued the MX Peacekeeper program and considered multiple basing modes to ensure its survivability. In other words, the MX program was a *response* to Soviet developments rather than part of a concerted U.S. initiative to develop first strike capabilities.

Where Kaplan’s bias shows most is in his unequitable treatment of the Obama and Trump administrations’ nuclear policies. Kaplan basically restates the Obama Administration’s talking points without appearing to analyze them critically. Had he accurately reflected reality, he would have noted that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) did not actually cut the number of U.S. and Russian deployed nuclear warheads to 1,550 because Moscow was under the 1,550 ceiling when the treaty was signed and, therefore, was allowed to build up to the limit. Moreover, bombers counted as one warhead under New START, although they can carry more than one nuclear weapon. Indeed, some have suggested that under New START, Russia has deployed more nuclear weapons than are accountable under the treaty and even more than what was allowed under the Bush Administration’s 2002 Moscow Treaty, which reduced the number of accountable deployed warheads from about 6,000 to the 1,700-2,200 range—the largest strategic arms control reduction in history. Kaplan also touts the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, as an agreement that would have stopped Iran’s pathways to nuclear weapons had the Trump Administration not withdrawn from it. The agreement at best delayed Iran’s nuclear efforts all the while providing it with billions of dollars to continue fueling terrorism and modernizing its nuclear infrastructure (that can be used later for nefarious purposes).

Similar bias is apparent in Kaplan’s discussion of the Obama and Trump nuclear weapons modernization program. The Obama Administration supported nuclear modernization due to disturbing trends in the national security environment (and as part of a deal to obtain support for ratification of New START). For all the administration’s talk of reset and smart power, adversaries did not choose to accept the olive branch President Obama extended them.



Programmatically, and with the exception of a low-yield Trident warhead, which is not a new weapon but a modification of an existing warhead to reduce its destructive potential, the Trump Administration endorsed and continued the Obama Administration's modernization plans. U.S. delivery platforms are aged and serving decades past their original service lives. The United States simply cannot continue to extend their service lives any further absent technical and military risks to the survivability of the platforms. Kaplan seemingly dismisses the notion that the strategic nuclear systems the United States deployed during the Cold War (the triad of bombers, ICBMs, and submarines armed with nuclear missiles), even if born out of bureaucratic rivalries, continued to be supported by successive bipartisan administrations because their inherent geopolitical value has not diminished over time.

The U.S. nuclear enterprise was a much more vigorous effort during the Cold War than today, attracting many of the nation's best minds and commanding the day-to-day attention of national leadership. The complexity of such an endeavor can hardly be reduced to the personalities of presidents and a few generals, particularly given the author's fundamental misreading of U.S. nuclear policy and strategy.

Although the book will likely win praise from those who are ideologically predisposed to agree with Kaplan's worldview, its value is significantly diminished by the author's misunderstanding of history and misrepresentation of the necessary criteria for effective nuclear deterrence. Caveat emptor.

David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (*Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 6, June 2021), 88 pp.

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The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities is an important work of theory and history.¹ It deserves a prominent place as part of the growing body of literature that seeks to understand the extent to which the U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War actually played out in accordance with the predictions of international relations theory.²

¹ This *Occasional Paper* is adapted from a longer study of the same name and is available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/OP-6-final.pdf>.

² See, for example, Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Thomas G. Mahnken, Joseph A. Maiolo and David Stevenson, editors, *Arms Races in International Politics from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-*



In this volume, David Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith Payne use historical documents and policy maker interviews to examine the application of the “arms race” metaphor to the practice of strategy during the Cold War.

Metaphors are powerful³ and can be particularly persuasive when they align with the preconceptions of those who use them.⁴ The “arms race” metaphor has been attractive because it is simple and catchy. Moreover, there is clearly something to it: the United States and Soviet Union clearly did interact with each other during the Cold War. American arms decisions clearly influenced those of the Soviet Union, and vice versa. But, as the authors amply demonstrate, the reality of U.S.-Soviet interaction deviated considerably from the predictions of an action-reaction arms race.

The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities does an excellent job of exploring the application (and misapplication) of the arms race metaphor during the Cold War. It also suggests the way ahead for research in this area. For example, it would be useful to delve even deeper into American and Soviet arms decisions and the extent they were influenced by statements and actions of the other superpower, as opposed to being shaped by organizational culture, bureaucratic routine, the push and pull of technology, industrial considerations, or other factors. Such a project would be ambitious, but there is precedent in the studies of the U.S.-Soviet strategic interaction performed by Andrew W. Marshall and by Ernest May, John Steinbruner, and Thomas Wolfe during the 1970s⁵ as well as more recent attempts to assess strategic interaction among the United States, Russia, and China.⁶ Such an effort would face challenges, to be sure, to include data availability and classification, but is also likely to yield the sort of insight that can enrich our understanding of strategic interaction and help insulate us against the mindless recitation of metaphors.

First Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Thomas G. Mahnken, “Arms Races and Long-Term Competition” in Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal, editors, *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 225-240.

³ And also potentially misleading. See David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), chapter 9.

⁴ Ernest R. May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁵ Andrew W. Marshall, “Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis,” R-862-PR (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972); Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, and Thomas W. Wolfe, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition, 1945–1972*, two volumes (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 1981).

⁶ Thomas G. Mahnken, Gillian Evans, Toshi Yoshihara, Eric S. Edelman, and Jack Bianchi, *Understanding Strategic Interaction in the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).



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