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Back to the Future: A Misguided Understanding of China's Nuclear Intent

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The discovery of hundreds of new Chinese missile silos that could house multiple warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles has left Western analysts scrambling to explain China's surprising action. This appears to be a blatant Chinese move to flex its military muscle, close the gap with U.S. nuclear forces, and signal a more aggressive nuclear posture by abandoning its oft-stated support for a "minimum deterrence" nuclear force. In fact, a force of some 300 Chinese ICBM silos containing missiles with 10 warheads apiece would amount to a greater number of ICBM warheads than the total number of deployed U.S. strategic nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, some Western observers and arms control enthusiasts have downplayed these developments as the actions of a nation seeking only to enhance the survivability of its own deterrent forces in the face of growing concerns over American nuclear modernization efforts and missile defense capabilities. In other words, they argue, China is merely reacting to an American offensive and defensive arms buildup that threatens China's national security.

For example, Jeffrey Lewis – whose initial work at the Monterey Institute for Nonproliferation Studies identified construction of the new silos – has suggested that China may be playing a "shell game" and may not intend to place missiles in every silo. "We believe China is expanding its nuclear forces in part to maintain a deterrent that can survive a US first strike



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and retaliate in sufficient numbers to defeat US missile defenses,” he declared, suggesting that China may be building “decoy missile silos” similar to the multiple protective shelter plan considered and later abandoned for the U.S. MX “Peacekeeper” ICBM.¹ Others have suggested that China “may be genuinely concerned about America’s evolving ballistic missile defense capability.”² Or that China’s new silos may be “a creative, if costly, negotiating ploy” that may be negotiated away in arms control talks.³ Still others speculate that the silos could be “launch positions for conventionally armed ballistic missiles,” arguing that “there’s little reason for the United States to worry much about whatever the Chinese military is building in these silos.”⁴

Such interpretations are highly questionable and are unsupported by empirical data. Mark Schneider, a former Department of Defense official and an astute analyst of Russian and Chinese military affairs, has outlined why such explanations are “not credible,” noting, “No nation has ever built an ICBM multiple aim-point system” and citing Chinese comments calling for a massive increase in the number of nuclear weapons.⁵ For example, the editor-in-chief of China’s state-run *Global Times* propaganda outlet has stated, “China needs to expand the number of its nuclear warheads to 1,000 in a relatively short time” because “we need a larger nuclear arsenal to curb US strategic ambitions and impulses toward China.”⁶ Moreover, U.S. missile defense policy remains limited to countering rogue state missile threats, not the intercontinental ballistic missile arsenals of near-peer countries like China or Russia.⁷

In addition, some have suggested that the way to deal to what USSTRATCOM Commander ADM Richard has called China’s “breathtaking” nuclear expansion is through arms control efforts. As one analyst commented, China’s nuclear expansion activities “require a 21st-century arms control framework.... Instead of saber-rattling, the Biden-Harris administration and leaders across the political spectrum should be putting the pressure on China to come to the table.”⁸

Such recommendations are eerily reminiscent of statements made in the 1960s and 1970s when, in the face of a massive Soviet nuclear buildup, pundits and commentators predicted that the Soviet Union was not interested in nuclear superiority – or even nuclear parity – and that arms control would prevent such an outcome. For example, as then-Secretary of Defense Robert Mcamara stated in 1965, “There is no indication that they are catching up or planning to catch up.... It means that the Soviets have decided that they have lost the quantitative race, and they are not seeking to engage us in that context. It means there is no indication that the Soviets are seeking to develop a strategic nuclear force as large as ours....”⁹ These predictions about Soviet behavior and objectives were wrong then, and they are in all probability wrong about China today.

In the 1970s, it was argued that the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which prevented the United States from building a comprehensive defense of its national territory against long-range missile attack, would nullify any Soviet reason to increase its strategic offensive nuclear



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forces, since the lack of any U.S. defenses meant that Soviet missiles would have – as Henry Kissinger put it – a “free ride” to U.S. territory. Then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara declared that “any attempt on our part to reduce damage to our society would put pressure on the Soviets to strive for an offsetting improvement in their assured-destruction forces, and vice versa.... This ‘action-reaction’ phenomenon is central to all strategic force planning issues as well as to any theory of an arms race.”¹⁰ In fact, the Soviets saw the U.S. agreement to remain defenseless as an invitation to expand its own nuclear missile force and undermine a significant portion of the U.S. assured destruction capability, creating what later came to be known as a “window of vulnerability” for the United States.

Efforts to explain China’s recent silo construction as merely a reaction to growing U.S. strategic offensive and defensive capabilities appear to be based on the same wishful thinking and faulty analysis that existed during the Cold War, when Western analysts downplayed the gravity and significance of the Soviet nuclear buildup.¹¹

To argue that China’s expansive nuclear growth reflects purely a defensive mentality on the part of President Xi, or that China is only seeking to enhance the survivability of its own forces against a possible strike by others, is to ignore recent statements of the Chinese leadership that suggest Beijing is seeking to use its expanded nuclear capabilities for coercive and aggressive purposes. For example, Xi’s recent statement that subjugating Taiwan to Beijing’s control is the Chinese Communist Party’s “historic mission” and that any country seeking to challenge China would have their “heads bashed bloody against a Great Wall of steel” is an ominous warning to the West – a warning that is now backed by a rapidly growing Chinese nuclear arsenal. Chinese leaders certainly understand that an empty silo lacks the same coercive capability as one that contains a multi-warhead ICBM.

As ADM Richard noted, China is engaged in a “strategic breakout” that is “inconsistent with a minimum deterrence posture.”¹² He stated, “China has correctly figured out that you can’t coerce a peer [nation] – in other words, us – from a minimum deterrent posture.” Beijing is “building the capability to execute any plausible nuclear employment strategy – the last brick in the wall of a military capable of coercion.”¹³

China’s recent military assault exercises around Taiwan, involving the deployment of naval vessels and combat aircraft,¹⁴ as well as its unprecedented incursion of nearly 150 aircraft into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone over several consecutive days,¹⁵ are provocative and coercive actions, now backed by a growing and more dangerous nuclear capability.

Some Western commentators and arms control advocates who have downplayed the severity of China’s actions are also looking to arms control as a solution for preventing an arms race with China and stemming Beijing’s offensive nuclear buildup. This, too, is reminiscent of Cold



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War-era predictions that arms control agreements would cap the Soviet nuclear buildup and ensure “strategic stability.”

China’s recent tests of hypersonic glide vehicles capable of carrying nuclear weapons have only intensified enthusiasm in some quarters for an arms control solution. As a *Washington Post* editorial stated, “China’s pursuit of hypersonics is just one more reason the United States ought to continue trying to bring China to the arms control table....”¹⁶ Some blame the United States for China’s aggressive development of nuclear and hypersonic weapons, with one analyst calling U.S. missile defenses China’s “top concern.”¹⁷ Indeed, there are again calls for the United States to negotiate an arms control agreement that limits its missile defenses, in order to stem the growth of the Chinese strategic nuclear arsenal. As Jeffrey Lewis has stated:

Russia and China have consistently made clear that they are not interested in significant arms control without real limitations on U.S. missile defenses. Both countries have made clear that, in large part, their nuclear modernizations are organized around the task of creating a survivable retaliatory force that can’t be wiped out by some combination of U.S. offensive systems, backed up by defenses to mop up any survivors. Neither country is willing to limit or abandon the systems it is developing without a corresponding limit on the U.S. defenses they are designed to defeat.... For China, it means increasing the number of nuclear weapons that can reach the United States, including the missiles sitting in those silos in the Chinese desert.... Yet just because limiting defenses is politically impossible, that doesn’t make doing so any less necessary.¹⁸

Similarly, James Acton of the Carnegie Endowment has argued that China “is concerned that the United States could seek the capability to attack China’s nuclear forces preemptively and then use missile defenses to intercept whatever surviving missiles are launched in retaliation.” Therefore, in a nod to Cold War thinking, he argues, “It’s time to limit missile defenses. Again.”¹⁹ As he states:

It is increasingly clear that whatever value the United States hoped to gain from homeland defenses has been more than outweighed by China’s reaction—and Russia’s too. The United States, therefore, should offer to negotiate new limits on missile defenses, to which it would only agree if China and Russia offered very significant concessions in return. It’s time to start planning such a trade.²⁰

The notion that limiting U.S. missile defenses will prevent China’s offensive nuclear buildup runs counter to the U.S.-Soviet Cold War experience. The original ABM Treaty not only failed to stop the Soviet nuclear buildup but actually encouraged it by perpetuating U.S. vulnerability and allowing the Soviets to concentrate their resources on increasing their ICBM capabilities. An “ABM 2.0 Treaty” is unlikely to result in a different outcome vis-à-vis China.



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What U.S.-Soviet arms control aficionados failed to recognize then—and U.S.-China arms control proponents fail to understand now—is that the most determined arms control negotiations will not prevent an adversary from seeking strategic advantages over the United States if their goals and objectives require the capability to coerce the United States with nuclear threats. In this regard, it is clear that Beijing—much like Moscow—sees nuclear capabilities as key to its goal of overturning a world order that it believes has been unfairly dominated by the United States and the West.

China's nuclear expansion underpins the increasingly belligerent tone of statements emanating from the Chinese government, including threats to Taiwan. For example, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official recently stated that Taiwan is "an inalienable part of China's territory" and warned ominously that "China's national reunification and rejuvenation are an unstoppable trend. No one should underestimate the strong resolution, determination and capability of the Chinese people to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity." He claimed that anyone trying to challenge China on this "will be like trying to hold back the tide with a broom and is doomed to fail."²¹

Likewise, the editor-in-chief of *Global Times* warned that inviting Taiwan to a planned summit on democracy later this year would be "a historic opportunity for [PLA] fighter jets to fly over the island of Taiwan," and stated: "We must put forward thunder-like measures before the crisis comes. We must be dauntless toward a showdown, and completely knock out the arrogance of the U.S. and Taiwan."²²

In response to Japanese concerns that a Chinese attack on Taiwan could jeopardize Japan's security and undermine global stability, a commentary on an official Chinese Communist Party website declared:

When we liberate Taiwan, if Japan dares to intervene by force, even if it only deploys one soldier, one plane, and one ship, we will not only return reciprocal fire, but also start a full-scale war against Japan.

We will use nuclear bombs first...and use nuclear bombs continuously until Japan declares unconditional surrender for the second time. What we want to target is Japan's ability to endure a war. As long as Japan realizes that it cannot afford to pay the price of war, it will not dare to rashly send troops to the Taiwan Strait.²³

This is hardly the language of a state interested in the preservation of international stability and the avoidance of conflict. Nor does it suggest a leadership that shares the defensive deterrence goals of the United States and the West. Nevertheless, there are those who insist that China's nuclear rise is nothing to worry about, that its actions are purely defensive, that



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the United States should not succumb to exaggeration and fearmongering, that China's actions are nothing more than a "great distraction" and should not "push us into pouring our national treasure into nuclear weapons that we do not need,"²⁴ and that arms control provides the only sure way to avoid a destabilizing and dangerous arms race.

It is true that China is not Russia or the Soviet Union. The truth about China may be much more worrisome. Yet applying the same Cold War arms control logic to China today that proved erroneous then would be counterproductive and dangerous. Make no mistake: China sees the United States as a declining power and itself on the ascendency. Recent developments in Afghanistan appear to have only reinforced this view.²⁵

China's massive expansion of its nuclear forces provides the backdrop for Beijing's more assertive conventional force posture in the South China Sea, around Taiwan, and elsewhere. Such assertiveness gives China's leaders greater confidence that they can coerce other states – especially the United States – into refraining from challenging Beijing's expansive foreign policy and national security ambitions. This is a dangerous course that neither wishful thinking nor arms control proposals will mitigate.

Reality can be an unforgiving teacher. Arms control is not the answer to China's nuclear saber-rattling and muscle-flexing. A strong and credible U.S. military posture, backed by a demonstrable commitment to implementing a long-overdue nuclear modernization program and a rethinking of our continued vulnerability to near-peer missile threats, may be the best way to deter China from taking aggressive military actions.

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