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Western hypocrisy over Chinese nukes

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A defense white paper released by China on April 16 has invited a debate over a shift in its nuclear policy, because this new paper, unlike previous editions, did not reiterate China's long-standing no-first-use nuclear weapons doctrine. [1]

Colonel Yang Yujun, a spokesman of China's Ministry of Defense, answered the speculation unambiguously during a briefing on April 25. [2] Yang stated that "China repeatedly reaffirms that China

has always pursued a no-first-use nuclear weapons policy, upholds its nuclear strategy of self-defense, and never takes part in any form of nuclear arms race with any country. The policy has never been changed. The concern about changes of China's nuclear policy is unnecessary."

Colonel Yang further explained that this new white paper elaborates clearly the readiness level of the PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) in peacetime and the conditions under which China would launch a resolute counterattack - if China comes under a nuclear attack. All these details, as Yang stated, show exactly that "China is earnestly fulfilling its no-first-use nuclear pledge".

But this new edition does have a major change: its format. Colonel Yang explained that all former white papers (each with the same general title, "China's National Defense", were

comprehensive (*zonghe xing*) and elaborated on China's nuclear policy in detail in sections on "national defense policy" and "arms control". But this latest edition for the first time adopts a "thematic" model (*zhuanti xing*) and focuses specifically on "Diversified Employment of China Armed Forces", the title of the new white paper, and does not address nuclear policy in detail.

In fact, during the briefing of the publication of the new white paper on April 16, Yang emphasized that China would in the future publish alternate "comprehensive" and "thematic" white papers. [3] It can be expected that in the next comprehensive report, the nuclear policy will be back again as before.

In addition, just six days after the new white paper's publication, on April 22, Pang Sen, Director General of the Department of Arms Control of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated at the Second Preparatory Committee for 2015 NPT Review Conference:

China is firmly committed to its nuclear strategy of self-defense. China has adhered to the policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons at any time or under any circumstances, and made the unequivocal commitment that we will unconditionally not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free-zones. [4]

To be clear, the wording "has adhered" here corresponds to the original Chinese terms "*Shizhong*" (from the start to the end) and "*Keshou*" (scrupulously abided by)" [5] that were used in earlier white papers (in Chinese versions) to mean China has always scrupulously abided by its no-first-use policy.

In practice, even though China has reiterated its commitment to the no-first-use nuclear doctrine, many experts and scholars still are suspicious such a pledge, claiming it is just a declaratory policy. Whether it is believed or not, a force posture dominated by a meaningful no-first-use doctrine should, however, have a much smaller and simpler arsenal with a much lower alert status, significantly different from that with a first-use option.

Indeed, China's nuclear force has all the features compatible with a meaningful no-first-use policy. China has the smallest military inventory of fissile materials among the P5 [6] nuclear states and with a total inventory of approximately 170 nuclear warheads (of which approximately 35 can reach the continental United States), the smallest nuclear arsenal among the P5 as well. [7]

The PLASAF conducts war planning and training under the assumption that the country will absorb a first nuclear blow and use its forces only to retaliate.

Nonetheless, some security analysts challenge whether China can maintain its no-first-use pledge for some extreme scenarios, such as if an enemy uses conventional weapons to attack China's nuclear arsenal. These analysts suggest China might consider a conventional counterforce attack the equivalent of a first nuclear strike and consequently initiate a retaliatory nuclear strike.

However, in practice, since 1980, when it initiated China's nuclear modernization, the PLASAF has focused on increasing the survivability of its nuclear force through deployment of mobile

missiles and moving missiles underground and ensuring that the country's limited number of land-based strategic missiles can survive a first strike - nuclear or not.

Since 1985, China has built tunnels known as the Underground Great Wall [8] to protect its smaller nuclear arsenal and assure a reliable second-strike capability. The tunnels are reportedly hundreds of meters underground, deep in mountain areas, and difficult to detect from space. They are designed to withstand nuclear and conventional attacks. If Beijing believes its nuclear arsenal can survive a first nuclear strike, why not a conventional strike?

In fact, the PLASAF has also developed and deployed advanced conventional missiles including DF-21s that can attack aircraft carriers and penetrate regional missile defense systems. These new conventional forces should make Chinese leaders more confident and less reliant on nuclear weapons to deal with conventional attacks.

Also, some argue that the deployment of missile defense systems by US and its allies would neutralize a Chinese second nuclear strike and thus might encourage China to launch a preemptive strike in a crisis. Can this be true? Given the huge disparities between the Chinese nuclear force and the forces possessed by the US, first use by China against the US in any plausible scenario, Beijing believes, would surely invite devastating retaliation. For China, this would be like "using an egg to crush a stone" (a Chinese idiom). What kind of Chinese leaders would undertake such a suicidal act?

In practice, even under a no-first-use nuclear policy and a minimum-deterrence posture, China still can employ a number of technically feasible and cost-effective measures so that a certain number of warheads would stand a strong chance of penetrating a US missile defense system. These include a nuclear buildup and missile defense countermeasures (eg decoys and penetration aids).

Indeed, US missile defense plans likely will be a major driver of Chinese nuclear expansion. However, any expansion of the Chinese nuclear arsenal would still be constrained by its inventory of fissile materials, which at present would not support an arsenal of more than 1,000 warheads.

In fact, there is no evidence that China will change its long-standing policy of no-first-use nuclear doctrine. Since its first nuclear explosion in 1964, China has consistently adhered to a nuclear policy that features a minimum deterrent and a no-first-use pledge, both aimed at avoiding a costly nuclear arms race. This policy has been based on Chinese leaders' perception of the nature and role of nuclear weapons and has been continuously embraced by top Chinese leaders, from Mao Zedong until today.

Mao once said that China should "have a little bit of nuclear weapons, keep the weapons a little bit, make the weapons a little bit better" (or, in Chinese, "*you yidian, shao yidian, hao yidian*").

While some Western security analysts worry about the intention of China's nuclear modernization program, Chinese nuclear weapons experts emphasize that China's nuclear modernization and force posture will continue to be dominated mainly by its nuclear policy, not

financial or technological constraints. Indeed, although China has made great progress in its economic development and technological base since the 1980s, it still has a very limited nuclear force, and there is no evidence that China plans on greatly enlarging that force in the near future.

China's nuclear modernization is aimed at increasing the survivability, reliability, safety, and penetrating ability of its small nuclear arsenal and, thereby, to maintain a limited but effective second-strike nuclear force.

China will continuously modernize its nuclear forces to match the international security circumstances of the day. However, the nuclear force will likely be kept at the minimum level Beijing feels is required to deter a nuclear attack. In the Chinese calculus, the minimum acceptable nuclear force is one that will survive a first nuclear strike and penetrate a missile defense system to reach its designated targets. The number of the "minimum" nuclear warheads to reach target would, therefore, be relatively constant.

However, the total number of warheads required to support an effective nuclear force is changeable, depending on a number of factors, including estimates about the survivability and penetrating abilities of Chinese missiles.

China has never declared a specific number that would constitute the "minimum" nuclear warheads to reach target. Mao said that "a few atomic bombs are enough. Six are enough" While the six warheads could not be the specific number in the mind of today's Chinese leaders, a nuclear force of approximately 10 warheads which could kill millions people may be enough to inflict unacceptable damages on a target country then enough to "deter" a nuclear first strike.

In fact, to substantially advance toward the nuclear-free world that President Barack Obama called for in Prague in 2009, each nuclear state must change its nuclear doctrine from one based on a preemptive strike to one that is purely defensive and based on a no-first-use policy, which will provided a solid base to promote further reductions of nuclear weapons. If the nuclear weapons states truly intend to take steps toward a nuclear-free world, it is time for them to adopt a global agreement on no-first-use of nuclear weapons.

Notes:

1. James Acton, "Is China Changing Its Position on Nuclear Weapons?". See Yao Yunzhu, "No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," China Daily, April 25, 2013.
2. See here
3. See here
4. See here
5. See here
6. Hui Zhang, "China's Fissile Material Production and Stocks," Chap. 7 in Global Fissile Material Report 2010: Balancing the Books. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University 2011.
7. Hui Zhang, "How US Restraint Can Keep China's Nuclear Arsenal Small," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 68, no. 4 ,2012: 73-82.
8. Hui Zhang, "The Defensive Nature of China's "Underground Great Wall," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 16, 2012

