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M y topic is about China's perspective on deterrence, but before I deal with the topic, I must point out that for a long time in the Cold War, China strongly opposed the concept of nuclear deterrence, which, as so frequently used by the US government, had carried with it such derogatory connotations as "nuclear blackmail," "nuclear coercion," "nuclear containment," and "nuclear threat." And China, as the country most frequently threatened by nuclear attack, was understandably reluctant to use such a term. Not until the late 1980s or early 1990s, when China's drive toward defence modernization inspired academic debate, did deterrence gain acceptance as a key concept in strategic studies and lose its pejorative sense. However, even though the term remained taboo for some time, the logic of deterrence has always played a major role in Chinese nuclear thinking. To facilitate understanding, I explain China's nuclear policy, making use of US deterrence terminology, and compare China's deterrence thinking with that of the United States.

China's no-first-use policy indicates that it applies pure deterrence and deterrence by punishment

The most important element of China's nuclear policy is renunciation of the first-use option. By adopting a no-first-use policy, China has to base its deterrence on retaliation, not on denial. Therefore it must develop retaliatory second-strike capabilities instead of nuclear war-fighting capabilities and doctrines. Studying the nuclear thinking of earlier Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, we find that neither man considered nuclear weapons usable on the battlefield in the same way as conventional means. Moreover, neither believed that nuclear wars could ever be fought and won in a measured and controlled way. Such thinking differs from that of American nuclear strategists who have explored many possible forms of nuclear conflict and have formulated complex, complete theories of nuclear war fighting, including limited war, theatre nuclear operations, and escalation control.

The self-defensive nature of China's nuclear policy means hat it carries out central deterrence but not extended deterrence

China preserves nuclear capabilities only to deter nuclear-weapon states from launching nuclear attacks against its homeland. China neither provides a "nuclear umbrella" to, nor accepts one from, any other country. Its opposition to the policy of extended nuclear deterrence—the practice of nuclear weapon states' providing nuclear umbrellas to their non-nuclear-weapon allies—attests to the self-defensive nature of that policy. China has clearly indicated that it will neither deploy nuclear weapons on foreign territory nor allow foreign nuclear weapons into China. By comparison, the United States has incorporated extended deterrence as a key component into its nuclear strategy and alliance policy, both during the Cold War and even today.

I disagree with the notion that extended deterrence helps non-proliferation by relieving allies of the need to develop their indigenous nuclear arsenals, thus reducing the number of nuclear states. In my view, extended deterrence is first and foremost a defence commitment used to strengthen an alliance, with non-proliferation a by-product of this commitment rather than a predesigned major mission. Very few of America's allies face threats today that can be dealt with only by US extended nuclear deterrence; rather, US conventional military means can easily satisfy their defence requirements. Additionally, extended deterrence promotes proliferation by motivating declared or potential enemies of the United States and its allies to possess nuclear weapons as asymmetric means to offset US conventional superiority. If we are serious about creating conditions for a nuclear-free world, as President Obama has suggested, the policy of extended nuclear deterrence should be among the first to change.

China's nuclear policy seeks deterrence at the grand strategic and strategic levels, not at the operational and tactical levels

Chinese leaders mainly consider nuclear weapons a political instrument for employment at the level of grand strategy, not as a winning tool for military operations. The concept of "what wins, deters" does not guide China's nuclear thinking. China has not stratified nuclear operations into strategic, operational, or tactical levels. China perceives a nuclear strike against its territory—whether with high- or low-yield warheads, causing either great or small losses— as the attack that invokes its counterattack. The American practice, by comparison, incorporates nuclear war fighting into strategic, campaign, and tactical operations. For example, theatre operational plans (OPLAN) like US Pacific Command's OPLAN 5077 (the OPLAN for military conflict in the Taiwan Strait) have annexes on nuclear operations.

China's nuclear arsenal at the minimum level can be interpreted to some extent as the minimum-deterrence posture

At this point, let me alter the meaning of the concept of nuclear deterrence somewhat by giving it some Chinese characteristics. Chinese minimum deterrence means that the role played by nuclear weapons in national security should be minimized. China would use nuclear weapons only against nuclear attack and only for second strike purposes. Accordingly, the arsenal must be kept at the minimum level needed. In China's official documents, "lean" and "effective" are the two adjectives used to describe the nuclear arsenal. To keep the arsenal lean, China has to exercise restraint in developing nuclear weapons; to keep the arsenal effective, China has to modernize it to ensure credibility after a first nuclear strike.

Furthermore, Chinese strategists regard the concept of minimum deterrence as a relative one, defined not only by quantitative criteria but also by the survivability of nuclear weapon systems and the credibility of counterattack. Some researchers in the United States have concluded that, based on its modernization effort, China is shifting from a minimum- to a limited-deterrence posture, whereby China could use nuclear weapons to deter both conventional and nuclear wars—and even to exercise escalation control in the event of a conventional confrontation. However, we must remember that the basic logic of China's nuclear thinking conceives of nuclear weapons as a deterring, not a winning, instrument against other such weapons.

China depends more on uncertainty for its deterrence than any other nuclear-weapon state

By introducing the matter of uncertainty, I try to pre-empt any questions on China's opaqueness regarding the structure and size of its nuclear force. For a state adopting a no-first-use policy and intending not to waste too much money on unusable weapons, dependence on opaqueness to bring about greater deterrent value is a wise choice. One can achieve deterrence through the certainty of prospective costs outweighing prospective gains, as well as through the uncertainty in cost/gain calculations. Deterrence works not only to reverse the enemy's original intention, but also to prevent him from forming such an intention for lack of information. Comparing China with the United States, one sees that the former places more emphasis on taking advantage of uncertainty in implementing deterrence, while the latter realizes more deterrence value by a show of force.

Lastly, China's nuclear policy has remained constant

Here, I want to make the point that China's perspective on nuclear deterrence has not changed very much since the start of the twenty-first century. The 1960s and 1970s had been the most crises-ridden years for China. Since then, China's security environment has improved steadily. However, several new factors complicate China's nuclear calculations. First, it has more nuclear neighbours than before. Second, the Taiwan Strait has become a potential flash point that might drag two nuclear states into military conflict. And third, the deployment of US ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems threatens the credibility of China's deterrence and the strategic stability between the United States and China. In spite of these new developments, we can see no substantial change in China's declared nuclear policy and no deviation from the basic deterrence logic in which it believes.

Several reasons may account for this lack of change. First, the multilateral-deterrent relationship that China forms with all nuclear weapon states can readily accommodate new nuclear neighbours. Second, deterrence applied at the strategic level, if credible, can deter nuclear use against China in peace and even in conventional conflict. Third, the BMD system may result in a reassessment of force structure and size, but not in the abandonment of a policy that has best served China's national interest for nearly half a century.

In conclusion, China will continue to apply deterrence at the grand strategic level, to base its pure and central deterrence on a retaliatory second-strike capability, to depend more on uncertainty for better deterrence effect, and to modernize its nuclear arsenal by keeping it more survivable, penetrating, and secure.