

Nuclear Ambitions in Asia: The Paper Tiger Revisited

Written by Christopher Whyte

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CHRISTOPHER WHYTE, MAY 28 2011

There is little doubt that the development of nuclear weapons radically altered the conduct of relations in the international system. Nuclear deterrence defined much of the otherwise-ideological Cold War standoff.

However, Mao Zedong often and famously referred to such weapons, and the great powers that wielded them, as nothing more than “paper tigers” – visibly fearsome but, in reality, a weak military asset and a bluff. Even despite Chinese development of the bomb in 1964, Mao’s underlying strategic doctrine on waging revolutionary warfare consistently rejected the idea that nuclear forces would be of any significance in future conflicts. That belief is still evident in People’s Republic of China (PRC) military practices today and has significant security implications for the East Asian and Pacific regions. With growing concern amongst China’s neighbors about the growth of PRC military power, it has been suggested that nearby states like South Korea and Japan may inevitably be forced to “go nuclear” as they struggle to construct the appropriate deterrent capabilities to affect a stable, strategic balance of power. This kind of action could certainly lead to the intense clash of existing doctrines that such deterrent forces would aim to avoid, as disparate security calculations and different capabilities’ assessments lead states to misunderstand intentions, operate from misleading positions of strength and unintentionally fuel a continued rise in regional tensions. In other words, any state seeking to balance against a rising China should exercise restraint when it comes to the development of nuclear weapons as such a move would do nothing to deter encroachment.

Disdain of nuclear weapons is evident in Chinese military and political thinking from the earliest days of Communist rule. In 1947, Mao wrote that “the atom bomb is a paper tiger that U.S. reactionaries use to scare people...the outcome of a war is decided by people, not by one or two new types of weapons.” At the outbreak of the Korean War, the PRC chief of staff Nie Rongzhen famously declared that “after all, China lives on the farms. What can atom bombs do there?” The idea that the institution of the people could win conflicts regardless of imbalances in military capabilities became a primary aspect of Mao’s “People’s War” war-fighting doctrine. This methodology for conducting conflicts was partly geo-strategic and partly ideological, combining the conventional capabilities of a state with the asymmetrical methods and tactics of non-state revolutionary forces. On the one hand, use of propaganda and directed education impassioned domestic hearts and minds, making the defeat of Maoist forces impractical with conventional tactics and weapons. Conversely, large-scale weapons of war, including air power and the bomb, would be of limited effect in a war against China. This was demonstrated time and again during the Korean War, as poorly equipped Chinese light infantry nevertheless often managed to effectively press UN forces through the use of rugged terrain, great numbers and night attacks. The strategic mindset of the People’s War continue to shape China’s military strategy throughout the propaganda-rich years of the Cultural Revolution to the present day, with highest emphasis consistently put on popular involvement in the state apparatus and the military maintenance of massive ground forces. In short, Chinese military strategy has, since Mao, tended to develop and deploy forces that are numerous and difficult to counter with conventional Western tactics.

China’s lack of emphasis on the use of nuclear weapons in warfare continues to this day, even though the current state of its nuclear arsenal is unclear. Ambiguity in the matter largely stems from the secretive way with which the Communist government treats its armed forces, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The number of actual weapons maintained by the PRC is unknown and varied estimates have at times put the arsenal anywhere between 80 and 2000 devices. However, recent approximations by the U.S. Department of State and non-state institutions like the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) quote a tidier ballpark of between 160 and 250 warheads, while a

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2004 white paper on international nuclear reduction saw China call itself nuclear-weapons state that “possesses the smallest nuclear arsenal.” This implies a number below the United Kingdom’s 200 strategic nuclear deterrent. China is also the only nuclear-weapons state to provide a blanket security assurance that promises not to use its arsenal on non-nuclear belligerents or in nuclear-weapons-free zones under any circumstances.

These circumstances, combined with a long history of limited reliance on such weapons, imply that any future conflict with the PRC would not take the form of nuclear warfare. The current dynamics of China’s military expansion are only further proof of this, with new technology and military hardware aimed at fighting a conventional war with a technologically advanced opponent. Indeed, China’s own 2004 white paper laid out strategic production and deployment plans (vaguely) to ready the country for conflict with highly advanced adversaries by mid-century. This strategic direction correlates with an overall minimization of the nuclear force to purely deterrent levels, as the use of general atomic force in a conflict with such a described opponent would do little to prevent the use of large, stealthy, sophisticated military forces.

China’s practical strategic doctrine, suggested and labeled in the West in successive Pentagon reports as the “island chain” doctrine, likely emphasizes securing regional hegemony by attaining preponderant operational power in both its own littoral (the first island chain) and the Western Pacific Ocean out to at least Japan and New Guinea (the second island chain). The dynamics of any potential future Chinese hegemony, whether internationally cooperative or aggressively militant, are the subject of constant debate in security communities around the world. However, the lack of focus on nuclear issues and the rise of a large conventional military-industrial production regime in China must be taken into account.

Recent developments in the military forces of the People’s Liberation Army have included advanced intercontinental ballistic missiles that are designed to accurately deliver conventional payloads to distant targets. While some types of these missiles can be deployed with nuclear warheads, it is widely suggested that they are primarily aimed at neutralizing localized military assets in an invasion of Taiwan. This could include their use against American and other foreign naval units that have the ability to intercede in regional conflict, especially aircraft carriers and their associated battle groups. Further developments in PLA capabilities have stressed the modernization and production of advanced fighter-bomber and blue-water naval forces to help achieve regional security objectives. Large submarine forces are already widely used by the PLA Navy to protect shipping interests and project power throughout the local region, while the ongoing construction of aircraft-carrying ships has been a source of constant discussion among members of Western defense establishments for several years.

To meet its own goal of capably meeting technologically-advanced threats by mid-century, China will assuredly have to continue expanding its conventional military force structure to reflect its strategic needs. Heavy investment in R&D that facilitates the production of new technologies will be an ongoing trend for the PLA. However, there are no signs that China’s nuclear forces play anything but a deterrent role in future security calculations and, as mentioned above, various signs that China dismisses their effectiveness.

The final result of the growth of the PRC’s military capacity is, perhaps, that China’s nuclear perspective will be exported abroad. After all, the extensive capabilities of any advanced military opponent reduce the tactical effectiveness of nuclear weapons in the field as those forces grow, diversify and become increasingly difficult to target with strategic warheads. Countries in the region that are concerned for their security should realize this truth and take steps to avoid a nuclear escalation that would do little to deter the doctrinally-different military culture of the People’s Republic of China.

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