



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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US and Chinese Nuclear and Missile Development: the Risk of Accidental Nuclear War

Wendell Minnick

[Japan Focus introduction: Among the various explanations for the collapse of the Soviet Union, a popular argument has been that the US escalated the arms race with Moscow to the point that it broke the bank in Russia, finally leading to the collapse of the Soviet empire. China has been determined to avoid that trap. Overwhelmingly out-gunned by the United States in every conceivable aspect of military hardware, the PRC from its earliest years to the present has struggled with vital security problems of how to defend itself from the American superpower. One important answer has been to build a minimum second-strike nuclear capability to confront American strategists with the fact of mutual vulnerability to nuclear attack. However, the Bush administration's strategy of preventive war, in its relentless search for absolute security, has created a new and more dangerous situation for China. US plans to revitalize its nuclear weapons program, to build missile defenses, and to press on toward [weaponizing outer space](#), threaten to undermine the viability of China's nuclear deterrent. The modernization of China's strategic defenses can best be understood as a comprehensive, asymmetrical response to the American challenge. But will that response set off a further arms race in an Asia Pacific region fraught with tensions and nuclear aspirations? The following report is reprinted from Defense News, a major organ of the US Defense establishment and its arms manufacturers. Characteristic of this genre, it makes no mention of expansive US missile development. Peter Van Ness]

A new U.S. report that says China's nuclear strategy could result in an unnecessary nuclear conflict has grabbed the attention of Asian strategic analysts and the Western defense community.

"China's Nuclear Forces: Operations, Training, Doctrine, Command, Control, and Campaign Planning" by Larry Wortzel, commissioner of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, examines the potential threat China's nuclear arsenal poses to the United States. It was released this month by the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute.

China's goal of developing the capability of attacking an aircraft carrier group with ballistic missiles appears near.

"For some time, American naval officers have dismissed this capability as beyond the grasp of the PLA [People's Liberation Army]," Wortzel writes. However, "The advances made in maneuvering re-entry vehicles and doctrine on attacking an aircraft carrier or naval battle group with ballistic missiles makes the Western Pacific a more dangerous place, especially as China improves its own sensor systems."

Of particular concern are recent media reports that China is developing an infrared system for the Dong Feng 21 medium-range ballistic missile that will allow it to pinpoint ships. China is particularly concerned with overcoming anti-ship missile defenses of Aegis-equipped warships.



Small Chinese ICBM

Wortzel introduces the reader to the PLA concept that "guided missile forces are the trump card (sa shou jian) in achieving victory in limited technology war." He argues that China's "limited technology war" can be won by using countermeasures, precision targeting and space platforms to support the effort.

Thomas Kane, a lecturer at The University of Hull and author of numerous publications on China's nuclear capabilities, said Wortzel is on the mark.

"The fact that PRC missile officers feel they can present their weapons as 'sa shou jian,' or, in Wortzel's translation, a 'trump,' further implies that they are prepared to entertain the possibility of using nuclear weapons," he said.

Further, Kane said, "conventionally armed ballistic missiles have seldom proved particularly decisive, and certainly not on their own. An American naval task force, for instance, would be well equipped to resist non-nuclear missile bombardment. For missiles to serve as a trump card, either the targets must be exceptionally significant or the warheads must be exceptionally devastating."

China has openly discussed using nuclear weapons on aircraft carrier groups and concentrations of U.S. military forces on Okinawa, particularly since these types of targets are isolated from civilian populations and serve as a potent threat to China.

Is Space the Key?

The "no-man's land" of space appears to be the key to beating the United States. China's recent anti-satellite (ASAT) tests demonstrated its determination to explore this Achilles' heel of U.S. dependence on technology for the conduct of war.

In August 2006, China blinded a U.S. spy satellite with a laser, and in January 2007, China destroyed one of its own satellites with a missile.

Knocking out GPS, reconnaissance and communication satellites would blind and hobble U.S. military forces in the Pacific. Warplanes and warships would have trouble navigating, smart bombs and missiles would have no guidance, communication would be hampered and intelligence on China would be crippled.



China's space expansion program

Wortzel believes there is a clear relationship between nuclear force survivability and the ASAT test run by China, and this reinforces arguments in China that foreign surveillance of China from space may constitute "battlefield preparation."

However, constraining U.S. satellite capabilities would make it nearly impossible to determine what China's intentions are. Panic and indecision could force the United States to respond more aggressively or too late to a Chinese nuclear strike.



US satellite launch

China's decision to put nuclear and conventional warheads of the same classes of ballistic missiles "near each other in firing units of the Second Artillery Corps also increases the risk of accidental nuclear conflict," Wortzel says. "If a country with good surveillance systems, like the United States, detects a missile being launched, it has serious choices to make. It can absorb a first strike, see whether it is hit with a nuclear or conventional weapon, and retaliate in kind; or it can decide to launch a major strike on warning."

The U.S. ability to observe and quickly analyze missile launches is greatly diminished by China's ASAT capabilities, which risk the potential for a miscalculation that results in a nuclear war.

No First Use?

China's nuclear strategy also is being debated in terms of the practicality of its no-first-use policy, said Wortzel. He said the PLA's pre-emptive nuclear strike strategy is designed to cause the will of the enemy to waver, destroy the enemy's command-and-control system, delay the enemy's war operations, reduce the enemy force generation and war-making potential, and degrade the enemy's ability to win a nuclear war.

"New interpretations of the concept of the 'self-defensive counterattack' in the strategy of active defense and the general view that ballistic missiles are a kind of trump card in war bring into question whether the CMC [Central Military Commission] will adhere to the stated 'no-first-use' doctrine," he said.

Kane, author of "Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power," argues that Wortzel's findings contradict a great deal of common wisdom in Washington and elsewhere that China is incapable of a coordinated national policy on nuclear weapons.

"Wortzel's work suggests otherwise," Kane said. "The PRC [People's Republic of China] has historically maintained that it possesses nuclear weapons only as a 'minimal deterrent,' and many Western analysts have accepted this. Wortzel warns that we should not assume that China would adhere to such restraint dogmatically for all time.

"Wortzel's work confirms that PRC leaders continue to prepare for the possibility that its future enemies may include the United States, and that many PRC leaders are prepared to consider using nuclear weapons in a so-called pre-emptive counterattack," he said. •

This article appeared in Defense News May 21, 2007.

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*For another perspective on the F-22 sales and Lockheed see William Hartung, [Why should Japan bail out Lockheed?](#)
By William D Hartung*