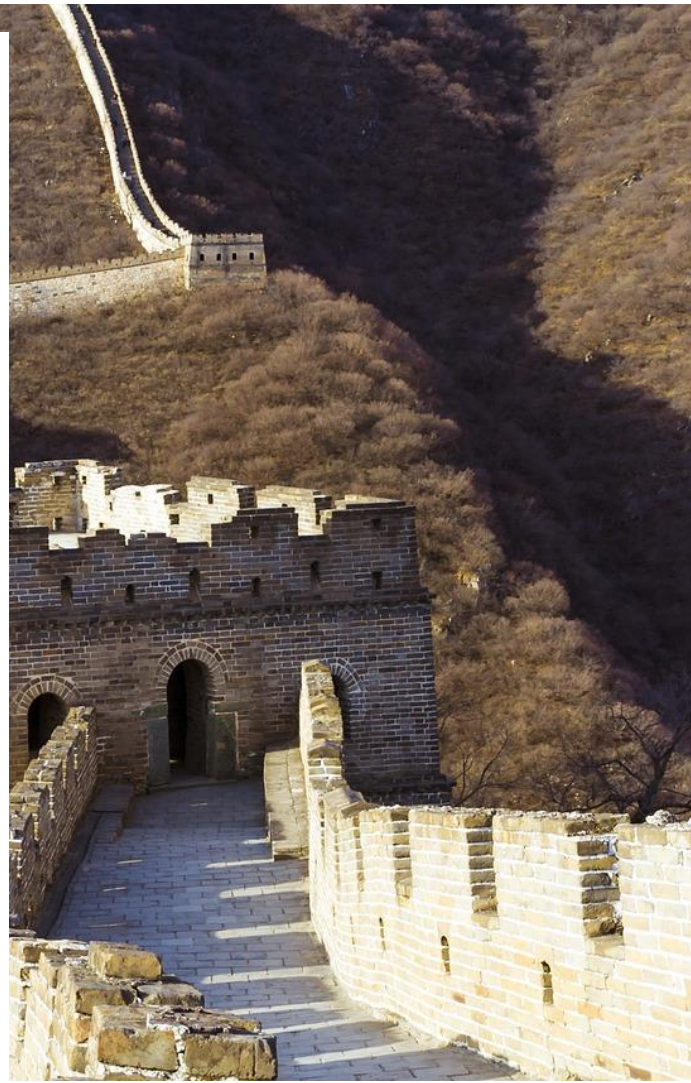

Chinese Strategic Deterrence Frameworks



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STRATEGIC MULTILAYER ASSESSMENT

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Chinese Strategic Deterrence Frameworks

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China does not have an overarching deterrence framework. However, it is possible to identify the primary objects of Chinese deterrence and describe the Chinese playbook. China's core strategic aims consist of deterring 1) a nuclear attack; 2) conventional, space, and cyber-attacks; and 3) outside efforts to encourage secession or political unrest. Nuclear deterrence has traditionally taken the approach that a secure second-strike capability is sufficient to prevent an adversary from threatening first use. This perspective is still dominant, but heightened worries about American brinkmanship and non-nuclear counterforce have prompted a major nuclear modernization campaign. Chinese conventional deterrence is notable for including an explicit role for compellence and a certain degree of optimism that purely military capabilities and resolve can help solve geopolitical problems. Finally, the Chinese government has long feared separatism and popular revolt at least as much as external aggression. In addition to its internal security apparatus, China deters external provocation on these issues through diplomatic and economic means, which make it costly for other countries to recognize Taiwan or support Chinese dissidents.

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of Chinese thinking about strategic deterrence. In keeping with the United States' commitment to integrated deterrence, it considers numerous domains, from nuclear to conventional to diplomatic deterrence. However, integrated deterrence is an American concept, not a Chinese one. In the words of Chinese deterrence expert Dean Cheng, “the available Chinese literature does not tend to focus on conventional deterrence,” focusing primarily on nuclear weapons. Accordingly, the paper devotes the most attention to Chinese thinking about nuclear deterrence. The second section reviews Chinese thinking about non-nuclear deterrence, including conventional, space, and cyber weapons. A third section describes the most frequently exercised form of Chinese deterrence: diplomatic and economic reprisals for actions that China believes constitute support for separatism or rebellion.

Briefly, the most important takeaways are: (1) China has a long history of avoiding nuclear brinkmanship, but it is committed to keeping its rivals vulnerable to a retaliatory strike; (2) China views conventional deterrence as a purely military battle of capabilities and resolve; and (3) China's economic importance makes it unusually effective in deterring outside support for internal opponents of the regime. The claims made below are based on a review of the academic and open-source literature on China's strategic deterrence frameworks, with particular weight given to scholarship based on Chinese sources.

Nuclear Deterrence

The Stability-Instability Paradox vs. Brinkmanship

In practice, strategic deterrence is always complicated, relying on the seamless cooperation of many thousands of individuals. Yet to analyze strategic deterrence frameworks, it is helpful to understand two basic theories. The first is known as the Nuclear Revolution. In its most basic form, the Nuclear Revolution is the idea that nuclear weapons have made great-power war obsolete. Terms such as the “balance of terror” or “mutually assured destruction” are closely linked with this perspective: Because they do not dare risk their own civilian populations, nuclear-armed states will not engage in total war with each other. Most analysts agree that “destruction” is not even necessary. As long as two adversaries achieve mutual vulnerability, such as the ability to threaten one or two large population centers, they will be deterred from attempting to fully defeat one another. In other words, so long as a country has the technical capability to ensure a second strike and the resolve to use it, strategic deterrence is comparatively easy to achieve.

Although this perspective is reassuring, it gives rise to the stability-instability paradox. If Countries A and B are each vulnerable to the other's nuclear arsenal, then conventional military operations (especially ones that do not target the adversary's homeland) should not trigger nuclear retaliation.

This means that mutual vulnerability greatly stabilizes the risk of nuclear war or direct invasion but leaves other forms of conflict unchanged. It may even make conflict in other domains more likely because ultimate retaliation is impossible. Many Western analysts have subscribed to this view, including Bernard Brodie (1946), Robert Jervis (1989), and Stephen Walt (2010). Yet this paradox is even more important for understanding Chinese strategic deterrence frameworks. China's nuclear strategists have long based their doctrine on a strong form of the stability-instability paradox, in which China's arsenal exists solely to guarantee a second-strike capability.

The second theory of strategic deterrence is closely linked to the ideas of Thomas Schelling (1966) concerning brinkmanship. This theory is much more skeptical about the stability-instability paradox's ability to cleanly separate nuclear and conventional conflict. Based in part on American and Soviet experiences during the Cold War, the brinkmanship school believes that conflicts can have a momentum of their own that escapes the control of top leaders. Accidents and misperceptions can cause a crisis to spiral into a nuclear standoff. To return to Countries A and B, the brinkmanship school says: If Country A can raise the risk of nuclear war to a point that Country B is unwilling to tolerate, A may be able to persuade B to change its behavior.² Even when neither country desires nuclear war, a greater tolerance for risk can prove decisive in a confrontation. With each country facing incentives to tolerate or even raise the risk of nuclear war, strategic deterrence appears much more difficult to achieve.

The brinkmanship school of thought has been much more influential in American nuclear thought but is still helpful in studying Chinese deterrence frameworks. First, the different strategic cultures open the door to misperceptions. For example, US analysts have hypothesized that technological overlap between China's nuclear and conventional missile forces could make it harder for the US military to avoid targeting China's nuclear arsenal, raising the risk that a limited conflict could go nuclear (Saalman, 2014). However, Chinese sources strongly suggest that this is not their intent (Zhao & Bin, 2017). Likewise, Chinese confidence that crises can be kept below the nuclear threshold has led to some potentially reckless ideas for deterrence. A key doctrinal work, *The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, proposes launching an ICBM armed with a non-nuclear warhead at the adversary's homeland as a signal of resolve in a crisis. In a genuine crisis, such a launch would quite possibly be treated by the United States as an incoming nuclear attack requiring retaliation (Logan, 2023).

Second, China's recent nuclear modernization campaign may be a concession to some of the hard questions posed by the brinkmanship school. For example: If the United States used non-nuclear means, such as conventional weapons and cyber, to target China's nuclear arsenal, how would China respond? Most analysts agree that the need to reduce vulnerability to US counterforce capabilities is

² This logic also applies in everyday life. Any car driver is likely familiar with aggressive drivers that create an unacceptable risk of an accident in order to gain an advantage on the road.

the most likely motivation behind this buildup. Finally, the brinkmanship school is helpful in understanding the consequences of this buildup: With a more sophisticated arsenal, achieving an edge in brinkmanship with China has become more difficult.

Core Principles of Chinese Strategic Deterrence

Although no core document laid out the PRC's strategic deterrence framework, the core principles were already assembled by the time of the nation's first successful test in 1964. These principles—no first use and mutual vulnerability—have governed China's approach to strategic deterrence to the present day.

No First Use

The most distinctive element of Chinese deterrence is a commitment to a policy of no first use (NFU) of nuclear weapons in any conflict. China adopted this policy when it became a nuclear state in 1964, and its diplomats continue to loudly draw attention to it in international discussions. For many years, it was the only nuclear power with such a policy, though it has since been joined by India.

According to the brinkmanship approach to deterrence, China puts itself at a disadvantage by committing itself to a policy of NFU. This is because China is less capable of creating a sense of danger among its adversaries. Yet from the perspective of the stability-instability paradox, NFU helps separate conventional and nuclear conflict. This is expected to lower the risk of nuclear war, while possibly heightening the risk of conventional conflict. This analysis points to a strategic reason why China may have adopted an NFU policy: Unable to compete in a battle of brinkmanship with its superpower rivals, it chose a strategy that would reduce the probability of nuclear crises.

However, China also had ideological reasons for choosing this policy. The PRC's founding and legitimating narrative places it in opposition to bullying, "imperialist" forces, including the United States. This worldview, which is sincerely held by most Chinese, shapes decision making about foreign policy. For this reason, China takes great pains to avoid bullying other countries. Although outside observers may be quick to point to Chinese activities in the South China Sea or reluctance to forgive its loans to developing countries as instances of "bullying," the essential point is that the Chinese have their own understanding of the moral stakes of international affairs. Threatening first use of nuclear weapons would violate this understanding. It can be thought of as a Chinese version of the "taboo" against using nuclear weapons that some scholars argue exists in the United States (Tannenwald, 1999).

Some analysts are suspicious of claims that morality shapes behavior in conflict. Robert Soofer, then deputy assistant secretary for nuclear and missile defense policy in the U.S. Department of Defense, stated, "I don't believe China when they say they have no first use policy" (McCleary, 2020). It is true that a few Chinese writers, including a researcher and a retired general, have raised the idea of

abandoning NFU (Kaufman & Weidelich, 2023). However, studies of Chinese policy documents (written for a Chinese audience) find that the principle seems to be sincerely held by a large majority of writers. Additionally, game theory provides reasons for bluffing (exaggerating one's willingness to use nuclear weapons) but does not provide a compelling logic for understating one's willingness to use nuclear weapons. Thus, China's NFU policy seems likely to continue to guide Chinese thinking about deterrence until it signals otherwise.

Mutual Vulnerability

Despite claims that it would not strike first, China's nuclear arsenal remains a serious threat to the United States. The core aim of China's strategic deterrence is to maintain a state of mutual vulnerability with potential adversaries. Mutual vulnerability is not precisely defined but exists between the extremes of "mutually assured destruction" and "minimum deterrence." Mutually assured destruction refers to the ability of one nation to threaten another's existence by causing such extensive damage as to bring about the collapse of society. China's arsenal has never been able to credibly threaten the existence of the United States.

Mutual vulnerability is much closer to "minimum deterrence." Consistent with the views of the Nuclear Revolution, minimum deterrence argues that after achieving the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on an adversary, the deterrent effect of more warheads is zero. In its first decades as a nuclear power, when it lacked an explicit nuclear strategy, the PRC did make references to "minimum retaliation." However, this term was replaced in 1987 by "limited nuclear retaliation," and contemporary documents describe China's policy as simply "self defense" (Lewis & Xue, 2012). It is also not clear if China ever believed that additional armament had *no* deterrent effect or whether it was simply not worth the risk of arms racing. For these reasons, it is not completely accurate to describe China as following a strategy of "minimum deterrence."

Remarkably, these two principles have governed China's approach to strategic deterrence for almost sixty years. As late as 2019, observers emphasized the seemingly unchanging nature of Chinese thinking (Cunningham & Fravel, 2019). Confidence in the stability-instability paradox remained central to Chinese doctrine, which contained no operational plans for limited nuclear war. The same observers called this doctrine "suboptimal." Would it really deter the United States from targeting China's nuclear arsenal with conventional or cyber weapons? Would it truly deter the United States from using a tactical nuclear weapon against military targets? The Chinese may have reached the same conclusions, because at roughly the same time, they embarked on the most notable upgrading of their nuclear forces in history.

China's Recent Modernization

In the past several years, China has significantly expanded its nuclear arsenal. The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that the number of warheads will increase by a factor of five from roughly 200 to

1,000 by 2030. Three new silo fields are under construction in the country's northwest. These silos may house the country's new DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile, which is also road-mobile and equipped with penetration aids. Finally, operational changes have improved readiness among the PLA Rocket Forces, reducing response times (though without adopting a launch-on-warning posture) (Cunningham, 2023). Taken together, these changes mark the first real transformation of China's nuclear forces since it first developed them.

After so many decades of stability, what underlies this shift? The first and most honest answer is that experts are unsure (Cunningham, 2023). However, it is possible to evaluate the evidence that points towards either of two options. On the one hand, the overhauled arsenal may reflect a new approach to deterrence. On the other, China may have decided that it needs superior means to pursue the same ends of mutual vulnerability.

A review of recent analysis based on Chinese sources finds strong support for the second explanation. Chinese writers are concerned about advancing US capabilities, including powerful, accurate conventional weapons that could be used in a counterforce role against China. Cyber and artificial intelligence capabilities are another worry, particularly their ability to be deployed without warning and their strong first-mover advantage. Improved anti-ballistic missile technology threatens China's ability to keep the United States vulnerable to a nuclear attack. Finally, tactical nuclear weapons pose a challenge for China's existing doctrine, which does not anticipate a limited use of nuclear weapons (Kaufman & Weidelich, 2023; Hiim et al., 2023).

Of course, the security challenges facing China are not only technological. Relations with the United States have grown steadily worse, while the United States has expanded security cooperation with India, Australia, South Korea, and Japan in an effort to check China. Furthermore, as US conventional superiority in the Taiwan Strait declines, China expects that the United States may be tempted to compensate with nuclear arms. In response to what it perceives as growing threats, the Chinese military has decided to upgrade its own capabilities so as to maintain a state of mutual vulnerability. This appears to be a classic example of a security dilemma, in which rivals take steps to improve their own security, diminishing the other's security and triggering a response each time.

Just as important as what the Chinese writers are saying is what they are not saying. The vast majority of these sources have not called for an end to the NFU policy and instead express continued support. Nor have the calls for improved readiness tipped into support for a launch-on-warning posture. Most experts have also rejected the idea of developing lower-yield weapons (Kaufman & Weidelich, 2023; Hiim et al., 2023). Some debate exists over each of these issues, and it is true that China seems better-positioned to change these policies than at any previous point. Yet it also seems clear that the modernization campaign has not been prompted by massive changes to deterrence theory.

So far, there is only evidence for one important change inside China: the group with the most influence over nuclear policy. Although the civilian leadership remains firmly in control, the military may have

supplanted nuclear scientists as the chief deputy in shaping policy (Zhao, 2021). This may be a contributing factor to China's heightened sense of threat.

Conventional, Space, and Cyber Deterrence

The Chinese term for deterrence, *weishe*, has a broader definition than its English-language counterpart. American strategic culture distinguishes between preventing an adversary from acting in a way that would change the status quo (deterrence) and changing the status quo by forcing an adversary to act (compellence). By contrast, the Chinese military's core text, *The Science of Military Strategy*, defines strategic deterrence as:

. . . a mode of military struggle in which the nation and armed forces, in order to realize certain political goals, and with powerful military strength as the foundation, synthetically apply multiple means to cleverly display strength and the resolve to employ strength so as to confront the adversary with losses that will outweigh the gains, and even an aftermath difficult to bear; and thus force him to make concessions, come to terms, or submit. (Quoted in Erickson, 2023).

As the quote suggests, the prospect of compelling an adversary to withdraw or submit plays a much larger role in Chinese thinking about deterrence in the conventional realm. To achieve this aim, China's military accepts more risk and works harder to send signals of resolve. A notable example of this are the aggressive Chinese maneuvers in response to US freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea. Similarly, tests of anti-ship missiles are intended to demonstrate capabilities and the willingness to use them.

China seems confident that this form of brinksmanship can be used scientifically. Careful movements up the escalation ladder are expected to achieve a desired result, with little risk of the situation getting out of control. This inference is based both on what Chinese strategy texts say (e.g., "flexibly selecting and applying deterrent means"), as well as what they do not say: There is a notable lack of attention to accidental escalation (Erickson, 2023).

Commenting on recent Chinese scholarship on deterrence, the veteran observer of the Chinese military Taylor Fravel also commented primarily on what was absent (Fravel et al., 2023). First, there is a lack of Chinese data, with the authors overwhelmingly reliant on US assessments. This is a symptom of a more fundamental issue: In China, the academy is unable to independently analyze and influence the military's deterrence practices. Second, there is a lack of attention to assurances, or the credible commitment to follow a course of action if an adversary refrains from doing something. This means that to the Chinese, deterrence is simply a contest of abilities and wills, with no role for political solutions. Finally, the articles show a lack of awareness that China is contributing to a security dilemma in its neighborhood. Even as China's military capabilities mature, its sense of vulnerability and victimhood prevent it from understanding how it makes its neighbors feel less secure.

What about the new domains of space and cyber? Far more than nuclear and even conventional arms, these domains are thought to be useful for offensive operations by the Chinese. This makes them prime targets for integrated deterrence: Space and cyber operations are expected to be used to deter adversaries from more than just space and cyber operations against China. These modes of conflict are also distinct in that defense-affiliated sources have laid out an explicit ladder of escalation for them: testing, propaganda, exercises, and resolve-demonstrating strikes (Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2023).

Of course, China is also vulnerable to space and cyberattacks, where denial is difficult. For this reason, China is more likely to use these capabilities against weaker opponents. This has prompted another round of investments by China's rivals, such as India's development of anti-satellite technology. As regards the United States, China believes that US capabilities outstrip its own in both space and cyber, but it also believes that the United States is more reliant on these systems, giving China an advantage in any conflict (Shou, 2013, p. 186).

Diplomatic and Economic Deterrence

Deterrence is not confined to the military domain. One constant of Chinese foreign policy since the PRC's founding in 1949 has been an uncompromising demand that other nations stay out of its "internal" affairs, such as the status of Tibet and Taiwan. This demand has been backed up by diplomatic and economic reprisals for actions that China perceives as violating this policy. At the same time, its sensitivity to these issues and ability to use economic means of deterrence have both increased over the past twenty years.

Why adopt a deterrence approach to these issues? Although the need for deterrence to keep the nation safe from nuclear and other attacks makes it immediately obvious, the need for deterrence in these contexts demands additional explanation. The most basic answer is that China feels extremely vulnerable to internal challenges. From the outside, China's government may appear to be one of the world's most secure: No rival political organization exists to challenge the Chinese Communist Party, and the heavy policing of society makes it difficult to imagine such a rival ever emerging. However, scholars of comparative politics know that autocratic regimes are fragile. Top leaders live in fear of being deposed by other elites or confronted by a sudden wave of protest that the military refuses to put down. Perhaps the most important proof of this comes from the fact that China spends more on "public safety" (internal security) than it does on national defense (Nikkei Asia, 2022).

The most serious internal threats are various separatist movements. Four are worth understanding in some detail. First is the East Turkestan independence movement, which seeks a Uyghur state in China's Xinjiang Province. The Turkestan Islamic Party has agitated for independence by conducting terrorist attacks, prompting a crackdown on the Uyghur people by Beijing. Second is the Tibetan independence movement, which similarly seeks a homeland for an ethnic minority. Third is Hong Kong, which was returned to China by the United Kingdom in 1997, more than 150 years after it was seized in the First Opium War. Fourth is Taiwan, a de facto independent country. This is a legacy of the Chinese Civil War,

during which the former government of China lost the mainland but retained control of the island of Taiwan.

Any government would vigorously oppose unauthorized secession movements, but China is particularly sensitive to them. This is because its founding narrative (analogous to the role of the Pilgrims and Boston Tea Party in the American story) is based on how the Communist Party delivered China from humiliation and piecemeal colonization by foreign powers. Even today, popular support for the government is rooted in its past and ongoing work to restore a strong, united China. The nation's leaders believe that any compromise, such as permitting Taiwan to declare independence, could lead to widespread disillusionment and regime collapse, as occurred in the Soviet Union.

Consequently, China views deterring external support for these separatist movements as a security priority on par with deterring external aggression. Most worrisome is Taiwan, which, as has been previously mentioned, is already independent as a matter of fact. To maintain its claim, China has adopted a strategy of extreme diplomatic deterrence: It breaks off diplomatic relations with any country that recognizes Taiwan's independence. By virtue of its much larger population and economy, China has been extremely successful in preventing other nations from recognizing Taiwan. 179 of 193 United Nations member states, including the United States, maintain formal diplomatic relations with China rather than Taiwan. Beijing is striving to bring the number of countries that recognize Taiwan down to zero. This bolsters its claim to the island, which benefits the regime, and also might deter other countries from assisting Taiwan in the case of an invasion from the mainland.

Breaking off diplomatic relations is a powerful but blunt instrument. Less significant provocations that Beijing nevertheless fears might fan the flames of separatism call for a second means of deterrence: economic reprisals. In response to actions such as hosting the Dalai Lama (associated with the idea of an independent Tibet), China will frequently punish the offending government by reducing imports from that country. Rigorous statistical evidence shows that during the 2000s, China did in fact reduce imports of machinery and transport equipment from countries for one year after a visit by the Dalai Lama (Fuchs & Klann, 2013). Another variation is to use failed safety inspections as an excuse to reject imports from countries that have recently offended China (Kim et al., 2023). Finally, China's response to a tweet by Houston Rockets GM Daryl Morey supporting protests in Hong Kong is instructive. Because the NBA is so popular in China, this tweet threatened to expose many Chinese to a sympathetic perspective on the protests. In response, China convinced domestic companies to pull sponsorships and cancel NBA broadcasts, costing the league hundreds of millions of dollars (Young, 2020). As China's economy has grown to become the world's second largest, this form of economic retaliation has become an increasingly effective tool in deterring even mild expressions of support for China's internal dissidents.

Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to summarize Chinese perspectives on deterrence. Across various domains, two contrasting themes emerge: China feels vulnerable but believes that deterrence is eminently achievable. A strategic culture rooted in the Nuclear Revolution view that nuclear war will always be avoided seems to be enduring, but heightened concerns about American intentions and capabilities have led to a new round of investment in nuclear forces. In the short run, maintaining peace and security in China's neighborhood means matching China's emphasis on capabilities and resolve while avoiding misunderstandings. In the long run, one must hope that political compromise can deliver the region from requiring such a precarious balance of deterrence.

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