



Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control in the 21st Century

A Response from Alex Wong

Rebecca Heinrichs puts forth a cogent evaluation of the U.S. nuclear deterrence posture and specific recommendations that err on the side of clarity and boldness over muddled intellectual hedging. That is no small compliment. As a foreign policy and national security community, we are too often captive to broad trends in thinking. It is tempting to channel our analyses through conceptual paradigms that may have been applicable in years and decades past but are ill-suited for a changed world. It is a continual struggle to step outside those paradigms, craft new ideas, and then shepherd them through the political and governmental processes that put them into practice.

In light of this struggle, it is important to emphasize the specific objective of this discussion. We are discussing nuclear deterrence and arms control in the *21st century*. Although we are more than one-fifth of the way through the 21st century, the tenor of the nuclear policy debate in the United States is still to a large extent weighed down by 20th century thinking and language. Heinrichs alludes to this in her paper when she mentions “archaic thinking about what constitutes ‘stability,’” and “Cold War notions of simple stability through vulnerability.” It is worth expanding upon this idea.

The latter half of the 20th century, of course, gave rise to the area of nuclear strategic studies. Its development occurred in the high-stakes crucible of the Cold War and the nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. The best strategic and military minds debated and informed U.S. nuclear doctrine and its investments in strategic forces. The deterrence and arms control thinking that developed in that bipolar world had its near misses and harrowingly close shaves. But it also had its signature,

historic successes, including those attributable to this conference's namesake, President Ronald Reagan. The nuclear strategy of that era reduced threats, established international norms of transparency and cooperation, and bought time for the wider U.S. Cold War strategy to run its full course toward the soft collapse of the Soviet Union. That we ended that era without a nuclear exchange between great powers was an unvarnished success, and it was an outcome that was by no means preordained. It is not a surprise, then, that the legacy of that era's nuclear thinking would cast a long shadow—particularly as the strategic focus of the intervening 30 years took a looping sojourn away from nuclear-armed competition toward a unipolar strategy, then to counterterrorism and “small wars,” and now back again.

However, it is imperative that we step outside of that shadow. History does not repeat. It does not even necessarily rhyme. We should be careful about an approach to nuclear strategy that consciously or unconsciously echoes what may have worked in the past. Scholars and policymakers should endeavor to reorient the nuclear policy discussion—complete with new concepts and more supple and flexible thinking—to account for the strategic landscape as it exists today. The failure to do so will pose dangers for the American people and the world.

Outmoded thinking leads to deficient U.S. nuclear capabilities, doctrine, and messaging. A deficiency in any of those elements risks enticing our geopolitical competitors to military adventurism—whether conventional, nuclear, or both. It risks the breakdown of the nonproliferation consensus we have forged with our partners, as nuclear-weapons development spreads beyond rogue states to stable governments seeking security outside the traditional U.S. nuclear umbrella. It also risks putting vital U.S. interests in certain theaters—and those of our friends and allies—at the mercy of the jealous and growing ambitions of China and Russia.

In the context of our current security environment, it is particularly important to consider how outmoded thinking negatively affects one area of our nuclear strategy: the growing challenge of China's nuclear forces.

Deterrence and China's Strategic Culture

Heinrichs lays out the facts of China's recent nuclear investments, which feature significant modernization, expansion, and diversification of its capabilities. Not many of these facts are in dispute among scholars and practitioners. What is in dispute are Chinese intentions and the impetus behind the nuclear buildup. This

debate introduces a strong line of thinking that

- China's recent buildup is fully consistent with its half-century-old (albeit uncertain) "no first use" policy;
- the buildup changes no strategic realities for the United States in the region, given the continuing advantage we have in arsenal size; and
- the "logic" of strategic deterrence between the United States and China is holding.

To the extent that the strategic balance is being threatened, it is U.S. nuclear modernization and ballistic missile defense development that is tipping the scales out of whack.

Proponents of this line of thinking draw from a half century of strategic theory—born mainly from a Cold War framework—to inform their assessments. However, what they do not have (due to Chinese obfuscation and opacity) is insight into current Chinese doctrinal thinking on nuclear forces, let alone clear insight into China's actual capabilities. In the face of this uncertainty, strategists should not rest so comfortably on what we have come to call the "logic" of deterrence. The prevailing theories of deterrence and arms control are underpinned by a common idealism, rationalism, and classical liberalism that—even if not shared by the Soviet Union at first—came to infuse the deterrence frameworks that arose in the latter half of the Cold War.

These principles may be inapt for a rising China. This is not to say that our strategists are being naïve or that Chinese decision makers are in some way irrational. However, it is to say that China's strategic culture may not map neatly onto the deterrence frameworks of the past 50 years. This is particularly so as China has entered a period where the sources of their power have swelled, the domestic Chinese political imperative to wield that power is rising, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has unveiled and expanded China's grand strategic designs.

In evaluating how China's strategic culture affects its nuclear planning and doctrine, we should ask a number of questions.

- How clean is their doctrinal line between nuclear warfare and conventional warfare? How does the line change depending on the contingency? Is there a line at all?
- What is the framework by which the CCP values the lives of

the Chinese people and its numerous population centers? Is that framework commensurate with the value that the United States places on our population and those of our treaty allies? How does the fact that China is a party state—with a Communist Party that exists parallel to and above the government and population—affect that valuation framework?

- How does China’s geographic position, combined with its historical self-conception at the center of Asia, affect notions of strategic deterrence and regional coercion? Do these immutable realities and historical legacies lead them to unwisely discount the value that the United States places on our position as a Pacific nation? Does this lead them to misunderstand the depth of our connections to the region’s democracies and expanding prosperity?
- How does China’s persistent territorial tensions with India and Russia, which are nuclear powers, affect its nuclear strategy?
- What effect, if any, do the idiosyncrasies of Xi Jinping (with his personality-driven rule and indefinite time in power) have on Chinese nuclear strategy, risk tolerance, and perception of U.S. doctrine?

Inherent in the concept of “strategic stability” is a belief shared among all players that the status quo, if perhaps not desirable, is at minimum the least disliked state of affairs. Judging from recent history, though—from its actions in the South China Sea to its global One Belt One Road endeavor to aggressive moves to quell dissent in its historic periphery—China is very much *not* satisfied with the status quo. It therefore does not desire stability. It desires *strategic instability*, at least in the short and medium term. With its nuclear buildup, China is willing to undergo a period of tension and heightened risk to advance a revised regional, if not global, order. The exact shape of that order is unclear, but the trajectory of their buildup indicates that it will be buttressed by a Chinese nuclear arsenal that is world-class in terms of capability and nearer in parity to those of the United States and Russia in terms of absolute warhead and delivery system numbers.

Sustainable Deterrence Will Rise Out of Actual War Planning

How should the United States respond? This is where the flavor of Heinrichs’ practical recommendations is instructive. The United States needs to make investments in modernization and diversification of nuclear capabilities (alongside conventional enhancements) that truly reflect how a conflict with China would

play out, up to and including nuclear exchange. Only by making investments with an eye toward actually fighting a war along the full spectrum of conventional and nuclear conflict will we complicate the Chinese calculus, introduce doubt into their scenario and arsenal planning, and form a true foundation for sustainable deterrence.

I emphasize actual war planning specifically to break free from outmoded Cold War ideas. I have mentioned that evaluating China's nuclear buildup within a Cold War framework encourages a certain complacency about our own nuclear forces. However, a narrow focus on the concept of "strategic stability" also tends to disembody deterrence policy from actual warfighting. Instead of shaping our arsenal according to battlefield needs, it becomes subject to the simplistic bean counting of an abstract deterrence game, with numbers to be metered up or metered down in an imagined negotiation. Perhaps that frame of mind works when all players agree they are in such a game and mutually recognize the rules. It certainly does not work when one party refuses to recognize that it is part of a game at all, which is the case for China today.

Put another way, nuclear strategic planning is not exclusively or even mainly about preserving an ephemeral "balance," at least not in the current environment. Strategic planning is about winning a war. Planning for that war is—perhaps ironically—the only way to achieve a balance that staves off conflict, discourages coercion, and maintains a prosperous and enduring peace.