

Red China's Concerns About Nuclear Escalation Are a Red Herring

By Curtis McGiffin and Adam Lowther

A recent [article](#) in *The Diplomat*, “China’s Concerns About Nuclear Escalation and the Way Forward,” claims that “the survivability of China’s nuclear arsenal is actually under ever greater threat.” Citing the United States’ bantam ballistic missile defense capacity, permeating space-based surveillance, and robust non-nuclear offensive capabilities, the article tries to persuade readers that China’s smaller nuclear retaliation capability is at real risk from a growing American nuclear threat. The article cites four guardrails the United States should implement to prevent a potential nuclear escalation between the two competing nations.

First, the article says, “The United States and China should make every effort to avoid armed conflict. The golden rule of international order is to respect each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. By following that golden rule, the US and China might effectively reduce the risks of armed conflict.”

This infers the US should ignore the plight of Taiwan’s sovereignty as well as accept the seizing of the South China Sea. The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) willful disruption of global peace and stability to further its imperial expansionism directly violates the sovereignty of its neighbors. Readers should not forget that it was only after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was victorious in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 that the communists invaded and occupied Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, East Turkistan, and areas in the southeast that were not historically part of China.

Neither is the history of Taiwan a history of control by Imperial China. The simple fact is that China is an expansionist power that is still hungry for more territory. The United States, however, is attempting to annex land or sea. The simple fact is that China can ensure the first guardrail by ending its imperial expansion.

Second, the article then suggests, “There should be agreement on No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. Some argue that a NFU policy is not credible. But if that is the case, it is hard to explain why both the Obama and Biden administrations tried but failed to adopt a NFU or sole purpose policy. Every person of integrity should acknowledge that NFU is relevant and meaningful.”

This argument is laughable. China’s NFU policy is a ploy to deceive American policymakers and dupe nuclear disarmament advocates. During the Cold War, China’s NFU pledge was [judged credible](#) because it had a small and unsophisticated nuclear arsenal incapable of engaging in first use. The recent [Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2023 Annual Report to Congress](#) describes an increasingly lethal capability that threatens more and more [American cities](#), contrary to American counterforce targeting strategies.

As noted in a [recent analysis of the annual report](#), the PRC sanctioned a [video](#) that threatens to employ nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear Japan. In that video, the narrator states, “We will use nuclear bombs first. We will use nuclear bombs continuously. We will do this until Japan declares unconditional surrender for the second time.” China’s NFU policy is [deliberately ambiguous](#) to deter conventional attacks on its nuclear forces. Moreover, the PRC’s [four exceptions](#)

to its NFU policy are meant to “dissuade the continuation of the strong enemy’s conventional attacks against our major strategic targets.” China has [deliberately entangled](#) its nuclear and conventional command and control to intentionally increase the risk of nuclear escalation in the early stages of conflict. Finally, the article proclaims the virtues of no first use because an American NFU policy would leave the United States’ Indo-Pacific allies uncovered from America’s nuclear umbrella and more susceptible to Chinese nuclear coercion.

Third, the article declares, “There should be no cross-domain deterrence.” The US should manage the interplay between non-nuclear capabilities and nuclear deterrence. The article argues that a deterrence policy “stating that nuclear weapons will not be only used to deter nuclear strikes, but also used to deter non-nuclear strategic strikes...significantly lowers the nuclear threshold and drastically increases the risks of nuclear escalation.” Thus, the article argues that the United States and China should prohibit cross-domain deterrence.

With the article also suggesting the United States should adopt a “sole purpose” nuclear policy, the American arsenal would serve one purpose—detering nuclear attack. Considering that the article suggests the PRC maintains an advantage in strategic cyberattacks, advocacy for a sole purpose policy is little more than an attempt to encourage self-deterrence on the part of the United States. In reality, cross-domain deterrence is key to American security.

The US cannot threaten an in-kind response to a biological attack any more than it can an in-kind cyberattack. Dr. Strangelove suggested that “deterrence is the art of producing, in the mind of the enemy, the fear to attack.” Asymmetric deterrence ensures the United States can deter any attack with the most destructive weapons available. The article advocates for a PRC advantage by removing that fearful threat and thus increasing PRC freedom of action.

Fourth, the article argues that “[t]here should be no unlimited development of missile defense systems. It is undeniable that missile defense has negative impacts upon strategic stability. The bilateral quarrel over missile defense is one of the root causes of US-Russia tensions in the past two decades. An agreement should be reached to limit the development and deployment of missile defense systems in order to assure other nuclear weapon states that their nuclear retaliation capabilities will not be compromised.”

Designed to defend against North Korean attack, American missile defense systems are part of [integrated deterrence](#) and are purposed to limit damage and “expand decision-making space for senior leaders.” With the PRC’s [brehtaking](#) growth and modernization of its nuclear forces exhibited in the recent construction of [over 300 new intercontinental ballistic missile silos and at least 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035](#), China may well be seeking to overwhelm any current or future missile defenses by orders of magnitude.

China is also [leading](#) the hypersonic missile arms race, including the coupling of hypersonic weapons with the fractional orbital bombardment system (FOBS) that are [potentially nuclear-armed](#) and a destabilizing first-strike capability. Finally, America’s nuclear recapitalization program is already into its second decade and has yet to produce the first new system.

Promulgating PRC propaganda as unbiased perspective may feel good, but it is a red herring. China long ago left the blocks in an arms race that the United States still does not understand it is losing. Not only is China modernizing and expanding its nuclear first-strike capability, but it is also doing so under the guise of deterrence and fear, while the PRC is developing a coercive force meant to ransom American cities in exchange for a Sino-centric Indo-Pacific.

If the United States wants to retain its geopolitical influence and continue to assure regional allies, it must avoid any compromise with the Chinese, like that offered in the article discussed. Instead, it is time for the United States to embark on a comprehensive nuclear arms build-up that accounts for the risks posed by an aggressive and hostile China. To do anything less is a concession to Chinese imperialism and an admission that the United States is no longer a “shining city upon a hill,” the beacon of liberty President Reagan once suggested this country is to the rest of the world.

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