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Implications of Chinese Nuclear Weapons Modernization for the United States and Regional Allies

DR. JOHN LEE & ASSOC. PROFESSOR LAVINA LEE

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Cover: A formation of Dongfeng-41 nuclear missiles takes part in a military parade celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing on October 1, 2019. (Xia Yifang via Getty Images)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on current trends, China will become a quantitative and qualitative nuclear weapons peer of the United States by the early to mid-2030s with a diversified, accurate, and survivable force that will rival America's. Rather than having only high-yield nuclear missiles as a strategic deterrent against nuclear attack, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is developing a range of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, the latter being lower-yield weapons usable in a conflict theater.

Why is China seemingly going beyond its long-standing nuclear weapons approach of maintaining only a minimal deterrent or assured retaliation? Why has it chosen to rapidly develop its nuclear arsenal and related delivery system in a deliberately opaque manner?

This report argues that Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decided to embark on such a rapid nuclear modernization not primarily because China wants to "win" a nuclear exchange against the US. Rather, Beijing wants to create political and psychological effects that lead to enormously important strategic and military effects.

As the report explains, the CCP and PLA are using the rapid development of nuclear capability and related delivery systems to subdue the adversary and win without fighting. The following are components of achieving this:

Photo: People watch a video featuring Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Military Museum in Beijing on March 2, 2025. (Pedro Pardo via Getty Images)

- Degrade the adversary's decision-making.
- Weaken the adversary's will to fight.
- Undermine the adversary's public support for war.
- Undermine the resolve of the adversary's government from within.
- Support and enhance deterrence.

The report assesses that there are three ways in which China uses nuclear modernization to change the material and psychological environment with important strategic effects that work to its advantage.

First, China uses advances in nuclear weapons to craft and entrench its strategic narratives throughout the region. Second, nuclear modernization enhances Beijing's ability to deter, enjoy escalation dominance, and coerce in material and psychological ways that are advantageous for China. Third, Chinese modernization manipulates and degrades trust in US extended nuclear deterrence and deepens allied fears of US abandonment.

More broadly, the report argues that these strategic effects of Chinese nuclear modernization are completely aligned with evolving CCP and PLA notions of strategic stability, strategic deterrence, and strategic capabilities. For China, strategic stability is not simply a stable state in its relations with other great powers. It entails a stability that is advantageous for the advancement of Chinese geopolitical and development objectives. In this sense, a stable but dynamic (rather than static) set of relationships and arrangements allows China to accumulate comprehensive national power in a relative and absolute sense.

For the CCP and PLA, strategic deterrence is not only about deterring an adversary from a specific military course of action or policy. It also involves placing ongoing and enduring military and nonmilitary constraints on an adversary in a manner that is advantageous for the pursuit of China's broader objectives. Indeed, China's nuclear weapons do not exist only to deter a nuclear attack. They also exist to shape the military and nonmilitary actions and mindsets of other states to ensure they are conducive to Chinese interests. This includes asymmetric strategic stability and asymmetric strategic deterrence, which shape the actions and mindsets of nations that do not have proportionate strategic capabilities.

The modernizing nuclear arsenal exists to enable China to attack the adversary's plans (strategies) and allies, bringing China one step closer to subduing the enemy and winning without fighting.

The report then offers case studies of the Chinese stratagem against the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea. It concludes with the recommendations summarized below:

- Abandon the false hope of arms control and embrace ambiguity and strategic instability.
- Recognize that there is no need for allies to consider developing their own nuclear weapons. This is a distraction that will play into Chinese hands.
- Double down on conventional allied rearmament and underpin it with credible US extended nuclear deterrence.
- Engage in psychological warfare with strategic effects.

1. INTRODUCTION: CHINESE NUCLEAR MODERNIZATION BEYOND A MINIMAL DETERRENT

In previous decades, nuclear weapons were one of the few areas of relative Chinese restraint. Even when it began its rapid conventional military modernization program from the 1990s onward, Beijing seemed unconvinced of the utility of nuclear weapons beyond demonstrating it could respond to a strategic attack as part of a policy of minimal deterrence and assured retaliation.

China's persistent shunning of arms control agreements on the basis that these would lock in advantages for the US[1] ought to have indicated that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wanted more than a minimal deterrent and was not genuinely committed to a no-first-use (NFU) doctrine. Similarly, China's insistence that "transparency is a tool of the strong to be used against the weak" is not indicative of a modest nuclear mindset.[2]

In any event, Western complacency is ending. From a stockpile of around 300 nuclear warheads several years ago, analysts estimate that China could have approximately 700 nuclear warheads by 2027 and over 1,000 by 2031 (see table 1). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is also rapidly developing a tripartite nuclear force structure consisting of land, sea, and air-based capabilities. For example, China has launched at least six Jin-class Type

Photo: People look at a Chinese H-6 bomber at the Military Museum in Beijing on March 2, 2025. (Pedro Pardo via Getty Images)

094 nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), which have likely already begun near-continuous at-sea deterrence patrols. Beijing will likely soon begin constructing its quieter next-generation Type 096 SSBNs with longer-range JL-3 sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). It is developing a next-generation stealth bomber that will likely be nuclear capable. It began construction of more than 300 new silos in 2020–21 that will significantly expand the size of its silo-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force. China is also investing in advanced nuclear capabilities such as hypersonic boost-glide systems and possibly a fractional orbital bombardment system.[3] Its nuclear weapons are launchable from multiple platforms, including ground-based silos, road-mobile launchers, submarines, and aircraft.

In addition to significantly expanding its stockpile of nuclear warheads and improving and expanding the means to deliv-

Table 1. China's Growing Nuclear Capabilities

CAPABILITY	2011	2022	2031
Total Warheads	178	~400	1,000
Total warheads that can reach the continental United States	~40	~200	`600-700
Land-based ICBMs	Completed development	Completed development	Completed development
SSBNs		Completed development	Completed development
Nuclear bombers		Incomplete or ongoing	Completed development
MIRV		Completed development	Completed development
Solid-fueled	Incomplete or ongoing	Completed development	Completed development
Mobile ICBMs	Completed development	Completed development	Completed development
Early-warning satellites		Incomplete or ongoing	Completed development
Large phased-array radars	Incomplete or ongoing	Completed development	Completed development
Over-the-horizion radars		Completed development	Completed development
Regional nuclear forces	Incomplete or ongoing	Completed development	Completed development
Tactical nuclear weapons			Uncertain
Hypersonic systems		Incomplete or ongoing	Completed development

Source: David D. Logan and Philip C. Saunders, *Discerning the Drivers of China's Nuclear Force Development: Models, Indicators, and Data* (National Defense University Press, 2023), 7, https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/china-strategic-perspectives/1.

er them, China is quickly improving the mobility, accuracy, and range of deployed weapons systems. It is developing its nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) system, which will have improved intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities that include early warning and ballistic missile defense systems. These would allow China to move to a launch-on-warning posture, meaning it could launch retaliatory nuclear weapons for an incoming strike that ISR systems have detected but that has not yet detonated on Chinese territory.

On current trends, China will become a quantitative and qualitative nuclear peer of the US by the early to mid-2030s with a diversified, accurate, and survivable force that rivals America's. Rather than having only high-yield nuclear missiles as a strategic deterrent against nuclear attack, the PLA is developing a range of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, the latter being lower-yield weapons usable in a conflict theater.[4]

Analysts disagree on the motivations behind Chinese nuclear modernization. Some argue that China is simply building a more survivable and effective nuclear arsenal as part of its long-standing assured retaliation doctrine. For example, it could be accumulating and updating strategic missiles, nuclear weapons stockpiles, silos, mobile delivery systems, and ISR capabilities to ensure an adversary cannot disarm it with a first strike and that it can inflict prohibitive damage against a nuclear adversary's homeland for deterrence purposes.[5] Others believe China is simply responding to advances in US capabilities that could threaten the credibility of its assured retaliation strategy.[6] If so, one should not be too alarmist about Chinese nuclear modernization.

Still others argue that the pace and nature of Chinese nuclear modernization no longer resemble those of a doctrine of minimal deterrence and assured destruction.[7] Is giving China the benefit of the doubt prudent when it is developing a growing number and variety of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons that the PLA can deliver quickly and accurately? If the rationalization is that China perceives a more hostile external environment and is responding, then does not the same logic apply in reverse? Should the US and its allies feel confident that China is simply upgrading its assured retaliation posture in this more hostile environment? Or should analysts conclude that China's nuclear modernization indicates Beijing will use strategic and tactical nuclear weapons to achieve strategic objectives?

What observers do not dispute is that China's development of a nuclear arsenal looks very different from the way previous generations of leaders and strategists understood the requirements of assured retaliation. Additionally, the numbers and capabilities of its arsenal sit uneasily alongside its formal doctrine of NFU. Given China's lack of transparency in doctrinal, operational, and capability contexts, its motivation and intent are difficult to decipher.

There are excellent ongoing assessments of Chinese nuclear modernization. It is not the purpose of this report to reproduce or add to this growing literature. Instead, we seek to understand the reasons why Xi Jinping has decided to embark on such rapid nuclear modernization and the strategic purpose and intent behind doing so. After all, the decision to embark on this path is presumably and primarily a political and strategic one driven by Xi Jinping rather than a decision with military origins. The PLA remains the party's 'military rather than one which owes loyalty to the Chinese state. Examining how Xi and the CCP think about all tools available to the Chinese state will offer better clues regarding the motivation and intent behind Chinese nuclear modernization—that is, why now and for what purposes?

This is the concern of the following section. We then look at the strategic intent and effects of Chinese nuclear modernization and how it might impact the strategic approaches of the US and its allies in the region. The final section looks at some implications and policy recommendations arising from these assessments.

2. CHINESE INTENT AND STRATEGY

The CCP derives its formal pronouncements about nuclear strategy and policy from Mao Zedong's view that nuclear weapons have limited value on the battlefield. For this reason, China has committed to an NFU policy since it became a nuclear power in 1964. As the previous section notes, the need to achieve a minimal level of deterrence through a credible second-strike capability has overwhelmingly guided China's traditional nuclear policy and doctrine. To be sure, Mao and his successors understood how being a nuclear power allowed Beijing to shape attitudes toward and perceptions of China (see table 2).[8] But they intended the nuclear element of Chinese military and geopolitical strategy to negate the ability of other nuclear powers to use these weapons to threaten or coerce China.

Some analysts argue that Xi does not represent a radical departure from his predecessors on nuclear policy. Yet before Xi came to power, the development and scale of China's nuclear arsenal remained modest compared to its military modernization in other areas. So why is Xi seemingly looking to develop a nuclear arsenal that goes beyond an NFU or minimal-deterrent policy and strategy?

Some responses seem superficially plausible but no more reassuring. Perhaps in the Xi era the CCP has concluded it is finally a major power and so has an intrinsic right to have nuclear parity with the US. After all, Xi's predecessors all linked the possession of nuclear weapons with China's reemergence as a modern great power: the greater Chinese power, the more modern its nuclear arsenal needs to become.

Or perhaps as the rivalry with the US deepens, China's threat perception of the US nuclear arsenal increases, leading to the

Photo: Chinese President Xi Jinping meets representatives when inspecting the information support force of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on December 4, 2024. (Li Gang via Getty Images)

Table 2. Chinese Leaders and Nuclear Weapons

MAO ZEDONG IN 1964	Imperialist countries "look down upon us because we don't have atomic bombs . . . therefore China should have atomic bombs and develop hydrogen bombs as soon as possible."
DENG XIAOPING IN 1988	"If China had not had atomic and hydrogen bombs . . . since the 1960s, it would not have been able to be called a major power with significant influence and would not have had the international status it has now."
JIANG ZEMIN IN 2002	China should "strive to build a lean and effective strategic nuclear force commensurate with China's great power status."
HU JINTAO IN 2011	China should "build a strategic missile force [including nuclear missiles] commensurate with China's major power status."

Source: Tong Zhao, *Political Drivers of China's Changing Nuclear Policy* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024), https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/china-nuclear-buildup-political-drivers-united-states-relationship-international-security.

need to modernize its nuclear weapons to maintain the credibility of its minimal deterrence. A key observation can counter this view: Despite the Obama administration's so-called pivot to Asia, which was a largely hollow strategic and military gesture, the rivalry with the US did not genuinely deepen until Donald Trump came to power in 2017. Yet Xi transformed and upgraded the Second Artillery Corps into a full military service and renamed it the PLA Rocket Force in 2015. He also began to immediately increase spending and the pace of development of nuclear weapons in the land, sea, and undersea domains. This seems more than what is necessary for a minimal deterrent.

Previous versions of the PLA's authoritative textbooks, such as the *2006 Science of Campaigns* and *2013 Science of Military Strategy*,[9] referenced the importance of nuclear weapons in the context of achieving deterrence and stability through assured retaliation and strategic balance.[10] However, the *2020 Science of Military Strategy* called for the PLA to "strive to build a lean and effective strategic nuclear force commensurate with China's international status *and commensurate with national security and development interests*" (emphasis added).[11] Analysts should take the "lean and effective" characterization with a grain of salt given the pace and scale of Chinese nuclear weapons development. More notably, nuclear weapons appear to take on a more proactive strategic role beyond a minimal deterrent, and they might even be an essential complement to China's growing international status as a global power.

This more proactive role for nuclear weapons seems to be an essential element of Xi's notion of strategic deterrence (which goes beyond only deterring others from using nuclear weapons against China).[12] The PLA Rocket Force became responsible for enhancing "strategic counterbalancing capabilities," and nuclear weapons played a central role in advancing this mission.[13] The point is that Chinese emphasis on nuclear weapons has not incrementally increased as the country's comprehensive national power has grown. Xi has rapidly, deliberately, and decisively increased the strategic value and utility of a growing nuclear arsenal. This change is not proportional to the steady increase in Chinese comprehensive national power.

Other developments suggest a fundamental shift in Beijing's approach to nuclear weapons. For example, China is increasing the number of new silo-based and submarine-based nuclear weapons it will likely prepare to launch on warning of an incom-

ing attack, and it is likely developing lower-yield tactical nuclear warhead capabilities.[14] In addition to undermining the credibility of its NFU declaratory policy, these changes indicate that Beijing might seek to enhance and exploit the strategic and geopolitical value of its growing nuclear arsenal.

While some experts argue that current Chinese nuclear modernization is more about status and military strength than about military objectives or deterrence, even they are perplexed. They concede that rapid increases in China's strategic nuclear arsenal, such as new silos and road-mobile ICBMs, are puzzling. As Tong Zhou, who is skeptical of the idea that Chinese nuclear modernization is about threatening or subjugating other nations, argues, there is "little evidence in China's official documents or in private analyses by its experts to support [such claims]" and that "without examining internal deliberations and policymaking processes, such speculation often remains quite subjective."[15]

China's nuclear doctrine and nuclear warfighting approach are notoriously opaque and deliberately ambiguous. While observers must speculate whether China seeks to use nuclear weapons to achieve tangible military or political objectives, assuming that rapid nuclear modernization is only about symbolism or national pride is dangerous. Even experts warning against overreacting to current Chinese nuclear modernization nevertheless assess such advancements as seemingly incommensurate with previous Chinese caution.[16]

Without clear evidence as to why Chinese nuclear modernization is occurring, a prudent inquiry should address the following questions. First, how do Chinese leaders make their most important decisions on strategic, political, and military policies? Second, how might current Chinese nuclear modernization relate to more general Chinese geostrategy in the Xi Jinping era?

Decision-Making in Contemporary China

The implementation and institutionalization process for centralized decision-making has several steps. First, authority has shifted away from ministerial and administrative bodies formally answerable to the State Council and toward CCP-controlled entities that were not previously formal organs of state power (see table 3).

Table 3. March 2018 Reorganization of State Council Entities under CCP Authority

STATE COUNCIL ENTITY	CCP LEADERSHIP BODY ASSUMING POWER AND RESPONSIBILITIES
Ministry of Supervision	National Supervisory Commission
Bureau of Corruption Prevention	National Supervisory Commission
State Office for Public Sector Reform	CCP Organization Department
Civil Service Department	CCP Organization Department
National Academy of Governance	Central Party School
State Administration for Press & Media	CCP Propaganda Department
State Ethnic Affairs Commission	CCP United Work Front Department
State Administration for Religious Affairs	CCP United Work Front Department
State Council, Overseas Chinese Affairs	CCP United Work Front Department

Source: Nis Grünberg and Katja Drinhausen, *The Party Leads on Everything* (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2019), https://merics.org/en/report/party-leads-everything.

Table 4. CCP Commissions and Leading Small Groups Chaired by Xi Jinping

COMMISSION / SMALL GROUP	HISTORY
Central Comprehensive Reform Commission	Est. 2013 as a small group, upgraded to a commission in 2018
Central Finance and Economic Affairs Commission	Est. 1958 as a small group, upgraded to a commission in 2018
Central Foreign Affairs Commission	Est. 1958 as a small group, upgraded to a commission in 2018
Central National Security Commission	Est. 2000 as a small group, upgraded to a commission in 2013
Central Commission for Cybersecurity and Informationization	Est. 2014 as a small group, upgraded to a commission in 2018
Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development	Est. 2017 as a commission
Central Comprehensive Law-Based Governance Commission	Est. 2017 as a small group, upgraded to a commission in 2018
Central Audit Commission	Est. 2018 as a commission
Central Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group	Est. 1954 as a small group

Source: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "CCP Decision-Making and Xi Jinping's Centralization of Authority," in *2022 Annual Report to Congress* (USCC, 2022), https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2022-annual-report-congress.

Second, in all matters related explicitly to national security, the CCP has transferred power from state organs to CCP commissions and leading small groups that Xi chairs (see table 4). Individuals who are personally and politically loyal to Xi and report directly to him lead these commissions, which lead all policy elements in their national security areas.

Third, Xi ensures he not only exercises formal authority over these entities as chairman but is also actively involved in defining and changing rules and regulations pertaining to them. For example, some analysts estimate that Xi is personally responsible for creating or changing more than two-thirds of the party's central regulations and rules. In 2021, he approved new CCP rules that increased his personal authority and control over personnel selection and promotions, senior cadres, and (as general secretary of the CCP) the agenda and operations of the Central Committee, Politburo, and Standing Committee of the Politburo.[17]

The upshot is that Xi has effectively imposed his comprehensive national security framing on almost every element of governance and policy, tying it inextricably to his centralized and personalized decision-making and authority.

At the same time, he has given greater definition and detail to his comprehensive national security concept to complement its overarching importance in contemporary China. The concept is based on the proposition that threats to the CCP and its legitimacy can come from any domestic or international source and require disciplined and proactive efforts to manage and minimize them. This stance covers political, military, territorial, scientific, cyber, cultural, societal, resource security, economic, environmental, space, deep sea, and biological threats.[18] It defines almost any vulnerability as a security threat and allows the regime to harness all elements of Chinese power and statecraft to minimize or even anticipate a threat. In this sense, Xi has imposed his deep sense of regime insecurity and vulnerability on the process of defining threats to the Chinese state. His comprehensive national security concept also requires viewing any threat to his personal rule or standing as a threat to the CCP and the Chinese state because it increasingly conflates the three entities.

Xi's authority and control over the military are even more pronounced. More than simply changing senior officers, which he has done, he has handpicked officers for almost all senior positions. All PLA personnel swear allegiance to him rather than only

to the CCP. He explicitly expects the PLA to follow the principles and dictates of Xi Jinping Thought.[19]

The Central Military Commission (CMC) retains ultimate authority over decision-making for both the PLA and People's Armed Police (PAP). As chairman of the CMC, Xi enjoys the institutional decision-making power that previous chairmen possessed. However, he has personalized this power to an unprecedented degree. Under Xi, the CMC has placed much more emphasis on "political work" to strengthen the loyalty of the military and paramilitary forces to Xi personally. The first priority of the PLA and PAP is explicitly to "obey the Party's command," which is Xi's command. The ability to fight and win is only a secondary priority.[20]

Moreover, Xi has enhanced the CMC's power over military policy and other related matters at the expense of the State Council, provincial officials, and PLA bodies—thereby enhancing his personal power over the PLA and PAP. For example, the CMC provides the overall management and direction for all military and paramilitary forces. While the theater commands (Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central) remain responsible for operational warfighting matters, the CCP restructured the PLA's previous four general departments (General Political, General Logistics, General Armament, and General Staff) in 2016 and allocated their previous responsibilities to entities reporting directly to the CMC. This means military functions such as training, mobilization, and strategic planning are now under direct CMC control, and military forces therefore seek out and follow Xi's direct instructions. Service chiefs of the PLA Ground Force, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force no longer have a direct decision-making role within the CMC.[21] As a PLA newspaper dutifully put it, the role of the military is to "resolutely respond to the call sent out by Chairman Xi, and resolutely complete the tasks bestowed upon them by Chairman Xi."[22]

Xi has personally demanded the acceleration and modernization of China's nuclear weapons arsenal. This is an essential component not just of a "world-class strategic force" but of Xi's China Dream of Rejuvenation.[23] For Xi, the Dream of a Strong Armed Force is essential for achieving the Dream of a Strong Nation and a world-class military, which includes nuclear modernization as an essential pillar of the China Dream.[24] For this reason, the thinking behind China's rapid nuclear modernization is likely Xi's thinking on geostrategy. It is not simply about elevating China's status. Neither can one explain such rapid modernization using purely military tactical reasoning (i.e., as an essential and missing component of existing PLA military doctrine and tactics).

For this reason, examining the Chinese approach to geostrategy in the Xi Jinping era offers some clues as to the thinking behind the Chinese focus on nuclear weapons. The following sections will look at China's geostrategic approach and how Beijing has implemented that strategy in the Xi Jinping era.

Chinese Indo-Pacific Geostrategy

One of the best-known lines from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is "To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." A subsequent passage gives this line context and content: "The highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities." In short, success is most likely when one avoids a direct assault in favor of subverting and circumventing an enemy's entrenched strengths and strongholds.

China believes a stable and amicable US-China relationship is possible only if the US accepts the legitimacy of the Chinese political system and state-led political economy and respects China's so-called core interests. The US and its allies might counter that Beijing continues to expand and ever more aggressively pursue its so-called core interests, and that China has long viewed the US as its primary and inevitable rival, even when the US pursued relatively benign policies toward it (such as in the 1990s and 2000s).

Regardless, the CCP believes it is already at war with the United States and its allies, including Australia. Like Sun Tzu, the CCP

prefers to win without fighting or, if there is recourse to kinetic action, to prepare the ground for victory before military hostilities begin. In this context, this report does not suggest that the allies should downplay the importance of the PLA and the threat its presence and capabilities pose. On the contrary, it suggests they should more comprehensively understand and appreciate how China seeks to compete, fight, and win. In doing so, the allies should accept that they are already in a war and need to rethink how best to compete, fight, and prevail.

The proposition that the US and its allies are in a war is troubling. In Western thinking, there are clear differences between peacetime and wartime even though leaders have long understood that war is the continuation of politics, albeit using extreme and violent means. In this way of thinking, a state of war occurs only when the state formally decides to use force to achieve political and strategic objectives.

For the CCP, war or warfare is a broader and more flexible concept. Like in the West, the aim of the use of force is to achieve political and strategic objectives. However, force is merely one form or domain of warfare. Others include the use of political warfare (e.g., information, influence, and psychological operations) and institutional warfare to either enhance the effectiveness of the possible use of force or to achieve political and strategic outcomes without relying on kinetic force. Warfare is about mobilizing national resources to subjugate and defeat the enemy, whether there is physical destruction or merely the threat of it.

Understanding the CCP's Political and Strategic Objectives

If the CCP believes it is already at war with the West, what are its political and strategic objectives? To answer this, it is important to understand how the CCP views the regional and global order within which China is still rising.

That global order has been based around US military and economic dominance. In the region, the US consolidated its strategic presence through its system of alliances and security partnerships. As far as Beijing is concerned, the US provided security and public goods that made economic development possible, but with the expectation that the US would export its values of political and economic reform to participants. From Richard Nixon's rapprochement to George W. Bush's encouragement of Beijing to become a "responsible stakeholder," China was to rise under US leadership and within the US-led system and eventually face irresistible pressures to change its political and economic institutions. Failure to do so would result in US-led isolation or partial containment of China.[25] Donald Trump and Joe Biden expressed similar objectives. This American aspiration is the Chinese vision of failure.

"Hide your brightness, bide your time" was a patient tactic that made the most of China's window of opportunity during a time of relative weakness, and it dissuaded the US and others from either demanding reforms inside China or limiting the growth of Chinese power and influence. From Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, the "struggle" against external forces never ended even if tactics and diplomacy changed radically over the decades. The Chinese have spent many decades and considerable resources studying and understanding the nature and sources of US power. As they concluded, a dominant nation's position in the regional and global order comes from the following broad sources or "forms of control":[26]

- Coercive capability, based largely on material means and resolve
- Consensual inducements, based on providing incentives to nations bilaterally or through preferred institutional arrangements
- Legitimacy, which can be based on gaining wide acceptance or setting institutional norms or conventions

China's vision of success is about enhancing its forms of control and weakening America's. As Rush Doshi and others have not-

ed, a weaker China focused more on nonkinetic warfare to blunt American and allied power, while a more powerful (or confident) China is transitioning to building and entrenching forms of control that surpass America's.[27] In this sense, Xi's China Dream of "rejuvenation" envisages the country and party enjoying and exercising dominant forms of control over Asia and beyond. As Xi explained in his 30,000-word speech at the CCP's Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017, victory is a "new era" of greater Chinese activism in global governance, the development of a "world-class" Chinese military with global projection and reach, and the emergence of a China that will "become a leading country in comprehensive national strength and international influence." This will herald China's arrival on the "world's center stage."[28]

Although there is no doubt about the scale of Beijing's global ambitions, most of its efforts (that negatively affect US interests) still focus on securing hegemony over the maritime nations of Asia. Ideational or nonmaterial considerations can never negate or wish away the significance of geography and other material factors. There are obvious reasons for the focus on the Indo-Pacific. The region is home to more than half of the world's population and around 60 percent of global gross domestic product. More than one-third of trade and energy flows pass through the region.

In addition to the US, the region has five nuclear military powers—Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—along with latent or potential nuclear powers, such as Japan and South Korea. The four largest military spenders in the world are Indo-Pacific nations (the US, China, India, and Russia) while Japan and South Korea occupy the ninth and tenth positions. It has also become the region with the most rapid increases in military expenditure and military modernization.

In security terms, the region is fluid. While there are multiple increasingly militarized maritime and land disputes, the region has weak security organizations and unclear security arrangements between countries. For example, the US and its Indo-Pacific allies have not institutionalized their security guarantees to the extent of the collective security agreement in Europe. Formal treaty commitments to Indo-Pacific powers have ambiguous phrasing and constantly evolve based on changing circumstances.

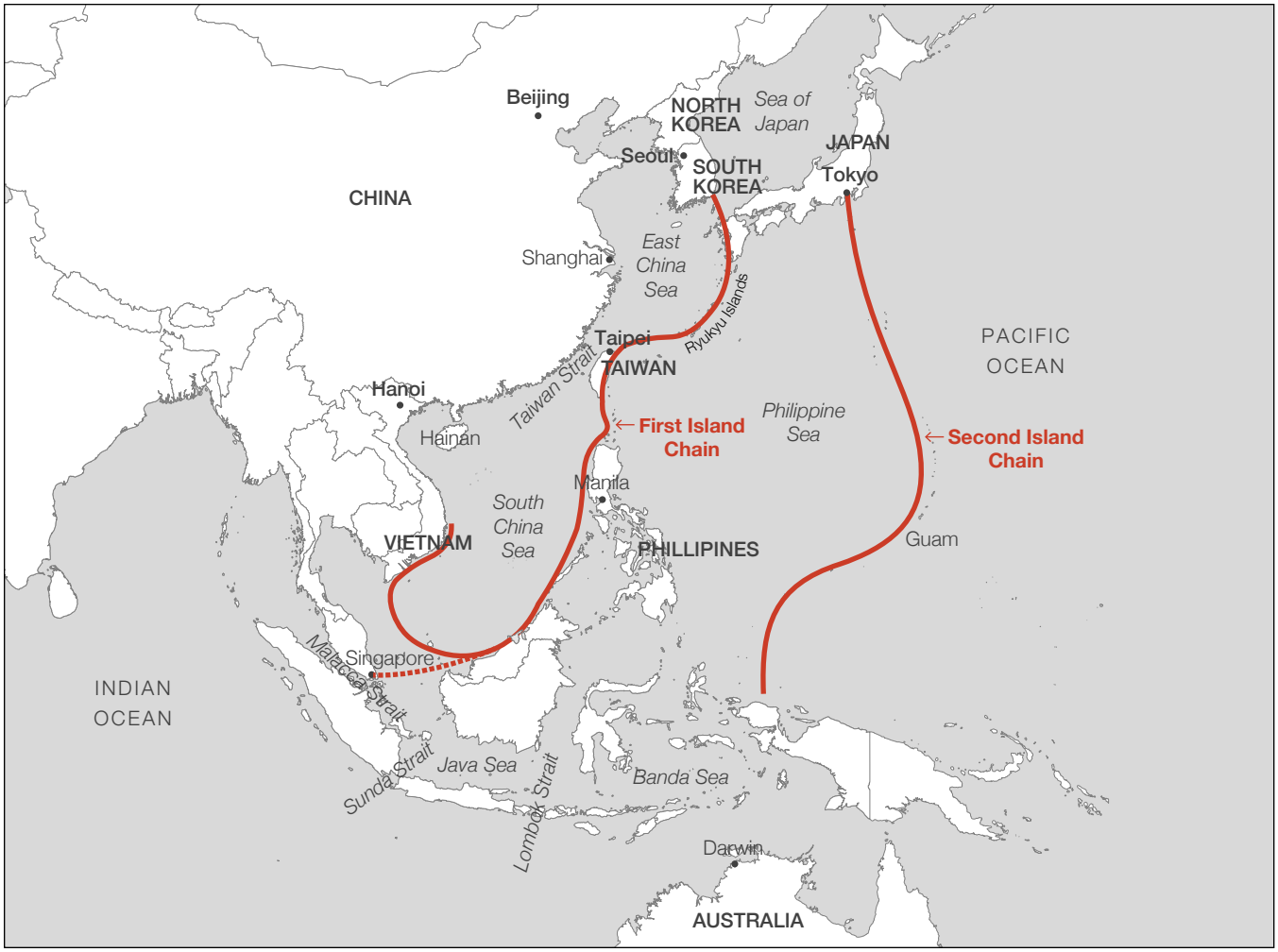
China exerts a dominant geographical presence in the heart of the Indo-Pacific. It shares land borders with 14 countries and claims maritime territories that directly impact the interests of almost every country in the region with a maritime border. It is also a rare beast as a continental power that has rapidly made the difficult transition to become a sea power (even if there is considerable uncertainty as to whether its strategic doctrine and operational competencies have kept pace with its sea power capabilities). As many analysts have noted, the most important geography in strategic terms throughout the Indo-Pacific is not the continental but the maritime areas.[29] This is because the maritime areas and activities overwhelmingly shape the security and prosperity of not just the maritime nations but also the major continental nations and the US.

Geostrategy analysts commonly refer to these areas as the First Island Chain, which begins at the Kuril Islands and extends down to the Japanese Archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and the southern part of Vietnam in Indo-China (see map 1). The first step toward dominance in the Indo-Pacific is preeminence in the First Island Chain, which opens the pathway toward presence and perhaps preeminence in the Second Island Chain. This area spans from the Bonin and Volcano Islands of Japan to Guam and toward the eastern islands belonging to Indonesia. A strong presence here would allow the preeminent power to establish a dominant foothold in the middle of the Pacific. It would also allow a traditionally continental power like China to negate potential vulnerabilities like bottlenecks and blockades in important straits and channels.

As Roy Kamphausen explains:

> These straits are of two kinds. The first run perpendicular to the Asian landmass and essentially cre-

Map 1. First and Second Island Chains



Source: Adapted from Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *Archipelagic Defense 2.0* (Hudson Institute, 2023), https://www.hudson.org/archipelagic-defense-2-taiwan-china-japan-australia-deterrence-us-navy-andrew-krepinevich-jr, 12.

Note: Some analysts draw the line for the First Island Chain so that its southern end continues to Singapore, as the dotted line indicates, instead of curving north to Vietnam.

ate paths between islands from the continent to the open sea [e.g., Tsugaru Strait between Honshu and Hokkaido, Ishigaki Strait between Ishigaki and Miyako Islands in the Ryukyus, and Malacca and Taiwan Straits, which offer access from one sea to another]. . . . The straits that pass through and between islands are decisive because they afford military and commercial advantages.[30]

In short, Beijing knows the fate and positioning of the US and China will depend on what occurs in the maritime space and with the maritime nations rather than in Central Asia or land-

locked South Asia. China's plans to its west, including through relevant parts of the Belt and Road Initiative, are important in developing the poorer inner provinces and offering possible trading routes that do not pass through maritime East Asia. But these will not be decisive in a global geopolitical sense. Beijing has no choice but to become a great, and eventually dominant, maritime power in East Asia.

Although Japan and a unified Korea have the potential to re-emerge as regional great powers, China still realizes that it is largely dealing with an assorted collection of small states. While some small states, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, may yet become formidable strategic actors in their immediate localities, their primary strategic value is to assist great powers as enablers or blockers.

These regional disparities mean that China has long been obsessed with identifying strategic, military, and other nonmaterial weaknesses pertaining to the US.[31] Beijing focuses on the United States because it realizes there is no real possibility of an enduring or effective balance without a US presence. This is notwithstanding the debates within China about whether American dominance has entered its twilight years in structural terms or whether renewal is possible. The point remains that in the decisive maritime areas of East Asia, and since the end of the Second World War, only the US possesses the capabilities and relationships to dominate or intervene decisively.

Beijing also realizes that the United States' much greater distance from maritime East Asia can be both a structural advantage and a disadvantage. It is an advantage because the prospect of an Asian hegemon creates more apprehension for smaller regional states than a distant one. The distant US power requires greater acquiescence from Indo-Pacific states to retain its presence and relevance in the region. In that sense, the US is more structurally bound to provide public security goods than an Asian hegemon would be. That partly explains why most states still largely welcome the US as a superpower.

Initially, China's approach from the 1990s onward was about acquiring capabilities to inflict (or threaten to inflict) prohibitive costs, which would dissuade the US from intervening decisively. As the PLA's capacities grew in absolute and relative terms, the conventional superiority of the US military would become decisive only in a protracted conflict or with the luxury of significant warning time prior to a conflict. As the PLA erodes, if not surpasses, US military superiority in theaters in China's periphery, such as the Taiwan Strait, the US and its allies become immensely vulnerable to attacks against their bases and ports. This means the US becomes ever more reliant on the goodwill, acquiescence, and resolve of regional allies and partners.

In this context, the US is at a structural disadvantage because the strategic neutrality or passivity of these small states can be crippling for a distant power while being only inconvenient for an Asian hegemon such as China. Hence, Beijing does not need the same strategic or military cooperation from local allies and partners that the US does. Beijing has the easier task of merely neutralizing US allies and partners rather than acquiring them for itself. If China can shift the cost-benefit calculations of these allies and partners in its favor, then it can leave the US immensely exposed as a geographically distant power.

In other words, simply minimizing the strategic and military relevance and agency of regional states works in China's favor given it is the PLA that is strengthening its presence in the region, not the US or its allies. Achieving that was always a central pillar of China's strategy to ease the US out of Asia and therefore to win without fighting. That is still China's primary strategic approach.

In China's view, the struggle began long ago, and war is already here. It is not (yet) fought in kinetic terms, but China's vision of success in Asia is not exclusively or even necessarily reliant on surpassing raw US power and influence, as would be necessary in a simple contest on a level playing field. The key to success is gradually locking the US out of the region, which it can

achieve if US allies and partners drift away from their alliances or lose the will to contribute to US-led actions in the region.

Winning Without Fighting and the Role of Nuclear Weapons

In 1948 under the leadership of George Kennan, a Policy Planning Staff memorandum described political warfare as "the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives."[32] A rich and growing literature has been analyzing this concept but applying it to contemporary China. This analysis reflects increased knowledge of the CCP's deep thinking and reliance on military and nonmilitary means to achieve strategic and political ends.

Analysts often use the term *political warfare* to describe PLA-led actions to influence the emotions, motivations, objective reasoning, and behavior of a target country's government, organizations, groups, and citizens in a way that favors China's political and military goals.[33] Political warfare commonly relates to nonmaterial approaches to achieve an intended outcome,

Table 5. The Actions and Purposes of the Three Warfares

WARFARE	ACTIONS	PURPOSES
Psychological	Use or disseminate specific information or arguments to affect the psychology and subsequent behavior of the enemy. Focus on the psychology of coercion (compelling specific behavior); mystification or obfuscation (spreading confusion and uncertainty about facts or issues); division (encouraging and exploiting disagreement among enemies); and defense or resilience (ensuring the same cannot be done to Chinese entities).[117]	Encourage a potential adversary to be cautious about joining an action (including war) against China. Encourage the enemy to base their policies and actions on false or irrelevant information to dilute the effectiveness of their decision-making. Enhance the CCP's capacity to control the nature and pace of escalation by manipulating enemy calculation of costs and benefits and understanding of risk. Undermine the enemy's will to resist or endure costs/losses.
Public Opinion	Disseminate disinformation through media (newspapers, radio, television, the internet, films, books, and social media) to affect discussions and shape desired narratives in an enemy's environment.	Degrade public resolve to oppose CCP policies and actions. Shape not only public opinion but also public thought and speech about an issue (such as Taiwan, human rights, or Chinese history). Create social license to support and propagate the CCP's view of history and deny others the social license to oppose it.
Legal	Use legal and pseudo-legal arguments to redefine notions of legality and legitimacy. Develop favorable norms and processes in international organizations.	Redefine legality and legitimacy to justify Chinese actions (such as in the South China Sea). Increase the sphere of "legitimate" coercive and subversive Chinese actions. Use the threat of legal action to intimidate or silence or to impose financial or reputational costs on entities and individuals promoting views against Beijing's interests.

Source: Author.

such as placing disinformation in traditional and social media platforms, co-opting entities in other countries to support CCP perspectives, and infiltrating institutions in target countries.

However, the Chinese approach to political warfare does not confine or limit itself to relying on nonmaterial elements to achieve its objectives. Just as the CCP sees itself under threat from material and nonmaterial elements, it seeks to use both material and nonmaterial tools to prevail over adversaries.[34] The defining element of CCP political warfare is the way this concept allows China to overcome adversaries, whether through military or nonmilitary measures—even if Beijing prefers the latter.

To draw this out further, consider the PLA's political warfare doctrines and operations, which are the responsibility of the General Political Department (GPD). The GPD is one of four general departments under the all-powerful CMC.[35] That Beijing charges the PLA with conducting the "Three Warfares" should not lead one to treat the doctrine as exclusively military and concerned only with supporting traditional warfighting. Table 4 summarizes the actions and purposes of the Three Warfares.

Political warfare, which includes the Three Warfares framework, commonly engages nonmilitary elements of statecraft and subterfuge. The West tends to make a distinction between actions in peacetime and wartime, leading to a general distinction between nonkinetic and kinetic warfare. For the CCP, warfare occurs along a spectrum that encompasses both nonkinetic and kinetic activities. In other words, there is no firm distinction between peacetime and wartime. In this sense, warfare is about subduing the adversary, whether the means are kinetic or nonkinetic, or material or nonmaterial. Moreover, subduing the adversary can have physical or nonphysical manifestations and effects. According to the CCP, this is its objective in its warfare with the US and its allies.

Contemporary investigations of CCP and PLA thinking about the importance of new and emerging technologies to achieve strategic objectives demonstrate the usefulness of a political warfare framework to draw out a core strategic purpose of Chinese nuclear modernization. Recent literature suggests several ways the PLA operationalizes psychological warfare (a form of political warfare that is one of the Three Warfares) for strategic effect:[36]

- Degrade the adversary's decision-making
- Weaken the adversary's will to fight
- Undermine the adversary's support for war
- Undermine the adversary government's resolve from within
- Support and enhance deterrence

Many Chinese military texts on psychological warfare refer specifically to technologies and methods to manipulate or control the adversary's cognitive functions. But analysts should understand psychological warfare in a broader context of achieving strategic effects that go beyond shaping the cognitive functions of an individual adversary.

For example, the Three Warfares is only one overarching framework or schema that the CCP and PLA have developed to engage in political warfare. Other concepts include cognitive domain operations,[37] which are similar to psychological warfare and use information to influence an enemy's thinking, from peacetime decision-making to actual physical warfighting.

Given that Xi is intent on using all forms of material and nonmaterial power to achieve strategic effects along the entire continuum of warfare (from peacetime to actual kinetic conflict), analysts cannot disregard something as formidable and consequential as Chinese nuclear modernization. It is clearly a valuable national asset in China's strategic tool kit. Indeed, one can suggest three ways Chinese nuclear modernization is changing the psychological and material environment with enormously important strategic effects that work to China's advantage.

Strategic Narratives

Under China's conception of psychological warfare and cognitive domain operations, one key approach to "mental" or "mind" superiority for strategic advantage is perception manipulation through strategic narratives.[38]

The Chinese intent is not merely to disrupt, confuse, or create mischief but to craft and control grand narratives. Doing so is extremely effective because these narratives determine how leaders and populations reflexively interpret information and situations, what seems possible or not, what seems prudent rather than reckless, and what appears to be rational and in their long-term interest. Grand narratives determine how people think about a problem, issue, or development. In doing so, they predetermine the range of "reasonable" options and solutions that people believe are available.

An examination of CCP and PLA grand or strategic narratives reveals that such efforts are consistent, coherent, and relentless.[39] The key CCP and PLA grand narratives are these:

- Chinese dominance is the historical norm and is inevitable.
- The objectives of the CCP are permanent and unchanging.
- The CCP and PLA are fundamentally undeterrable and are prepared to pay any price to achieve an expanding list of core objectives.
- The US is an increasingly weak, unpredictable, and unreliable ally.

These grand narratives lead to the cognitive, psychological, ethical, and institutional predisposition to accept and internalize perspectives and alternatives that directly contradict and undermine national resolve and strategic creativity. They weaken the will and resolve of nations to resist and persuade decision-makers that the escalatory advantage is with Beijing, that preparing for and winning a war against China is impossible and must be avoided at any cost, that resistance will lead to catastrophic isolation and abandonment by the US and other allies, and that it is better to come to an arrangement with Beijing on contentious issues even if the terms heavily favor China.

Nuclear modernization is a unique and compelling element for Chinese grand narratives to build on with great strategic effect. Consider the fraught issue of Taiwan's future. The CCP is relentless in trying to persuade the world that integrating Taiwan into the mainland is a permanent and unchanging core objective for the CCP, that it will instruct the PLA to expend all efforts to prevent Taiwanese independence (and in more recent times, forcibly take Taiwan if necessary),[40] and that US resolve to defend Taiwan cannot be as firm as China's. This leads to the implication that allies like Australia would be foolhardy to become involved in any Taiwan Strait conflict.

Some, or all, of the narratives might well be accurate. The point is that the CCP crafts and promulgates them to produce strategic effects. With the addition of recent Chinese nuclear modernization efforts, one can find multiple instances in which experts and commentators who have absorbed and internalized these narratives invariably advocate for an accommodationist approach that heavily favors China's interests.

Analyses by Australian academic Hugh White offer one prominent example. For White, a US-China war over Taiwan would be the first serious conflict between two nuclear powers. To arrive at his policy conclusions and recommendations, White argues that China cannot afford to lose a war over Taiwan as this would be a politically existential crisis for the CCP. At the same time, the US is unlikely to allow China to forcibly seize Taiwan due to the extremely negative implications for America's credibility as a security guarantor in the region and therefore for its role and presence in the Indo-Pacific more broadly. Consequently, such a war is likely to be a large-scale regional conflict rather than a small and contained one.

Let's accept these assumptions, as they appear reasonable. It is at this point that the spellbinding power of Chinese strategic

narratives takes over. Even if one believes the military balance in Northeast Asia between the US and China is equal, White assesses China's resolve and ability to bear the risks and costs of a major war over Taiwan as exceeding America's. The US might be able to inflict significant damage on Chinese forces, but such costs will not be sufficient to be prohibitive. Over an issue like Taiwan, the CCP is prepared to pay almost any price to achieve victory.

If the US finds itself unable to prevail against China through conventional means, Washington might threaten Beijing with nuclear weapons. However, China is also a nuclear power, and as it gradually reaches nuclear parity with the US, any US president who considers embarking on this escalatory path will seem foolish. For these reasons, the onus is on the US to rethink its role in the defense of Taiwan in the first place, as White concludes:

> [This] danger (of a nuclear exchange) would weigh on American leaders more heavily than on Chinese leaders, for two reasons. First, China has a better chance of achieving its objective of taking Taiwan without threatening nuclear war than America does of stopping it. So America would probably have to make the first move towards the nuclear threshold—and without much confidence that even this would achieve its objectives. . . . Second, China's stake is higher than America's. It is not just that Taiwan is more important to China than it is to America. The wider prize of strategic primary in East Asia also matters more to China than it does to America, for the simple reason that it is China's backyard, not America's. . . . That gives the Chinese a big advantage in a deadly game of nuclear bluff and counter bluff.[41]

While this narrative assumes China is able and willing to inflict prohibitive costs on the US, at no point does it consider that the US can do the same without causing China to suffer prohibitive costs of its own. For those who accept the narrative, the only plausible and sensible policy response is for the US to avoid a war over Taiwan under any circumstances. If this kind of reasoning is accurate, it begs the question of why China has not already used force against Taiwan. But the power and persuasiveness of strategic narratives are causing some credible voices to advocate appeasement and submission without a proper assessment of Chinese vulnerabilities and risk-cost tolerance.

From here, it is a small and logical step to argue further that US allies such as Australia ought to disavow any efforts to join the US in collective brinksmanship against China, let alone contemplate any role for Australian forces in a Taiwan conflict. As former Australian Chief of Defense Chris Barrie argues, "In a large-scale war involving many hundreds of thousands of people in offensive and defensive operations, even before reaching the attendant prospect of reaching a nuclear war threshold, Australia is unlikely to make a substantial difference."[42]

The corollary is that, unable to make any significant military contribution, Australia should sit out a US-China war that could involve a catastrophic nuclear weapons exchange.[43]

Deterrence, Escalation, and Coercion

Chinese nuclear modernization gives China another asset related not just to the mechanics of deterrence but also to the psychology of deterring other states. Since the publication of Thomas Schelling's seminal work *Arms and Influence* in 1966, strategists and experts have generally approached deterrence by using game theory to map out the interests of decision-makers and states and predict their reactions and responses in pursuing or defending those interests. That is, seeking to deter is an activity taking place between rational actors.

Schelling produced his work at the height of the Cold War, and policymakers commonly applied his frameworks to deterrence between nuclear powers. In this context, they developed frameworks including mutual assured destruction and the madman theory. Behind these and other postulations is the idea that

actors can strategically use violence or coercion to shape and change the behavior of adversaries. For this reason, risk becomes an instrument of policy. This is a recognition that securing one's political objectives with only military force is difficult and often prohibitively costly. To *win* might be a military term, but to *deter* is far more complex than simply calculating which side has the more formidable military advantage.

Hence, one needs to use coercion, threats, and, if these fail, force in a way that compels adversaries to yield—what game theorists might refer to as the manipulation of risk for advantage. As Schelling argues, the power to hurt is bargaining power. This means actors can use threats (i.e., the power to hurt) to achieve a political outcome that is not necessarily based on the *imminent* material devastation of the adversary. Applying this concept to deterrence, one does not necessarily design the threat and pain-inflicting capacity to destroy the adversary. One designs them to persuade the adversary that refraining from a particular action (e.g., joining the US in defending Taiwan) will lead to a superior or preferable outcome for that adversary than what it might expect by using force. In other words, they aim to persuade the adversary that certain courses of action are too risky for them to even contemplate.

Crucially, one should not conflate the essence of deterrence with the credible and demonstrated ability to win a battle or even a war. This is especially pertinent to Chinese nuclear modernization. There is no evidence that Chinese military planners or strategists are preparing to *win* a war involving a nuclear exchange. That China had nuclear weapons in the past to deter an enemy from using nuclear weapons against it is beyond doubt. The question is whether Xi thinks China's nuclear modernization and posture can help it either deter the US from joining a war to defend Taiwan or deter US allies from joining America in the fray. In this sense, it is about how China might be seeking to control and manipulate the objective and subjective risk calculations[44] of both the US and its allies short of outright and explicit threats to launch a nuclear weapon before an adversary attacks it with a nuclear weapon. (Note that China is unlikely to want to make such threats explicit for several reasons. First, doing so would be admitting that its NFU policy is not believable. Second, such threats might compel the US to adopt a much more aggressive nuclear posture against China and trigger allies, such as Japan and Australia, to acquire or host nuclear weapons. Third, explicit threats might cause the US to explicitly strengthen its guarantees of extended nuclear deterrence for allies, thereby weakening China's capacity to use its modernizing nuclear forces to coerce and deter nonnuclear nations.)

Indeed, the key to deterrence is the credible and demonstrated ability to inflict pain on an adversary in a way and to an extent that the adversary seeks to avoid danger or the risk of taking on more pain. This is both an objective and subjective assessment. As the *2013 Science of Military Strategy* puts it:

> Nuclear deterrence and deterrent tactics must change with variation in the object and in accord with the circumstances, and strictly avoid always following the same pattern. On the basis of fully considering many factors and conditions—the character, psychology, and degree of rationality of the decision-makers on the deterred side; the adversary's political system, decision-making mechanisms, value system, and tradition of social change and the influence of the masses on decision-making, plus the informationized levels of society, and the degree of national integrated-whole prosperity—[we should] select the corresponding deterrence mode, deterrent intensity, and deterrence tactics, and strike to have a tactic for each nation, a tactic for each event, and a tactic for each circumstance.[45]

Moreover, strong evidence suggests that China is pursuing nuclear modernization primarily to achieve political and strategic objectives by deterring, compelling, and coercing the US—not by winning a nuclear exchange. As part of this strategy, the PLA Rocket Force is responsible for China's "dual deterrence and

dual operations"[46] comprising both conventional and nuclear strike capabilities. Regarding the role of nuclear and conventional weapons, Xi emphasizes strategic deterrence, which the *2020 Science of Military Strategy* defines as the following:

> 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.[47]

As Xi explains, his comprehensive and integrated approach to nuclear and conventional capabilities is to use them for "deterrence and actual warfare, war operations and the use of military force in peacetime as a whole."[48]

China's use of its nuclear arsenal to achieve deterrent (or coercive) strategic or political effects is grounded in deliberate ambiguity. On the one hand, China maintains its NFU policy to assert its ostensible good global citizenship. On the other hand, its nuclear modernization program suggests the PLA is building capabilities beyond those necessary for a minimal deterrent. Moreover, the PLA's practice of entangling conventional and nuclear capabilities, investment in dual-capability missiles, refusal to agree to any treaties related to its nuclear weapons program, and general lack of transparency regarding Chinese nuclear doctrine and tactics[49] seem designed to confuse, coerce, and intimidate without making such threats explicit.

The lack of clarity about strategic and tactical reasons for Chinese nuclear modernization is strategically potent when combined with the broader range of Chinese political warfare activities. For example, in response to then–Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, China fired several nuclear-capable missiles into Taiwanese waters. This show of possible intent in the event of an escalating Taiwan crisis is ominous because China already deploys hundreds of nuclear-capable missiles in the region, while the US does not.

Without needing to formally abandon lip service to its NFU nuclear policy, Beijing enhanced both its deterrence of other nations and its capacity to coerce. Then President Joe Biden delayed a long-planned test of the nuclear-capable Minuteman III ICBM to avoid escalating tensions with Beijing during China's show of force near Taiwan. White House National Security Communications spokesperson John Kirby explained that "as China engages in destabilizing military exercises around Taiwan, the United States is demonstrating instead the behavior of a responsible nuclear power by reducing the risks of miscalculation and misperception."[50] That these missile tests are essential for strengthening one element of the US land-based nuclear deterrent against China would not have been lost on Beijing. In April 2022, Biden similarly canceled a test of the Minuteman III missile in a bid to lower nuclear tensions with Russia during the war in Ukraine (initially, the White House only wanted to delay the test).[51] Beijing also observed US reticence to authorize Ukraine to strike Russia-based military assets using US and other Western weapons for fear of escalating matters with nuclear-armed Russia.[52] Moscow's deterrence of the US mirrors how China wants to control and dominate regional escalation dynamics.[53]

The point is that China's nuclear modernization achieves an integrated strategic effect of coercion and deterrence. This essential component of political warfare degrades an adversary's preparedness to resist or fight using a combination of material power, narratives, and psychological manipulation. Having demonstrated its material capability and promulgated the narrative of its superior resolve, preparedness to escalate, and greater ability to absorb risks and costs in pursuit of core interests,[54] Beijing only needs to gradually expand its list of core interests—from its continental territories in Tibet and Xinjiang to Taiwan to the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea. As the PLA's *2013 Science of*

Military Strategy puts it in the context of a nuclear strategic deterrent, China must control and manipulate the adversary's "train of thought." The adversary must deeply believe and fear China's propensity and willingness to use its nuclear forces.[55]

In turn, small states in Southeast Asian and other regions are internalizing Chinese narratives. Fearing nuclear catastrophe, these smaller states have a tendency to urge the US and its allies to de-escalate even if doing so means accommodating an expansionist and aggressive China.[56]

Extended Nuclear Deterrence

US extended nuclear deterrence for allies is the most ambiguous, uncertain, and unspoken of all US guarantees. Context dependent, it involves a future US calculation that makes it largely inscrutable and unknowable. In a sense, a potential nuclear adversary such as China also cannot know the US calculation and the extent to which the latter is prepared to retaliate on behalf of an ally that has been attacked with a nuclear weapon.

Readers should keep in mind the meanings of certain terms in military policy. Extended deterrence (including extended nuclear deterrence) aims to *deter adversaries* by threatening a response to attacks against a country's allies. In contrast, *assurance* provides allies with *sufficient or adequate confidence* that the nuclear superpower will indeed respond against an adversary on their behalf if the adversary attacks them with weapons of mass destruction or with a massive conventional barrage.

Although extended nuclear deterrence seeks to shape the adversary's calculation, while assurance aims to offer an ally a sense of security, they are two sides of the same coin and operate interrelatedly. If the US does not convince China that it will offer an ally extended deterrence (either because the US fears an attack against its territory or assets, or simply because the US lacks the will to inflict costs on an adversary), then China is more likely to threaten, coerce, or attack an ally. At the same time, if allies lack assurance that US extended deterrence will cover them, they are less likely to confront, enter, or join a conflict against a powerful country such as China. In other words, the weakening or failure of either element emboldens the adversary, makes an attack more likely, and leads to serious deterioration in the strategic environment—to China's advantage.

There are strong reasons to argue that the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence and sense of allied assurance are weakening given the combination of preexisting fears of US abandonment, ongoing Chinese nuclear modernization, and long-standing US and allied responses (or non-responses) to this modernization.

First, the Chinese willingness to escalate—from gray zone activities (e.g., in the Taiwan Strait or the East and South China Seas) to its conventional and nuclear buildup—and the US tendency to de-escalate in response, gradually decrease allied confidence that the US has the resolve to retaliate with a nuclear strike. Demonstrating credible deterrence (and assurance) requires constant signaling to both allies and adversaries. While China continually escalates in many contexts, the US has traditionally shown an extreme reluctance to impose costs on China, even for the sake of deterrence.[57] If the US does not have the resolve to escalate and impose costs (even in the gray zone), what confidence will allies have that it will somehow manufacture the resolve to impose costs on China in more extreme scenarios—up to and including nuclear retaliation?

Second, extended nuclear deterrence is most credible if retaliation against China leads to certain, extreme, and disproportionate devastation. However, as China rapidly grew its nuclear and conventional capabilities, the US did not preserve its nuclear dominance. This situation, combined with China's escalatory advantage (at least in psychological terms), increases the perceived and actual risk and cost the US would face if it launched a retaliatory nuclear strike on behalf of an ally. Incidentally, and as a troubling corollary, Abraham Denmark argues that Chinese nuclear modernization might affect US willingness to provide ex-

tended deterrence in the future because the risk and cost of defending allies from a *conventional* Chinese attack against a vastly more capable nuclear China is significantly higher than before.[58]

Furthermore, US extended nuclear deterrence is even less credible due to China's improved tactical or theater-level nuclear weapons arsenal (e.g., the Dong Feng-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile, which can field low-yield nuclear warheads, and the H-6N bomber, which can deliver air-launched tactical nuclear weapons).[59] This arsenal can potentially exploit a gap in the US extended nuclear deterrence framework, whereas the US has placed less emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War. It is one thing for the US to offer an implicit promise to retaliate if an adversary launches a strategic nuclear weapon against an ally's homeland. However, if an adversary launches a low-yield tactical nuclear weapon against an ally's forces in the battle theater, there is poorer implicit assurance that the US will retaliate with a nuclear strike. The situation is even worse because the US has a relatively low number of tactical nuclear weapons it can deploy quickly in the region as a deterrent or for retaliation.

These are some of the strategic effects that Xi is presumably seeking. US extended nuclear deterrence is only ever a whispered or assumed guarantee under unclear circumstances. As allies must develop policies based on this nebulous promise, its weakening vis-à-vis the dramatic advances in the Chinese strategic and tactical nuclear arsenal hands China another form of escalatory and coercive advantage. Beijing thus creates uncertainty it can exploit, and as a result, allies are less willing to contemplate any high-end conflict with China.

How China Uses Nuclear Weapons to Win Without Fighting

The strategic effects of Chinese nuclear modernization align completely with evolving CCP and PLA notions of strategic stability, strategic deterrence, and strategic capabilities. For China, strategic stability is not simply a stable state in its relations with other great powers. It entails a stability that is advantageous for the advancement of Chinese geopolitical and development objectives.[60] In this sense, it is a stable but dynamic (rather than static) set of relationships and arrangements that allows China to accumulate comprehensive national power in a relative and absolute sense.

Similarly, strategic deterrence is the framework through which China seeks strategic stability. For the PLA, strategic deterrence is not only about deterring an adversary from a specific military course of action or policy. It also involves placing ongoing and enduring military and nonmilitary constraints on an adversary in a manner that is advantageous for the pursuit of broader Chinese objectives. For example, China's nuclear weapons do not exist only to deter a nuclear attack against China. They also exist to shape the military and nonmilitary actions and mindsets of other states so that they are conducive to Chinese interests. This includes asymmetric strategic stability and asymmetric strategic deterrence, and especially policies that shape the actions and mindsets of nations that do not have proportionate strategic capabilities. Finally, a country requires these strategic capabilities to implement strategic deterrence to achieve strategic stability.[61]

For these reasons, and as indicated earlier, deterrence is a concept integrated with coercion and compellence. By controlling and manipulating the risk tolerance and perception of the adversary, it is a much more comprehensive and dynamic application of Schelling's seminal approach to deterrence.

Moreover, through a leader such as Xi Jinping who long ago abandoned the tactic of "hide brightness, bide time" in favor of amplifying Chinese assertiveness and strength (while concealing vulnerabilities),[62] China has enhanced its use of a growing nuclear weapons arsenal to deter, coerce, and compel the US and its allies to achieve broader strategic objectives. The modernizing nuclear arsenal exists to enable China to attack an adversary's plans (strategies) and allies, thereby getting China one step closer to subduing the enemy and winning without fighting.

3. CASE STUDY: THE PHILIPPINES

Prima facie, the Philippines seems a less important and relevant case study in comparison to other US allies in the region when it comes to possible implications of Chinese nuclear modernization. Analysts understand Chinese nuclear modernization mainly in the context of the US-China rivalry and countering American nuclear and conventional forces in the region. Since the withdrawal of US forces from Subic Bay in 1992, the scale and importance of US military presence in Japan, South Korea, and even Australia have been more significant than in the Philippines. While tensions between China and the Philippines over disputed areas of the South China Sea are persistent and worsening, China's growing conventional military assets and activities are more than sufficient to coerce and intimidate the Philippines. In our conversations with them, Filipino political leaders, officials, and experts did not raise China's growing nuclear weapons capabilities as an issue of major concern. Instead, it was Beijing's use of its overwhelming conventional capabilities to intimidate and coerce Manila, especially in the gray zone, that they identified as the main problem.

Manila's preoccupation with China's conventional buildup is understandable and appropriately reflects the current situation. In a tactical sense, the primary threat to the Philippines is conventional. However, and although still speculatory, we believe China will increasingly use its growing nuclear capabilities as implicit threats to advance strategic effects that benefit it in the following ways:

To persuade Manila that hosting certain types of US and allied military assets is prohibitively dangerous and foolhardy.

Photo: A Chinese H-6K bomber flies near Scarborough Shoal (known in China as Huangyan Island) in the South China Sea in July 2016. (Xinhua/Liu Rui via Getty Images)

To dissuade the Philippines from allowing the US and its allies to use Filipino territory during a Taiwan Strait conflict.

Filipino Complacency About Chinese Nukes

Although Filipino leaders, officials, and experts are well informed about China's nuclear modernization program, almost all the individuals we spoke to were more concerned about other Chinese actions. They identified Chinese gray zone activities in the South China Sea as the immediate problem and the Chinese plan to achieve an eventual fait accompli in entrenching its presence and control over disputed areas as the longer-term challenge. They do not view China's growing nuclear arsenal as pertinent to these challenges. Indeed, there appeared to be little interest in a sustained discussion of Chinese nuclear modernization for this reason.

This "see no evil, speak no evil (of Chinese nukes)" approach could prove short-sighted given how we believe China will increasingly use nuclear weapons as part of its political or psychological warfare to achieve strategic effects. In a sense, the Filipino strategic disinterest in Chinese nuclear weapons stems from the smaller role the country has played in enabling an American military presence in the region since the 1990s.

Before the 1990s, Filipino strategic circles discussed the possibility of a Soviet nuclear attack against the Naval Base Subic Bay and Clark Air Base, which hosted major US military assets. Filipino nationalist critics of the US bases then used this perceived possibility of nuclear attack to argue for their closure.[63]

To be sure, some in the Philippines have been interested in the Chinese nuclear program. During the Corazon Aquino administration from 2011–16, the government's National Security Policy officially noted that "nations in the region who are developing weapons of mass destruction" and have "aggressive intentions" could use these weapons for "geopolitical blackmail."[64] Even so, and although Sino-Filipino relations deteriorated during that administration, subsequent policies or documents have not identified Chinese nuclear weapons as a major concern. The Rodrigo Duterte administration of 2017–22 merely identified the possible "proliferation" of nuclear weapons as a major concern and did not even identify China as a possible problematic proliferator.[65]

The point is that since the end of the Cold War, Filipino administrations have not taken seriously the notion that their territory will ever be a nuclear target. Despite the growing strategic and military threat from China, they think in purely conventional terms.

We agree that China's conventional forces—in both gray zone and war contexts—ought to be the primary Filipino concern. Presently, China does not need nuclear weapons to threaten or defeat Filipino forces. However, we argue that the Filipino government is not sufficiently assessing or appreciating the growing Chinese use of nuclear weapons to manipulate the psychology and future actions of the Philippines in more indirect and subtle ways. The likelihood that China's nuclear modernization will affect and influence future Filipino calculations and actions is growing for the following reasons.

Even though the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which the US and the Philippines signed in 2014, allows their militaries to train together and allows the US to build and operate facilities on Filipino territory in some circumstances, China would most likely use only conventional weapons to target existing military assets if a conflict broke out.

This relatively reassuring assessment makes sense if US forces on Filipino territory and the development of the Armed Forces of the Philippines proceed modestly to mainly counter Chinese gray zone provocations over disagreements in the South China Sea. It is also worth noting that Japanese and Australian contributions to the Philippine Coast Guard are significant but still assist the Philippines only in narrowing the gap in gray zone capabilities vis-à-vis China.

China is wary but reasonably comfortable with the nature, pace, and scale of Filipino defense cooperation with the US and other allies. Manila does not yet challenge China's capacity to enjoy escalatory dominance while conducting gray zone operations in disputed waters. Existing US and allied activities, combined with capability improvements for the Armed Forces of the Philippines, are slowing but not yet reversing the long-term shift in the balance of military power, which favors China on the one hand and disadvantages Filipino and allied forces on the other.

If the US and others were to assist the Philippines in reversing the shift in disputed areas of the South China Sea, simmering tensions between Beijing and Manila would increase. However, any subsequent acceleration of an arms race between China and the Philippines (and allied military assets on Filipino territory) is unlikely to make assets and troops in Filipino territory a nuclear target.

However, American interest in dramatically upgrading its military presence in the Philippines for a South China Sea crisis will almost certainly have a direct bearing and relevance to the balance of power associated with a Taiwan Strait crisis. Any Chinese military action against Taiwan would likely bring in both Japanese and Filipino elements. As war games have credibly demonstrated, China would direct the lion's share of PLA forces toward Taiwan. This would certainly be true in a blockade-of-Taiwan scenario. However, if China decides to directly attack Taiwan, the PLA would also need to manage and suppress a northern flank consisting of American and Japanese assets around Okinawa and the southern flank of Luzon in the Philippines.[66]

For the moment, Okinawa is much more critical to American and allied forces than bases in Luzon are. The point is that China would not want Luzon to be an important staging and launch location for American and allied forces in any Taiwan Strait contingency. This will significantly complicate matters for the PLA. Yet, any significant upgrade of an American and allied military presence in the northern Philippines to deter China in the South China Sea will very likely transform Filipino bases into important assets to deter (or fight) China vis-à-vis the Taiwan Strait issue.

Indeed, a major American and allied permanent military presence in the northern Philippines would undermine the PLA's existing plan to use entrenched integrated air defense and missile systems permanently positioned on the Chinese mainland and Hainan Island to threaten US forces in a contingency. Luzon is less vulnerable to Chinese land-based short-range ballistic missiles and guided rockets based in these areas.[67] To put it in direct terms, the more significant and important Philippines-based assets become in managing South China Sea issues, the more significant and important they become in dealing with a Taiwan Strait contingency.

This elevates the importance and threat of the Philippines for a core Chinese interest (i.e., Taiwan) around which the threat of nuclear weapons use becomes more likely. If the Philippines increases its own security by allowing permanent and significant American and allied forces on its territory, it inadvertently strays into a darker and more dangerous strategic environment in which it becomes a player in a potential nuclear conflict.

Chinese Nuclear Psychological Warfare

China will not suddenly and explicitly threaten the Philippines with potential nuclear strikes as it is currently unnecessary and would cause immense alarm among virtually all regional nations. The approach will be more subtle and targeted toward slowly but unrelentingly shaping the strategic decisions and psychology of Filipino administrations and the country's national security and social elites.

There is evidence that China is already implementing this psychological and political warfare approach. For example, the US has positioned Typhon mobile missile batteries on Filipino territory since 2024. The batteries can support systems that fire multipurpose missiles up to thousands of miles, which puts assets

on the Chinese mainland under threat. These include Tomahawk cruise missiles and SM-6 missiles, which the US can use for anti-air warfare, ballistic missile defense, and anti-surface warfare.

As one response, a Chinese military journal with formal links to the government prominently reported that China is developing an attack submarine in a Wuhan shipyard specifically to target medium-range missile defense systems in the Philippines.[68] Moreover, and in the same context, the article mentioned that China's latest submarine in development can launch hypersonic missiles, which will enable the PLA to launch attacks from outside areas that Filipino and American military assets can easily reach, and can carry conventional and nuclear payloads as necessary. This includes the YJ-21 missile, which has an estimated range of 1,000–1,500 miles and reaches an estimated speed of up to 1,500 miles per hour.

There are several pertinent aspects of these reports. The articles promptly made their way to prominent public outlets such as the *South China Morning Post* and *Asia Times*, which strategic elites in the region often read. While the PLA did not explicitly confirm that such a submarine is under development, the public articles cite the information as coming from the *Naval and Merchant Ships* publication, which the China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) owns. The reporting also gives credible details about the new submarine's design and features. CSSC is a prominent PLA Navy partner and supplier. The source offers credibility for the capability and intent of the submarine under development as well as plausible and diplomatic deniability for the PLA and CCP to minimize any unhelpful alarm and resulting fallout.

Formally, senior CCP leaders have already identified their displeasure with the deployment of the Typhon system in the Philippines. For example, in September 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi publicly argued that the Filipino and American decision "undermines regional peace and stability" and "is not in the interests of regional countries."[69] Wang Yi repeated the claim again in February 2025, demanding that the US withdraw the Typhon system from the Philippines and accusing the latter of repeatedly breaking its promises, acting in bad faith, and endangering "peace and prosperity" in the entire region.[70]

This episode has the typical hallmarks of how Beijing seeks to shape the narratives, threat perception, assessment of risk and opportunity, and ultimately strategic decisions of other states in the region—this time in a more frightening nuclear weapons context. It is too early and self-defeating for China to directly and openly threaten the Philippines with nuclear weapons. However, as far as Beijing is concerned, it is never too early to preempt and dissuade Manila from "interfering" in China's ability to retake Taiwan. This political and psychological warfare approach is itself a form of gray zone offense. It aims to persuade or coerce smaller states to refrain from making strategic decisions that do not favor China, but without incurring a robust American or allied reaction.

Using Nuclear Weapons to Exploit the Southeast Asian Strategic Mindset

China uses implied nuclear threats to dissuade the Philippines from joining or militarily integrating into US-led efforts against Beijing in a Taiwan Strait conflict. This is the most obvious way for China to convince Manila not to permit US use of its territory for such purposes. There is another avenue that China is likely to exploit in this context.

Although the Philippines is the most active treaty ally of the US in Southeast Asia (contra Thailand), it is also an integral member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Southeast Asian strategic community. This community has some common mindsets, even though there are variations among the key maritime states of Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines.

From previous investigations and in work published elsewhere,[71] we have concluded that many Southeast Asian nations do not define strategic opportunity as shaping the environment and

behavior of states around them. Rather, they define strategic opportunity and statesmanship as the ability to negotiate arrangements and maximize benefits with great powers. In other words, great powers were "externalities" in the system, and statesmanship is about moderating some of the costs or maximizing some of the benefits to Southeast Asian states, which are largely powerless third parties in the system.

This apparent strategic passivity is the result of several factors.

First, it is simply a matter of structure. Asia is defined by an immense material imbalance between a small number of giants (the US, China, Japan, and possibly India in the future) and a large number of dwarfs. Rather than influence the balance of power, which is not possible, Southeast Asian states can influence only how oppressive or generous the great powers might be to them.

Moreover, and even though American preeminence reconstructed and redefined the region in the decades after the Second World War, the United States had bilateral alliances with only six nations (five excluding New Zealand). None of these alliances offered explicit and automatically triggered security guarantees, which exacerbated the Southeast Asian sense of vulnerability.

This sense of vulnerability leads to what many Americans and Australians might consider strategic passivity because it contributes to the mindset that smaller nations (even American allies such as the Philippines and Thailand) court disaster if they choose to stand firm against an aggressive great power. As a common saying throughout the region puts it, standing up to China would be like "throwing toothpicks at a mountain."

Until China's reemergence, this was not a major concern so long as the US assisted with combating communist insurgencies—something these countries knew Washington was willing to do. However, in an era of great power competition, smaller Southeast Asian nations believe that remaining passive rather than proactive is the more prudent course of action.

Second, there is a matter of civilizational power or historical roles and power. While there were once great civilizations in places such as Indochina, only the Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Western civilizations have survived.

Civilizational power is relevant in this context in several ways. Focusing on the longevity and superiority of so-called foundational civilizations reflexively introduces a hierarchical element to the subjective ordering of international politics from the view of both powerful and weaker states. A nation-state emanating from a foundational and existing civilization (what some call a *civilization-state*) has a role and enjoys social and even moral privileges that others might not. When that nation-state also has significant hard power, then it is imbued with a "natural" right to enjoy even more privileges and legitimacy not available to other entities.

Moreover, such a right implies that in the ongoing jostling or negotiation with smaller states, the great civilization power necessarily begins from a privileged and unequal position. The further implication is that it is an affront to that civilizational state if a smaller power demands equality, which is what the US promises to offer smaller states. To emphasize the point, we have found that elites in many Southeast Asian states accept that demanding strict equality with the greater civilizational state is an affront or even inappropriate.

Additionally, and although Asia is a geostrategic and historical construct, many Southeast Asian strategic and social elites do think of themselves as belonging to a distinct "Asian" entity. This Asian entity encompasses East Asia rather than South Asia, meaning many Southeast Asian states believe that India has less civilizational power and relevance. It also means they do not consider the US a natural part of this Asian entity, as much as they may welcome the US strategic role and presence.

Within this distinct Asian identity and intersubjective consciousness, Japanese culture and civilization cannot match the standing and relevance of Chinese culture and civilization—and

certainly not in a period when China's hard power capabilities exceed Japan's. Countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, which have exhibited anti-Chinese sentiment in the past, still see the Chinese culture and civilization as natural, permanent, and dominant in Southeast Asia. Hence, occasional resentment against Chinese entities (e.g., firms and communities) in these countries does not change the widespread acceptance of Chinese culture and civilization as a dominant and permanent presence in Asia.

This all translates into what the US and other allies might see as greater passivity vis-à-vis aggressive Chinese activities and policies. Indeed, many Southeast Asian states find it easier and more natural to complain to America about its policies as America is an outsider. Strategic disagreement with China therefore does not lead to expected countering and balancing activities against China in many countries.

Third, and related to the above points, there is a sense among many Southeast Asian elites that Asia (or East Asia, to be more precise) moves as one toward regional prosperity. This is intrinsic in the various ASEAN blueprints and aspirations emphasizing greater connectivity and economic integration. The breakup and destruction of Asia that would occur if there were a regional war would be a collective disaster and an immense blow to a collective or common sense of strategic identity and belonging. Nuclear war would be even worse, an unthinkable future far less desirable than if China dominated an Asia that remained intact and stable.

For many Southeast Asian nations and their national security elites, there is perceived benefit for all of them pursuing this same nonconfrontational blueprint and approach vis-à-vis China. This is why there is considerable anxiety regarding the speed and scale at which the Philippines is welcoming American naval assets and forces back into its territory.[72]

The Philippines walks a fine line between working with the US and other allies to increase Filipino ability to manage Chinese gray zone activities, on the one hand, and its role as a founding member of ASEAN and a central Southeast Asian nation on the other hand. The latter role is at the heart of a collective enterprise to usher in a new era of prosperity for Asia based on enduring stability and common enterprise.

China is clearly aware of the pressures that other Southeast Asian states are placing on Manila as it tries to straddle this middle ground. It is significant that China (disingenuously) frames Filipino efforts to enhance its own security through strategic and military cooperation with the US and its allies as "provocative," "destabilizing," and hazardous to joint Asian efforts to enhance regional prosperity.[73]

China's attempts to paint the Philippines as the upstart and provocateur build on its successful efforts to persuade and compel other Southeast Asian nations to acquiesce to, ignore, and even normalize and internalize Beijing's aggressive and illegal activities in the South China Sea.[74] If it can frame the Philippines as the instigator generating instability by provoking a conventionally dominant China, then, a fortiori, it can frame the Philippines as an even more reckless instigator of instability by "provoking" a China that has achieved nuclear parity or even dominance over any other great power in East Asia.

4. CASE STUDY: JAPAN

Just as it is for the Philippines, the US is the cornerstone of Japan's defense strategy and the single most important element of the Japanese sense of national security. Unlike for the Philippines, the nuclear element is central to how Tokyo views both threats to Japan and the necessary conditions for Japan to seek an adequate level of security.

This is understandable. Japan is surrounded by potentially hostile nuclear powers (China, Russia, and North Korea). Since the end of the Second World War and as a defeated power with constitutional prohibitions on future aggression and militarism, Japan has seen reliance on the US as a dominant conventional and nuclear power hardwired into its mindset and defense policies.

Regarding the nuclear weapons element, Japan has a complicated and somewhat contradictory approach. On the one hand, and as the only country ever attacked with a nuclear weapon (twice), there is a strong and enduring anti-nuclear-weapons sentiment throughout the country. Having acceded to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1976, it has long championed nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation and is a significant contributor to the development and evolution of the NPT.[75] On the other hand, Japan is explicitly dependent on protection under the US nuclear umbrella. Some might seek to fit the proverbial peg into the round hole by drawing a distinction between support and reliance on the Japan-US Security Treaty and rejection of the notion that Japan is or ought to be under the US umbrella. The reality is that virtually all national security leaders and experts accept US extended nuclear deterrence as essential to Japanese security. The current uncomfortable strategic and

Photo: A new type 094A Jin-class nuclear submarine, *Long March 10,* of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy participates in a naval parade near Qingdao, China, on April 23, 2019. (Mark Schiefelbein via Getty Images)

moral compromise is that while a world free of nuclear weapons and a ban on their use is an aspiration, reliance on American nuclear weapons is a current strategic and existential necessity.

Japan's awkward and ambivalent relationship with nuclear weapons and extended deterrence offers China an opportunity to further muddy and complicate this strategic and moral compromise with strategic consequences that favor China and are adverse to Japanese and allied interests. In recent decades, the threat of a nuclear North Korea has produced fewer dilemmas for Japan than the more recent question of Chinese nuclear modernization. As it will for the Philippines, but in a different way, China's psychological use of its growing nuclear capabilities against Japan will produce strategic effects that exacerbate the sense of insecurity for Japan and the US-Japan alliance.

Nuclear Coercion Against Japanese Active Defense

In the decades leading up to the 2000s, Japan publicly said that North Korea and its developing nuclear capabilities were the primary security threat to Japan. Since Shinzo Abe's second term in government (2012–20), Japan has formally identified China as the greater and more enduring challenge and threat to its interests and even its territory. From Abe's *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond* to Fumio Kishida's 2022 National Security Strategy, 2022 National Defense Strategy, and 2022 Defense Buildup Program, Japan identifies China as the primary threat and reason for modernization of its military and strategic doctrine, capabilities, and posture.

This Japanese modernization is about more than simply allocating more money to the defense budget. Traditionally, Japan's national security and defense strategy focused on having a defense force based on the earlier 1957 Basic Policy on National Defense doctrine: Japan maintains and develops only the military capability necessary for self-defense and a minimal deterrent against conceivable threats.[76] Many Japanese might claim they have not altered this fundamental approach.

Even so, the 2022 documents affirm the importance of Japan's commitment to a far more proactive and offensive notion of self-defense and deterrence. Building on Abe's vision and sometimes called an "active denial" posture,[77] the newer Japanese official mindset seeks to develop and position sufficient offensive assets—such as anti-ship missiles, torpedoes, and autonomous weapons—to deny or delay (at least until US assistance arrives) China's military success if it attacks Japan. In recent years, and in addition to a potential conflict in the East China Sea, Japan has also been applying this active denial posture to its commitments to assist the US in the defense of Taiwan.[78]

In terms of Japan's self-defense forces, the long-standing view of their evolution is that their primary objective is to deny the enemy the ability to achieve military success (i.e., deterrence through denial) while the US takes the lead in maintaining the ability to inflict hopefully prohibitive costs on the adversary (i.e., deterrence through cost imposition). In this sense, Japan is the *shield* and the US is the *sword* in the military alliance.

The Japanese desire to acquire and develop a potent military strike capability is completely consistent with preexisting strategies to achieve deterrence by denial. However, such a counterstrike capacity is synonymous with the ability to strike an enemy's bases, and this begins to resemble the proverbial sword and not just a shield.

The advancing Japanese offensive ambition is clear. Moreover, as Defense of Japan 2022 puts it, "In order to protect Japan's peace and sovereignty in an increasingly severe security environment, the [Self-Defense Forces] must become more powerful on its own while improving its ability to coordinate with allies and partners." This leads to the assessment that Japan is "not content with its current deterrence and response capabilities."[79]

Note that this is widely understood not only in the context of China's growing capabilities, aggression, and ambition but also in response to the possibility of American military overstretch

and the worsening military balance in Northeast Asia between China on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other. In short, Japan and other countries will improve their strike capabilities to enhance active denial, contribute to what Abe termed a "proactive contribution to peace,"[80] add to US-led allied capability, and meet growing American expectations that allies shoulder more of their own security burden.

From the Philippines case study, it is obvious that China strongly disapproves of significant enhancements to offensive capabilities of US allies that have implications for conflict in the Taiwan Strait.[81] Japan is even more of a concern and an important target for China given its greater military capability, geography, deeper integration with American forces, and emerging indications that it will likely assist the US in the defense of Taiwan.[82]

In the previous decade, and even when Japan began to recognize China instead of North Korea as the primary threat, Tokyo still views the military challenge as a conventional one. It rarely considered China's nuclear arsenal in strategic assessments of the challenges facing Japan. More recently, ignoring the implications of Chinese nuclear modernization would be imprudent for Japan as it improves its ability to implement its active defense doctrine.

While China insists that it maintains an NFU policy, there is a growing conviction in Japan that it cannot trust this. For a start, in addition to implicitly threatening a far weaker and nonnuclear Philippines, China has similarly threatened Japan. For example, in July 2021, a video surfaced on Chinese social media warning that China would abandon its NFU policy if Japan participated in the defense of Taiwan in a hypothetical conflict. The video appeared on the relatively obscure Wisdom and Strategies for Six Armies online military channel, which is nevertheless affiliated with the PLA.[83] The fact that it was viewed millions of times, generating considerable domestic and international attention, strongly suggests Chinese authorities tolerated, if not tacitly promoted, the video. Given the extent of Chinese state monitoring and censorship of such sensitive or important matters, it seems improbable that the video escaped their attention, and it was taken down only after it gained extensive notoriety within and outside China.

As with the Philippines, this episode exemplifies China's use of its growing nuclear weapons prowess to conduct psychological coercion and political warfare while maintaining some level of formal deniability. In delivering government-tolerated or -backed nuclear threats against nonnuclear powers, Beijing appears to be intentionally sowing doubt over whether its NFU nuclear doctrine is reliable.

For a nonnuclear state such as Japan, suppose an assessment determines there is a low (say 1 percent) chance that China will use nuclear weapons against it if it participates in the defense of Taiwan. Even this small chance will cause Tokyo to reassess the acquisition of offensive capabilities that the US and its allies might need in a Taiwan contingency, willingness to develop and operationalize such capabilities, and willingness to host forces the US might deploy from Japanese territory to defend Taiwan. The point is that the deliberate uncertainty China creates in this scenario introduces incalculable and implacable anxiety and risk for Japan. The Chinese intention is to create Japanese strategic and doctrinal paralysis that comes from an inability to reasonably assess the risk.

China further encourages Japanese hesitation by remaining deliberately unclear as to what constitutes a nonnuclear state. Beijing might well consider the allies of a US nuclear state a legitimate nuclear target if that ally serves as a critical host for US-led actions against China in the defense of Taiwan. As is the case with the Philippines, China is offering indications that it is the strategic and tactical importance of a country to the US-led defense of Taiwan, rather than whether that country has nuclear weapons, that determines whether that country could be a legitimate Chinese nuclear target.

Muddying the Waters of America's Nuclear Umbrella

Creating fear, uncertainty, and hesitation with strategic effects is the Chinese intention. As disagreements and tensions with China deepen, the lack of faith in and distrust of China's NFU nuclear policy will increase. Disagreements regarding Japan's nuclear policy will also grow as a result of Chinese actions.

Formally, Japan remains faithful to its Three Nonnuclear Principles that Prime Minister Eisaku Sato established in 1967: not possessing, producing, or introducing nuclear weapons. These principles are long-standing doctrine but not legally binding. There is a parallel and ongoing debate about whether the Japanese constitution allows the acquisition of nuclear weapons for self-defense,[84] which China's nuclear modernization has reinvigorated. Abe's suggestion of "nuclear sharing" with the US introduced a newer angle. This arrangement occurs in Europe as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization agreement.[85] It would involve the hosting of US nuclear weapons on Japanese territory with the possibility of authorizing Japanese personnel to deliver US nuclear weapons against preapproved targets under pre-agreed circumstances.

While these debates rage on, Japan needs the assurance of coverage by the American nuclear umbrella to bear a significantly greater security burden through its own conventional military modernization[86] and through greater preparedness to host and support more American military assets. In the future, perhaps these will include American nuclear weapons.

In other words, assurance of American nuclear extended deterrence vis-à-vis China is necessary for the Japanese to have strategic courage and appetite for burden and risk, even more so in a time of rapid Chinese nuclear modernization. It also means that successful Chinese attempts to undermine Japanese assurance will likely strike a considerable blow against Tokyo's willingness to step up as the American "northern anchor" in the regional alliance.

The greater the extent and pace of Chinese nuclear modernization, the more difficult it becomes to assure Japan of US nuclear umbrella coverage, and the more difficult it will be for Japan to rely upon US extended nuclear deterrence against China. Beijing will exploit this advantage for several reasons.

First, although Japan needs assurance of US nuclear umbrella protection, only the US decides its nuclear policy, not Japan. In any given situation, a US administration, and the president most of all, ultimately decides whether the US will launch a nuclear weapon against an adversary that attacks Japan with a weapon of mass destruction (WMD).[87]

No US administration can offer Japan an ironclad guarantee of nuclear retaliation if such an attack occurred. Therefore, Tokyo has to make constant and fluid calculations of both changing American interests and the nature of each administration and president. In this context, recent events will only increase Japanese doubts over the US nuclear umbrella.

For example, the Biden administration ruled out direct military intervention even before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Subsequently, the White House placed restrictions on the nature and extent of American assistance to Ukraine. It did so on the basis that the US did not want to risk a nuclear confrontation with Russia.[88] While Ukraine is not an ally or a NATO member, observers widely viewed the Russian invasion as an attempt by Vladimir Putin to acquire previous Soviet Union territories or satellite states. These include the Baltic States and possibly Poland. The point is the perception that the loss of Ukraine opened the door for Putin to further seize NATO countries and other treaty allies of the US. The fact that the administration elevated the prospect of nuclear escalation as a reason for restraint and refused to give Ukraine the military means to defeat Russian forces when the latter was vulnerable in the first two years of the war is not lost on Japanese leaders and officials constantly assessing levels of American resolve.

In our conversations, Japanese leaders and officials seem ambivalent about whether Japan ought to be more rather than less assured about the US nuclear umbrella under the second Trump administration. On the one hand, experiences during the first Trump administration have left some scars because Washington took a transactional approach and Trump questioned the cost and worthiness of meeting US alliance obligations in Asia.[89] On the other hand, the second Trump administration has frequently identified China as the US's primary competitor to justify declining American commitments in Europe.[90] It is prepared to confront and escalate matters with China (economically but not yet militarily) and is proposing a military budget exceeding $1 trillion.

Even putting aside differences between American administrations and presidents, doubt that the US will risk a tactical nuclear attack on a base or a strategic nuclear attack on a homeland city by using its own nuclear arsenal to retaliate on behalf of an ally only increases as China's nuclear arsenal grows. Note that this is a psychological rather than a technical calculation. China already has the capacity to deploy a tactical or strategic nuclear weapon against an American base or city. The most damaging strategic effect of Beijing's rapid nuclear buildup is that it increases Washington's belief, or at least suspicion, that China is prepared to or will use nuclear weapons. In turn, Tokyo becomes more apprehensive of US reluctance to fulfill implied promises of nuclear retaliation on behalf of an ally. As a result, Japanese assurance and the credibility of American extended nuclear deterrence decrease in Chinese eyes. If that occurs, the risk that China will launch a conventional or nuclear attack against Japan if the latter joins a Taiwan contingency increases. In short, China strengthens its psychological and escalatory advantage.

To counter this dynamic, American and Japanese officials have been participating in an Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) since 2010, which demonstrates American seriousness about extended conventional and nuclear deterrence. The EDD and other similar meetings are worthwhile gatherings. For example, they are useful for technical discussions of closing any gaps in the tactical nuclear balance. But closing the gaps won't eliminate doubts about what the US president will actually do, which may make the EDD less helpful.

Therefore, these meetings are likely to be less reassuring to Japan than the two countries might hope. Japanese delegates are at the deputy director-general level, and the American delegates are at the deputy assistant secretary level. These are senior bureaucratic positions and are appropriate when discussing the technical aspects of deterrence. But the decision to follow through on an implied promise and put one's allies under a nuclear umbrella is a political decision by executives at the highest level of government.

For this reason, meetings such as the EDD are unlikely to decisively deter adversaries and even less likely to reassure allies. As British Secretary of Defense Denis Healey put it, it "only takes a 5 percent credibility of American retaliation to deter an attack, but it takes a 95 percent credibility to reassure allies."[91]

Second, it is true that some actions will increase Japanese assurance and prospects of extended nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis China. One is the development of and significant increase in US deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in the region. Another is nuclear sharing, as Abe proposed. Note that in both of these possibilities, it is more about demonstrating US commitment to allies than about achieving tactical nuclear dominance, which is of questionable usefulness in a conflict.[92]

Either of these actions will be enormously controversial in Japan. The latter already walks a contradictory line between relying on the US nuclear umbrella and championing nuclear nonproliferation and ultimate elimination. A nuclear sharing agreement might well violate the NPT, which prohibits any transfer of nuclear weapons between nuclear and nonnuclear states. It would also be difficult to justify under Japan's long-standing Three

Nonnuclear Principles, particularly the third: "not introducing nuclear weapons."

China's well-established political warfare and foreign influence operations and networks would easily exploit the resulting controversy and division within Japan.[93] There is much for China to work with. There is significant domestic Japanese opposition to allowing foreign naval vessels to carry nuclear weapons through Japanese territory, ports, or airspace.[94] Even Japanese leaders rarely discuss, much less justify, Japanese reliance on the US nuclear umbrella for fear of inflaming anti-nuclear sentiment in the country.[95]

The upshot is that increasing Japanese assurance is becoming more difficult, as is increasing the credibility of American extended nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis China. The consequence is growing Japanese anxiety about confronting and preparing for Chinese military threats and contemplating involvement in a Taiwan Strait crisis. Bear in mind that the lack of transparency in China's nuclear buildup exacerbates this anxiety because it makes calculations more problematic—particularly American calculation of Chinese intent and capabilities and, in turn, Japanese calculation of American intention to retaliate. Uncertainty toward allies can be fatal to such assurance.

5. CASE STUDY: SOUTH KOREA

Unlike Japan, which sees no acceptable alternative to a US alliance and presence in the face of Chinese power and aggression, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) seems more ambivalent in defining an acceptable strategic environment. The obvious insight is that South Korea overwhelmingly focuses on the constant and possibly existential threat the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) poses. For this reason, we encountered very few South Korean politicians, officials, or strategists paying significant attention to China's nuclear weapons buildup unless the hypothetical was about China assisting North Korea in a way that worsens that threat.

Prioritizing Regional Stability over US Alliance

South Korea is ambivalent because Seoul prioritizes regional stability and predictability above all else. Moreover, its desire for stability and predictability pertains largely if not exclusively to the Korean Peninsula, in contrast to the Japanese, who take a more global view of strategic threats and stability. The ambivalence comes from the notion that a robust US presence is the best way to achieve stability and predictability in practice. But in principle, stability and predictability might be possible without a preeminent US role if China were to become the primary stabilizer on the Korean Peninsula. This is not a claim that South Korea expects or prefers China to do so. Instead, Seoul does not identify China as its primary threat or the fundamental cause of instability in the region. Therefore, and unlike Japan, the end of US preeminence need not be the precursor to a darker and more dangerous strategic environment on the Korean Peninsula.

Photo: A North Korean intermediate-range strategic ballistic rocket Hwasong-12 lifts off at an undisclosed location near Pyongyang on August 29, 2017. (Korean Central News Agency / AFP via Getty Images)

This largely explains the South Korean reluctance to elevate the US-China rivalry as the defining and most important aspect of the contemporary strategic environment. It also explains Seoul's reluctance to commit to any allied or collective effort against China and its anxiety about US Forces Korea (USFK) conducting operations against China in a Taiwan contingency or another theater. The previous conservative Yoon Suk Yeol administration did make promising moves to look beyond Korean Peninsula affairs and sought greater cooperation with Japan against common threats (which includes China even if North Korea is the primary focus). However, the more ambivalent approach to China seems to be the mainstay of South Korean strategy. This is likely to be the case under the progressive Lee Jae-mung administration.

To be sure, South Korea is closely monitoring the "no limits" friendship between Russia and China.[96] There are deep concerns in Seoul about the true extent of the quid pro quo between North Korea and Russia: What has Moscow promised Pyongyang in return for DPRK troops fighting alongside Russian counterparts against Ukraine? Does it go beyond advanced air defense equipment, anti-aircraft missiles, and electronic warfare systems?[97] Under United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions, Russia (like other states) is prohibited from assisting the North Korean space and nuclear programs. However, Russia has already violated these sanctions by giving armaments to the DPRK. Article 10 of the North Korean–Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which the parties signed in June 2024, states that Pyongyang and Moscow will "develop exchanges and cooperation" in certain scientific fields, including space and "peaceful nuclear energy."[98] These two civilian forms of cooperation clearly have direct relevance to the development of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.

For the moment, South Korea does not seem to be framing the "axis" of authoritarian states comprising China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran as the challenge to strategic stability—another difference with Japan. While Beijing maintains the appearance of a plausible distance from these Russia-DPRK activities, Seoul is not yet implicating China. This is another reason the ROK does not yet see China's nuclear modernization as a direct problem or serious challenge to its interests on the Korean Peninsula.

A Narrow Focus That Benefits Beijing

China is satisfied with the narrower, self-constrained South Korean view of its strategic interests as confined to the Korean Peninsula. While Beijing can never be certain that USFK will not deploy against it in a non–Korean Peninsula context, it seeks to ensure that the US and ROK forces on South Korean soil limit their operations to deterring Pyongyang and that they lack the capability to seriously complicate Chinese military actions against Taiwan or elsewhere.

This explains Beijing's furious reaction to the South Korean installation of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in 2016, even though it followed a surge in nuclear weapons and missile testing by North Korea. That the THAAD system was a direct response to DPRK aggression was irrelevant to China. Regardless of intent, Beijing sees any military capability on ROK territory that can severely complicate matters for China in East Asia as an unacceptable South Korean entry into a broader strategic contest beyond the peninsula. In this case, China believed that radar linked to the THAAD system would significantly enhance the US's ability to identify, track, and intercept Chinese long-range missiles.[99] China insisted on the Three Nos policy, which the Moon Jae-in administration subsequently adopted—no additional THAAD batteries, no participation in US-led missile defense systems, and no trilateral security alliance with the US and Japan. This shows the Chinese determination to neutralize South Korea as a strategic and military player beyond the Korean Peninsula.

In the current context of China's nuclear modernization, Beijing will want to ensure that Seoul remains preoccupied only with the Korean Peninsula, a task that the demise of the Yoon

administration eases. If it can achieve that, then China will argue that its nuclear modernization does not increase strategic instability on the Korean Peninsula as it targets only the US and its allies (such as Japan) that take an interest in and interfere in broader strategic affairs in East Asia and beyond. Therefore, it is of little or no concern to South Korea.

This should be an easy sell to Seoul. If South Korea has shown traditional reluctance to join the broader strategic contest resulting from a rapidly advancing Chinese conventional capability, it likely will not want to join the even more perilous contest that a rapidly advancing Chinese nuclear capability is exacerbating. For this reason, China is likely to seek to assure South Korea that the PLA's nuclear modernization will not help Pyongyang's nuclear or missile programs.

Persuading Seoul that China's nuclear weapons program is irrelevant to stability on the Korea Peninsula is critical for Beijing because the latter's redline seems to be the deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea (including under a nuclear sharing arrangement) or the less likely scenario of South Korea receiving US blessing and assistance to develop its own nuclear weapons.[100] This explains Beijing's hostile reaction to the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) in 2023 by the Biden and Yoon administrations. They set up the NCG to discuss enhancements in US extended nuclear deterrence, which has raised Chinese fears that they might consider stationing US tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean territory.[101]

If nuclear sharing by the US becomes a real possibility, we would expect Chinese economic coercion of South Korea to be far more extreme than what occurred following the THAAD deployment in 2016. If the US and South Korea went ahead nevertheless, we would also expect implied conventional and nuclear threats against ROK targets in the hope of stirring the pacifist and anti-US elements in South Korean politics and society into action.

Finally, a potential complication for China when it comes to keeping South Korea in a strategic and nuclear straitjacket is the Russia–North Korea axis. Seoul and Washington might well begin to discuss nuclear sharing on ROK soil (and with Japan) if Russia offers substantial nuclear and missile assistance to North Korea. If that occurs, then nuclear proliferation in East Asia will accelerate, which is beyond Chinese expectations and control. For this reason, we assess that for China to continue its nuclear modernization program without triggering serious unwanted and unintended consequences, it will need to ensure Russia does not ruin Beijing's best-laid diplomacy and plans to constrain South Korea.

6. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While China is developing a nuclear arsenal far beyond what is necessary to convince adversaries of a minimal deterrent or assured retaliation, there is little evidence that it is seeking to "win" a future nuclear exchange. At the same time, there is little evidence China is seeking a strategic stability that comes from nuclear parity in the manner of the former Soviet Union, as Beijing's lack of transparency in nuclear doctrine, capability, and posture demonstrates.

If China already has a minimal deterrent and strategic nuclear weapons with a second-strike capability, what is the contemporary reason for its rapid nuclear modernization program? We believe there is emerging evidence that China intends to use its advancing nuclear capability and opacity to achieve strategic and psychological effects against the US and, more importantly, its allies.

China is not yet engaged in any high-intensity conflict with the US or its allies. Instead, it is seeking to achieve strategic and psychological effects to better position itself for potential future conflicts (especially over Taiwan) by shaping and manipulating US allies' current strategic decisions. This mainly takes the form of dissuading them from contributing more significantly to future US-led efforts to defend Taiwan, such as by rearming, hosting and enabling US forces, and preparing to join a combined effort against the PLA. If Beijing is successful, then it reduces the prospect that China will need to even rely on force to eventually secure Taiwan's capitulation (as the US and its allies are less

Photo: Military vehicles carrying DF-17 missiles participate in a military parade at Tiananmen Square in Beijing on October 1, 2019. (Greg Baker via Getty Images)

likely to intervene). Alternatively, China can increase the chances that the US and its allies will not be as prepared and positioned as they need to be if there is a war over Taiwan.

The US and its allies hesitated to further arm and assist Ukraine to decisively seize the initiative against Russia in the first year after Moscow's full-scale invasion due to profound anxiety that Putin might resort to nuclear weapons if he were facing defeat. This makes the psychological usefulness of nuclear weapons clear.

China's objective is far more strategic and subtle than Putin's. The fundamental basis of the Chinese approach is to amplify uncertainty through its opaque and unexplained but self-evident rapid nuclear modernization. The purpose of amplifying uncertainty is to *manipulate notions of uncertainty and therefore risk to its advantage*, which will allow it to gain psychological ascendancy to achieve strategic effects. This is primarily about exacerbating hesitancy among US allies by exploiting persistent fears of abandonment and doubts regarding America's commitment, weakening assurance of extended nuclear deterrence, and implicitly warning US allies about entering an unpredictable dynamic of nuclear threat and bluff against a far more formidable China.

Our assessment is that a major, if not the primary, purpose of China's rapid nuclear buildup is exploiting uncertainty and manipulating risk to its advantage vis-à-vis US allies. This leads to the following conclusions and recommendations.

1. Accept ambiguity and strategic instability. Abandon the pursuit of mutual vulnerability and the false hope of arms control.

Strategic stability and arms control agreements might be possible if both sides recognize, agree on, and accept each other's core interests and boundaries for competition. In a narrow nuclear context, strategic stability comes from bilateral recognition of mutual vulnerability: the damage one side can impose on the other using nuclear weapons is greater than the value of the prize they are fighting over.[102] In a broader nuclear contest, strategic stability decreases or eliminates geopolitical incentives for either side to use nuclear weapons against the other.

This is problematic to pursue, let alone achieve, with China for several reasons.

The quest for strategic stability is anathema to the Chinese approach to "war" (defined as a continuous state of interaction with an adversary both in peacetime and during kinetic warfare). China's deliberate lack of transparency and ambiguity in capability and posture, especially in the nuclear weapons context, makes strategic stability unattainable. Indeed, lamenting the loss of strategic stability[103] and yearning for a return to the days of arms control are unproductive and features of an incorrect mindset.

Moreover, China is constantly wrestling for psychological and capability-related advantage, whether it is dealing with a materially superior foe (i.e., the US) or a materially inferior one (i.e., US allies). The objective is to win without fighting[104] or to ensure the adversary is as ill-prepared as possible prior to a conflict. The rapid development of its nuclear forces is to coerce and gain the psychological escalatory advantage (vis-à-vis US allies) rather than to secure and agree on a state of nuclear mutual vulnerability with the US to achieve greater strategic stability. For this reason, a nuclear arms control agreement is not feasible.

Besides, a critical element of China's strategic narrative is to entrench the belief in the US and its allies that Beijing will pay any price and suffer any cost to not only prevent Taiwanese independence but also integrate Taiwan into the Chinese mainland.[105] The latter is an intrinsic element of Xi Jinping's China Dream or "Rejuvenation," which is a fundamental assault against the geostrategic status quo and the US-led system that allied leaders cobbled together after the Second World War. Stability

based on a common pathway to recognition of mutual vulnerability would contradict and undermine this strategic narrative and cause China to relinquish the psychological escalatory advantage that it has put immense effort into entrenching.

Indeed, policymakers would be unwise to expect that China would offer greater transparency and seek strategic stability once it has gained nuclear parity with the US. If China were to achieve such parity, it would more (not less) likely double down on the strategic narrative that it will pay any price to secure Taiwan and concomitantly argue that US and allied resolve to defend Taipei has terminally weakened.

On a related point, the pursuit of strategic stability, and more narrowly a declaration of mutual vulnerability, is unattainable and dangerous for two further reasons.

First, it depends on the US acquiescing to core Chinese interests. If those interests consisted of merely preventing Taiwanese independence, then one might be more optimistic. However, Xi's China Dream includes not only the integration of Taiwan (including using force if required) but the eclipse of US preeminence in Asia and beyond. Xi is determined to fast-track and exploit the "great changes unseen for over a century,"[106] which refers to the inevitable eclipse of US and Western power. This makes it difficult to envision the US and China arriving at a common strategic understanding, as some who recommend pursuing strategic stability and mutual vulnerability as a starting point and end state suggest.[107]

Second, the US and allied pursuit of strategic stability is a self-limiting and self-defeating approach. Pursuing it effectively imposes a strategic and military ceiling on themselves in the belief that China is also binding itself to a strategic and military ceiling. There is little evidence that China is willing to do so for the reasons already presented. This will cause the US to restrain itself in the pursuit of an elusive state of affairs when China shows no willingness to do so and when such restraints run counter to China's approach to comprehensive warfare, perpetual "struggle" against the US,[108] and the pursuit of victory.

Furthermore, if the US limits its own increase in hard power and strategic advantage (relative to China's) in a misguided attempt to strategically reassure China or achieve an arms control agreement that Beijing will not genuinely agree or bind itself to, allies grow ever more apprehensive about US capacity and resolve to defend them and deter China. This increases China's ability to intimidate and coerce them in conventional and nuclear contexts. It is why allies tend to view US flirtation with strategic stability as akin to the dangerous delusion of advocating for a Group of Two arrangement between the US and China, which would leave other nations more vulnerable to Chinese assertiveness.[109]

The more inelegant and messier but better approach is to accept that the US-China relationship is necessarily in a dynamic and fluid state of *strategic instability* and to exploit uncertainty and risk arising from such ceaseless competition or "struggle."[110]

Regarding China's rapid nuclear modernization, offering concessions to secure strategic stability only increases Beijing's capacity to manipulate and coerce using its advancing nuclear weapons capacity. It is better to find ways to persuade Beijing that US extended nuclear deterrence becomes even more credible and robust as China's nuclear weapons capability grows more potent. This leads to the second recommendation below.

2. US allies should not go nuclear. This is a dangerous distraction that leads to poor strategic outcomes and plays into Chinese hands.

The increased importance of assisting the US in any hypothetical defense of Taiwan exacerbates several allied fears that play on each other:

- China might have more reason to target military assets in the allied country, perhaps using nuclear weapons.

- This risk increases allies' reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence, which in turn increases apprehension about US abandonment in the event of a WMD attack.[111]

Doubts about the reliability of US extended nuclear deterrence are leading to discussion as to whether allies such as Australia ought to acquire their own independent nuclear weapons in the future.[112] (Note that this is distinct from Abe's concept of nuclear sharing, which is about deploying US nuclear weapons on Japanese soil.) This discussion exists alongside a parallel debate about whether Australia should decrease its commitment to, and ties with, the US[113]—a discussion generating more interest and receiving more weight as China modernizes its nuclear arsenal.

The problem with the more independent route is that US allies do not have the military know-how or resources to respond to and counter the PLA or to prevent unacceptable levels of Chinese intimidation and coercion. The annual budget of the PLA, which has superior technological capabilities, exceeds the combined defense budgets of the whole of Asia and Oceania. Allies such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines lack any geographic depth and are on the front lines of Chinese military harassment and of any possible conflict.

Chinese hegemony in East Asia will mean that Australia finds itself in a hostile strategic and geopolitical environment, which will leave it completely vulnerable to Chinese coercion and imposition. Australia might not be on the front lines of any conflict, but Chinese hegemony will severely change and constrain its ability to pursue its interests and prosperity.

In short, an effective coalition of the US and its allies is the greatest possible deterrent to Chinese aggression, especially against Taiwan, which if successful would likely bring about a new hegemony in East Asia.

There is still the issue of whether allies should acquire their own nuclear weapons. China can already target any regional state with nuclear weapons.[114] Will seeking its own nuclear arsenal enhance or harm an ally's interest? Even putting to one side the enormous cost, opportunity costs for conventional rearmament, and difficulty for allied nations acquiring their own nuclear arsenal, there are several reasons why going down this path is premature and, in the current time, foolhardy.

First, no ally will be able to develop and acquire its own nuclear weapons without US technical assistance and diplomatic approval. Racing down this path would send an unmistakable signal to China that US extended nuclear deterrence is no longer in play. This would increase China's capacity to use nuclear or conventional threats to coerce and intimidate that ally.

Second, even if a US ally in Asia were able to develop its own nuclear arsenal, China's arsenal would dwarf its nuclear capacity in terms of numbers, delivery systems, and survivability for a second strike. If a conventional war escalated, China would be more (not less) tempted to take out that ally's limited nuclear capacity—especially if China already doubts US extended nuclear deterrence is a factor.

Third, given the devastating retaliation that China can launch against a weaker regional nation, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which a nuclear allied nation would contemplate the use of a nuclear weapon against China. For example, Chinese capture of Taiwan or complete dominance of the South China Sea would constitute a strategic disaster for the US's regional allies. However, it would not be an existential one. China is not seeking the physical annexation of Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, or Australia.

In that case, US allies are highly unlikely to court or countenance their own complete devastation by using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China. In other words, an independent nuclear arsenal would be an unconvincing and therefore perilous nuclear bluff that China could easily expose and exploit, leaving that country even more vulnerable to Chinese coercion.

Instead, the US should maintain its monopoly on nuclear weapons within the network of alliances in Asia and maintain the necessary capability and posture to assure allies and convince China that extended nuclear deterrence is in play. Washington also urgently needs to correct the virtual absence of US theater-based nuclear weapons in East Asia, modernize its nuclear delivery systems, and demonstrate nuclear operational readiness.[115]

To reiterate, the psychological and subsequent strategic effects of the US updating its nuclear arsenal and posture in the Indo-Pacific cannot be understated. It is Chinese apprehension about America's nuclear arsenal and posture as well as Chinese belief that the US is likely to provide a nuclear umbrella for allies that lead to the best chance of deterring China from considering the use of nuclear weapons to "escalate its way out of conventional defeat."[116]

3. Double down on conventional allied rearmament and underpin it with credible US extended nuclear deterrence.

Allies are better off allocating resources to modernizing and bulking up their conventional capabilities and posture. Australia is not on the front line of a Taiwan contingency like Japan and the Philippines. However, it is geographically positioned to allow US and Australian assets from its territory to strike Chinese assets in the South China Sea or to assist directly in the defense of the Philippines if necessary.

In the context of responding to China's nuclear modernization, the key point is that allies ought to double down on the rapid modernization of their own conventional forces to help strengthen a coalition against the PLA rather than fall into the Chinese trap of seeking an alternative or independent option.

Remember that China's primary objective is to weaken allies' resolve, capabilities, and purpose. Beijing also knows that the further allies stray from the common strategy of bulking up the US-led conventional deterrent, the less important they become to the US, the less likely they will enjoy US nuclear umbrella coverage, the less assured they will feel, and the more easily China can coerce them using implied conventional or nuclear threats. This is a diabolical downward spiral that allies need to avoid.

The strategic and psychological effect of Chinese nuclear modernization is to increase the timidity of allies about their conventional military buildups and willingness to commit to US-led strategic initiatives. Allies should do the exact opposite of what China is seeking to achieve.

4. Engage in psychological warfare with strategic effects.

China intends to use its nuclear modernization efforts to achieve powerful psychological effects on US allies. Primarily, it seeks to coerce or persuade allies that planning for, let alone becoming involved in, a US-led defense of Taiwan or another conflict against the PLA is too dangerous and risky. As a response, allies need to engage in psychological warfare of their own and demonstrate to China that its attempts to manipulate and coerce are having the opposite strategic effect. They should aim to make China consider and reevaluate the downside risks of its rapid nuclear rearmament program.

It has become commonplace for the US and its allies to refer to a worsening or deteriorating strategic environment in policy statements and documents. In doing so, taking the following measures is important:

Publicly release detailed information about China's conventional and nuclear buildup and update it continually.

Publicly state that China's nuclear modernization program goes beyond what is necessary for assured retaliation and that China is using it to coerce allies to become neutral in strategic terms and passive in military terms.

Explicitly deny that such nuclear coercion is working, and instead link increases in the allies' conventional military spending, as well as improved integration and interoperability of allied forces, to Chinese nuclear and conventional rearmament.

Publicly endorse the notion that the US and its allies are willingly engaging in an "arms race" with China and that the object is not de-escalation but collective rearming for the purpose of deterrence.

This messaging aims to make the point to one's own population and to Beijing that strategic instability resulting from Chinese nuclear modernization is a major driver of collective determination to increase allied conventional capability. To reiterate, it is this increase in conventional allied capability and forward-leaning posture of conventional forces that China is seeking to dampen.

Furthermore, the objective is to cause China and other regional countries to expect and internalize the increased focus on hard power accumulation by the US and its allies. The more a great power and its allies undertake an activity, the more other nations accept it as a reality and inevitability in the region. Just as China has fixed the narrative that Chinese hard power and capacity to coerce are enduring and unavoidable, the US and its allies need to embed the narrative that they are hardwired to win the arms race against an assertive Chinese power.

It is also critical that Xi and the CCP leadership internalize this narrative. If regional governments can view the US and its allies as simply as stubborn and intractable as they accept China to be, then there will eventually be fewer calls for the US and its allies to forever compromise and pull back.

Conclusion

So long as China believes in the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence, there is little downside risk to allied conventional rearmament. US and allied rearmament demonstrates resolve and builds up the capability necessary to deter China from launching a conventional attack against Taiwan. Building conventional capability also speaks to the intent and willingness to accept risk, which increases the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence. This is essential to prevent China from using (or threatening to use) a nuclear weapon to avoid a conventional defeat.

Stated differently, as China speeds ahead with nuclear modernization, the US and its allies need to persuade Beijing that doing so only accelerates US and allied conventional rearmament, which makes a successful Chinese military victory over Taiwan even less likely and more costly.

ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CMC: Central Military Commission

CSSC: China State Shipbuilding Corporation

DPRK : Democratic People's Republic of Korea

EDCA: Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

EDD: Extended Deterrence Dialogue

GPD: General Political Department

ICBM: intercontinental ballistic missile

ISR: intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NC3: nuclear command, control, and communications

NCG: Nuclear Consultative Group

NPT: Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

PAP: People's Armed Police

PLA: People's Liberation Army

PRC: People's Republic of China

ROK : Republic of Korea

SLBM: sea-launched ballistic missile

SSBN: ship, submersible, ballistic, nuclear (ballistic missile submarine)

THAAD: Terminal High Altitude Area Defense

UNSC: United Nations Security Council

USFK: US Forces Korea

WMD: weapon of mass destruction

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Notes

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