Chinese Thinking On Nuclear Weapons

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nuclear experts began to join international nuclear dialogues in the late 1970s when China launched its policy of reform and openness. Their communications with U.S. nuclear experts are sometimes difficult and inefficient, in part because of differences in the ways that Americans and Chinese think about nuclear weapons.

One aspect of this divergence is terminology. Some international efforts have been undertaken to develop a common language among nuclear experts from different countries by compiling multilanguage nuclear glossaries. These glossaries are a useful first step to smoothen international communication on nuclear issues, but they are not enough to eliminate misunderstandings caused by divergent beliefs and analytical paradigms.

This article summarizes the findings of a project by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on Chinese nuclear thinking. The project aims to promote an effective and efficient dialogue between Chinese and U.S. nuclear experts by developing each side’s understandings of the other side’s thinking on nuclear weapons.

Terminology

Several important security concepts have very different meanings in China and the United States. The differences are rooted in philosophical, historical, and cultural contexts and cannot be clarified simply by translating one side’s words into the language of other.
The word “security” itself is difficult to translate in Chinese. In English, security generally is about avoiding damage caused by intended human attacks while “safety” is about avoiding damage caused by accidents or natural disasters. In Chinese, the word “anquan” refers to the avoidance of damage from any cause and thus encompasses the meanings of “security” and “safety” in English.

The assumption in the English-speaking world is that security and safety issues are distinguishable. In China the assumption is that security and safety issues are sometimes tangled with each other and should be addressed in an integrated way. This Chinese thinking is based on a holistic philosophy and is now called the “comprehensive security concept” or “comprehensive security theory.”

At its first meeting, in April 2014, the Chinese Council of State Security, which is analogous to the U.S. National Security Council, announced 11 important security issues that it would address, most of which are nonmilitary issues. According to China’s comprehensive security theory, military and nonmilitary security issues are at the same level of importance and should be managed synergistically.

In the trade-off between the military power and the safety of nuclear weapons, the comprehensive security theory allows China to optimize its nuclear weapon systems in a more comprehensive framework. This can explain why China chooses to keep its nuclear weapons at a low level of alert. A higher level might strengthen the deterrent power of Chinese nuclear forces, but it also increases the risk of accidental launch and other safety problems. A “purely military viewpoint” that optimizes a weapons system only with regard to its military effects has long been criticized as unwise by the leaders of the People’s Liberation Army.

China also has a very different understanding of the concept of nuclear deterrence. For a long time, Chinese and U.S. nuclear experts have had communication problems in their exchanges about the concept. The Americans generally believe that nuclear deterrence is a defensive posture while the Chinese criticize the offensive nature of nuclear deterrence.

According to the U.S. understanding, both deterrence and compellence are considered coercion. Nuclear deterrence is to force an adversary to give up an action by threatening to use nuclear weapons while nuclear compellence is to force the adversary to take an action. The belief of the U.S. strategic community is that nuclear deterrence and compellence are distinguishable. If a coercive action is intended to change the status quo, it is compellence; otherwise, it is deterrence. The definition works well when it describes a coercive behavior in an isolated, large international conflict. For example, in this school of thought, if a country relies on the existence of its nuclear weapons to prevent a nuclear attack from its rival, it is an example of nuclear deterrence. On the other hand, if a country uses the influence of its nuclear weapons to occupy a large piece of its rival’s territory, that is nuclear coercion.

Many international conflicts, however, are small, and many large conflicts begin as small ones. In many small conflicts, it is very difficult to determine which country changed the status quo first. If a country wants to exploit its nuclear weapons in a small conflict or in an escalation of a small conflict into a larger one, it would be very difficult to distinguish compellence from deterrence. A country could launch a conventional attack against its adversary and use its possession of nuclear weapons to dissuade a conventional counterattack. In this case, nuclear weapons seem to play a deterrent role if one looks at only the second step in conflict. Yet, one could argue that nuclear weapons play a compellent role in the context of the whole process. The Chinese believe that nuclear deterrence and compellence are not distinguishable if the influence of nuclear weapons is applied to small conflicts or the escalation of such conflicts.

The Chinese translation of “deterrence” is “weishe,” but “weishe” actually means “coercion” in Chinese. This is not a translation error. It comes from the Chinese philosophy of holism. The Chinese worry about the compellent effects that are naturally associated with some policies that are labeled as “nuclear deterrence.” A nuclear policy reserving the possibility of using nuclear weapons in response to conventional conflicts could encourage and support conventional aggression aiming to change the status quo. Such a policy actually represents nuclear compellence rather than deterrence. If nuclear weapons were used only in retaliation for nuclear attacks, the compellent roles
of these weapons would be significantly reduced. This is why the Chinese government criticizes “nuclear deterrence based on first use of nuclear weapons.”

An arms race could be driven by concerns about a weakening of national security or influence in one side or in both sides of a pair of adversaries. If each of two rivals wants more nuclear weapons to better protect itself against attacks from the other side, this is an arms race due to the security dilemma. If each side wants more nuclear weapons to support its bid for leadership in the world, this is an arms race for hegemony. When Americans talk about an arms race, it is usually about the security dilemma; when the Chinese talk about an arms race, it is always about global hegemony. In Chinese eyes, the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War was driven mainly by the two countries’ ambitions for global hegemony.

When China explains its self-constraint with regard to the growth of its nuclear weapons stockpile, it always pledges that it will not engage in an arms race with other countries. By that, China means that it will not seek to amass a large nuclear arsenal for the purpose of global hegemony.

Yet, if China sees the development of new strategic capabilities in other countries undermining its nuclear retaliatory capability, it certainly will consider the option of deploying more nuclear weapons. For example, one option for China to respond to growing U.S. missile defense capabilities is to develop more offensive missiles. If such a quantitative missile competition took place between China and the United States, it would be an arms race due to a security dilemma. The Chinese commitment rules out a strategy of nuclear growth for global hegemony, but it does not exclude a strategy of nuclear growth to respond to a security dilemma.

The two types of arms races mentioned above are different in their natures. An arms race for global hegemony always includes quantitative competitions. A country that has the goal of global hegemony cannot accept a larger strategic nuclear arsenal in any other country. In contrast, an arms race due to the security dilemma does not have to include quantitative competition. A small and survivable nuclear force is enough for the purpose of security.

This is why China feels comfortable with the small size of its nuclear arsenal. Its responses to new strategic capabilities in other countries do not have to involve an increase in the size of the arsenal if available countermeasures are smart and cheap. Chinese nuclear experts worry about new strategic
capabilities in the United States, including missile defense and the ability to deliver precision conventional strikes, but the choices of countermeasures are still open. One option for China is a moderate increase in the number of its offensive missiles to compensate for the loss of its nuclear retaliatory capability, but Beijing has pledged not to pursue quantitative nuclear parity with United States for the purpose of hegemony.

**Paradigms**

In the United States, security analysis follows a basic paradigm, which is to identify and assess the threat to U.S. national security. A national security threat is usually an outside enemy that could hurt the United States; the threat is measured by the capability and intention of the enemy. If an enemy has a strong capability and an intention to hurt United States, it is regarded as a significant threat. Advocates of a change in security policy usually need to establish that an outside enemy has the capability and intention to hurt the United States.

The security paradigm measuring the capability and intention of an enemy is straightforward and transparent, so it is popular in the United States and is widely accepted by scholars in other countries, including some Chinese scholars and students. The paradigm is believed to be the only basis for security analysis. Very few people notice that there is a different indigenous Chinese security paradigm. The indigenous Chinese security paradigm emphasizes national security challenges instead of national security threats. A national security challenge is a dangerous situation in which China is vulnerable. Because of the influences of the U.S. security paradigm, Chinese security documents always use the phrase “national security challenges and threats.” In national defense “white papers” issued by the Chinese government in recent years, almost all cases of “national security challenges and threats” are situations rather than enemies. For example, one security challenge identified by a 2008 paper is the situation of technical lagging, in which “China is faced with the superiority of the developed countries” in economic, science and technology, and military affairs.

In the U.S. security paradigm, national security threats are usually outside the United States. In the Chinese security paradigm, the origins and effects of national security challenges could be inside China. For example, the situation of technical lagging may be caused by quick development of a particular technology in foreign countries and slow progress in China. In the U.S. security paradigm, security threats are mostly military threats while in the Chinese security paradigm, security challenges include military and nonmilitary factors.

Although some Chinese scholars and students have begun to use the U.S. security paradigm in academic research, the Chinese paradigm still dominates security policy research. Some Chinese nuclear policies and views cannot be explained by the U.S. security paradigm. For example, Chinese security experts expressed their concerns over the U.S. project on an earth-penetrating nuclear warhead during the George W. Bush administration. The small project would have brought very little new capability to the United States, and its declared purpose was to attack deeply buried targets in proliferator countries. Under the U.S. security paradigm, the Chinese should not have been worried about the project.

The Chinese security paradigm can well explain Beijing’s concern. A robust nuclear taboo against nuclear weapons use is favorable to China’s no-first-use policy and China’s security. Any development of this kind of tactical nuclear weapon would weaken the nuclear taboo and therefore increase the risk of nuclear weapons use.

As mentioned above, technical lagging is a dangerous situation and is regarded by the Chinese as a national security challenge. Many Chinese strategic and nuclear projects aim merely to master new defense technologies but not necessarily deploy them. A typical example is the Chinese effort on the neutron bomb. The purpose of the effort was to understand the technology. China decided not to deploy the neutron bomb because it is contrary to China’s no-first-use policy.

Another example is China’s response to U.S. national missile defense activities. The Chinese have two concerns in this area. The first concern is that the U.S. missile defenses may weaken China’s
nuclear retaliatory capability. Because the concern can be well explained by the Chinese and U.S. security paradigms, it is easy for Chinese and U.S. security experts to have bilateral discussions on it. The second Chinese concern is that U.S. missile defense development may lead to great scientific and technical breakthroughs in the United States and that it would enlarge the technical gap between the United States and China. According to the Chinese security paradigm, possible technical lagging in China would be a security challenge and should be avoided. The 863 Program, launched in China in 1986, was to address the concern. Unfortunately, the second concern cannot be explained by the U.S. security paradigm and has been ignored by all U.S.-Chinese nuclear dialogues.

In a broader area of national policymaking, the Chinese and U.S. ways of calculating national interests also are different. In the United States, it is very unusual to suggest that security interests should be sacrificed for economic interests. In China, economic and security interests are at the same level in the calculation of national interests, although some analyses may value one or the other highly. In Chinese debates on issues related to security and the economy, it is normal that security arguments yield to economic arguments. The economy-centered calculation on one hand encourages Chinese decision-makers to constrain China’s nuclear weapons development and, on the other hand, makes China cautious about nonproliferation sanctions, as illustrated by its attitude toward export controls in the 1980s and in the first half of the 1990s.

**Approaches**

The Chinese have some approaches in nuclear policy that are different from those of the United States. The most noticeable approach is to keep the roles of nuclear and conventional weapons separate. The Chinese do not believe that nuclear weapons are usable and can help China in conventional wars. China always wants to avoid the influence of nuclear weapons on conventional weapons issues. It has a bilateral no-first-use agreement with Russia and never tries to use the influence of its nuclear weapons in its relations with India. The Chinese feel it is unreasonable to claim that Beijing would become more aggressive at the conventional level if its nuclear retaliatory capability became more credible. The approach of keeping the roles of nuclear and conventional weapons separate also allows China to maintain a small nuclear arsenal because it does not need a large nuclear arsenal for damage limitation in a first nuclear strike or reassuring allies as the United States does.

Many Chinese use the term “strategic stability” in a general way. They understand the term to refer to political trust and respect between countries. This is why the terms “strategic stability” and “strategic reassurance” are always associated with each other in U.S.-Chinese nuclear dialogues. In
recent years, some Chinese experts, especially technical experts, have begun to use the Western definition of the term. Now the discussions between Chinese and U.S. security experts on the issue of strategic stability are sometimes on two different tracks. One track emphasizes the big picture of overall U.S.-Chinese relations while the other track pays attention to strategic force structures and related details. Some efforts are needed to make sure that the two tracks are not separated too widely.

The Chinese have an indigenous idea of strategic stability although they might not use that term. In China, there is a widespread belief that technical lagging would invite attacks. The belief accurately expresses the Chinese calculation in this area: deployed and nondeployed technologies are important in maintaining strategic stability. In the U.S. calculation of strategic stability, only technologies that a country is deploying or planning to deploy are considered. The logic is that only deployed systems ready to be launched contribute to the cost-benefit calculations for launching an attack in a crisis. The Chinese idea is that other countries would consider it a window of opportunity to attack their country if it does not have some important military technologies.

This is based on the painful experience that China first had when it was invaded by Western powers in 1839 during the First Opium War. If China has state-of-the-art military technologies available, it can move them into deployment when necessary. Chinese security experts always worry that U.S. military projects will lead to great scientific and technical breakthroughs in the United States, and U.S. security experts always worry that Chinese military projects will become deployed systems. These worries may cause overreactions by each country. Future U.S.-Chinese dialogues could consider including discussions on the Chinese indigenous approach to the calculation of strategic stability so that each country can better understand the intentions of the other.

China has had its preferred approach in nuclear disarmament since it acquired nuclear weapons. The approach includes two elements: The ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament is the complete elimination of all nuclear weapons in the world, and the best way to reduce the role of nuclear weapons is by constraining the use of nuclear weapons.

The nuclear-weapon states have had more in common with regard to the first element since President Barack Obama’s proposal for moving to a nuclear-weapon-free world, but they still differ on the route of nuclear disarmament. In recent years, China has been expending less of its diplomatic capital to press positions with which the other nuclear-weapon states do not agree and generally has become more realistic and cooperative on nuclear disarmament issues. For example, it took the lead in compiling the nuclear glossary and has joined discussions on the verification of deep nuclear reductions by the nuclear-weapon states.

Some aspects of Chinese nuclear policy have undergone significant changes in recent years. The most obvious changes are in transparency and nonproliferation.

In the area of nuclear transparency, the traditional Chinese views are that transparency with regard to intention is more important than transparency with regard to capability and that China’s small nuclear force needs to be protected by a higher level of secrecy. In recent years, China has begun to exhibit more nuclear transparency as Chinese society has become more and more open. Some nuclear information is presented in official documents or at public events, such as parades in which military systems are displayed. Some information is leaked to social media, a practice that the government now tolerates more than it has in the past. A system for regular publication of nuclear information has yet to be built in China.

China’s views on and approaches to nuclear nonproliferation also have undergone major changes in recent years. Before the reform in China, the Chinese felt embarrassed to criticize nuclear weapon programs in proliferator countries such as India because they saw that it was discriminatory to criticize other countries when China had a nuclear weapons program. After China launched the policy of reform in 1978, the Chinese viewed national economic interests as a whole as more important than national security interests. That is a main reason why China was very reluctant to join international sanctions and export control efforts against proliferation. Over the past two decades, the Chinese have come to take a more balanced view on economic and security interests, and China has become more active in nuclear nonproliferation. China now considers nuclear proliferation and
nuclear terrorism to be serious challenges to its national security and is willing to invest in the efforts against these challenges.

The Chinese have their special understandings on some important nuclear terms and have a special paradigm in analyzing nuclear issues. In international dialogues on nuclear arms control, it is necessary to explain the logic and background of the Chinese nuclear thinking. Otherwise, communication among international nuclear experts would be difficult.

International society should pay attention to the special Chinese understandings on nuclear weapons. Experts from other countries should make greater efforts to explore Chinese security paradigms, nuclear terminology, and approaches to nuclear policy. Future international nuclear dialogues involving Chinese experts could include special sessions to address the differences between Chinese and U.S. nuclear thinking. These efforts could help clear suspicions between Chinese and U.S. nuclear experts in the strategic nuclear arena and thus avoid overreactions by both countries.

ENDNOTES


2. The products of the project will be a book in Chinese and a book in English.


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international relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

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