

## CHAPTER 8

### CHINESE AND MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION: IS CHINA GETTING MAD?

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#### INTRODUCTION

Alone among nuclear powers in the Cold War, the People's Republic of China (PRC) maintained a publicly ambivalent attitude about Armageddon, occasionally shocking the world with statements that appeared to welcome the deaths of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people as a possible shortcut to communist nirvana. Yet these disturbing assertions often were tempered by comments disparaging nuclear weapons, refusing to see atomic arsenals as more decisive in war and peace than "man" or "the people." Outside observers struggled to interpret these seemingly contradictory Maoist precepts about nuclear war, and tried to disentangle the dialectical embrace of opposites from the practical impulse to denigrate that which one does not possess.

Since the death of Mao and the deployment of nuclear-capable delivery systems, however, Beijing's attitudes about nuclear warfare continue to change in subtle but important ways. Put briefly, Chinese views of nuclear weapons have evolved from initial disparagement and covetousness prior to the acquisition of an arsenal, to a nuclear minimalist perspective that resembles mutually assured destruction (MAD) in every way but name. Ironically, China appears to be implicitly embracing MAD and achieving a credible minimal deterrent at precisely the same time that the United States, from the Chinese perspective, appears to be abandoning MAD and deterrence in favor of defenses and preemptive strike.<sup>1</sup> In its desperation to retain the MAD dynamic, China may therefore be forced to build to higher force levels, permitting the PRC to actually contemplate post-MAD counterforce strategies in the future.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first outlines Chinese attitudes about mutually assured destruction from 1945 to

1964, and focuses on the interplay between Maoist ideology, the split with the Soviet Union, and ongoing tension with the United States. The second section charts the evolution of Beijing's policies from 1964 to 1976 and assesses the impact of the successful acquisition of the bomb on China's views of nuclear weapons and warfare. The third section analyzes Beijing's evolving attitudes about deterrence from the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 to the present day. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the strategic implications of Beijing and Washington's diverging views on MAD.

## DEFINITIONS

The Chinese literature on nuclear deterrence presents significant terminological challenges to comparative study. To a certain extent, the linguistic divergence is intentional, as Chinese scholars and officials explicitly rejected the content and frameworks of the Western deterrence discourse as hegemonist and imperialist. For the purposes of this chapter, MAD is defined as minimum, mutual deterrence,<sup>2</sup> and has three key principles. First, do not pursue first-strike options. Second, do not attack weapons, since they cannot all be destroyed and the process will lead to an arms race. Instead, aim at cities and people in the form of countervalue strikes. Third, do not defend against the adversary's weapons with missile defenses, since it would be impossible, prohibitively expensive, and destabilizing by encouraging preemptive first strike. A MAD force therefore is relatively minimalist, seeking to satisfy, not maximize and secure forces through mobility, concealment, and hardening. Submarine-based forces are the ideal MAD system, because they are relatively invulnerable to a decapitation strike.

Chinese strategists use two terms to describe their nuclear doctrine: "minimal deterrence" and "limited deterrence." Minimal deterrence is China's self-defined doctrine, characterized by a small, second-strike countervalue force bound by a no-first use doctrine as well as negative and positive security assurances. In many respects, the doctrinal aspects of the concept strongly resemble MAD, though the credibility of the PRC's deterrent force was historically in question. More recent Chinese writings call for an aspirational

doctrine of “limited deterrence” (*youxian weishe*) comprised of counterforce, warfighting capabilities “to deter conventional, theater, and strategic nuclear war, and to control and suppress escalation during a nuclear war.”<sup>3</sup> According to Chinese analysts, such a posture requires “a greater number of smaller, more accurate, survivable, and penetrable intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs); sea launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) as countervalue retaliatory forces; tactical and theater nuclear weapons to hit battlefield and theater military targets and to suppress escalation; ballistic missile defense to improve the survivability of the limited deterrent; space-based early warning and command and control systems; and anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) to hit enemy military satellites.”<sup>4</sup> In terms of Western theories, this “limited deterrence” concept resembles the “flexible response” concept of the late McNamara period.

## **CHINESE ATTITUDES ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS, 1945-PRESENT**

### **1945-64: Paper Tigers, Bloody Feuds.**

When the American atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima in 1945, the Chinese Communist Party and its leader, Mao Zedong, were mopping up their victory over the Japanese Imperial Army and readying themselves for civil war against Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist forces. Mao’s guerrilla armies had been fighting for nearly 2 decades and were beginning to see the fruits of his theories of protracted struggle and People’s War against technologically superior foes. Among his tenets was a belief that man was ultimately more powerful than machine and that no weapon was sufficient to defeat the will of the “the people.” Despite this view, however, there was understandable fear about the awesome destructive power of atomic weapons and a significant amount of frustration, as evidenced in this unattributed historical analysis published by a Chinese author:

At the end of World War II, after it had dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, U.S. imperialism assumed that armed with this “ultimate weapon” it could ride roughshod over the world and do whatever it pleased. At the time there was a kind of fear mentality

among the Chinese people as well as among the peoples of other countries. U.S. imperialism, possessed of atomic weapons, appeared to them so powerful that they thought it could put down peoples' revolutions at will.

Until 1955, China sought to control these fears by enforcing a virtual news blackout on news related to global nuclear developments. For example, there was no mention in any Chinese news source about Britain's 1952 successful test of a nuclear weapon.<sup>5</sup>

When the bomb was mentioned by Chinese officials or media, the tone was always disparaging, downplaying the strategic significance of the technology and emphasizing the power of the Chinese people. The classic encapsulation of this viewpoint was Mao's famous statement:

The atom bomb is a paper tiger with which the American reactionaries try to terrify the people. It looks terrible but, in fact, is not. Of course, the atom bomb is a weapon of mass annihilation: the outcome of a war is decided by the people, not by one or two new weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Quoting Mao, then Minister of National Defense Lin Biao in his 1963 article, "Long Live the Victory of People's War," argues "The spiritual atomic bomb which the revolutionary people possess is a far more powerful weapon than the physical atomic bomb."<sup>7</sup> While these statements accurately reflect Mao's normative and ideological beliefs about the primacy of man over technology, it is also clear that he made a virtue out of a necessity. A country that does not have nuclear weapons has an incentive to downplay their strategic significance. Moreover, the Beijing government believed that "exaggeration of the destructiveness of nuclear war only served to demoralize the socialist camp and plays into the hands of U.S. nuclear blackmail,"<sup>8</sup> while consistent dismissal of the threat "boosted the morale" of the Chinese people.<sup>9</sup> As explored in more detail later, these dismissive views also played an important part in shaping China's minimalist view of its own nuclear weapons and their role, encouraging Beijing to develop the smallest possible deterrent and thus embrace the essence of MAD.

While Beijing sought to devalue nuclear weapons in this period, events in the international security environment also highlighted the fact that nuclear weapons were in some cases counterproductive to

Chinese national interests and relations with other countries. From a threat perspective, the Korean War, as well as the 1954 and 1958 Quemoy-Matsu crises, were marked by implicit or explicit threats of nuclear attack from the United States, which the Chinese denounced as “nuclear blackmail.” Unprotected from such an attack, Beijing turned to its ally, the Soviet Union, for a nuclear umbrella commitment and technical assistance in building its own bomb. In 1956, Mao Zedong stated plainly that China needed nuclear weapons, arguing that “if we are not to be bullied in the present-day world, we cannot do without the atomic bomb.”<sup>10</sup> He implicitly accepted that nuclear weapons had deterrent value, at least against the corrupt West. Yet the intra-alliance debate over the correct interpretation of these crises and the nature of nuclear war itself, as well as the subsequent negotiations for a Chinese bomb, severely frayed the unity of the socialist camp, and eventually was a major factor in its rupture in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The Sino-Soviet debate over the nature of nuclear warfare reveals important features of Chinese attitudes about the bomb and its perceived utility. View in hindsight, the heart of the argument was a disagreement over whether “mutually assured destruction” was indeed “mutual.” While both Moscow and Beijing agreed with Clausewitz’s dictum that “war is the continuation of politics,” they disagreed over its continuing applicability in the nuclear era. Asserting that “the effects of massive retaliation are highly doubtful,”<sup>11</sup> China interpreted American unwillingness to use nuclear weapons in Korea and the 1954 and 1958 Quemoy-Matsu crises as further proof that atomic weapons were a “paper tiger.”<sup>12</sup> Beijing also believed that nuclear weapons limited American power:

Recourse to this kind of weapon places U.S. imperialism in a position of extreme isolation, and militarily, the massive destructiveness of nuclear weapons limits their use, for in civil wars and wars of national independence, where the lines zigzag and the fighting is at close range, the use of nuclear weapons of mass destruction would inflict damage on both belligerents.<sup>13</sup>

For the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), however, the consequences of war, i.e., total destruction, threatened to undermine

the desired political end of communist domination. In response to Malenkov's 1954 statement that nuclear war would result in the "annihilation of mankind," Foreign Minister Chen Yi responded, "We do not believe that the power of atomic weapons is too overwhelming. We do not believe that atomic weapons could destroy mankind."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Beijing rejected the potential effectiveness of nuclear weapons against China:

Nuclear weapons would not be effective against China because of her large territory and the general dispersal of her armed forces, population, and industrial centers, and that battles were won decisively only with the occupation of enemy territory by infantry forces.<sup>15</sup>

The atomic bomb itself cannot be the decisive factor in a war . . . It cannot be employed on the battlefield to destroy directly the fighting power of the opposing army in order not to annihilate the users themselves. It can only be used against a big and concentrated object like a big armament industry center or huge concentration of troops. Therefore, the more extensive the opponents' territory is and the more scattered the opponent's population is, the less effective will the atomic bomb be.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, Mao insisted in 1957 that China was not afraid of nuclear war:

People all over the world are now discussing whether or not a third world war will break out. In regard to his question, we must be psychologically prepared and at the same time take an analytical view. We stand resolutely for peace and oppose war. But if the imperialists insist on unleashing another war, we should not be afraid of it. Our attitude on this question is the same as our attitude toward all disturbances: Firstly, we are against it; secondly, we are not afraid of it.<sup>17</sup>

More disturbing to observers in Moscow and around the world, Mao in the same year asserted that China could survive and prevail in a nuclear war, and therefore saw global megadeath as a potential historical shortcut to victory over capitalism:

The first World War was followed by the birth of the Soviet Union with a population of 200 million. The Second World War was followed by the emergence of the socialist camp with a combined population of 900 million. If the imperialists should insist on launching a third world war, it is certain the several hundred million more will turn to socialism; then

there will not be much room left in the world for the imperialists, while it is quite likely that the whole structure of imperialism will utterly collapse.<sup>18</sup>

Lest one assume that this was a political line unsupported by professional Chinese military officers, Marshal Peng Dehuai, who would later stand up to Mao over the failures of the Great Leap Forward, agreed with the Chairman's arithmetic:

America possesses atomic weapons and is threatening us with them. But we are not afraid of atomic warfare. Why? Because China has 600 million people. Even if 200 million people were killed by atomic weapons, 400 million people would still survive. Even if 400 million people were killed, 200 million would still survive. Even if 200 million survived, China would still constitute a big country of the world. Furthermore, these 200 million people will absolutely not surrender. Therefore, at the end America will lose the war.<sup>19</sup>

At its most extreme, the hyperbole of Chinese communist propaganda promised impossible rewards for war: "The victorious people would very swiftly create on the ruins of imperialism a civilization thousands of times higher than the capitalist system and a truly beautiful future for themselves."<sup>20</sup> This rhetoric was deeply alarming to the Soviet Union, and explains Moscow's unwillingness to implement nuclear cooperation agreements with Beijing as well as their reluctance to extend a Soviet nuclear umbrella over Beijing in the 1958 Quemoy crisis.<sup>21</sup> From then on, China knew that the Soviet Union could not be relied on for extended deterrence. According to Foreign Minister Chen Yi in 1963, "[W]hat is this Soviet assurance worth? . . . This sort of promise is easy to make, but . . . worthless. Soviet protection is worth nothing to us . . . No outsiders can give us protection, in fact, because they always attach conditions and want to control us."<sup>22</sup>

As a result of these fissures in the Sino-Soviet relationship, open verbal warfare broke out between Moscow and Beijing on the issue of nuclear warfare and the struggle with American imperialism. Moscow openly rejected Mao's political analysis of the bomb, arguing that "the atom bomb does not adhere to the class principle."<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Moscow excoriated the lack of realism in Chinese understandings of nuclear war, arguing that "the Chinese

Communist Party has developed some kind of special aims and interests which the socialist camp cannot support with its military force.”<sup>24</sup> Finally, Moscow made the following unsubtle threat to leave Beijing in the cold, warning that “the attempt of any socialist country to rely on its own force in insuring its defense—forces which, moreover, may not be sufficient in all countries—can prove to be a fatal mistake in the age of nuclear arms.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, “China might be subjected to massive destruction before the Russians had a chance to intervene.”<sup>26</sup>

Shorn of any guarantee of protection from nuclear attack, China returned to its “man over machine” line in 1958:

Although the absolute control of atomic weapons is now in the socialist camp, it still does not believe that the atomic weapons is the chief factor in determining victory. Atomic weapons and ICBMs are good weapons, but they cannot be substituted for men in warfare. The United States should therefore realize that the Chinese people are no longer frightened by any atomic attack!<sup>27</sup>

Beijing also stepped up verbal assaults on the Soviet views of nuclear conflict, rejecting Moscow’s contention that mutual deterrence excludes the possibility of war.<sup>28</sup> Instead, China argued that mutual deterrence gave them political and military room to maneuver, especially in national liberation wars and revolutionary civil wars.<sup>29</sup> Beijing responded to Moscow’s risk-averse behavior with taunting:

The crucial point is, what should be the policy in the face of U.S. imperialist nuclear blackmail and threats—resistance or capitulation? We stand for resistance.<sup>30</sup>

Imperialism, whose doom is sealed, cannot save itself by relying on nuclear weapons, nor can the socialist countries win victory in their struggle against imperialism by relying solely on nuclear weapons . . . The Soviet leaders insist on exaggerating the role of nuclear weapons and trust blindly in them, despise the masses, and have forgotten that the masses are the makers of history, and so they have degenerated into worshippers of nuclear weapons.<sup>31</sup>

The Chinese believed that Soviet policy—its support of peaceful coexistence, emphasis on the horrors of nuclear war, and downgrading of militancy in national liberation movements—paralyzes the revolutionary process and, consequently, the struggle against imperialism.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, China warned the Soviet Union that its attempts at control in the socialist camp, particularly with regard to the distribution of nuclear technology, were not going to prevent China from pursuing its own capability. As a 1963 government statement forcefully asserts, "the Chinese people will not tremble before U.S. nuclear threats,"<sup>33</sup> and will not "kneel before the nuclear blackmail of the U.S. imperialists."<sup>34</sup> Instead, an official argues that "the one and only way to counter the threat of a nuclear war is for more socialist and peace-loving countries to gain a nuclear self-defense capability."<sup>35</sup>

### **Views of Nuclear Weapons After Acquisition, 1964-78.**

By the early 1960s, China was moving closer to its goal of developing an indigenous weapon, which would serve "as a principal means to remain autonomous from both Soviet and U.S. alliance systems" and the "ultimate guarantor of their national security."<sup>36</sup> While the Chinese believed that even a token capability would deter the United States,<sup>37</sup> Beijing's relentless disparaging of nuclear weapons undermined the credibility of rumors about Beijing's impending atomic and missile capability.<sup>38</sup> However, China's successful detonation of a fission weapon in 1964 was effective "propaganda of the deed,"<sup>39</sup> announcing to the world that Beijing was no longer vulnerable to U.S. "nuclear blackmail."<sup>40</sup> The official statement is a fascinating window into China's conflicted attitude about nuclear weapons. It is riddled with internal contradictions and dialectical mindbenders. It strains credulity, for instance, that the Chinese would have spent an enormous amount of scarce state resources to build a weapon that is explicitly labeled as a "paper tiger." If atomic weapons were a paper tiger, it is difficult to fathom how nuclear weapons will provide "defense" and protect "the Chinese people from U.S. threats to launch a nuclear war." Moreover, the official insistence that China developed nuclear weapons in order to aid in the global disarmament of nuclear weapons seems disingenuous at best. But to question this report's logic misses the point, because it is a testament to ideological correctness. Only Mao's death in 1976 provided an opportunity to strip the bomb of its political character and explore the strategic rationales and possible utility of nuclear weapons in Chinese defense and foreign policy.

After China joined the ranks of the nuclear powers, its views of nuclear weapons underwent some important and understandable modifications. First, the incessant disparaging of nuclear weapons as a “paper tiger” was toned down in favor of trumpeting of China’s success in creating a “real tiger,” which could deter the country’s enemies and boost the morale of the population. At the same time, China stepped up its criticism of the nuclear weapons policies of the Soviet Union and the United States, particularly the superpowers’ use of their arsenals to intimidate and bully smaller states. Beijing’s fears were confirmed during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, when a feeler from Moscow to Washington was leaked. The feeler called for a preemptive strike against China’s nuclear facilities, but was ultimately disavowed by Kissinger. China sought to differentiate itself from the superpowers by issuing a no first use policy, asserting both negative and positive security assurances,<sup>41</sup> and advocating the proliferation of nuclear-free zones around the world.<sup>42</sup> China also embraced the notion of a minimalist mutual deterrence, arguing that its small, new arsenal would credibly deter U.S. threats to launch a nuclear war. In short, China embraced MAD when it acquired nuclear weapons, as reflected in emerging doctrine and force structure, but for ideological reasons was precluded from explicitly labeling it as such. At the same time, both Russia and the United States abandoned MAD as an official policy, leaving China with a minimalist posture while they ratcheted up the ladder to a more maximalist position.

### **Views of Nuclear Weapons After the Death of Mao, 1978-Present.**

The death of Mao permitted important changes in Chinese views of nuclear weapons, though the shifts were gradual in scope and timing. Deng Xiaoping, for instance, did not completely abandon the Maoist rhetoric about using nuclear victory over capitalist imperialism, and he was certainly no less cold-blooded in its analysis:

It is impossible to exterminate the human race by using nuclear weapons. Now there are more than four billion people in the world. If the worst came to worst and more than two billion people died, the other more than two billion people would remain. More than two billion people would live on the globe just the same.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, official statements about deterrence since the late 1970s have been remarkably consistent, despite wholesale changes in the arsenals of both the United States and the former Soviet Union. In 1983, Deng Xiaoping validated China's minimalist deterrence posture, declaring that the development of nuclear weapons "had forced the superpowers not to use" their arsenals against China, adding that "China only wants to adhere to principle: we have what others have, and anyone who wants to destroy us will be subject to retaliation."<sup>44</sup> In 1986, Defense Minister Zhang Aiping elaborated on this theme, asserting "We have built a powerful national defense and possess a nuclear strike capability. The enemy no longer dares to strike [the first blow] or to underestimate us."<sup>45</sup> These views have survived the end of the Cold War and are still being publicly delivered by officials. In a July 1997 speech to the U.S. Army War College, Lieutenant General Li Jijun, Vice President of the PLA's Academy of Military Science, reiterated China's public position regarding its nuclear posture:

China's nuclear strategy is purely defensive in nature. The decision to develop nuclear weapons was a choice China had to make in the face of real nuclear threats. A small arsenal is retained only for the purpose of self-defense. China has unilaterally committed itself to responsibilities not yet taken by other nuclear nations, including the declaration of a no-first-use policy, the commitment not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states and in nuclear-free zones . . . In short, China's strategy is completely defensive, focused only on deterring the possibility of nuclear blackmail being used against China by other nuclear powers.<sup>46</sup>

These comments also reveal the ongoing contradictions between China's declared nuclear principles, its changing force structure and doctrine, and important changes in the international security environment during this period, including U.S. and Russian drawdowns, the abrogation of the antiballistic missile (ABM) Treaty, the imminent introduction of theater and national missile defenses, the advent of increasingly accurate conventional precision guided munitions (PGMs), and the emerging weaponization of the Indian arsenal. Indeed, the comments highlight the necessity for a more critical examination of the discontinuities between China's public statements about nuclear weapons, its technical modernization programs, and doctrinal debates, with the goal of developing

a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the force. The question remains as to whether MAD is still an important organizing principle for China's arsenal.

China's currently deployed nuclear forces are incompletely postured for mutually assured destruction, as defined earlier. The small ICBM force (roughly two dozen missiles) is structurally and doctrinally configured for MAD, though its second strike has historically lacked credibility. The deployed continental United States (CONUS)-capable ICBM force is based exclusively in silos. It has no strategic early warning infrastructure to permit launch-under-attack (LUA)/launch-on-warning (LOW). As a result, the operational survivability of China's nuclear retaliatory capability vis-à-vis major nuclear powers was and probably still is open to question, particularly in the context of an all-out preemptive decapitation strike. At best, China's minimalist deterrent was primarily psychological, though the potency of this aspect of the deterrent should not be underestimated. Beijing's concerns about the credibility of its second strike, however, have been exacerbated by the expected deployment of theater and national missile defenses by the United States, as well as the recognition that U.S. conventional forces have developed the ability to destroy fixed targets like silos with PGMs.

At the same time, the Chinese force has grown to encompass more than simply minimal deterrent forces, including theater and tactical systems. Viewed in its totality, the Chinese nuclear arsenal seems to defy simple categorization as a MAD force. The PRC's multifaceted inventory is made up of strategic, theater, and tactical systems of varying range, accuracy, and yield, reflecting the very different missions it is required to perform. The small ICBM force, anchored by the DF-5 family of missiles, is the heart of the MAD force, composed of a minimally necessary number of missiles with large warheads and CEPs designed to hit countervalue targets like cities. The theater systems, by contrast, are unlikely to be used in a second-strike role following a preemptive strike. Instead, the theater systems look like offensive systems meant to threaten or strike U.S. forces and bases in Asia in order to deter coalition operations or degrade conventional capability. The short-range, ballistic missile forces, which are also nuclear capable, further confuse the situation by serving a variety of conventional warfighting and nuclear

warfighting roles. For the future, the doctrine and force structure of China's Second Artillery must be analyzed at three distinct levels. The first level is a MAD posture of *credible minimalist deterrence* with regard to the continental United States and Russia, the second is a more offensive-oriented, counterforce posture of "*limited deterrence*" with regard to China's theater nuclear forces, and the third is an *offensively-configured, preemptive, counterforce warfighting posture* of "active defense" or "offensive defense" for the Second Artillery's conventional missile forces.

How did the Chinese force evolve into this arrangement? First, the evidence tends to confirm the arguments of Lewis, *et al.*, of the importance of technology as a determinant of Chinese doctrine. The progression of missile systems, with their gradually expanding ranges and capabilities, defined the limits of the possible for the Chinese leadership. Technology alone did not determine the nature of the Chinese nuclear force posture. Central guidance on ranges and payloads, while admittedly vague, appears to conform with strategic-level perceptions of threats and goals in the external security environment, especially when matched with its corresponding logical deployment pattern. Perhaps, the Chinese made a virtue out of necessity in the construction of their nuclear deterrent by accepting the technological constraints of the system and making rational choices under those constraints. Historically, attention has focused on reducing the discontinuity between reality and aspiration, which is oftentimes referred to as the "capabilities-doctrine gap."

At the present stage in the Second Artillery's modernization, China is nearing an historic convergence between doctrine and capability, allowing it to achieve credible minimalist deterrence vis-à-vis the continental United States. This represents a convergence of its doctrine and capability that China has not confidently possessed since the weaponization of its nuclear program in the mid-1960s. Indeed, the PRC's current modernization program appears to be a quest to increase the credibility of its deterrence posture by improving the readiness and survivability of the force. Measures being implemented include a transition from volatile liquid fuels to more stable solid fuels, a shift from fixed basing to mobile basing, the introduction of improved guidance systems, and the construction of a robust C4I infrastructure. Currently, the Chinese have not operationally deployed their planned solid-fueled, road-mobile ICBMs, though the

DF-31 seems to be nearing initial operational capability after more than 30 years of work. When these systems come online, the Chinese will have succeeded in fielding a much more credible minimalist deterrent force, whose mobility and readiness theoretically increase the chances that some percentage of the force could survive a first strike and, thus, effectively deter potential attackers. In short, China has nearly put in place a fully-realized MAD force.

But what about the future? In particular, how should one interpret the streams of writings beginning in the late 1980s from PLA strategists that advocate so-called “limited deterrence,” and appears to resemble counterforce “flexible response.” While these writings are not official declarations of doctrine, the fact that they are written by military analysts and appear in officially-sanctioned military publications gives them a special salience which deserves further scrutiny. In analyzing these writings, Johnston observes the emergence of “more comprehensive and consistent doctrinal arguments in favor of developing a limited flexible response capability” and that “Chinese strategists have developed a concept of limited deterrence . . . to describe the kind of deterrent China ought to have.”<sup>47</sup>

These recent Chinese writings call for limited, counterforce, warfighting capabilities “to deter conventional, theater, and strategic nuclear war, and to control and suppress escalation during a nuclear war.”<sup>48</sup> According the Chinese analysts, such a posture requires:

[a] greater number of smaller, more accurate, survivable, and penetrable ICBMs; SLBMs as countervalue retaliatory forces; tactical and theater nuclear weapons to hit battlefield and theater military targets and to suppress escalation; ballistic missile defense to improve the survivability of the limited deterrent; space-based early warning and command and control systems; and anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) to hit enemy military satellites.<sup>49</sup>

Because such a posture requires a significant increase in present Chinese capabilities, Johnston correctly highlights the gap between this proposed doctrine on the one hand, and actual capabilities on the other. As Godwin points out, the lack of any space-based reconnaissance or early warning systems means that Beijing’s command and control system does not have the ability in real time to determine the size and origin of the attack, making it difficult to

determine what kind of response is required. This information is an essential component of the more sophisticated versions of limited deterrence found in Chinese military journals.<sup>50</sup> Johnston also notes that achieving such a deterrent posture is not an inevitable outcome, due to several constraints.

There is little empirical basis for questioning the findings of Johnston about internal military writings on nuclear deterrence, especially since there is a striking disappearance of discussion of the term “minimal deterrence.” There are a number of possible explanations. Paul Godwin suggests that Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, and the implementation of Deng Xiaoping’s military reforms in the late 1970s permitted China’s military analysts to explore issues of doctrine and strategy “free from the stultifying requirement to verify everything they wrote with a literal interpretation of Mao’s writings and statements.”<sup>51</sup> Second, Godwin points to the increased battlefield nuclear weapons threat on the Sino-Soviet border, which “raised the salience of strategic deterrence and nuclear warfighting to a level it had never before achieved.” This threat encouraged Chinese military analysts to read extensively in Western theories and journals.<sup>52</sup> Johnston himself offers some additional explanations in the last few pages of his *International Security* article.<sup>53</sup> Many of the PLA authors contrast limited and minimal deterrence, obviating the possibility that they have simply renamed the previous doctrine for bureaucratic purposes. The authors appear to be well-placed to affect the operational doctrine of the Second Artillery, which removes the possibility of a disjuncture between academic and military writings, as occurred between the writings of RAND strategists and the war-winning strategy of General LeMay at Strategic Air Command. If limited deterrence is defined as flexible response, counterforce warfighting, then perhaps limited deterrence is the *aspirational* doctrine for a future Second Artillery.

Three more caveats can be added to interpret the emergence and meaning of an ostensible counterforce doctrine in China. First, assuming a continued adherence by China to its testing moratorium, and the possibility that it will ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in the future, it is reasonable to question China’s ability to develop smaller, lighter, and more accurate nuclear warheads (including potential multiple reentry vehicle [MRV] and multiple independent reentry vehicle [MIRV] capability) consistent

with the counterforce aspirations described by Chinese analysts in the late-1980s and early 1990s. Second, it is possible that China's previously discussed tripartite system is a confirmation of Johnston's conclusions about limited deterrence, and the analysis has simply come to the same place from a different direction. Perhaps the Chinese, when they looked at the multifunctional force structure they created, felt that minimal deterrence no longer could encompass all of the various defensive and offensive, long-range and short-range systems in their arsenal. Borrowing from Confucius, they may have concluded that harmony could only be restored when the name of the thing matched the nature of thing, and the product of this *zhengming* was "limited deterrence." Third, even if one accepts limited deterrence as an overarching *aspirational* goal of this multifaceted system, the misinterpretation of Johnston's writings by some, such as the Cox Committee, to mean that the Chinese are unquestionably engaged in an aggressive modernization of their missile forces meant to enable counterforce warfighting, must be rejected. Indeed, there are legitimate, alternative explanations for many of the hardware trends in China. Reforms in mobility, readiness, and C<sup>4</sup>I infrastructure are readily and more comprehensively explained as an attempt to increase survivability from foreign attack. It may simply represent the long-sought confidence of a credible deterrent, and not necessarily the desire to achieve a warfighting, war-winning strategy. Moreover, as long as the numbers of the force stay beneath a certain level, increases in accuracy and multiple warheads alone do not pose an appreciably greater threat to American and Russian nuclear superiority. American strategic nuclear forces number close to 8,000 deployed on 575 ICBMs, 102 strategic bombers, and 17 SSBNs. A single *Trident* SSBN, carries more missiles (24) than the entire Chinese ICBM inventory.

## CONCLUSION: IS CHINA FINALLY GETTING MAD?

In retrospect, Jonathan Pollack's tentative predictions in a 1995 book chapter entitled "The Future of China's Nuclear Weapons Policy" appear prescient:

Over the coming decade, the asymmetries between China's nuclear forces and those of the major nuclear arsenals seem likely to narrow, perhaps

appreciably. As the arsenals of the United States and the successor Soviet states diminish, the scale and imputed significance of Chinese nuclear deployments will grow. In addition, the Chinese appear in throes of a transition to a more credible nuclear deterrence, though there are ample uncertainties here as well.<sup>54</sup>

Ironically, since the above publication, more uncertainty was created by Beijing's perceptions of the West than by Chinese behavior. Its growing perception is that the Bush administration is moving away from MAD and deterrence towards a focus on preemption. As a result, Pollack's analysis that "the Chinese presumably feel less subject to strategic pressure than at any point since their emergence as a nuclear weapons state" is certainly no longer true.<sup>55</sup> While the analysis in the previous section suggests that China's deterrent was credible in the psychological rather than technical sense of word, the ongoing development in the United States of a new generation of missile defense systems and the development of a potential capability to decapitate a small, nonmobile nuclear arsenal with conventional, precision-guided munitions undermines Beijing's "'insurance policy' against the prospect of significantly heightened U.S.-Chinese antagonisms."<sup>56</sup> As a result, Beijing has accelerated deployment of a new generation of solid-fueled, road-mobile missiles, and is on the verge of achieving a technically credible deterrent for the first time and restoring some equilibrium in the offense balance with the United States. If one factors in U.S. continuing failures with so-called "Scud-hunting" for mobile missiles, China may soon arrive at a stable equilibrium in the impending world of offense-defense racing, whereby a U.S. preemptive first strike would not be capable of sufficiently degrading China's forces such that the currently planned architecture of missile defenses could reliably catch the stragglers.

It is not clear whether Beijing will be content with the status of its nuclear force modernization once it reestablishes the credibility of its minimalist MAD force, particularly in a world marked by missile defenses, preemption and conventional attack. Indeed, the more interesting implications arise when one contemplates a larger Chinese force structure, combined with continuing reductions in Russian and American arsenals. Here Pollack's musings about the

declining appeal of minimalism and the possibility of trilateral “parity” between the PRC, United States, and Russia are relevant.<sup>57</sup> So are Brad Robert’s challenge to the nuclear community to consider what trilateral deterrence at, say, 600 warheads apiece would look like.<sup>58</sup> In its desperation to retain the MAD dynamic, China may build to these levels, though it also permits the PRC to contemplate post-MAD counterforce strategies, such as a *force de frappe* capable of “tearing of an arm” of the adversary. Whether or not this force will ever be large enough to eclipse MAD in favor of counterforce is open to debate. What is clear, however, is that China is one of only two countries (the other being India) that is increasing the number of its forces while the Cold War arsenals of Russia and the United States are being gradually dismantled. Once the mobile DF-31 is deployed, China can be much more confident in its ability to ride out a preemptive strike, and rain down death on the attacker’s cities. Assuming that the contradictions between its No First Use policy and the conventional threat result in the eventual scrapping of the policy, one can imagine a future in which China contemplates limited first strikes against an adversary’s population centers or strategic forces. In such a violent world, we may dream of the days when China was only MAD.

## ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 8

1. See *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002.

2. This definition is drawn from Arthur Steiner’s excellent chapter in this book.

3. Alastair Iain Johnston, “China’s New ‘Old Thinking’: The Concept of Limited Deterrence,” *International Security* 20, No. 3, Winter 1995/96, p. 19.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

5. Alice Langley Hsieh, *Communist China’s Strategy in the Nuclear Era*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962, p. 4.

6. Mao Zedong, “Talks with the American Correspondent Anna Louise Strong (August 1946),” *Mao Zedong Selected Works*, Vol. IV, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1975, p. 100.

7. Lin Biao, “Long Live the Victory of People’s War,” *Renmin ribao* [People’s Daily], September 3, 1965.

8. Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy in the Nuclear Era*, p. 4.
9. Rong Zhi, "The Big Powers' Military Strategies and Our Countermeasures by the End of This Century," in *Guoji Xingshi yu guofang zhanlue [The International Situation and Defense Strategy]*, Beijing, 1987, p. 73.
10. Mao Zedong, "On the Ten Major Relationships" (April 25, 1956), in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Vol. 5, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977, p. 288.
11. "United States Strategy is in a Blind Alley," *Shijie zhishi*, December 5, 1957.
12. *Renmin ribao*, February 21, 1958; *Ta kung pao*, July 5, 1958.
13. Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China, 16 October 1964, found in John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988, pp. 241-242.
14. *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, May 12, 1958.
15. *Jiefangjun zhanshi*, March 11, 1956.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Mao Zedong, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," *Xinhua*, June 18, 1957.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Peng Dehuai comment to a mission of Japanese military officers visiting the mainland, August 22, 1956.
20. Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China, 16 October 1964, found in Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, pp. 241-242.
21. Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy in the Nuclear Era*, p. 136.
22. *Washington Post*, December 8, 1963.
23. Soviet government statement, August 21, 1963.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 260
25. *Ibid.*
26. Alice Langley Hsieh, "The Sino-Soviet Nuclear Dialogue: 1963," in Raymond Garthoff, ed., *Sino-Soviet Military Relations*, New York: Praeger, 1966, p. 162.
27. *Jiefangjun bao*, July 17, 1958.
28. Chinese government statement, August 15, 1963.
29. Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy in the Nuclear Era*, p. 76.
30. Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China, 16 October 1964, found in Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, pp. 241-242.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Alice Langley Hsieh, "The Sino-Soviet Nuclear Dialogue: 1963," p. 158.
33. Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China, 16 October 1964, found in Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, pp. 241-242.

34. *Ibid.*
35. Liao Chengzhi speech, *Radio Peking*, August 1, 1963.
36. Jonathan Pollack, "The Future of China's Nuclear Weapons Policy," in Weixing Hu and John Hopkins, eds., *Strategic Views from the Second Tier: The Nuclear Weapons Policies of France, Britain, and China*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995, pp. 157, 164.
37. Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy in the Nuclear Era*, p. 97.
38. *Ibid.*, p.123.
39. An account of this program based on official sources can be found in John Wilson Lewis and Litai Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
40. Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China, 16 October 1964, found in Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, pp. 241-242.
41. "China undertakes not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon States or nuclear-weapon-free zones at any time or under any circumstances. This commitment naturally applies to non-nuclear weapon States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons [NPT] or non-nuclear weapon States that have undertaken any comparable internationally binding commitments not to manufacture or acquire nuclear explosive devices." See Lieutenant General Li Jijun, *Traditional Military Thinking and the Defensive Strategy of China*, Letort Paper No. 1, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, August 29, 1997, p. 7; and China's white paper entitled *China: Arms Control and Disarmament*, Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, November 1995. The U.S. NSA, by contrast, is conditional in retaining the possibility of nuclear weapons use against non-nuclear weapon states who take part in an attack on U.S. territory, armed forces, or allies.
42. *China: Arms Control and Disarmament*, Beijing: State Council Information Office, November 1995, p. 261.
43. Xia Zhengnan, "On the Political Essence of War and the Atomic Age," *Mao Zedong Sixiang Yanjiu*, No. 2, 1990, p. 111.
44. Li Fumin and Li Dunsong, "A Brief Account of the Growth and Development of Our Country's Strategic Missile Troops," *Junshi Shilin [Military History]*, No.5, 1988, p. 51.
45. Li Jianghe and Hou Aiping, "What We Think About Our Country's Defense Development Strategy," *Junshi Shilin*, No. 5, 1987, p. 9.
46. Lieutenant General Li Jijun, *Traditional Military Thinking and the Defensive Strategy of China*, Letort Paper No. 1, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, August 29, 1997, p. 7.
47. Johnston, p. 5.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

50. Godwin, "China's Nuclear Forces."

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. Johnston, pp. 35-36.

54. Pollack, pp. 157-158.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 165.

58. Robert A. Manning, Ronald Montaperto, and Brad Roberts, *China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control: A Preliminary Assessment*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000.