



China's Evolving Nuclear Strategy: Will China Drop "No First Use?"

by Nan Li

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OE Watch Commentary: The PLA Rocket Force is continuing to upgrade its missile forces and shift its emphasis from a posture of immobile and vulnerable positions hidden deep in mountains to a highly mobile and more survivable mode. A new CCTV documentary also reveals that China's multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV)-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) DF-41 will begin active service in 2018.

While China's strategic nuclear capabilities are changing, there is still a high level of uncertainty among analysts about the specifics of China's nuclear strategy. Though China vigorously censors information about its missile forces, examination of a body of relatively authoritative military texts provides useful context to help understand China's nuclear strategy beyond the more visible changes in equipment. Importantly, it is evident that as China modernizes its nuclear forces, it is also debating a shift in strategy, including the abandonment of its No First Use (NFU) policy.

According to Chinese nuclear strategists, two major concepts best describe the evolution of China's nuclear strategy. The first, overarching drive for China's development of a nuclear weapon was to "curb and stop nuclear blackmail," and secondly to maintain "effective counter-nuclear attack deterrence." China's first nuclear strategy, adopted during the 1960s and 70s, is based on the premise that a country must possess nuclear weapons in order to prevent nations with nuclear weapons from "blackmailing" those without them. China's lack of nuclear weapons during the Korean War and the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1958 motivated Chinese leadership to accelerate research and development of nuclear weapons, resulting in China's first nuclear test in 1964. But because this strategy has "no clear requirements for the quantity and quality of nuclear weapons" due to technological and financial constraints, it could only meet the "minimum goal" of symbolic possession to prevent nuclear blackmail.

The second concept, which is understood as China's nuclear strategy from the 1980s up to present, is "effective counter-nuclear attack deterrence." This strategy requires China to possess nuclear counter-attack capabilities that can survive the first nuclear attack and launch retaliatory nuclear strikes. These requirements may account for China's efforts in recent years to develop its own missile defense system and counter-missile defense capabilities, develop and deploy more solid-fuel, road and rail-mobile strategic missiles and nuclear ballistic missile submarines, and test MIRV-capable ICBMs and hypersonic glide vehicles.

China's nuclear policy can be understood as following the principle of No First Use, which is consistent with its second strike-based nuclear strategy of "effective counter-nuclear attack deterrence." But there appears to have been increasing discontent with this policy from within China's analytical community on nuclear policy and strategy in recent years. This discontent has been reflected in several critical views of NFU.

One view is that NFU may impose certain limitations on the strategic use of China's Rocket Force, implying reduced crisis response flexibility due to the highly centralized decision-making in employing nuclear weapons. Moreover, some believe that NFU reduces the credibility of China's already small nuclear forces, and that abandoning NFU may enhance China's nuclear deterrent.

Chinese analysts have also suggested that China abandon NFU in a number of threatening scenarios:

- China's conventional forces are unable to defend against a "large-scale foreign invasion"
- If "the enemy attacks our nuclear bases with conventional arms, posing enormous threat to our strategic nuclear forces"
- PLA's operational objectives face an "enormous threat" by a "large-scale foreign military intervention" in a "war of safeguarding national unity"—referring to a Taiwan conflict scenario
- Escalation indicating an opponent's "intention" to cross the nuclear threshold
- Attacks with conventional arms against nuclear bases and targets of life-and-death value like the Three-Gorges Dam causing destruction comparable to or larger than a nuclear attack" (*continued*).

“The DF-41 has a range of 12,000 kilometers and a deviation of some one hundred meters. It can carry six to 10 multiple maneuverable warheads.”

Source: “Wenyu, Sun “China’s latest intercontinental ballistic missile expected to be deployed next year,” *People’s Daily Online*, 28 November 2017. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/1128/c90000-9297997.html>

China’s intercontinental ballistic missile DF-41 is expected to be deployed in early 2018, said military expert Yang Chengjun on a TV program broadcasted on China Central Television (CCTV) on Nov. 26...

Public data shows that DF-41 is a rival of the 6th-generation missiles of some developed countries...The Chinese missile even has an edge with regard to some technologies. The DF-41 has a range of 12,000 kilometers and a deviation of some one hundred meters. It can carry six to 10 multiple maneuverable warheads...It can be launched from road- and rail-mobile launcher platforms, as well as silo-based launchers...

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Continued: China's Evolving Nuclear Strategy: Will China Drop "No First Use?"

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Supporters of NFU offer a number of rebuttals. Rather than hampering crisis response flexibility, they argue, the decision to employ nuclear weapons has always been “controlled in the hands of the state’s top leadership.” Supporters of NFU also argue that a “large-scale foreign invasion” of China is unlikely due to the rapid increase in the destructiveness of modern warfare, which has forced major powers to pursue limited objectives with limited wars.

While No First Use is likely to remain China’s official nuclear policy in the near future, in the meantime, the dynamic evolution of China’s nuclear policy, strategy, and capabilities requires careful analysis. Such analysis is particularly necessary if the anti-NFU view begins to have great popular support within the PLA, if China develops a more grim view of its regional security environment, or if China believes that its economy is sufficient to support a more robust nuclear capability along the lines of Russia or the United States. **End OE Watch Commentary (Li)**



DF-31A intercontinental ballistic missile at military parade in Beijing commemorating 70 years since the end of World War II (September 2015).

Source: By IceUnshattered (Own work), <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e7/Dongfeng-31A.JPG>, CC BY-SA 4.0.