

# Conclusions and Recommendations

Some in the United States argue that China is the next great threat and therefore new weapons and increased military spending are necessary. Some in China see recent U.S.-led wars, military modernizations, and aggressive strategies and policies as proof of American “hegemony” and argue that this requires them to modernize their military. Both countries are investing large sums of money in planning for war, and any U.S.-Chinese war comes with the potential of escalating to use of nuclear weapons. China is in the final phase of modernizing its ballistic missile forces, and the United States continues to enhance its remaining nuclear weapons and war plans. Indications of a nuclear arms race between the two giants are mounting, accusations fly, and suspicion permeates all aspects of relations.

It is true that China is modernizing its conventional military forces and its nuclear systems. Much of the effort is cloaked in secrecy and there is an increasing need for Chinese authorities to explain their plans and intentions. But the fact that China is modernizing is hardly surprising. All the other nuclear powers are doing so as well. What is clear in the Chinese case is that the pace of the nuclear effort is taking a long time and is not being carried out on a crash basis. Even after China introduces its nuclear forces currently under development the overall size of its nuclear arsenal likely will not be significantly greater than it is today.

It goes without saying that the United States also is modernizing its forces and improving its capabilities and is years ahead of the Chinese. The quantitative and qualitative disparities that have characterized the two nuclear arsenals for decades are likely to remain for the foreseeable future. The U.S. ballistic missile defense program only adds a new element, to which other nations – including China and Russia – will respond by upgrading their offensive forces and measures to overwhelm the defenses.

The first U.S. ballistic missile defense system in the 1970s, combined with deployment of highly accurate ballistic missiles on high alert, helped trigger a Chinese development of mobile long-range ballistic missiles that are now the cause for great concern at the Pentagon. Unlike the highly offensive U.S. nuclear counterforce posture with accurate and flexible weapons maintained on high alert and capable of conducting decapitating first strikes on short-notice with little or no warning,<sup>502</sup> the Chinese so far have avoided the temptation to change their minimum deterrence posture consisting of nuclear forces on low or no alert.

The Pentagon often depicts the Chinese military in general, and their new mobile nuclear forces in particular, as looming threats and uses those threats to justify its own programs and plans. This approach was used with the Soviet Union during the Cold War but might prove counterproductive in the more complex integrated relationship that the United States has and is seeking to deepen with China. The U.S.-Chinese relationship is vastly different than that with the Soviet Union. Economically, China supplies the United States with an enormous array of goods and holds billions of dollars of its debt. China enjoys an infusion of technology and know-how from U.S. companies profiteering from cheap labor in China. A large Chinese ethnic community thrives in the United States and provides an important human and emotional link between the two nations. The countries are bound together in ways that were inconceivable in the U.S.- Soviet relationship.

The United States has an awkward and self-contradicting approach to the Chinese security issue. After having spent most of the 1980s actively encouraging China to modernize its military forces, the United States insists it must modernize and forward-deploy significant forces to counter the Chinese capabilities. Yet when China responds to that encouragement and posturing by modernizing its own forces, the United States insists that China is a threat. In terms of U.S. policy-making, it is as if one hand doesn't know what the other is doing. China, a undemocratic state that may potentially one day rise from decades of one-party dictatorship, hides its military modernization behind a cloak of secrecy that is causing considerable concern and suspicion in other countries. In both the United States and China, those who profit from the military posturing need to be moved to the back row and civil interests must take charge of shaping the future relationship.

The predictions by the U.S. intelligence community and the Pentagon about the future developments of the Chinese nuclear arsenal need to be improved. They have traditionally been inflated, self-contradictory, and the estimated timelines for introduction of new Chinese systems have been almost consistently wrong. Likewise, some lawmakers, private institutions and certain news organizations frequently inflate the Chinese threat even beyond the worst-case estimates made by the Pentagon, which further poisons the atmosphere.

Inflated and worst-case descriptions of China's nuclear programs feed on the lack of or inadequate information. The Chinese could counter this process by being more open and transparent about their military budget and the scale and scope of weapons programs. For its part, the United States must also improve and explain why it is deploying additional strategic submarines in the Pacific and bombers to Guam and improving the effectiveness of its strategic warheads and war-planning capabilities.

Since the end of the Cold War, military posturing has been allowed to dominate the development of U.S.-Chinese relations to an extent that undermines the security of both countries and the Pacific region as a whole. It would serve China's and the United States' interests to avoid a continued arms race that will only heighten tensions, fuel animosity, be wasteful to both economies and increase chances of a military confrontation. The stakes are high indeed. In the potential nuclear strike scenarios we examined for this report we saw how potentially destructive even a limited attack would be.

A U.S. strike against China's 20 ICBM silos would result in up to 26 million casualties, depending upon the type and number of warheads used. Strike plans maintained by the Pentagon probably include options for significantly larger attacks against a broader target base. The declassified documents we examined reveal that U.S. nuclear war planning against China traditionally has involved much larger strikes against a broad range of facilities. Even so, the Pentagon has advocated – and the White House has authorized – additional targeting against China. It is hard to see where deterrence ends and nuclear warfighting begins, and with U.S. planners pursuing “more discriminate capabilities for selected target types through lower yields, improved accuracy, and enhanced penetration,”<sup>503</sup> the quest of the never sufficiently “credible deterrent” seems to be entering its next phase.

A Chinese attack on the continental United States with 20 ICBMs would result in as many as 40 million casualties. As if that is not enough, China is in the final phase of a nuclear facelift that the U.S. intelligence community has predicted will result in 75 to 100 warheads “primarily targeted” against the United States by 2015. Whether this projection will come true remains to be seen, and we have our doubts, but Chinese leaders apparently have decided that its antiquated long-range ballistic missile force is becoming vulnerable and a new generation of ICBMs is needed to ensure the credibility of China’s minimum deterrent. Our calculations show that the increase in warheads anticipated by the U.S. intelligence community could potentially inflict in excess of 50 million casualties in the United States.

Whatever number of warheads China eventually decides to deploy, the new situation will almost certainly alter the deterrent relationship with the United States (and others), but not necessarily in ways normally assumed in the public debate. A “several-fold” increase in the number of warheads “primarily targeted” against the United States would not necessarily result in a “several-fold” increase in the number of casualties that China could inflict in the United States. In fact, our calculations show that if China decided to deploy the maximum number of warheads envisioned by the U.S. intelligence community, the result would be a nearly 70 percent *reduction* in the megatonnage due to replacement of high-yield warheads with smaller-yield warheads, and a 25 percent to 50 percent *reduction* in the number of potential casualties that would result from a Chinese countervalue strike against the continental United States.

Even if China decided on the option with the most megatonnage that could inflict an additional 10 million casualties, what does this say about the Chinese intentions? In the arcane world of nuclear war planning, 50 million casualties are not that much different from 40 million casualties. Since the United States would probably be equally deterred by either number, it begs the question to the Chinese: Why the extra 10 million? Or to put it another way, why does the Pentagon imply that a China that can inflict 50 million casualties rather than 40 million is a greater threat? Of course there are many nuances to answering these questions, but since the ability to inflict casualties is fundamental to the Chinese countervalue strategy, it strongly suggests that the primary objective of the current Chinese modernization is to ensure the effectiveness of the deterrent rather than to increase the ability to inflict casualties and destruction.

The nuclear war scenarios we examined are a stark reminder to policy-makers and military planners that a modest-sized arsenal on low or no alert can suffice as a deterrent. The additional nuclear capabilities that advocates in both countries argue are necessary to ensure a “credible” deterrent add nothing to either side’s security, but would, if ever used, only increase the insecurity. Even if the weapons are not used, the continued nuclear competition they will provoke will not benefit either country but only heighten tensions, fuel animosity, harm both economies, and increase the chance of a military confrontation.

At the current juncture in their nuclear relationship, both the United States and China need to make careful decisions about the future of their nuclear forces and the way they are deployed.<sup>504</sup> China should clearly communicate its intentions for the size and purpose of its future nuclear arsenal, reaffirm its commitment to its no-first-use policy and a strictly minimum deterrent, and resist the temptation to develop additional capabilities to make the arsenal more “credible.” The United States should pull back its strategic submarines from the Pacific, visibly relax its nuclear posture against China, and stop enhancing its nuclear weapons under the guise of Life Extension Programs. An important step would be to take nuclear weapons off high alert, a move that is long overdue, and commit to deep reductions in the number of nuclear weapons beyond the force level set by the Moscow Treaty.

Both countries should engage directly in talks about their nuclear forces and publicly show leadership in advancing disarmament and nonproliferation goals by diminishing the number and role of nuclear weapons against each other (and others) and in national security policy in general. With the end of the Cold War and a more direct adversarial relationship between China and the United States, the traditional claim by China that it doesn’t need to engage in direct arms reductions until the United States and Russia have reduced their arsenals to the Chinese force level is outdated and counterproductive.<sup>505</sup> The Bush administration, for its part, needs to get over its aversion against nuclear arms control and begin a long-term focused effort to engage China (and the other “smaller” nuclear powers) directly in talks about limitations on the role and numbers of nuclear weapons.