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Emerging strategic dilemmas in U.S.-Chinese relations

Since the Cold War, arms control negotiations have been strictly a bilateral affair between Washington and Moscow. But as times have changed, so must this dynamic. Enter China.

BY JOSHUA POLLACK

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S APRIL 5 SPEECH IN Prague made it official: Arms control is back. The United States and Russia already are pursuing a new bilateral nuclear arms reduction treaty to replace the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, which expires on December 5. Work toward a second, more ambitious bilateral treaty is expected to follow. Another early goal of the administration is to secure Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. All of these steps, it is hoped, will smooth the path for a successful 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference.

The administration's agenda is driven both by the START calendar and by a belief that rapid progress will build momentum for strengthening the nonproliferation regime. But amid these urgent plans, it pays to recall something equally important. Traditionally, arms control has two fundamental purposes—to contain the risks of war and to prevent the spiral of mistrust driven by arms races, either numerical or technological. Neither of these goals can be achieved without a parallel arms control agenda, one focused on the United States and China. Today, there is no longer a plausible war scenario between the United States and Russia. But the U.S.-Chinese relationship remains dogged by the potential for conflict that emanates from the 60-year contest over the status of Taiwan. Major defense acquisitions on both sides seem inexorably to be justified in terms of this scenario, spurring mutual fear and suspicion.

The good news is that since Taiwan elected President Ma Jingyeou in March 2008, the "Taiwan question" has gone into remission, at least temporarily. The governments of mainland China and Taiwan have renewed contacts and reached new understandings on

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economic ties. Recently, Beijing has even consented to Taiwanese participation as an observer in the U.N. World Health Assembly, under the guise of “Chinese Taipei.” The easing of tensions across the Taiwan Strait could create a favorable atmosphere for reaching new U.S.-Chinese understandings on military issues.

But the present calm is not guaranteed to last. Two waves of confrontation between the United States and China took place in the strait, in the 1950s and in the 1990s. Serious tensions have come and gone, depending on developments in China, Taiwan, and beyond. Moreover, in the decade since the U.S. Air Force accidentally bombed China’s embassy in Belgrade in March 1999, military developments on both sides of the Pacific have drifted into unfamiliar and potentially dangerous waters. What political scientist Christopher Twomey aptly calls an “interlocking pattern” of new or upgraded strategic forces increases tensions and risks for both sides.¹ In future war scenarios, the interactions of strategic forces may encourage preemptive moves that risk even more serious forms of escalation.

Current risks—already a source of discomfort—are only liable to grow as China and the United States continue to modernize their strategic forces. Each side tends to draw ominous inferences about the other’s intentions for new weapons developments, which justifies countermeasures and, most of all, injects considerable suspicion and antagonism into a centrally important international relationship. The particular crisis, war, and escalation scenarios that animate this security dilemma are outweighed in significance by their potential to confound cooperation on crucial global challenges: financial stabilization, trade relations, economic recovery, and climate change. But this outcome can be avoided. China and the United States should seize on the current lull in cross-strait tensions to quell the prospect of a trans-Pacific strategic arms race before it becomes self-fulfilling.

A delicate transition. U.S.-Chinese strategic military interactions do not resemble a numerical nuclear arms race along Cold War lines. The two sides’ arsenals are unevenly matched. The United States has a mature strategic triad, rivaled only by Russia’s, with thousands of warheads ready to launch within minutes of receiving an order. China’s Second Artillery Force has a relatively slender silo-based force, with an even smaller handful of new road-mobile missiles added in recent years. The new strategic submarine force of the People’s Liberation Army Navy is just starting to take shape. Even as the Second Artillery and the navy are expanding and modernizing their respective nuclear capabilities, there is no indication that they will seek to match U.S. or Russian force levels, absent dramatic cuts by the two other powers.

The differences in these arsenals stem from their divergent pur-

poses. For the United States, the strategic nuclear triad is a source of power, advantage, and respect worthy of the world's sole superpower. It is alert, survivable, and accurate, standing behind unparalleled U.S. conventional forces and underwriting a global network of alliances. Through a studied ambiguity about when U.S. nuclear

forces might be employed, the nuclear arsenal is even believed to provide the United States, its conventional military forces, and its allies with a measure of security against chemical or biological attack.

By comparison, China's relatively modest strategic nuclear forces are designed to assert the country's status as a recognized major power, immune to the sort of episodes of nuclear coercion that punctuated the 1950s. To convince Washington (and Moscow) that its nuclear force had some ability to survive an attack and retaliate,

Beijing's deterrence strategy originally depended on maintaining ambiguity about how many weapons it had. But technological progress is enabling a new approach. As China develops and fields a new generation of solid-fueled, long-range ballistic missiles, mobility has begun to replace uncertainty as the mainspring of credible retaliatory capability. The force remains small, but it is becoming considerably more sophisticated.

This situation seems benign on its face. China is neither maintaining a large force on high alert nor racing to catch up to the United States numerically. The United States, therefore, feels little pressure to stay ahead of China. But two issues complicate the picture: (1) the unpredictable effect of emerging Chinese doctrine and operational practices in a crisis; and (2) the emergence on both sides of new strategic weapons, primarily based on ballistic missile technology but adapted to purposes other than nuclear attack or retaliation. In a crisis or a limited conflict, these new weapons would have the potential to interact with both conventional forces and strategic nuclear forces, creating a pathway for escalation. Furthermore, each side's acquisition of non-nuclear strategic forces has begun to justify the other side's acquisition of its own.

Chinese nuclear doctrine has consistently been articulated as retaliatory in character, exemplified by the no-first-use pledge that Beijing's leaders supported even before the country's first nuclear test in 1964.² (Periodic calls by Chinese military analysts to revisit this commitment have gone unheeded by policy makers.) Despite Beijing's commitment to no-first-use, its transition to road-mobile and submarine-based missiles raises concerns about the outcome of

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the next potential crisis. In particular, it is unclear when the navy or Second Artillery might be ordered to engage in “alert operations,” mobilizing nuclear submarines or missiles with the intention of advertising their ability to survive and retaliate in the event of a first strike.³ According to the 2008 edition of a white paper on national defense issued by China’s State Council, “If China comes under a nuclear threat, the nuclear missile force of the Second Artillery Force will go into a state of alert and get ready for a nuclear counterattack to deter the enemy from using nuclear weapons against China.”⁴ But it is difficult to anticipate what words or actions would constitute a “nuclear threat” in China’s eyes. It is also unclear how the United States would interpret and react to such moves, especially since some U.S. experts believe that China’s no-first-use doctrine contains unresolved ambiguities, and alert operations may not be clearly distinguishable from launch preparations.⁵

The transition to a mobile nuclear deterrent also raises a new set of operational questions connected to the appearance of China’s first generation of fully deployable nuclear ballistic missile submarines. According to the New America Foundation’s Jeffrey Lewis, the U.S. intelligence community believes that nuclear warheads are stored separately from the Second Artillery’s land-based missiles, including mobile missiles.⁶ It is difficult to imagine how comparable arrangements could be made at sea. Submarines can be expected to hold missiles with warheads attached, as there will not be opportunities to mate these systems underwater. Strategic submarines also may be expected to conduct long-range ocean patrols. All of these conditions call for rigorous communications, command, and control arrangements, seemingly beyond anything in China’s experience to date.⁷

The initial deployments of China’s nuclear-armed submarines will raise unsettling questions: Under what circumstances will submarine commanders be authorized to launch? During an intense crisis or a conventional military conflict, what sort of communications will they be able to maintain with the chain of command onshore? The problem extends in the other direction as well: If a submarine is lost at sea during a crisis—or simply falls out of communication—would leaders onshore perceive it as the opening shot of a preemptive attack on its strategic nuclear forces?⁸ The South China Sea incident in March, when Chinese boats harassed a U.S. Navy ocean surveillance vessel, hints at the Chinese Navy’s growing sensitivity to the threat of U.S. antisubmarine warfare.⁹

Entanglement with theater missiles. As troublesome as these problems may be, they are familiar in their outlines thanks to interactions between U.S. and Soviet strategic forces in the early days of the Cold War. Other characteristics of U.S.-Chinese relations are less well understood. For example, the addition of more than one

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thousand conventional theater ballistic missiles to the Second Artillery's arsenal during the last two decades complicates the picture. While nuclear missiles are deterrent weapons, conventional missiles are available for use in the early stages of an armed conflict. In such an event, the United States would have incentives to attack Second

Artillery command-and-control nodes, raising difficult questions about the precise boundaries of China's no-first-use pledge.

According to the 2008 white paper, the conventional missile force "is charged mainly with the task of conducting medium- and long-range precision strikes against key strategic and operational targets of the enemy."¹⁰ The annual U.S. Defense Department report on China's military anticipates the potential use of these missiles against Taiwan, either to close off the island to shipping or to attack key

targets in the event of war. It also anticipates the development of anti-ship ballistic missiles designed to disable (or sink) U.S. aircraft carriers.¹¹ At least some Chinese sources describe conventional missile strikes as a means of demonstrating the willingness and ability of the Second Artillery to employ its weapons against a nuclear-armed enemy.¹²

The idea of China demonstrating resolve during a conflict by attacking high-value U.S. targets introduces—for both sides—the classic dilemma of when to act assertively in order to give pause to a foe, and when to act with restraint in order to avoid dangerous escalation. U.S. intelligence analyst Lonnie Henley has expressed concern that the writers of Chinese military doctrine tend to gaze past this problem, underestimating the unpredictability of crises by presuming that adversaries will understand each other's motives clearly. Chinese doctrine, Henley concludes, contains "little consideration of the possibility that what China considers a resolute response to maintain the political initiative, the opponent might misconstrue as alarming preparations for aggressive military action."¹³

Operational and organizational factors complicate matters further. Once mobile missiles have been dispersed into the field, they become notoriously difficult to locate; the most effective way to suppress their fire would be to silence the command-and-control centers that issue launch orders. Yet conventional theater ballistic missiles appear to share command-and-control channels with land-based nuclear ballistic missiles, as both are the property of the Second Artillery. According to Stanford University scholars John Lewis and Xue Litai, the Second Artillery maintains a General

Communications Station in Beijing through which all of its coded messages flow.¹⁴ Unlike the army, navy, and air force, the Second Artillery also is subject to the direct authority of a senior civilian body, the Central Military Commission (CMC) and “strictly follows the orders of the CMC.”¹⁵ Lewis and Xue report that the CMC communicates to the Second Artillery through the General Staff’s communications department.¹⁶

As a consequence of these arrangements, attempts to “decapitate” Chinese command-and-control capabilities for conventional missiles could implicate China’s nuclear deterrent force, and even its entire military establishment. This places U.S. planners in a bind. Targeting central command-and-control nodes could threaten China’s nuclear deterrent and might be interpreted as a prelude to—or equivalent to—a nuclear first strike. (It is difficult to ascertain what Second Artillery bases are instructed to do if the General Communications Station were to fall silent, or whether there are backup stations.) Yet it is difficult to imagine that, in the event of an armed conflict, a U.S. commander would be content to absorb a barrage of precision strikes. Absent some means of protection, such as plentiful and reliable theater missile defenses, the U.S. side therefore may be faced with a choice between either striking early at undispersed mobile missiles or keeping aircraft carriers at a safe distance from the conflict zone.

Entanglement with non-nuclear strategic forces. Thanks to the emergence of new weapon types on both sides of the Pacific, the problems surrounding theater missiles are increasingly paralleled in the strategic domain. These innovative non-nuclear strategic forces overlap with both conventional weapons and strategic nuclear weapons, creating additional pressure to deliver strikes early in a conflict against targets associated with the other side’s non-nuclear strategic forces.

One of these new “entangling” weapons is the U.S. Ground-Based Midcourse Defense system, the only strategic ballistic missile defense system deployed by the United States. Although the U.S. Missile Defense Agency states that the system is designed exclusively to counteract emerging threats from North Korea and Iran, Chinese officials and experts take a skeptical view of these claims. And in theory, the system—in combination with theater defense systems—could provide U.S. leaders with the ability to blunt China’s threat of retaliation should they choose to threaten a U.S. nuclear first strike.

With this added edge, or so Beijing might conclude, Washington could return to the “bullying” that originally motivated China’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. This possibility has been cited as driving some aspects of China’s intercontinental ballistic missile modernization, including the development of decoys and counter-

measures to overcome defenses. But as long as Beijing perceives the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense system as emboldening Washington, Chinese military planners will be tempted to consider the system a legitimate target, especially because it is not a nuclear target.¹⁷

For most of the past decade, the interests of Washington and Beijing have aligned behind economic ties and a common rhetoric of fighting terrorism. But seemingly lacking a coherent alternative, both sides have continued to develop their military capabilities and planning against each other.

The expected deployment of the U.S. Space Tracking and Surveillance System (STSS) satellites could increase the system's effectiveness and heighten Chinese concerns. According to the manufacturer, STSS will provide "unique capability to track and discriminate missiles in midcourse; report on post-boost vehicle maneuvers, reentry vehicle deployments, and the use of various types of decoys; and provide hit/kill assessment."¹⁸ If Chinese officials lack confidence that their new generation of missiles could overcome a U.S. missile defense system enhanced by STSS, or even if they believed that STSS would provide *unwarranted* U.S. confidence in the system's effectiveness, they might plan to disable or destroy the satellites during a crisis before nuclear threats could come into play. To attack the satellites, the Chinese would rely on a second category of entangling weapons: antisatellite weapons, either involving ground-based lasers or direct ascent (i.e., attack with a ballistic missile).¹⁹

Partly as a counter to this potential threat, U.S. defense officials have turned to the idea of deploying "conventional prompt global strike" weapons. To protect important imaging and communications assets in orbit, these weapons would stand ready to strike antisatellite systems preemptively, by attacking their sensors, command-and-control facilities, or launchers.²⁰ In a potential conflict with China, this third type of entangling weapon could be called upon to strike valuable targets deep inside China from platforms traditionally associated with strategic nuclear capabilities. All of these circumstances implicitly require great confidence in the integrity of the Chinese no-first-use pledge under extreme and confusing circumstances.

Attacking the systems and networks that support antisatellite weapons could raise similar concerns to those associated with attacking theater ballistic missiles. If antisatellite command-and-control arrangements overlap with those for nuclear forces then the stakes involved in attacking them are considerably greater than simply the security of a satellite constellation. The direct-ascent antisatellite weapon tested by China in January 2007 was reportedly fired from a mobile launcher of the type associated with the DF-21 theater ballistic missile, presenting some of the same difficult choices as conventional theater ballistic missiles.²¹

Revisiting assumptions. These new strategic military trends and interactions have emerged during a period of relative calm in the U.S.-Chinese relationship. For most of the past decade, the interests of the two countries have aligned behind economic ties and a common rhetoric of fighting terrorism. But seemingly lacking a coherent alternative, both sides have continued to develop their military capabilities and planning against each other. Starting in 1999 with the Cox Commission report on “U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People’s Republic of China” and the Belgrade embassy bombing, a series of espionage allegations and military incidents have deepened mistrust between the two countries and hobbled efforts at dialogue.

The Obama administration’s ambitious arms control agenda and the positive trend in cross-Taiwan Strait relations creates an opportunity to shift away from these unwelcome trends in the U.S.-China strategic arena. But to achieve progress, both sides must revisit some of the assumptions that have brought them to this point. In the United States, strategic thinking appears to labor under an unstated belief that decisions about different classes of strategic systems can be made without reference to each other and to no more than one potential adversary at a time. U.S. nuclear forces have been sized to match or exceed Russian forces, a stance codified in the 2002 Moscow Treaty; initial deployments of strategic missile defense systems have been postured against North Korea. Relatively little thought appears to have been given to how Chinese officials might perceive either of these decisions, let alone the two in combination.

In China, meanwhile, the elite juggle two competing and seemingly incompatible views. The first is that U.S. national security strategy is inexorably focused on restraining or opposing China.²² The second is that China should avoid high-level bilateral negotiations about nuclear or strategic weapons, a situation that would be too reminiscent of Cold War summitry. Chinese participants at international conferences often express the view that Beijing’s participation in arms reduction talks can be deferred until Russia and the United States reach China’s low force levels. China’s preferred venue for arms control proposals has been the U.N. Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, a broadly multilateral format.

Another way of describing the relationship is that U.S. strategic force planners see China as neither as big as Russia nor as unpredictable as North Korea, and therefore, judge it not to be their first concern. (Conventional force planners plainly do not share this perspective.) Chinese policy makers, for their part, seem to see the United States as too big and strong for China to face on its own. This combination of U.S. distraction and Chinese aloofness has allowed the two sides to slide into dangerous strategic interactions.

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of national energies. But the single greatest benefit of quashing an incipient strategic arms race may simply be to interrupt the cycle of suspicion and antagonism that lends an adversarial cast to relations and makes war scenarios seem plausible at all.

Both to ease mutual suspicions and to minimize escalation pressures, it is in the interests of both sides to negotiate arrangements to manage, verifiably limit, or ban entirely classes of non-nuclear weapons—such as non-nuclear applications for ballistic missiles and directed-energy

weapons—which interact with nuclear weapons and with each other. Separately, the United States and China should consider negotiating a “code of conduct” for maritime operations in the Pacific, potentially along the lines of the U.S.-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement of 1972.

Arms control advocates should not expect too much too soon from U.S.-Chinese relations. Russia currently dominates the U.S. arms control agenda, and economic issues occupy center stage between Washington and Beijing. The April 1 joint statement between presidents Hu Jintao and Barack Obama affirmed a process of continuous dialogue with both a “strategic track” and an “economic track,” but economic concerns can be expected to receive the bulk of high-level attention for the time being, and there is no similarly prominent military track. (On the U.S. side, the “strategic track” is chaired by the secretary of state.) Even in the best case, it may take years to build up a level of mutual comfort for serious discussions on strategic affairs. The record of bilateral arms control talks is relatively scant.

In the meantime, the countries can pursue a number of working-level activities to develop greater mutual familiarity and promote understanding of each side’s concerns. Expanding military-to-military dialogue would be valuable, as would resuming the laboratory-to-laboratory exchanges that have been suspended for more than a decade. Renewed lab-to-lab contacts could help to build a common understanding of verification technology, information barriers, and other technical aspects of arms control practice. Arms control expert Lewis Dunn also has put forth a useful proposal to hold consul-

tations with Chinese officials during the course of the ongoing Nuclear Posture Review and to provide briefings on the results.²³

Whatever mechanisms U.S. and Chinese officials settle on, it is important for them to start early and to continue even in the event of one of the periodic incidents that tend to perturb the U.S.-Chinese relationship. Without a dialogue aimed at developing agreements to regulate military interactions and limit forces, mutual risk and suspicion will only grow. ■

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NOTES

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