The Nuclear Deterrence Strategy of the US-Japan Alliance is Failing but Can Be Fixed

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ABSTRACT
The current nuclear deterrence strategy of the US-Japan alliance, which is based on the threat to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict with China, is not credible and is counterproductive. A new strategy, based on diplomacy rather than threats, is needed. Unfortunately, time is no longer on the side of the alliance. China has been waiting for the United States to advance two critical international nuclear arms control agreements for twenty-five years. Chinese diplomats say they are still willing to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and negotiate a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. But the Chinese military seems to be pursuing an expansion of Chinese nuclear forces that will be difficult stop if it gets much farther along. Since a likely motivation for this expansion is to convince the US-Japan alliance that its current deterrence strategy can never succeed, reviving nuclear arms control diplomacy is the only viable means to reduce the risk of Chinese nuclear attacks against Japan.

The current nuclear deterrence strategy of the US-Japan alliance, which some have called a “blue theory of victory”, is to threaten first use of nuclear weapons to prevent a conventional military conflict with China (Roberts 2016). But these US and Japanese threats are not credible. Continuing attempts to make them credible by developing and deploying new nuclear capabilities are not only unlikely to succeed, but they are also counterproductive. Chinese construction of hundreds of new missile silos in Xinjiang (Korda and Kristensen 2021) and Inner Mongolia (Hille 2021), combined with activities at China’s nuclear test site (Brumfiel 2021), makes it impossible for US and Japanese officials to ignore that China is committed to retaining the ability to retaliate if struck first. Chinese leaders believe that if their capability to retaliate is beyond dispute, they can continue to view US threats to use nuclear weapons as they always have; as “paper tigers”.

The backup plan if allied nuclear threats don’t work is to launch a limited nuclear attack against Chinese forces with low-yield nuclear weapons if deemed necessary to avoid defeat. The US and Japanese architects of this plan hope China will not risk escalation by retaliating (Roberts 2016). However, if the alliance uses nuclear weapons first, China’s Strategic Rocket Forces appear prepared to launch limited retaliatory nuclear strikes against one or more US military bases in the
region. The description of the potential targets suggests they will be in Okinawa and Guam. China’s nuclear planners believe their limited retaliatory strikes will shock the United States and Japan into halting further attacks against China and ending the conflict (Yu 2004).

Neither side seems willing to admit it is impossible to predict what will happen in a conflict after one or both sides threaten to use or use nuclear weapons. This tendency of military planners to believe they can predict and manipulate the response of the other in a nuclear war is irresponsibly dangerous. A new strategy to preserve peace, led by diplomats instead of defense analysts, based on negotiations rather than threats, is the only viable alternative.

The first steps for the US and Japanese diplomats to take in this new strategy are:

1. To tell China the alliance will never use nuclear weapons first.
2. To tell China the alliance accepts vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation.
3. To halt preparations to deploy US tactical nuclear weapons in Asia.
4. To ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).
5. To resume negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT).

None of these steps can undermine a nuclear deterrence strategy that is already failing and has no reasonable hope of ever succeeding. It is possible however, that taking these steps will encourage China to ratify the CTBT and negotiate a FMCT. The entry into force of these two agreements is the most effective way for the alliance to place a verifiable cap on the size and sophistication of Chinese nuclear forces.

Time is no longer on the side of the alliance. China has been waiting for the United States to advance these two international nuclear arms control agreements for twenty-five years. Chinese diplomats say they are still willing to ratify the CTBT (China 2020) and negotiate a FMCT (IPFM 2020). But the Chinese military seems to be pursuing an expansion of Chinese nuclear forces that will be difficult to stop if it gets much farther along. Since a likely motivation for this expansion is to convince the alliance its strategy of relying on the threat of limited nuclear first use will never work, adopting a no first use policy, accepting vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation, and abandoning the deployment of new low-yield weapons could give Chinese diplomats the upper hand they need to prevail in internal Chinese debates over the future of Chinese nuclear weapons policy.

**The Blue Theory of Victory**

In US war games, blue is the color of the United States and its allies. There are reports that in simulated military conflicts between the United States and China, especially in conflicts over Taiwan, the blue team often loses, and the percentage of blue losses is increasing (Pickrell 2019). A 2015 RAND Corporation assessment of the balance of military forces argued China “is not close to catching up to the U.S. military in terms of aggregate capabilities” and “by many standards, the PLA continues to lag far behind”. But it noted China “does not need to catch up to
prevail” in conflicts over sovereign claims close to its borders, including a conflict over Taiwan. The report concluded China’s geographical advantages “neutralize many U.S. military strengths” (Heginbotham 2015).

China achieved this ability to prevail in wars on its borders without excessive military spending. Chinese defense expenditures as a percentage of government spending have been declining for more than thirty years (SIPRI 2021). Moreover, China spent a relatively constant and comparatively low percentage of GDP on its military every year since 1990: an average of 1.96% per year. That’s significantly lower than the global average of 2.42% per year and approximately half the US average of 3.97% per year over the same period (SIPRI 2021). The US Pacific Defense Initiative (OUSD 2021) or future proposals to further increase allied military spending are unlikely to reverse Chinese gains. China does not need to arms race to continue to increase its chances of victory in a future war over Taiwan, and the longer it waits, the greater China’s advantage will become.

In response to these trends, US and Japanese defense and foreign policy officials embraced a strategy of using low-yield nuclear weapons to cope with China’s growing conventional capabilities in a large-scale military conflict like a war over Taiwan. The expectation is that the mere threat of allied nuclear first use will prevent China from using military force (Colby 2016). If that threat fails, the hope is limited allied use of low-yield nuclear weapons will not trigger Chinese nuclear retaliation. The theory presumes China will be reluctant to escalate a nuclear conflict it cannot control or win. This is the blue theory of victory (Roberts 2016).

Bradley Roberts and Akiba Takeo, via the Extended Deterrence Dialogue between the United States and Japan established at the beginning of the Obama administration, cultivated and consolidated Japanese support for the theory (C-SPAN 2013). US and Japanese participants in the dialogue described the biannual meetings as more like seminars than discussions. This may explain the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s enthusiastic response to the Trump administration’s Nuclear Posture Review (MOFA 2018). It called for deploying three new low-yield nuclear options: removing the secondary from the W76 warheads on some US submarine launched ballistic missiles, making the F35 capable of delivering the B61-12 variable yield nuclear gravity bomb, and developing a new nuclear capable submarine launched cruise missile to be placed on US attack submarines visiting

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1 The government of Japan recently announced Japan’s Self Defense Forces will assist the United States in a military conflict with China over Taiwan (Jennings 2021). US defense officials, and their Japanese counterparts, appear to be pushing the Japanese government to deploy ground-based intermediate range missiles in Japan that are capable of striking targets in China (Takahashi and Sayers 2019). This would, if approved, draw any Japanese community that hosted these missiles into the fight.

2 Other US defense analysts, most notably former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, have proposed non-nuclear means of solving this problem, using artificial intelligence, cyber-attacks, and drones (Gentile et al. 2021). The desire to maintain a broad-based technological edge may be responsible for recent efforts to shift US economic policy regarding critical technologies like semiconductor production (US Congress [Senate] 2021).

3 Japanese and US participants in the dialogue confided to the author that Roberts warned any leaks would result in their dismissal and perhaps even the end of the dialogue itself. The latter threat was perceived to be aimed at Japanese defense and foreign policy experts and officials who, traditionally, are far more willing to talk to outsiders about internal discussions on security issues.

4 The existing warheads contain a primary and a secondary explosive package. By removing the secondary one and replacing it with inert material of the same shape and size, as is done during testing, the expected yield of the nuclear explosion was reduced from approximately 100 kilotons to approximately 7 kilotons.
Japanese ports. These are precisely the kinds of nuclear weapon capabilities Akiba Takeo requested, on behalf of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, during testimony to a US congressional commission in November 2009 (MOFA 2009). Unfortunately, the blue theory of victory fails to take Chinese perceptions of nuclear threats and nuclear weapons into account.

**Chinese Nuclear Thinking**

The earliest indication of how the Chinese communist leadership thinks about nuclear weapons came in the spring of 1946, less than a year after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong told US Journalist Anna Louise Strong that although he recognized the atomic bomb was “a weapon of mass slaughter”, it was also “a paper tiger, which the US reactionaries use to scare people” (Mao 1996). The Chinese leadership would face this nuclear paper tiger twice in the following decade, first during the Korean War and again during the Taiwan Strait Crisis. These experiences had a profound and lasting impact on the Chinese communist leadership’s perceptions of the military utility of nuclear threats and nuclear weapons.

Even before US president Harry Truman threatened to use nuclear weapons to halt Chinese intervention in Korea, Chinese communist leaders were worried the war could spill across China’s border and precipitate US atomic attacks on Beijing and Shanghai (Shen [1945–76] 2017). Chinese troops massing near the border were suffering psychological problems because of fear of the bomb (Xiangli 2013). Nevertheless, after extensive debate, the Chinese communist leadership believed the risk of a US nuclear attack, either on the battlefield in Korea or against Chinese cities, was quite low. They concluded the fear of international condemnation would prevent US nuclear attacks on Chinese cities and that nuclear weapons were too powerful to be used effectively on the battlefield (Shen [1945–76] 2017). Truman’s threat to use nuclear weapons after China intervened (Leviero 1950) did not deter China from continuing to prosecute the war.

In March 1955, at the height of the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the Eisenhower administration threatened to use smaller and more precise nuclear weapons that purportedly could “utterly destroy military targets without endangering unrelated civilian centers” (Abel 1955a). The New York Times published an expose explaining how these new “tactical nuclear weapons” could be used to fight “limited” nuclear wars (Baldwin 1955). Once again, however, the threat of US nuclear use did not deter China from pursuing and achieving many of its military objectives during the crisis (Kulacki 2020).

Both experiences confirmed Mao’s initial hypothesis that nuclear weapons were primarily psychological weapons; that they could not be used to fight and win wars. However, the psychological impact was apparently severe enough for Chinese leaders to conclude they needed their own nuclear weapons. A former director of the Chinese
nuclear weapons labs said they needed them “to be able to sit up straight”.\(^5\) China’s only public statement discussing why China built the bomb, issued on the day of China’s first nuclear test on 16 October 1964, described it this way:

The atomic bomb is a paper tiger. This famous statement by Chairman Mao Zedong is known to all. This was our view in the past and this is still our view at present. China is developing nuclear weapons not because it believes in the omnipotence of nuclear weapons nor because it plans to use nuclear weapons (China 1964).

They were developing them so they would no longer have to worry about others using them against China. The capability to retaliate would ensure that no nuclear-armed state could credibly threaten to attack China first. In the statement they put it this way:

They have it and you don’t, and so you are very haughty. But once those who oppose them also have it, they would no longer be so haughty, and their policy of nuclear blackmail and nuclear threat would no longer be so effective (China 1964).

From the beginning, the purpose of China’s nuclear arsenal has been to defeat the intent of the current nuclear deterrence strategy of the US-Japan alliance. It exists to allow Chinese leaders to make decisions, especially decisions about the use of conventional military force, without worrying about foreign threats to use nuclear weapons first.

Chinese leaders would most likely be shocked if the alliance resorted to its back-up plan to use low-yield nuclear weapons to avoid a conventional defeat. But the Chinese military has written about this contingency. A highly classified Chinese military text called The Science of Second Artillery Operations\(^6\) contains the following description of what Chinese nuclear forces are preparing to do if they are attacked with nuclear weapons.

Our position of not using nuclear weapons first determines that our nuclear attack will be carried out afterwards, and in general under conditions where we have suffered serious losses. Therefore, we must concentrate our limited nuclear retaliatory force to carry out a punishing nuclear retaliatory attack. Concentrating our forces is actually concentrating our firepower, to make full use of our limited nuclear force to create regional superiority and compensate for the shortcomings of our limited number of imprecise weapons (Yu 2004).

The objective is to “create heavy enemy losses that cause a great shock in the enemy’s mind and by this achieve the objective of weakening its will to fight.” The targets are “command and control centers, communication hubs, transportation hubs, military bases, political centers, economic centers, heavy industrial bases and other important targets.” The Chinese military plans to concentrate its initial nuclear retaliation on one or more of these targets, depending on the situation, and will prepare later waves of retaliatory attacks if the first fails to achieve the objective of ending the fighting (Yu 2004).

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\(^5\)A comment made to the author during a September 2007 visit to the Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics in Mianyang, Sichuan (Lewis 2007).

\(^6\)The title is frequently translated, inappropriately in my view, as The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns. The term “Second Artillery” refers to what is now called the “Strategic Rocket Forces;” a subdivision of the Chinese military that operates China’s conventional and nuclear missiles. The book is a training manual, distributed to officers in this subdivision. The book explains Chinese policies regarding the purpose and use of Chinese missiles and Chinese nuclear weapons and serves as a guide for training and exercises.
Obstacles to Diplomacy and the Need to Overcome Them

There is no imaginable military plan that permits either the “blue” alliance or the “red” Chinese to prevail in a major military conflict so long as both sides are willing to continue to invest in upgrading their respective military technologies and stratagems, especially when they include the use of nuclear weapons. In the past, this awareness encouraged decision makers in the United States and the Soviet Union to open the door for diplomacy. But today, there are powerful vested US interests that benefit from this interminable competition who hold considerable sway over both the public discussion of the problem and the bureaucracies charged with managing it (Stimpson 2020). China’s closed communist system, where there is no free press or independent academic inquiry, permits very little public discussion and limits the ability of outsiders to learn how decisions are made, by whom and for what reasons.

Given these circumstances, relying on military advice is unlikely to produce the “strategic stability” that defense analysts euphemistically discuss, and defense officials seem to be trying to acquire through what might best be described as controlled arms racing. That’s an inherently unstable and dangerous approach to the problem as well as a terrible waste of scarce human, fiscal and technical resources that would be better spent preparing for future pandemics, managing climate change or any number of other pressing global problems.

For the past several decades, while China was still sufficiently poor and weak, and relations were more cordial, this military competition could continue with relatively little danger of erupting into war. But times have changed. China is modestly wealthier, and its military is capable enough to create doubts about the outcome in the disputes most likely to lead to war, especially the dispute over Taiwan. Moreover, the US relationship with China is rapidly deteriorating. The Biden administration and the US Congress have recast US-China relations as a struggle between “autocracy and democracy” to “win the 21st century” (Whitehouse 2021). Together they’ve launched a “whole of government effort” to prevail in this supposed historic contest (US Congress [Senate] 2021).

The promises US presidents Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter made to China; that the United States recognized Taiwan was a part of China (FRUS 1972) and that the resolution of the Taiwan problem was China’s domestic affair (FRUS 1978, 109) seem, especially to China’s current communist leaders, far less likely to be honored in the context of this imagined global struggle over forms of government. The ascendancy of Taiwanese leaders, backed by public opinion, who choose to seek formal independence could trigger a crisis that is beyond the control of Japan, the United States or China. The possibility of a major war between the United States and China over Taiwan, which Japan now appears to have pledged to join, is much greater today than it has ever been.

Alliance threats to use nuclear weapons will not deter Chinese leaders from using military force to resolve a Taiwan crisis if they feel they have no peaceful options left. Given the increasing probability this could happen at any moment, diplomatic negotiations to take the use of nuclear weapons off the table are urgently needed. A war over Taiwan would be tragic and costly, not just to the participants but to the entire global economy. The use of nuclear weapons in such a war could escalate quickly and expand beyond the initial participants. Additional debate and delay are luxuries the governments of Japan, the United States and China can no longer afford.
First Steps

The efforts of influential Japanese bureaucrats to preserve a failing nuclear deterrence strategy predicated on the first use of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons, and the entreaties of US counterparts who encourage or indulge them, are a significant obstacle to beginning negotiations. To preserve their strategy, Japanese Foreign Ministry officials successfully lobbied against the Obama administration’s consideration of a no first use declaration (Watanabe 2021). They applauded the Trump administration’s investment in new low-yield nuclear options (MOFA 2018), and they are currently lobbying the Biden administration to preserve those options and the willingness to use them first in a conflict with China.\footnote{Off-the-record personal conversations with officials in the Biden administration.}

Removing these Japanese and US bureaucrats from positions where they can influence alliance nuclear weapons policy is the most efficacious step Japanese and US decision-makers can take to get negotiations started. They should then empower a group of diplomats committed to immediately communicating to their Chinese counterparts US and Japanese interest in taking the following five steps.

Step One: Declaring No First Use

A US no first use declaration would vitiate the current US-Japan nuclear deterrence strategy and replace it with a nuclear posture that restores the original intent of the US nuclear umbrella, which was to protect Japan from a nuclear attack – to the greatest extent possible – by committing to retaliate with US nuclear weapons if Japan was attacked with nuclear weapons. The US nuclear umbrella was never intended to deter a Chinese military attempt to enforce its sovereign claims over Taiwan or any other disputed territory. A no first use declaration would not impinge on the US promise to retaliate with nuclear weapons if Japan is struck first. It would not weaken the US nuclear umbrella. Indeed, it would make the umbrella stronger by removing the threat of a nuclear attack on Japan created by the current failing strategy of planning to use nuclear weapons first in a US-China war, inviting Chinese nuclear retaliation against US military bases in Japan.

A US no first use declaration would also open the door to meaningful US-China conversations on nuclear arms control. For more than twenty years, US and Chinese analysts and experts have held regular non-official talks on nuclear weapons issues. Throughout, the representatives from China pressed their US colleagues on the question of no first use. It was, and remains, important to China. It is an expression of intent, a benchmark for assessing whether the United States recognizes that the only acceptable purpose of nuclear weapons, as we work to eliminate them, is to prevent an attack from another nuclear-armed nation. The US side refused to consider it and grew tired of Chinese efforts to press their point. Without a no first use commitment, the Chinese government is highly unlikely to engage the United States in discussions on nuclear weapons issues at an official level.
**Step Two: Accept Vulnerability to Chinese Nuclear Retaliation**

The second thing Chinese participants repeatedly requested during twenty years of non-official talks with US analysts and experts was US recognition that the United States was vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation and would not take steps to negate China’s small nuclear force with preemptive strike capabilities, missile defenses or some combination of the two. Mutual vulnerability was the cornerstone of US-Soviet bilateral nuclear arms limitation agreements and remains the cornerstone of US-Russian negotiations on nuclear arms control. Once again, the US side refused the Chinese request. One of the architects of the failing US-Japan nuclear deterrence strategy, who was also a leading participant in those talks with China, said, “This is something the United States will never do”. The reason he gave was that accepting vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation was “not something Japan wants to hear” (C-SPAN 2013). So, preventing the United States from accepting vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation is yet another way the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is blocking progress in US-China nuclear arms control discussions.

The reason the ministry is opposed to accepting US vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation is that it does not trust the United States government. The Japanese bureaucrats in charge of cooperation with the United States on nuclear deterrence policy do not feel confident the United States would honor its promise to retaliate if China attacked Japan with nuclear weapons. They believe if the United States is vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation, it would not expose itself to that risk to honor its promise to Japan. This is an indication that the so-called “Japan handlers” in the United States and the “America handlers” in Japan are not as good at managing the US-Japan alliance as is often imagined by elected officials in both nations who axiomatically trust their advice.

US acceptance of vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation would provide the same basis for bilateral discussions on nuclear arms control between China and the United States that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union when they first agreed to begin to control the nuclear arms race. Without acceptance of mutual vulnerability there is no basis for discussions. It would mean China would be forced to accept the United States will continue to try to negate China’s ability to retaliate. When combined with a refusal to set aside first use, it is a clear signal the United States seeks to dominate China rather than treat it as an equal. China’s only possible response to this US quest for dominance is to increase the size and capability of its nuclear forces. The emergence of large new missile silo fields in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia indicate China is tired of waiting and is preparing to significantly improve its capability to retaliate.

**Step Three: Halt Preparations to Deploy US Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Asia**

If the United States abandons the current failing strategy of using low-yield nuclear weapons to deter or prevent defeat in a US-China military conflict and declares the United States does not intend to use nuclear weapons first, then the deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons in Asia serves no purpose. US officials often claim deployments of these types of weapons are necessary to reassure doubtful Japanese officials. But since the weapons would remain under the control of the United States, where they are deployed would not change the perceptions of Japanese Foreign Ministry officials who doubt the
United States will use them to retaliate in the highly unlikely event of a Chinese nuclear first strike against Japan. Moreover, deployment of these types of weapons would be provocative and undermine US efforts to convince China that it now accepts that the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons is to prevent a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies.

**Step Four: Ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)**

The United States conducted 1,030 nuclear tests. China conducted 45 (ACA 2020). Despite this enormous disparity, China agreed to stop testing and sign the CTBT in 1996. That locked in a significant US advantage in the number of different types of nuclear warhead designs the United States had tested, especially low-yield nuclear warheads. Currently, the United States has the capability to strike Chinese targets with nuclear warheads with yields as small 0.3 kilotons and as large as 1.2 megatons, and there are 11 other yield options in between (Kristensen and Korda 2021). China’s limited testing record produced three very high-yield options: a five-megaton warhead for its liquid-fueled ICBM, a two megaton warhead for its liquid-fueled intermediate range missile and a several hundred kiloton warhead for its solid-fueled IRMBs, ICBMs and SLBMs (Lewis 2007). In addition to this disparity in yield options, US nuclear warheads are smaller, lighter, and more efficient than China’s; they use less plutonium. This makes it easier for the United States to deliver those warheads to targets, to put multiple warheads on a single missile and to make more warheads out of the same amount of plutonium.

The last series of Chinese nuclear tests, which were planned in the mid-1980s and completed just before China signed the CTBT in 1996, allowed China to verify the design of the warhead for the solid-fueled mobile missiles that are the backbone of China’s small nuclear force (Lewis 2007). China signed the treaty because it believed that single warhead design would be enough to secure its ability to retaliate if struck first. It allowed them to put one warhead on missiles that it could protect by hiding them in a huge network of underground tunnels and moving them around on trucks. They believed those two features made it difficult enough for China’s nuclear armed adversaries to destroy them in a first strike.

The United States then took several steps that gradually undermined Chinese confidence in the survivability of these missiles. The first was the US Senate’s decision not to ratify the CTBT in 1999 (Dewar 1999). The CTBT was the first international arms control treaty China participated in drafting. The Senate vote was a devastating blow to Chinese confidence in international nuclear arms control, which has been stalled ever since. Next, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2001 to pursue ballistic missile defenses (Neilan 2001). Given the small size of China’s nuclear force, even a marginally effective missile defense could raise doubts about the credibility of China’s ability to retaliate. Finally, the United States identified China’s nuclear forces as potential targets for new US precision-guided conventional strike weapons the United States would integrate into its nuclear doctrine and policy (Arkin 2002).

The hundreds of new missile silos China is building in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia can be interpreted as a response to Chinese doubts about the credibility of China’s ability to retaliate. These silos cannot be destroyed by US conventional munitions. And
the sheer number of silos, even if they remain empty, create insurmountable doubt in the minds of rational US decision-makers about their invulnerability to a Chinese retaliatory nuclear strike. But Chinese leaders also may feel they need to develop new warheads for the missiles they may put in at least some of these silos. They may feel the need to place smaller, lighter warheads on those missiles, especially if they intend to put multiple warheads on them to defeat US missile defenses. Finally, to undermine the US-Japan belief China might not be willing to retaliate with the high-yield warheads it current has, Chinese leaders may want to develop and test lower-yield warhead designs. Recent activity at China’s nuclear test site is a reminder China could resume testing at any time.

It is in the best interest of the US-Japan alliance to discourage a resumption of Chinese testing. The new missile fields and the activity and China’s test site suggest urgent action is necessary. The US Senate should ratify the CTBT as soon as possible. If the Japanese government lobbied as hard for CTBT ratification as it currently does for its failing nuclear deterrence strategy, it would greatly increase the prospect of Senate ratification.

**Step Five: Resume Negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT)**

China produced a limited amount of weapons grade plutonium and its current warhead designs are not optimized to reduce plutonium use (Lewis 2007). China currently has a few hundred nuclear warheads and enough weapons-grade plutonium to make several hundred more (IPFM 2021). If China intends to fill all the new silos it is building with nuclear-armed missiles that can carry multiple warheads, it will need to produce more plutonium. If Chinese leaders feel they need a significantly larger number of new nuclear warheads, they could quickly resume production of weapons grade plutonium. It would be in the best interest of the US-Japan alliance to prevent that.

The FMCT would verifiably cut-off China’s ability to expand its nuclear arsenal beyond its current potential size. Resuming negotiations on the FMCT would make Chinese resumption of weapons grade plutonium production less likely. Here again, vigorous Japanese government lobbying in support of an immediate resumption of FMCT negotiations in the UN Conference on Disarmament would significantly increase the chances those negotiations would resume and end successfully with the entry into force of the treaty.

**Concluding Remarks**

The current nuclear deterrence strategy of the US-Japan alliance is not only failing to achieve its objective of protecting Japan from a nuclear attack, but also increasing the possibility that Japan will be attacked. By expanding the role of the Japanese Defense Force to including collective security obligations to join in a future US military conflict with China, especially over Taiwan, the Japanese government has placed the Japanese people in nuclear harm’s way.

The US-Japan strategy of threatening to use US low-yield nuclear weapons to prevent China from using conventional military force will not succeed if China believes it has a credible ability to retaliate. US and Japanese refusal to accept vulnerability to Chinese
nuclear retaliation and their efforts to make the alliance seem invulnerable appear to have triggered Chinese preparations to expand the size and decrease the vulnerability of its nuclear forces.

The back-up plan of using US low-yield nuclear weapons to offset growing conventional Chinese military capabilities will trigger Chinese nuclear retaliation, and US military bases in Japan appear to be on the list of potential Chinese targets.

There is no hope the current US-Japan nuclear deterrence strategy will ever succeed. The bureaucrats responsible for conceiving and advancing this strategy should be immediately removed from positions of influence. They should be replaced by diplomats empowered to conduct negotiations to reduce the risk that a military conflict between the United States and China will lead to nuclear threats or nuclear use. There are clear diplomatic steps to take, and they should be taken quickly, before China gives up on nuclear arms control diplomacy, dramatically expands the size of its nuclear arsenal and resumes nuclear testing.

This is the only viable strategy to reduce the risk Japan will suffer a nuclear attack from China.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

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