A Study of China’s No-First-Use Policy on Nuclear Weapons

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ABSTRACT
China’s no-first-use policy implies that the country possesses nuclear weapons only to deter other states from a nuclear attack. It expresses the purely self-defensive nature of China’s nuclear strategy. The no-first-use policy has effectively helped China to establish a moderate nuclear capability that is adequate to deal with nuclear threats from the outside and to maintain a delicate strategic balance. The policy has also contributed to strategic stability particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. More fundamentally, it has demonstrated a viable path toward international nuclear disarmament. Although it appears that China will most likely to continue to stick to its pledge of the no-first-use in the foreseeable future, the fate of the policy hinges, in a large part, on the evolution of China–US relations in the growing major power competition. China’s serious rift with non-nuclear weapon states on the role of nuclear weapon may also have important bearings on its no-first-use policy. Ultimately, the real question for China is whether it has the strategic vision and political courage to realize the limits of its no-first-use policy in the twenty-first century, go beyond this commitment, and take the lead in the world efforts to reduce and eliminate the role of nuclear weapons in the military strategies of any powers so as to pave the way for the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of all nuclear weapons.

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Introduction

On 16 October 1964, China exploded its first-ever nuclear test device, thus becoming the world’s fifth nuclear weapon state after the United States (US), the Soviet Union (USSR), Britain, and France. On the same day, the Chinese government announced that China would “not be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time or under any circumstances.”¹ Soon afterwards, China further promised “not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones” (NWFZs) under any circumstances.² Clearly, the first pledge was expressed toward nuclear weapon states; the second, aimed at non-nuclear-weapon states, was a logical extension of China’s no-first-use pledge, since non-nuclear-weapon states do not possess nuclear weapons and therefore a no-first-use policy is irrelevant to them.
Together, these two official commitments have since served as the cornerstone of China’s nuclear strategy till today.

This nuclear policy, distinguished by its unique no-first-use pledge, has set China apart from all other nuclear weapon states. However, Western states have consistently questioned the pledge’s credibility. Some have called it an empty promise, difficult to verify and hard to trust, particularly if China faces an imminent, urgent security threat. Fundamentally, such expressions of skepticism assess China’s nuclear strategy through an outlook embedded in the traditional nuclear culture of all the other nuclear weapon states. As such, they deem it incomprehensible and implausible that China would refrain from fully exploiting the high military value of nuclear weapons, willingly and unilaterally tying its own hands with a no-first-use pledge.

How should China’s no-first-use pledge be interpreted? Is it a serious pledge, and if so, why has China adopted and persisted in holding this position? What implications does this pledge carry for China’s security and for that of the international community? Will China reconsider this policy in the face of dramatic changes in the global landscape since the Cold War? This paper seeks to answer those questions.

**How should one understand China’s no-first-use nuclear policy?**

In its very first official statement on the no-first-use nuclear policy, the Chinese government purposefully chose powerful expressions, such as “at any time” and “under any circumstances,” to stress that this pledge is absolute, unconditional, and crystal clear. This fact has four implications.

First, the unconditional no-first-use policy means that in China’s security calculation, nuclear weapons play only one role: to deter other states from attacking China with nuclear weapons. Simply put, if you do not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against China, then China’s nuclear arsenal is no threat to you. If you choose to launch nuclear attacks on China, you must anticipate nuclear retaliation, most likely in the form of counterattacks on several large cities that would demonstrate the “unbearable and disastrous consequences” that accompany the use of nuclear weapons. Following this logic, China hopes to achieve its objective of deterring any state from resorting to the nuclear option against China. In short, China’s no-first-use commitment reflects the purely defensive nature of its nuclear policy.

In this respect, China’s strategy that is aimed at deterring a nuclear attack differs fundamentally from the deterrence strategy pursued by the Western nuclear community. It aims strictly to prevent a nuclear war, whereas the deterrence strategy long maintained by other nuclear powers, particularly the United States and the USSR (now Russia), is based on preparing to win a nuclear war and is offensive in nature. This offensive strategy caused the US and the USSR to enter into a near-crazy nuclear arms race, escalating to a total of more than 70,000 warheads at the peak of the Cold War, far beyond any rational defensive needs.

The US nuclear strategy has another striking feature: it is also applicable to non-nuclear-weapon states. Particularly with respect to those states considered unfriendly or disobedient, the US presents its nuclear weapons as a principal means of military threat and political blackmail, using its nuclear strategy as a powerful pillar to dominate the world. Intent on disassociating itself from Western deterrence theory, the Chinese
government has little interest in going along with those Western defense analysts (as well as some nuclear theorists in China itself) who try to observe China’s nuclear strategy through the lens of the Western deterrence concept and who describe China’s nuclear doctrine with such labels as “limited deterrence” or “minimum deterrence” (Xu 1987, 366–369; Chen 1989, 214; Yang 1990, 407–411). China believes that these are specious interpretations that blur the clearly self-defense nature of its nuclear strategy.

Second, its unconditional no-first-use policy implies that China has no need to engage in an arms race with other nuclear weapon states. No doubt, China must maintain a survivable nuclear force that can withstand the first wave of nuclear attacks with sufficient counterattack capability. However, China believes it is much more practical and sensible to keep its nuclear weapon development at that level than to pursue a strategy like that of the US and the USSR (Russia), which led inevitably to a nuclear arms race during the Cold War. Throughout those decades of rivalry, the two nuclear superpowers had to stand ready to strike first, thereby plunging themselves into a paranoid mindset. They never knew how much nuclear strike capability was sufficient, and they constantly worried about being overtaken by the other country. Each side, never sure when the other might launch the first bomb, remained constantly at the highest possible “launch on warning” alert; each exaggerating the other’s nuclear capabilities and proceeding with its own nuclear armament and readiness planning based on the worst-case scenario. From China’s perspective, a strategy containing these elements is the root cause of the escalating risk of a nuclear war.

China has never been bothered by such over-anxiety or over-action in its nuclear thinking. China believes that to prevent a nuclear war from happening, it is sufficient to target just a few big cities for retaliation; thus it is not necessary to build a huge arsenal or develop massive offensive capabilities. Since acquiring its own nuclear capability in 1964, China has conducted the least number of nuclear tests among the five Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) nuclear weapon states, and it has maintained only a minimum number of warheads throughout that time. Also notably, China sees no need to develop non-strategic nuclear weapons, such as tactical nuclear weapons, which in China’s view are primarily for use on the battlefield; to develop so-called precision-strike nuclear war-fighting capabilities; or to deploy nuclear weapons on the soil of other countries. Furthermore, China considers it unnecessary to keep its nuclear forces at the launch-on-warning alert level, because it is prepared only to mount counterattacks if attacked.

Before any counterattack takes place, China must first determine whether the attack against China is of a nuclear nature and who the attacker is. Such investigation and verification will be time-consuming. In fact, China generally keeps its warheads away from intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers, installing them only when launching becomes necessary. This approach not only improves the survivability of its nuclear force but also, more importantly, tells the world that China’s nuclear posture is never offensive. All these are logical effects of the no-first-use policy, which indeed determines China’s nuclear posture, including the mission, size, and structure of its nuclear forces.

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3 See the section on China, Nuclear Country Profile, Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), 1 December 2017. [http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/china/](http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/china/).
nuclear weapons, as well as the doctrine governing them. For this reason, the common depiction of China’s no-first-use policy as unverifiable rhetoric is demonstrably groundless.

Currently, along with its technological and political development, China, like other nuclear weapon states, is also modernizing its array of nuclear armaments, particularly by enhancing the surety, reliability, and effectiveness of its ballistic missiles. This includes, among others, building a nuclear triangle focusing on land-launching ICBMs complemented by bombers and submarines. China is also strengthening its capacity for rapid reaction, effective penetration, conventional precision strikes, damage infliction, and its own protection and survivability. All these actions are geared toward effectively handling future war threats and emergencies. And all these steps, as pointed out by China’s Defense White Paper, have been taken in line with the country’s pledge never to be the first to resort to nuclear weapons (Information Office of the State Council (China) 2013, 12). In short, the no-first-use policy keeps China out of an arms race with other states, and this healthy mindset allows China to proceed with its nuclear modernization programs at a more measured and unruffled pace, in conformity with its national defense needs and within the limits of its overall national strength.

Third, the unconditional no-first-use policy also means that nuclear development is not considered a way of compensating for any shortage of conventional capabilities in China’s overall military planning. This is another important factor distinguishing China’s nuclear strategy from that of other nuclear powers.

In the eyes of other nuclear powers, nuclear weapons, other than being more powerfully destructive, are not qualitatively different from conventional weapons; both are ready and available for use in the battlefield. In the early years of the Cold War, when the US enjoyed first a nuclear monopoly and later nuclear superiority over the USSR but lagged behind in terms of conventional forces, it waved nuclear bombers as a trump card in its massive retaliation plan. In those years, Washington planned that if war should erupt with the USSR, it would immediately use nuclear weapons to crush the enemy. But soon, the Soviets caught up with the US nuclear capability while maintaining a superior conventional posture relative to NATO’s deployment in Europe. By this time, the latter alliance was forced to abandon the idea of winning the war through massive nuclear attacks. But the US and NATO were still prepared to use nuclear weapons first as an effective firewall to stop an offensive by Warsaw Pact conventional forces.

With the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Warsaw Pact, the confrontation persisted between the two factions, with the US and the NATO on one side, and Russia, which retained the legacy of the Soviet era, on the other side. But the two sides now seem to have swapped positions, with Russia on the weak side, particularly with regard to conventional weapons. It is, thus, now Russia’s turn to follow the same path that the Western bloc had adopted during the Cold War era, offsetting its conventional inferiority with its nuclear arsenal. Soon after the end of the Cold War, in November 1993, Russia announced that it was abandoning its pledge not to use nuclear weapons first, emphasizing that in a future major military conflict with the West, it would launch a first strike if deemed necessary – although many believe that the USSR was never serious about its no-first-use pledge during the Cold War.
Britain and France, the two next-tier nuclear states, also cling to the position of willingness to use nuclear weapons first, even though as members of NATO they are already under the US nuclear umbrella at least theoretically. Their calculation seems to be that, if they were to give up this position, their status as global powers would be substantially undermined and their status within NATO greatly impaired. Another consideration behind these countries’ threat to use nuclear weapons first is the desire to maintain their traditional interests in specific regions of the world, such as the Middle East and Africa.\(^4\)

China has taken an approach fundamentally different from the other NPT nuclear weapon states. Its no-first-use pledge demonstrates that China does not plan to offset its relatively weak conventional strength (vis-à-vis the US, for example) with its nuclear capabilities, nor would it consider resorting to nuclear weapons first in a conventional conflict. There are at least two reasons for this approach. One reason is that China deeply understands the huge, devastating consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, including the massive and inhumane damage that would be perpetrated on both sides, and especially on innocent people. Furthermore, China believes that a disconnection between nuclear and conventional forces may be in China’s best interests. The no-first-use policy was formulated by the first-generation leaders of the newly founded republic in 1949; all these leaders had experienced long revolutionary wars and had little taste for engaging in another large-scale conventional war. In their vision of a next war involving China, there was no role for China as an invader; rather, China would be the invaded country, meaning that the war would be on China’s soil. Such a war was quite familiar to leaders like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. They were confident that under the Communist Party’s leadership, and with its disciplined military force supported by the people, China could fight a prolonged people’s war, using inferior weapons to vanquish its technically superior enemies, who would eventually drown in “the sea of people’s war” (Sun 2006). This strategic thinking, passed down from the forefathers, continues to be deeply imprinted in the minds of their successors and serves as important guidance shaping the no-first-use policy regarding nuclear weapons.

Finally, the unconditional no-first-use policy indicates that China does not intend to employ nuclear weapons as a foreign-policy tool to advance its national interests. This view arises from China’s socialist system, which has consistently supported a non-allied, independent foreign policy of peaceful coexistence. In sharp contrast, the US acted in exactly the opposite way. By providing “extended nuclear deterrence” to its allies, the US sought from the onset to control these countries and prevent them from developing indigenous nuclear weapons, keeping them dependent on a global security system dominated by Washington. Such arrangements may have worked for some time, but whether they could work permanently is a big question. Many of these allies have never become fully reconciled to putting their fate in US hands and have desired to break away from the US control from time to time, giving rise to complicated frictions in the alliances. China has no such problems. It stands firm, not forming a military alliance with any other state nor using nuclear weapons as a means to control or influence another state’s policy. This position is consistent with its no-first-use pledge.

\(^{4}\)For the discussion of nuclear strategies of various nuclear powers in the Cold War, see Wang and Wen (2000, 72–181).
Why does China persist in its unconditional no-first-use nuclear policy?

China’s no-first-use policy has three ideological foundations. First, it has been profoundly influenced by the dialectal philosophical outlook of Mao Zedong, China’s paramount figure in its first generation leadership since the founding of the new republic, regarding nuclear weapons. Second, it is an integral part of China’s active defense strategy. Third, it draws on ancient wisdom from China’s 5,000-year civilization with regard to warfare and national security.

Mao Zedong is no doubt the central figure in all decision making in China on the role of nuclear weapons. His assertion that “the nuclear bomb is both a paper tiger and real tiger” served as a major theoretical basis for China’s no-first-use policy. On the other hand, Mao believed that the nuclear bomb was primarily a paper tiger. In 1946, after the US dropped two nuclear atomic bombs on Japan toward the end of the Second World War and then waved the bomb like a club in building its hegemony, Mao commented:

Nuclear bomb is but a paper tiger used by the imperial United States to scare people. This tiger appears fearful but actually not so much. Certainly nuclear bomber is a massive killing weapon. However, the decisive factor in any war is people, not one or two new weapons (Mao 1991, 1994–1195).

Many Western pundits have used Mao’s words to portray him as an arrogant warmonger, ignorant of the destructive power of nuclear weapons and indifferent to the value of human life. But this is a gross distortion. Later, Mao explained his view in greater detail to the world audience:

Imagine, how many people would die if a nuclear war erupts? The world now has a population of 2.7 billion. About one third of them may perish. Or worse, half the population may die. It is not we, it is they, who want the war, want to drop nuclear and hydro bombs upfront. I debated with a foreign politician on this issue. He believed that if a nuclear war takes place, the whole mankind will be erased. I disagreed by saying that in the worst scenario, half of the population would perish. But there is yet the other half… and in time it would multiply to 2.7 billion again, and much more. We want to concentrate in building our underdeveloped country. We want peace. However, if the imperialists force a war on us, we would have to make the hard decision, to handle the war first, and then resume our economic development. What’s the use that you live in fear of war every day and are unable to stop it from coming your way? Previously I talked about the East wind overwhelming the West wind and it was when the possibility of another war was remote. Now there is another possibility that war could erupt, so I made the above remarks to complement my previous one. This way, both possibilities are covered.5

Clearly, what Mao scornfully described as a “paper tiger” was not the nuclear bomb itself but the imperialists who were waving the nuclear club, pursuing nuclear blackmail. Later, Mao further expounded on his view about the paper tiger: “What I have said is a vivid metaphor, a strategic consideration, and meant for people who have boasted about how marvelous atomic bombs are and who use them to scare kindhearted people.”6

5Mao Zedong’s Speech at the Moscow Conference of Representatives of Communist and Workers’ Parties, 18 November 1957, in Mao (1999, 326).
6Mao Zedong, “Speech on 15 January 1955 at Secretariat Extended Meeting of CPC,” quoted in JiangbianJiacuo (2004, 216).
On the other hand, Mao Zedong and his colleagues in China’s inner decision-making circle had a very sober-minded understanding, and indeed, were in almost profound awe of the devastating effects of nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction. Mao stressed on many occasions that nuclear bombs were also like a “real tiger, an iron tiger, and a man-eating tiger.” In his perspective, this was particularly true in a situation when others have the weapon and you do not.

In fact, Mao had never hidden his profound awe of nuclear weapons. It had grown out of his lifelong experience in confronting overwhelmingly superior hostile forces ever since he was engaged in the struggle for national liberation. Particularly when the new China was founded in 1949, the Cold War had already taken shape and Mao faced an extremely adverse security situation. The Western powers, led by the US, relentlessly pursued a full-blockade policy against China. Military conflicts, such as the Korean War, the Indo-China War, and the first Taiwan Strait crisis occurred one after another in the 1950s, all involving China’s core security interests. During these conflicts, Washington more than once seriously considered launching nuclear attacks against China. Mao painstakingly felt the mounting pressure from such nuclear threats in each military conflict (Lewis and Xue 1988, 35). As a Western strategist stated, “Since the nuclear blast over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no countries were more close to facing another nuclear attack than China” (Freedman 1981, 276).

This huge nuclear threat forced the Chinese leaders, led by Mao Zedong, to decide that China must develop its own nuclear weapons to survive. In their view, this was the only option left to them. Mao stressed that “in today’s world, if we do not want to be bullied, we must have it,” and that “this [nuclear bomb] is something that determines our fate” (Mao 1999, 435, 453). As China was about to carry out its first successful test of a nuclear device, Mao looked forward:

In the future, we may produce limited amount of nuclear bombs, but not plan to use them. Then why should we produce something not to be used? We use it only as defensive weapons. Currently, some big nuclear powers, the U.S. in particular, scare people with nuclear bombs... The people of the world all oppose to the use of nuclear bombs to kill (Mao 1994, 540–541).

In essence, Mao’s dialectical view of the nuclear bomb was consistent with his dialectical philosophy toward all kinds of serious threats. Mao summed up his method of action as to “defy the enemy strategically while tactically taking it seriously.” This dialectical philosophy determines the duality of China’s nuclear strategic thinking: if you have nuclear weapons, I must also have them, but I must be extremely cautious with nuclear weapons and guard against their irresponsible use. Mao cautioned, “How could nuclear bombs be dropped carelessly? Even if we have them, we must take great caution. Carelessly dropping bombs equals committing crimes” (Mao 1994, 453). Mao’s philosophy on the use of nuclear bombs has served as the cornerstone on which China would build a nuclear strategy centered on the no-first-use concept.

Next, the unconditional no-first-use policy serves as part of China’s active defense strategy. Since the founding of the new China, and under the guidance of this active philosophy.

7Mao Zedong, “Speech on Summer 1958 at the Reception Meeting with Nuclear Scientist Qian Xuesen and Qian Sanqiang,” quoted in JiangbianJiacuo (2004, 436).
8Mao Zedong, “On the Ten Relationships,” in Mao (1999, 27).
defense strategy, China has effectively defended its sovereignty and national security. As a developing country, constantly on the weak side confronting strong adversaries, such an active defense strategy was China’s only logical choice. The strategy can succinctly be summarized in a vivid expression: “We will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked.”

Insistence on the possession of nuclear weapons but in conjunction with a no-first-use pledge rightly reflects the essence of China’s self-defense strategy. It requires first and foremost that China must have sufficient nuclear deterrent capability to ensure its security, without which “active defense” is only an empty phrase. Precisely out of this conviction, Mao Zedong and his fellow first-generation leaders made an extremely difficult yet crucial decision to build the bomb on 15 January 1955 – at a moment when China was just starting to recover from the end of the Korean War, when its domestic social and economic foundations were extremely frail, and when China knew next to nothing about nuclear technology. In dire need of technology and specialists, China was tightly contained by the Western camp. Though China initially received technological aid from the Soviet Union, this support was soon withdrawn when a rift emerged between the two socialist countries (Li et al. 1987, 19–22, 32–33; Xie 1992, 28; Wuan et al. n.d). In such trying times, China refused to cave in. Under the firm leadership of the Communist Party, China fully leveraged its centralized socialist system, mobilizing more than 900 plants from more than 30 departments in about 20 provinces (Jin 1998, 1747–1748). China successfully developed two (nuclear and hydro) bombs and one satellite, attaining development of a comprehensive strategic nuclear deterrence system at a far greater speed than any other nuclear weapon powers.

After possessing its basic deterrence capabilities, China could have chosen further investment in expanding its nuclear arsenal to counterbalance the US and the USSR. This option could have been all the more enticing after the end of the Cold War as China set itself on a fast track toward economic development, rapidly expanding its economic and technological strengths. Even though dramatic nuclear expansion was now fully within reach, China rejected this path. As Premier Zhou Enlai once said:

> Our doing this (developing nuclear weapons) is to break the nuclear monopoly and blackmail. We want to have the two superpowers feeling constrained. Ideally, we hope our effort to succeed so as to stop nuclear war and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons… Nuclear weapons in our possession are not for scaring people, therefore it is not the more the better. Still, we need some quantity, some quality, and some varieties.  

9 China’s nuclear development has in general followed Zhou’s line of thinking ever since. That is, China maintains an active defense strategy but will never fire the first shot.

Third, the no-first-use policy also reflects the strategic flexibility deftly developed by Mao Zedong and China’s first-generation leadership. This superb war art, characterized by timely initiatives to move from a passive to an active posture and fight at a time and place of one’s own choosing, was distilled and refined throughout their long revolutionary career. Yet it could also be traced back to the quintessence of the ancient Chinese war culture.

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9Zhou Enlai’s speech when interviewed with the conference delegates of the program of National Defense Science and Technology Commission, Beijing, 22 October 1970, in Zhou (1998, 661).
As a skilled strategist, Mao Zedong was well-versed in the art of war. From Sun Tzu, he learned to be extremely prudent about resorting to force. At the very beginning, *The Art of War* says that a “decision on war is a vital matter to the state, a way to survival or ruin,”\(^\text{10}\) which implies that the highest end state of a truly successful strategy is not to win a war but to prevent it from happening. Lao Tzu, another ancient Chinese militarist-philosopher, also warned, “Weapons, which are ominous tools, and not applicable to the noble, should be considered only as a last resort.”\(^\text{11}\) In the event of conflicts, ancient Chinese military theorists emphasized the role of wisdom in the use of force and attached importance to strategic planning in the hope of avoiding as much as possible the losses that the country and people would bear. In this respect, Sun Tzu stressed that “the highest form of generalship is to thwart the enemy’s plans; the next best is to prevent the alliance of the enemy’s forces; the next is to attack the army in the field; and the worst of all is to besiege cities.”\(^\text{12}\) Such brilliant ancient wisdom deeply undergirded China’s no-first-use nuclear policy.

At first appearance, the pledge of no-first-use would seem to tie China’s hands as it confronts more muscular opponents. Here again, however, ancient Chinese wisdom shines through. The no-first-use policy encompasses an inherent motivation to seek something that Sun Tzu recommended long ago: “shaping and leveraging *shi*.\(^\text{13}\) *Shi* is a traditional Chinese security and warfare concept with no equivalent in Western culture. The US Department of Defense (2002) tried to explain *shi* as “building momentum,” or something that a skilled strategist can exploit to maximum advantage to change the existing strategic configuration of power in his favor. This explanation, although it does not fully cover all the connotations of the Chinese term, seems quite close to its essence. Simply put, *shi* could be interpreted as an effort to develop a favorable situation in an encounter with an enemy. The no-first-use policy aimed precisely to build and shape such a *shi* so that China could take the initiative and establish a winning position as a burgeoning nuclear weapon state in an unfavorable strategic configuration of power.

In the 1960s, although China reached the “what you have I must have” milestone, its opponent, the US, still maintained unquestionable nuclear supremacy. Besides, the international community was largely wondering about China’s intentions. Choosing the right time to announce its no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons, China not only challenged the US to follow suit but also assumed leadership in the world’s effort to move toward total prohibition and ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons. In doing so, China demonstrated its goodwill, built up understanding and sympathy within the international community, and reduced suspicion and hostility regarding its actions. Thus, in a strategic confrontation with stronger foes, China succeeded in shaping a *shi* that helped greatly to reverse the situation in its favor. Also significantly, China gained badly needed time to develop its nuclear power. In retrospect, this succinct policy announcement protected China against an overwhelming threat from the outside.

Superior strategists like Mao Zedong also knew how to lead and not react to the opponent’s maneuvers in a confrontation. Mao’s famous saying, “You fight your way, I

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\(^{10}\)Sun Tzu, “Art of War,” quoted in Wu (1990, 2).

\(^{11}\)Lao Tzu, Dao De Jing, Chap 31, http://www.daodejing.org.

\(^{12}\)Sun Tzu, “Art of War,” quoted in Wu (1990, 71).

\(^{13}\)Sun Tzu, “Art of War,” quoted in Wu (1990, 79).
fight mine,” vividly reflects how he managed to maximize his own strengths while minimizing those of his opponents so as to seize the strategic initiative under adverse conditions. Again, this military wit was inherited from ancient Chinese strategists. Instead of engaging the enemy in the regular way, Mao, following Sun Tzu’s teaching “yi-zheng-he, yi-qi-sheng” (win through unexpected moves), skillfully adopted an extraordinary, asymmetric course after China had successfully developed its own bomb. China firmly rejected a nuclear arms race with the US or any attempt to compete with this powerful foe head-on – an approach that would have meant playing the game on the other side’s terms and eventually losing the initiative. By instead committing to an unconditional no-first-use policy, China seemingly bound itself unilaterally. But in doing so, it succeeded in occupying the moral high ground, not only gaining international understanding and sympathy but also surrendering the “kickoff” of the nuclear ball to the US. Mao had anticipated that the powerful destructive nature of nuclear weapons was also an equally powerful constraint on its actual use. A nuclear taboo was thus formed (Tannenwald 2007; Li and Nie 2008; Li and Xiao 2010; Li 2006; Wu 2009). Mao perceived that the US would be extremely hesitant to break this nuclear taboo, an insight that has proved true ever since. He once commented, “Though the possibility of another world war between big powers exists, the fact that a few atom bombs are showing up in their hands has made everyone hesitate.”

Mao may have also anticipated that with the Soviets and the Americans in a deadly nuclear stalemate, China was likely to gain their acceptance as a fellow nuclear weapon state only if it refrained from challenging the nuclear dominance of either superpower by publicly announcing its purely defensive nuclear stance through a no-first-use pledge. By all measures, China’s decision was the best possible move based on an accurate assessment of the international dynamics prevalent at the time and a profound understanding of the nature of nuclear weapons.

How has China contributed to the world and regional peace and stability through its no-first-use policy?

Over 50 years have passed since China made its no-first-use announcement. History proves that this policy has been impressively successful.

First, the no-first-use policy has effectively helped China to carry out its nuclear programs and to succeed in building, over time a moderate nuclear capability that, though not comparable to that of either the US or the USSR (Russia), is adequate to deal with nuclear threats from the outside and also to establish a delicate strategic balance with them. In the meantime, China has become the only NPT nuclear weapon state to promise not to be the first to use nuclear weapons, and not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or NWFZs, thus demonstrating to the world that it is a responsible nuclear power. Evidently, the no-first-use policy has elevated China’s strategic status in the global arena.

14 Sun Tzu, “Art of War,” quoted in Wu (1990, 79).
15 Mao Zedong’s speech when meeting with Le Duan, First Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, cited in Mao Zedong and China’s Atomic Energy Undertakings, ed., cited in China National Nuclear Corporation (Beijing, Atomic Energy Press, 1993) 13.
China’s no-first-use policy has contributed to strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region in particular. Its non-provocative nuclear posture has gone a long way toward alleviating its neighbors’ concerns about any challenges that China’s acquisition of nuclear weapons might bring to them, as well as strengthening the non-proliferation regime. During the Cold War, the Asia-Pacific region did not see an escalating nuclear arms race as a consequence of China becoming a nuclear weapon state. China’s no-first-use pledge played a crucial role in the development of such a nuclear landscape in the region. This alone is an outstanding achievement.

In this respect, it may be worth noting that among its neighbors, Japan’s attitude is perhaps the only exception. Tokyo has been strikingly ambivalent toward nuclear weapons and also towards China. Having been the only country to suffer a nuclear attack, the Japanese people understandably have a strong aversion to nuclear weapons. Japan’s pacifist constitution is also a big obstacle to changing course with regard to the nuclear option. As early as in 1967, under heavy pressure from the US, Japan had announced the so-called three non-nuclear principles – namely, no manufacturing, deployment, or allowing passage through its territory of nuclear weapons. But Japan has another face on the nuclear issue; its own government never became reconciled to a permanent non-nuclear status. Even during the Second World War, Japan’s imperial military reportedly had its own project to develop atomic bombs. After the country’s defeat, the conservative elites and the military in Tokyo never abandoned the ambition of seeking nuclear capability. At the same time, the conservative elites and the military in Japan could not reconcile to the fact that they were defeated by China in World War II. Against this backdrop, Japan cast a particularly wary eye on China’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. But here again, China’s no-first-use policy may have played a stabilizing role, for as long as Beijing maintains this non-provocative policy, Washington would most likely prefer to maintain the status-quo nuclear landscape in the Asia-Pacific rather than let Japan have a free hand to develop its own nuclear arsenal.

More fundamentally, China’s no-first-use policy has demonstrated a viable path toward international nuclear disarmament. From China’s perspective, one of the major obstacles to nuclear disarmament is the obstinate insistence of nuclear powers, in their security strategies, on the so-called irreplaceable role of nuclear weapons. As long as this propensity for nuclear weapons persists, genuine progress toward nuclear disarmament is almost impossible; worse, there will always be incentives for nuclear weapon proliferation, accompanied by the risk of their actual use.

Along this line of thinking, the Chinese leaders believe that the first step toward the real solution of nuclear disarmament is to acknowledge that nuclear weapons are inhumane weapons that cause massive destruction, and that therefore they should be totally removed from military and national security calculations. This conviction would provide a solid basis for consensus on nuclear disarmament. To translate this understanding into action, China hopes that all nuclear weapon states will reach, as a first step toward nuclear disarmament, an agreement committing themselves to the non-use of nuclear weapons. If such broad agreement is not reachable for the time being, they should at least pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons against each other, and

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16See the Chinese Ambassador Wu Hailong’s speech on nuclear disarmament at the second session of the Conference on Disarmament, Geneva, 1 June 2012. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/ziliao_611306/tytj_611312/t937146.shtml.
not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states and NWFZs.

Based on this rationale, China has always highlighted its no-first-use pledge as a first, significant, meaningful, and readily workable step in the multilateral disarmament effort. As early as 16 October 1964, when China first exploded its bomb, Beijing in its official statement took the lead in pledging unconditional no-first-use of nuclear weapons, and it emphatically suggested to hold an international summit attended by state leaders, to discuss the issue of comprehensive ban and thorough elimination of nuclear weapons. As the first step, this summit should yield an agreement in which all nuclear and nuclear-developing states commit to not be the first to use nuclear weapons, not to use nuclear weapons against nuclear weapon-free states and NWFZs, and not to use nuclear weapons against each other.17

Since then, China has repeated this position on numerous occasions. In 1971, when China’s seat in the United Nations was reinstated, China presented its viewpoint in nuclear disarmament discussions at the most influential world body. The then Chinese Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, who represented China at the UN General Session for the first time that year, reiterated China’s no-first-use pledge, offering a poignant challenge to the two nuclear superpowers:

The United States and the Soviet Union, if taking disarmament seriously, should commit themselves to the obligation of not first using nuclear weapons. This is not a difficult thing to do. Whether or not they can do it is a touchstone to tell whether or not they really want to proceed with disarmament.18

In 1982, the UN General Assembly held a second special session devoted specifically to disarmament. At this session, the Chinese delegation submitted for the first time a concrete, comprehensive proposal for progress in arms control and disarmament. One important suggestion contained in this proposal stated that if the US and the Soviet Union each agreed to reduce their nuclear arsenal by 50% and pledged to permanently stop nuclear testing, improvement, and production, China would also stop these activities and join the other nuclear weapon states in negotiating nuclear weapon reductions on the basis of reasonable ratios and procedures. This proposal became well-known as the “three stops and one reduction” proposal or TSOR. Yet many people may not realize that in this comprehensive proposal by China, the first step suggested was actually not the TSOR, but again a step concerning the non-use of nuclear weapons. The proposal stressed that before all other measures are taken,

All nuclear states will reach the agreement of no use of nuclear weapons. Before reaching this agreement, every nuclear state should pledge unconditionally that it will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states and nuclear-free zones, that under all circumstances, it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons against each other.19

After the Cold War, China continued to push for the conclusion of a multilateral treaty on mutually agreed no-first-use of nuclear weapons. In January 1994, China formally

17“Statement by the People’s Republic of China on 16 October 1964,” People’s Daily, 17 October 1964.
18Qiao Guanhua’s Speech at the 26th Session of the UN General Assembly, 15 November 1971. http://bbs.news.163.com/bbs/country/403543534.html.
19Huang Hua’s speech at the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly Devoted to Disarmament, 11 June 1982. http://www.reformdata/content/19820308/18968.html.
submitted a draft treaty on this topic to the US, Russia, France, and Britain and suggested holding consultations among the P5 at an early date. In September 1994, China and Russia concluded an agreement to undertake not to be the first to use nuclear weapons against each other or aim their nuclear weapons at each other. In June 1998, during US President Clinton’s visit to Beijing, China tried to persuade him to sign a similar treaty, but he declined. The two countries eventually reached an agreement in which they pledged not to target each other with nuclear weapons. All along, the Chinese government has also called on all nuclear weapon states to undertake a commitment to provide negative security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states and the NWFZs without any conditions as soon as possible. It further contends that such assurance should be guaranteed by a legally binding convention through negotiation.

What challenges could China face for its no-first-use policy in the future?

China should be proud of all the contributions that it has made to the world and regional peace and stability with its no-first-use policy. Looking into the future, however, China might face challenges for its no-first-use policy.

China’s no-first-use policy is yet to receive the wider recognition that it deserves in the world arms-control community. Questions regarding the true intention behind China’s nuclear doctrine have continued to persist abroad. Western states, taking advantage of their overwhelmingly powerful media and think tanks, have worked hard to dilute and belittle the credibility and significance of China’s no-first-use policy. In a world in which the West continues to dominate the podium, China’s voice remains weak and subdued, and its no-first-use nuclear policy, despite being clear and unique, is yet to evolve into the dominant international trend. China should respond forcefully to all distortions of its stance, highlighting more explicitly the contributions of its no-first-policy on nuclear weapons to global peace and stability. This response should be part of an overall effort to market China’s new security concept and build up a world community of common destiny.

Lack of transparency has been the most convenient accusation regarding China’s nuclear policy. Some accuse China of concealing its true nuclear strength. Others raise the accusation to the strategic level, treating this alleged technical concealment as a reason to question the validity of China’s no-first-use commitment. But these accusations fail to understand that technical opacity is actually a price that China pays for its no-first-use policy. Since China has prepared to take the first nuclear hit and then hit back, survivability becomes the first requirement for China’s nuclear arsenal, which means that the country must conceal its nuclear forces in terms of number, quality, and deployment locations. Such intentional technical opacity is absolutely necessary for China’s minimum nuclear force to withstand the first wave of attacks and launch forceful counterattacks. China cannot technically act as transparently as other nuclear states do – a fact that China does not deny. So long as its nuclear arsenal remains in a defensive posture, China will continue to maintain its technical opacity, as a necessary concomitant of its no-first-use pledge. So, China should feel no sense of guilt about being technically less open.
Furthermore, the transparency of China’s nuclear force also depends on the policies of other nuclear powers. If, for example, the US agrees to conclude a treaty on no-first-use of nuclear weapons with China, the door will be open for China to offer greater transparency on its nuclear weapons. However, increasing military transparency is crucial for building confidence and reducing mistrust among states, an essential element of China’s attempt to integrate itself into the international community. Thus, China will face the daunting challenge of how to find a more appropriate balance between protecting military confidentiality and increasing military transparency.

The above said problems about China’s no-first-use policy have been lingering on ever since China announced it; and the new international and domestic context in the post-Cold War era, fast scientific and technological advancements, and China’s rapid rise as an emerging world power may raise a compelling question if China’s no-first-use policy continues to serve its best security interests.

The world has witnessed an unprecedented power restructuring since the end of the Cold War. Competition among major powers is dramatically intensifying. Whereas the Cold War revolved around the US-USSR rivalry, the focus today has increasingly shifted to the competition between the US and China for leadership of the future world security architecture and order. Washington has increasingly pinpointed China as the major threat to its security and has invested a sizable share of its resources in enhancing its military deployment and strengthening its alliances in the Asia-Pacific region to counterbalance China’s expanding influence.20 In the nuclear field, the Trump administration also picked up China as one of the major threats to the United States, and planned to speed up the modernization of the US nuclear arsenal, including developing low-yield nuclear weapons for a possible nuclear exchange (US Department of Defense 2018). This will be an entirely new situation in which China has lost its former leeway to maneuver in the shadow of the US-USSR rivalry and must bear the full brunt of US military pressure. A new round of the arms race may be likely. The pressure on the Chinese government to seek more effective means to protect its own security interests will mount.

Militarily, amidst the intensifying power rivalry, China must face the reality that all nuclear weapon states are attaching greater importance to the role of nuclear weapons in their security strategies in the post Cold War era. All of them are planning huge investments to modernize their nuclear arsenals and to prepare to fight a nuclear war. Indeed, due to the above developments, to many people the use of nuclear weapons seems more conceivable than at any time since the peak of the Cold War in 1984. The long-held theory of the nuclear taboo is increasingly on the verge of being broken.21

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20 See, for example a news report “美防长:中俄现是美最大威胁 [The US Defense Secretary: China and Russia are the greatest threats to America],” 联合早报 [Lianhe Zaobao], Singapore, 20 January 2018. http://www.zaobao.com/realtime/world/story20180120-828591; “The summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” US Department of Defense, Washington DC, January 2018.

21 According to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the doomsday clock is currently set at three minutes to midnight—the closest to midnight it has been since the height of the Cold War in 1984, and only one minute ahead of the lowest setting ever, in 1953. William Perry, former US Defense Secretary has warned recently that in addition to the nuclear crisis in the Koran Peninsula, there are three main nuclear dangers today that, taken together, makes the current world even more dangerous than most of the Cold War. These three dangers are: the possibility of a nuclear war between Russia and the US, a regional nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan, and the prospect of nuclear terrorism. See Rett (2018).
For China, the implications of this strategic shift are enormous. China must contemplate a war scenario in which the US may launch a nuclear attack, perhaps in a conflict over the Taiwan Straits. In the view of most Chinese analysts, this is the only conceivable scenario that would provoke a nuclear response from China (Xu 2016, 32). The question for China is whether its current nuclear posture, based on the no-first-use policy, is adequate to address such a nuclear conflict. Clearly, the passivity of the no-first-use stance would become more salient if a nuclear attack actually took place. For example, if an enemy were to launch a small tactical nuclear attack with a low-yield tactical or battlefield bomb – perhaps at sea, in an attempt to destroy China’s fleet, but resulting in thousands of deaths – China would certainly counterattack, but its retaliation options would be very limited. In accordance with China’s nuclear doctrine and its current nuclear retaliation capability, China could be expected to respond by striking one of the enemy’s large cities, with the loss of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of lives among other devastating effects. Whether China’s leadership has sufficient political courage and determination to resort to such a disproportionate retaliation could be a big question.

The dilemma thus facing the Chinese leadership is whether to give in or take actions that involve a risk of unpredictable, dire consequences. This situation is quite similar to one that the United States faced in its nuclear confrontation with the USSR in the mid-1970s. At that time, a heated debate ensued in Washington as to whether the US needed to establish more levels of possible response to a nuclear conflict so as to achieve the desired strategic flexibility. China may wish to follow this US example of avoiding passivity and rigidity by designing more options for responding to a nuclear attack. This approach has become feasible as China now has the requisite financial and technological resources. But clearly, adding strategic flexibility to China’s no-first-use policy, however desirable, could also entail certain modifications of China’s nuclear posture by adding new types of nuclear (non-strategic) weapons to its arsenal. Whether and how such a change would affect China’s no-first-use policy deserves serious discussion.

Technological advancements have presented another new major challenge to China’s future implementation of its no-first-use policy. New offensive weapons from space and cyberspace, as well as robotic or automatic armaments in all domains, are being added to the arsenals of leading powers, offering them new ways to launch strategic blitzes. In the Asia-Pacific region, US development and deployment of ballistic missile defense systems (BMDSs) have particularly posed a new threat to the validity of China’s limited nuclear retaliation capability. Moreover, rapid technological development not only brings a few more powerful types of hardware to these powers, but may also dramatically change the future of warfare in both form and norm.

Accompanying this evolution is the transformation of military ideologies and operational doctrines. In the nuclear field, some emerging non-nuclear means may be used to replace at least partially the role of nuclear weapons in a future conflict, greatly blurring the line of demarcation between a nuclear and a non-nuclear attack. All these developments would have profound implications for the security and military environment in which China maintains its current active defense strategy, as well as for its no-first-use nuclear policy.
As one conceivable example, some studies by Western researchers have raised an apparently provocative question: if an adversary should use non-nuclear weapons to attack China’s nuclear infrastructure or its central command-and-control systems, how may China respond while upholding its no-first-use pledge on nuclear weapons (Xu 2016, 85). This question actually raises the issue of whether China should redefine what would constitute a nuclear attack so as to justify legitimate use of nuclear weapons in response. It should not merely be regarded as a provocative question but should be regarded as a logical outcome of its military doctrine development, meriting serious study at both academic and operational levels. In particular, the academic community in China should boldly examine this and other newly rising challenging questions in military and political theory by strengthening its strategic studies. After all, academia should always assume a pioneering role in the new military development.

Nuclear proliferation is another new element that will enter into China’s security calculations. Thanks to the intensifying regional tensions, coupled with the spread of high technology, the Asia-Pacific region has witnessed a wave of nuclear proliferation, to the point of forming a nearly complete circle of nuclear-armed states surrounding China. A regionally limited nuclear war, a possibility that never existed in the Cold War era, is now conceivable and could directly or indirectly involve China’s core interests. Adding to the complexity of the situation is the rising danger of nuclear terrorism, another phenomenon absent during the Cold War. China may have to revisit its threat perception and see if its existential nuclear posture based on its no-first-use policy will be adequate to deal with the growing diversification of nuclear threats in the future.

**Will China’s no-first-use policy change?**

The changing situation has opened the door for public debate on nuclear matters in China. Domestically, the no-first-use policy received little public discussion for many years until the country started its process of reform and opening up to the outside in the late 1970s. Divergent voices are now being heard in these emerging public debates, in which the civilian and academic communities in China are addressing issues like the no-first-use policy. The focus is essentially on a crucial pair of questions. First, will the no-first-use policy still be valid and useful to China in the rapidly changing security environment? Second, if not, should it be readjusted or scrapped altogether?

To be fair, the emergence of challenges to the no-first-use policy on China’s domestic front is understandable. It is an inevitable effect of China’s speedy economic development, which requires strategic reevaluation and adjustment of its policies. This should be considered a positive trend as diverse voices help China to establish a more democratic process of decision making and assist the Chinese government in adopting better-informed policies with public support.

Broadly speaking, two main views questioning the no-first-use policy have emerged in the domestic debate in China, at opposite ends of the policy spectrum.

The first proposition comes chiefly from a small number of researchers in China who advocate that China should abandon not only its no-first-use policy but nuclear weapons altogether, so as to join the club of nuclear-free states. They argue that giving
up nuclear weapons would not only elevate China to a moral high ground, but would also be in China’s security interest. This view was heard mainly in the 1990s and early 2000s, and it is primarily based on the following arguments:

1. The international focus has shifted from military confrontation to economic competition. A nuclear war is now out of the question, especially between major nuclear powers. Keeping up with the changing times by abandoning nuclear weapons will benefit China’s economic development and national security as well.
2. Nuclear capability is a waste of resources with regard to national security. States like Germany and Japan, which did not invest in nuclear weapons development, have prospered and gained international respect as well.
3. By unilaterally giving up nuclear weapons, China will set a shining example for the other nuclear states, which in turn will give great impetus to the progress of international nuclear disarmament.
4. This decision will further enhance China’s image as a peace-loving nation. South Africa, just before its historic regime change, announced that it would scrap its secret nuclear weapons program, a move hailed throughout international society. Should China follow suit, the praise would be much louder (He 2006a; He 2006b; Shi 2000).

This viewpoint is, at best, paradoxical. The arguments sound quite distant from reality and utopian in nature. It is true that Germany and Japan do not possess nuclear weapons, but they have the US nuclear umbrella to protect them. South Africa gave up nuclear weapons at a time when the Soviet threat had disappeared with the end of the Cold War, and the outgoing white-dominated regime was not willing to hand over its secretly developed nuclear weapons to the incoming black-dominated regime. China is in an entirely different situation. Of the total world nuclear arsenal, China possesses only a tiny fraction. Even if China gives up its nuclear arsenal, doing so will not practically change the whole international nuclear landscape, nor will it have dramatic implications for the strategies of the other nuclear weapon states. More importantly, the traditional threats that China faces have never disappeared, even though countries generally are investing more effort in their economic development. China continues to be a major target in US nuclear strike planning. In the face of this reality, how would China, if it relinquished its nuclear capability, respond to nuclear threats from the outside, and what else would China have to do to keep itself secure?

As can be expected, promptly after its appearance in the Chinese media, this proposition was overwhelmed by severe criticism and accused as “destroying the Great Wall from within.” The argument soon faded away, as a clear indication that any suggestion that China should unilaterally give up its nuclear weapons will not gain support from mainstream public opinion in the country.

The other proposition takes just the opposite position. It claims that the no-first-use policy has failed and should be discarded in favor of a first-use strategy so that China can occupy a strategic vantage point in the inevitable, fiercer power competition coming in the future. This view rests mainly on the following arguments:
(1) The no-first-use policy has not prevented the US from blockading and containing China.

(2) The no-first-use policy has not helped to improve China’s security environment. On the contrary, China now is facing a grimmer situation in its region, as evidenced by the fact that nuclear weapons keep proliferating in its surrounding environment and that some mid-size and even small countries, backed by the US, blatantly provoke China. China must learn from Russia, building its credibility by daring to use nuclear weapons first. This is the only way to stand up to the US hegemony and to defend China’s sovereignty and vital rights.

(3) The no-first-use policy would put China in a very passive position in a possible conflict with the US, such as one in the Taiwan Straits. China is no match for the US in conventional strength. In such a conflict, China would have no effective means to deter the powerful enemy, except perhaps the threat of using nuclear weapons as a deterrent. China must unshackle itself by giving up the no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons and by preparing to make maximum use of nuclear deterrents (Kahn 2005; Zhao 2003; Zhang 2004; Qiao 2014).

Unlike the former proposition, this view has gained a certain degree of popularity, not only among the general public but also among some PLA members. It has ridden the rising tide of nationalism and has in turn empowered it to rise higher. But to maintain that China should build its credibility by reversing its no-first-use policy and confronting the US is, in essence, a reflection of rashness in the field of national security studies in China. In conjunction with the increase in China’s comprehensive strength, quite a few people think that China has reached a point at which it should no longer keep a low profile in its security policy and should instead dare to call the bluff of any world powers, including the most powerful US, who continue to bully China. They seem to believe that by waving a few pieces of high-tech weapons, China would be able to change the power balance and turn the nation’s fate around. Calls for abandoning the no-first-use policy are a product of just such a psychological impulse.

But of course, this view remains a minority position in China so far. Many more hold that giving up the no-first-use pledge would have serious consequences in numerous dimensions. First, it would run counter to the nuclear security concept formulated by the founding fathers of the new China, who witnessed how the Soviet Union had exhausted itself in a nuclear arms race with the US. It would repeat the Soviets’ mistake and run against the historical trend. Strategically, giving up the no-first-use policy would mean dramatically expanding China’s nuclear arsenal, a step that would unquestionably initiate a nuclear arms race with other nuclear powers, gravely destabilizing global, as well as regional peace and stability. In addition, throwing out the long-held no-first-use pledge would overturn the favorable image that China has worked so hard to burnish. Last but not least, abandoning the no-first-use policy would undermine nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts by the international community. Fundamentally, any suggestions that advise China to contemplate being the first to use nuclear weapons betray the spirit of peaceful coexistence with others to which China has always been committed. Thus, although from time to time some divergent voices have called for changing China’s no-first-use policy, there are no signs that such opinions have greatly influenced the Chinese government’s decision making so far.
Concluding remarks

To sum up, today, it is safe to predict that the mainstream view in China is to agree that the real, practical question for the Chinese leadership is not whether it should abandon the no-first-use policy but how the country should make this commitment more credible, reliable, and effective in the current dynamic strategic situation.

There also seems to be a consensus between China’s official statements and the views from the research community that if China wants to maintain a credible no-first-use policy, then it will have to “walk on two legs” (Licheng 2018).

First, China will have to make diligent efforts to upgrade its own nuclear strength, as appropriate for the changing world geopolitical situation. Otherwise, the promise of no-first-use will become meaningless. Second, it will have to strive to alleviate the mounting military pressure through arms control management, including, for example, reaching agreements on such topics as restraining BMDS deployment and establishing a common code of conduct in cyberspace and conventional fields. These agreements will not only serve China’s interests but will also help to curb a new round of the global arms race, support strategic stability among nuclear powers, and eliminate the risk of nuclear weapon use – the essential goal of China’s no-first-use policy. For China, working on both fronts is imperative.

But will this dual approach work for long and will it be able to resolve all the problems that China’s no-first-use policy might confront in the fast changing domestic, as well as international situation, as previously discussed, in the future? It is probably unlikely. At the end of the day, China’s real problems regarding its no-first-use policy could be two-fold.

First, China’s new strategic goal of achieving a most influential world power status by the mid-twenty-first century may envisage a greater role of its military force, including the role of nuclear weapons, and perhaps the need to revisit its no-first-use policy. What is worth notice is that the international and domestic situation that had helped China shape the no-first-use policy under the first generation leadership has dramatically changed.

Today, with the expansion of its overseas interests and its growing ambition for national rejuvenation, Beijing has pursued a more assertive diplomacy, vowing to undertake greater international obligations in the new world order. Beijing is also determined to build the PLA into a first-class army, modernizing its military strategy and operational doctrine to meet all military challenges. Like other nuclear weapon states, China has now even given nuclear weapons a multiple role in supporting its national interests. However, it is unclear what implications all these developments would carry, amidst the rising nationalistic sentiments in China, for its no-first-use policy. They do not necessarily call for the country to immediately abandon its no-first-use pledge, but could increasingly generate incentives to question the validity of the

22See the excerpts of the Report Delivered by Xi Jinping to the 19th CPC National Congress on 18 October 2017. http://cpc.people.com.cn/19th/n1/2017/1019/c414305-29595247.html.

23Unlike the previous time when China emphasized that its nuclear weapons serve only one purpose of deterring a nuclear attack, the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy now has evidently expanded. Xi Jinping stresses that China’s nuclear force should serve as the core strength of the country’s strategic deterrence, the strategic backup of its big power’s status, and important cornerstone of its national security. For the first time, it seems that China envisages a multiple role of its nuclear weapons. See “News Report: Xi Jinping’s speech – Striving to Build a Powerful, Modern Rocket Force.” Xinhua News Agency, 26 September 2016. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-09/26/c_1119627545.html.
nuclear policy, and demand its “upgrading” in whatever form or content. The domestic debate on the no-first-use policy is far from over.

In this respect, the future evolution of China–US relations may go a long way towards determining the fate of China’s no-first-use policy in the future. If the two countries succeed in developing a more constructive relationship as Beijing wished to be characterized with non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect, and win–win cooperation, then China would feel more comfortable to adhere to the existing policy. On the other hand, if this relationship goes in a wrong direction, and if the two sides are embroiled in a growing power competition, even prepared for a military showdown, then the pressure for China to seek maximum benefits from its possession of nuclear weapons would mount. The voice at home for China to change its no-first-use policy will become louder and louder.

In the meantime, from the other end of the spectrum, China has begun to see a serious rift with non-nuclear weapon states on the role of nuclear weapon, which will inevitably have important bearings on its no-first-use policy. This is a challenge that did not exist before.

For all the claimed merits, the no-first-use policy has its limits. It is based on the recognition of the legitimacy of possessing nuclear weapons and of their conditional use. The no-first-use pledge thus reflects China’s inherent ambivalence toward nuclear weapons: the country maintains extreme caution regarding their use but still needs them for its national security. This position, however understandable in the past, is evidently some distance away today from the call by a broad coalition of non-nuclear weapon states for the prohibition of nuclear weapons, and may be more so in the future.

On 7 July 2017, 122 non-nuclear weapon states voted to adopt the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty (NWPT) at the conclusion of a United Nations conference in an attempt to build up a legally binding framework in which all nuclear-armed states are obliged to act for the progress of nuclear disarmament. According to the NWPT, all use of nuclear weapons, whether conditional or unconditional, should be banned. In this new situation, China’s traditional claim that committing to no-first-use of nuclear weapons should be the first step toward nuclear disarmament is evidently losing its appeal.

China apparently is not in a position to accept the NWPT in the foreseeable future, although it was the first country in history to officially call for a world summit to adopt a convention on the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. China now acts more like other nuclear powers, cherishing its nuclear feather. From the signs, China seems now more interested in maintaining strategic stability, based on the possession of nuclear weapons by a few, rather than implementing nuclear disarmament as required by the NPT and other related world legal documents. Beijing does not seem in a hurry to see the disappearance of nuclear weapons any time soon. This could be a serious dilemma for China in the world nuclear disarmament field since it has always claimed to stand together with the non nuclear weapon states.

Thus, ultimately, the real question in the nuclear field for China is whether it has the strategic vision and political courage to realize the limits of its no-first-use policy in the twenty-first century, go beyond this commitment, and take the lead in the global efforts
to reduce and eliminate the role of nuclear weapons in the military strategies of any powers, so as to pave the way for the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of all nuclear weapons.

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