



CHINA'S NUCLEAR UMBRELLA TO UKRAINE

Debalina Ghoshal

Associate Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi

During the Cold War, when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, Kiev possessed on its territory "world's third largest nuclear arsenal." The arsenal comprised of forty-six SS-19 ICBMs each with ten independently targetable warheads, forty SS-19s with six independently targetable warheads at Pervomaysk and 90 more at Khmel'nitskiy. In addition to this, there were nineteen Tu-160 Blackjack, twenty-five Tu-95 Bear-H strategic bombers and Kh-55 air launched cruise missiles to be fitted with these aircrafts and tactical nuclear warheads.¹ This nuclear arsenal was however, transferred to Russia at the end of the Cold War.

Recently, Ukraine has been in news after China agreed to extend its nuclear umbrella to Kiev. The news contradicted China's principle of claiming to be a non-believer of extended nuclear deterrence. In fact, in 1998, according to reports, Pakistani delegates led by Pakistan's then Foreign Minister, Shamshad Ahmed had visited Beijing in hope of getting nuclear protection from them, should India attack. However, he was not guaranteed any nuclear protection from Beijing.²

However, in December 2013, under a joint statement of a pact signed between Ukrainian

President, Viktor Yanukovich and Chinese President Xi Jinping, it was decided that China would not "use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the nuclear-free Ukraine." Beijing further pledged to provide Ukraine "nuclear security guarantee when Ukraine encounters an invasion involving nuclear weapons or Ukraine is under the threat of nuclear invasion".³ Security guarantees were granted to Ukraine by Beijing even in 1995 when Beijing "promised not to use nuclear weapons"⁴ against Kiev. However, in 2013 for the first time, China offered to extend its nuclear deterrence to a country.

Ukraine's Nuclear Ambitions

At the end of the Cold War, in 1992, Ukraine sent a memorandum on nuclear policy issues to all the embassies in Kiev raising the issue of "right to own all components of nuclear warheads...deployed on its territory".⁵ In May 1992, the 46th Air Army, which controlled two nuclear weapons technical operation units took an oath to control 600 strategic nuclear munitions of the Soviet Era. This oath enabled Ukraine to use these munitions too.⁶ In July 1993, Ukraine also attached the Soviet era nuclear arsenals that it possessed in its territory to its 43rd Missile

Security guarantees were granted to Ukraine by Beijing even in 1995 when Beijing "promised not to use nuclear weapons" against Kiev. However, in 2013 for the first time, China offered to extend its nuclear deterrence to a country.

Army.⁷ Late July, in the same year, the Ukrainian Defence Minister also visited the United States in the hope of being recognised as possessing 'transitional nuclear status' from a 'temporary nuclear power.' However, Kiev's attempts proved failure.

It was then that the Chairman of the Standing Foreign Affairs Commission decided that Ukraine would retain 'partial nuclear status.' It was also decided that forty six solid propelled SS-24s would remain in Ukraine until 1995 till the revision of the Non Proliferation Treaty.⁸ In September 1993, it was decided that Ukraine would return all the nuclear munitions to Russia once the START Treaty was ratified. However, Ukraine's presidential adviser, A. Buteiko deleted the word "all" and inserted the phrase "falling under the treaty" after the term 'Strategic Nuclear Force' in the document in which the agreement was penned down.

One of the major reasons for the disagreement by Kiev to give up its nuclear weapons arsenal was the commercial value of highly enriched uranium (HEU). HEU could be blended down to low enriched uranium for using in fuel rods for nuclear power reactors.⁹ However, in 1994, the trilateral negotiations with Russia and the United States paved the way for Kiev to give up the Soviet era nuclear weapons and join the Non Proliferation Treaty. A promise was made to Kiev that they would receive security assurances, compensation for the commercial value of the HEU and the Nunn-Lugar assistance for disposing off the ICBMs and their silos, bombers and other nuclear infrastructure in the Ukrainian territory.¹⁰ Hence, by 1996, the last of the nuclear warheads in the Ukrainian territory was transferred to Russia for elimination. In 2004, the last nuclear delivery system, the SS-24 missile silo was eliminated.¹¹

By 1994, Kiev had began to participate in the "Partnership for Peace" with the United States and NATO. But despite that, Ukraine has not been granted membership of the NATO, perhaps owing to Russia's opposition to any former Soviet state joining the NATO.¹² This meant that the NATO nuclear umbrella protection was also not available to Ukraine.

Ukraine's Threat Perception

Nuclear weapons have been a key to Russia's national strategy. It may be recalled that Ukraine's relationship with Russia has always involved a sense of threat perception. Russia had also threatened to annex Ukraine in case it joined the NATO. In recent years, Moscow had also "cut off" Ukrainian exports and "banned" imports from Kiev.¹³ While Russia's base in the Crimean peninsula, Sevastopol, leased out to Moscow is expected to expire in 2017, Moscow has expressed a desire to extend the lease. Ukraine, however, wants the Russian fleet in the Black Sea to leave.¹⁴ Kiev is uncomfortable with Russian presence and fears coercive diplomacy, even, for example on matters of gas supplies. Hence, if Russia claims to have "special rights and interests" in Crimea, it could lead to serious confrontation with Ukraine.¹⁵ Russia's Re-armament program of 2020 in order to ensure Russia's defence capabilities is "sufficient" further puts Ukraine's security at threat. Also, Russia's deployment of nuclear capable Iskanders in the Kalingrad region and Moscow's resistance over the EU-Ukraine trade agreement¹⁶ were also not taken in good stead by Kiev.

In case Kiev really perceives a nuclear threat from Russia, then it gets several advantages from being under the nuclear protection of the dragons. Firstly, for Kiev, it saves the cost of developing nuclear weapons and the necessary infrastructure of its own. Chinese nuclear umbrella would save the cost for Ukraine to develop a nuclear infrastructure which would have otherwise not been feasible for Kiev. Secondly, it gets the benefit of a ready-made and survivable nuclear force.

To add to these perceptions, the Russia-Georgian conflict has obviously raised concerns of the erstwhile Soviet Union states. Since Georgia chose Ukraine as a "strategic ally, Kiev had provided Georgia with weapons to fight the Russia-Georgia conflict.¹⁷ In such a situation, Ukraine obviously understands the benefit of a nuclear weapon, even if it was through an umbrella of another established nuclear

power. In fact, according to J.F. Dunn, Ukraine "has no credible "second strike capability" and thus can never hope to establish a "balance of terror" and effective nuclear restraint vis-à-vis Russia."¹⁸

Advantage of Chinese Nuclear Umbrella

In case Kiev really perceives a nuclear threat from Russia, then it gets several advantages from being under the nuclear protection of the dragons. Firstly, for Kiev, it saves the cost of developing nuclear weapons and the necessary infrastructure of its own. Chinese nuclear umbrella would save the cost for Ukraine to develop a nuclear infrastructure which would

have otherwise not been feasible for Kiev. Secondly, it gets the benefit of a ready-made and survivable nuclear force. In 1993, John Mearsheimer in one his analysis had stated that Ukraine did not possess “the technical, intellectual, nor political wherewithal to be trusted with nuclear weapons”.

Thirdly, Ukraine is bound by Article 5 of the Lisbon Protocol¹⁹ to become a non-nuclear member of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty in 1994. Hence, development of its own nuclear weapons would make Kiev guilty of proliferation. Fourthly, Ukraine has two radar stations in Sevastopol and in Mukachevo which Kiev would want to integrate with a security system. The best option for Ukraine at present would be to integrate it Beijing’s systems in order to maintain good diplomatic relations with both NATO and Russia. Beijing could also assist them in modernising these radar stations since these radar systems are “outdated” and “inefficient”.

What does China stand to gain?

If indeed China is going against its explicitly stated nuclear policy, what is the logic of extending a nuclear umbrella to a country like Ukraine? For one, China could exploit this nuclear umbrella protection in order to station its nuclear capable ballistic missiles in Ukraine which can point towards NATO countries. Moreover back in 2011, Beijing had showed interests in military cooperation with Ukraine “for aircraft building, tank construction and in air defence”²⁰ in order to avail for more sophisticated technology. Beijing is also interested to strengthen its trade in defence with Ukraine and could become Ukraine’s No.1 military technology partner.²¹

China could take this as an opportunity to avail sophisticated technology from Ukraine where it feels it lacks in the field of defence. Reports suggest that in the past Ukraine has transferred the Kh-55 cruise missiles to Beijing which were nuclear capable. Ukraine is also reported to be the source of design advice for the Korshun missile which has the development features of the Kh-55 and also proves that Ukraine can assist China on development of simple and sophisticated land attack cruise missiles.²² Ukraine’s Research and Development entities like the Academy of Sciences has cooperated with Chinese Aerospace Research Institute of

Materials and Processing Technology for overcoming technological hurdles for heating of re-entry vehicles and also developing “ablative heat resistant materials for maneuvering boost-glide re-entry vehicles”.²³ Ukraine’s Yuzhmash machine building factory, which developed the Satan missiles, possesses the technical experience and qualification to missiles far more advanced than Russian industrial complexes can build.²⁴ Ukraine also possesses one of the most sophisticated surface-to-air missile network capabilities in Europe, after Russia.

In addition to this, China could use this as an opportunity to prevent a regime change in Ukraine which could be “more pro-western”.²⁵ Moreover, in 2009, the United States had held talks with Kiev in order to use Ukrainian radar stations as a part of the US Phase Adaptive Approach. This could be Beijing’s way of checking the fielding of US missile defence systems in Europe.

Implications for China and Ukraine

Yu Ligong, an associate professor at Shih Hsin University at Taipei, stated that this step could be a way for Beijing to “amend” the consistent position of “no first use of nuclear weapons”. He further added that countries in East China Sea and South China Sea have “provoked” China in the recent years over territorial claims.²⁶ However, it is too early to make an assessment.

Acceptance of such commitments from China would result in the non adherence of the three principles committed by Ukraine in Section IX of the Declaration of the State Sovereignty passed by Rada on July 16, 1990. Under this, Kiev pledged to ‘accept, to produce and to purchase no nuclear weapons’.²⁷ Ukraine also speaks of disarmament and supports the cause of nuclear weapons free zone, but is slowly moving from highly enriched uranium to low enriched uranium. The idea of accepting a nuclear umbrella from China negates Ukraine’s steps taken towards a nuclear weapons free zone and towards a nuclear free Ukraine. Moreover, Ukraine’s attempts to gain security guarantees through extended nuclear deterrence would only result in the Eastern European Region which is apprehensive of Russia to either come under the nuclear umbrella of a powerful state or develop their own capability thereby resulting in arms race rather than disarmament.

China could exploit this nuclear umbrella protection in order to station its nuclear capable ballistic missiles in Ukraine which can point towards NATO countries.

Implications for India

China's extended nuclear deterrence strategy could affect its minimum deterrence posture and China could make provision of security guarantees to weaker states an excuse to enhance its nuclear weapons capabilities. However, there is minimal chance of Beijing giving up its 'no first use' policy. Firstly, Beijing's survivable nuclear forces would enable to strengthen its 'no first use' posture. Secondly, by adopting a 'first use' policy, especially after providing an extended nuclear deterrence to a state situated so close to Russia, Beijing would not want to annoy Moscow. In fact, according to C Raja Mohan, India's problem lies in the China-Pakistan nuclear nexus rather than China's shift to providing an extended nuclear deterrence to Ukraine.²⁸ He also further cautions that, "as China rises to become a great power and is compelled to deal with its expanding interests worldwide, it is bound to construct solid alliances and, in special cases, likely to extend its nuclear umbrella".²⁹ Hence, in the future, India might have to deal with the extended nuclear deterrence strategy of Beijing which could be lent out to weaker states in South Asia too.

Conclusion

As Beijing attempts to strengthen its bilateral relations with Ukraine, its interests to penetrate deep into the Ukrainian economy and to avail of sophisticated Soviet technology in the field of defence could be reasons for Beijing to provide a nuclear umbrella. In return, Ukraine also fulfils China's conditions by advocating the one-China policy and supports China's national unification.³⁰ In all likelihood, Ukraine could also crack down any "organised dissent" against China thereby making it easier for China to provide a nuclear extended deterrence.

According to *Want China Times*, "China is currently striving to have a lead role in the Asia-Pacific region, and once its diplomatic layout in completed, it's inevitable that China will gradually adjust its traditional non-interference and non-aligned policies. This time Beijing's nuclear security pact with Ukraine indicates that it may forge further alternative alliances in the future".³¹ This could include neighbouring countries like North Korea, Cambodia and Myanmar.³² The Chinese nuclear umbrella to Ukraine could be a step forward towards North Korea and Iran giving up their nuclear weapons program and agreeing to accept the Chinese extended nuclear deterrence. According to Major

General Zhu Chenghu, this would enable China to promote international proliferation and increase regional stability.

Ukraine's new President has shown favourable interests towards deeper cooperation with China. The extension of the nuclear umbrella by China to Ukraine is indeed a new and intriguing development that is worth monitoring to see how it shapes up and impacts China's nuclear doctrine in the long run.

Notes:

¹ Steven Pifer, "The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons", *Arms Control Series*, Paper 6, 2011, < http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/5/trilateral%20process%20pifer/05_trilateral_process_pifer >

² Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Chinese Delegation Seems to Deny Pakistan a Nuclear Umbrella", *The New York Times*, May 21, 1998, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/21/world/chinese-delegation-seems-to-deny-pakistan-a-nuclear-umbrella.html>>

³ Miles Yu, "Inside China: Ukraine gets nuclear umbrella", *The Washington Times*, December 12, 2013, < <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/dec/12/inside-china-ukraine-gets-nuke-umbrella/?page=all> >

⁴ "Beijing seeks new alliances with nuclear security pact with Ukraine", *Want China Times*, December 20, 2013, < <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20131220000045&cid=1701> >

⁵ Yuri Dubinin, "Ukraine's Nuclear Ambitions: Reminiscences of the past", *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol.2, No.2, April-June 2004, < <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ord538=grp1&ots591=eb06339b-2726-928e-0216-1b3f15392dd8&lng=en&id=15103> >

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Steven Pifer, n.1

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, *Federation of American Scientists*, <<https://www.fas.org/irp/threat/prolif97/fsu.html>>

¹³ Brittany Greenquist, "The Ukraine Conflict in 60 Seconds", *Ryot*, December 10, 2013, < <http://www.ryot.org/ukraine-conflict-60-seconds/495153> >

¹⁴ Pavel Felgenhauer, "The Russian Military Concentration in the Caucasus", *European Dialogue*, < <http://>

eurodialogue.org/The-Russian-Military-Concentration-In-The-Caucasus >

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sweden Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt accused Russia of running an “extensive propaganda campaign of misinformation and sometimes outright lies” about the EU-Ukraine agreement.

¹⁷ Andrey Mikhailov, “Is Ukraine ashamed of its infamous military cooperation with Georgia”, *Pravda.ru*, October 2, 2012, < http://english.pravda.ru/world/ussr/02-10-2012/122326-ukraine_georgia_military-0/ >

¹⁸ J.F.Dunn, “The Ukrainian Nuclear Weapons Debate”, *Royal Military Academy*, March 1993, < <http://www.fas.org/news/ukraine/k16.html> >

¹⁹ The Lisbon Protocol was signed in 1992 by Belarus, Kazakhstan Ukraine, Russia and the United States.

²⁰ “China hunts for both Soviet and US military technology”, *RT.com*, August 15, 2011, < <http://rt.com/politics/soviet-china-military-technology/> >

²¹ “China the biggest customer for Ukraine’s military industry”, *Want China Times*, January 19, 2014, < <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?cid=1101&MainCatID=11&id=20140119000024> >

²² Richard Fisher, “China’s New Strategic Cruise Missiles: From Land, Sea and Air”, *International Assessment and Strategy Centre*, June 3, 2005, < http://www.strategycenter.net/research/pubid.71/pub_detail.asp >

²³ Dallas Boyd, “Advanced Technology Acquisition Strategies of the People’s Republic of China”, *Defense*

Threat Reduction Agency, September 2010, < <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dtra/strategies.pdf> >

²⁴ Polina Sinovets, “The New European Missile Defense Architecture: Is There A Role for Ukraine?”, *PONARS Eurasia*, September 2011, < http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_183.pdf >

²⁵ Neil Clark, “Who’s the bully?” American anti-missile system more about attack than defense”, *RT*, December 19, 2013, < <http://rt.com/op-edge/anti-missile-system-defense-494/> >

²⁶ Yu Ligong, “Why is China entering a nuclear security pact with Ukraine?”, *Want China Times*, December 15, 2012, < <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20131215000030&cid=1703> >

²⁷ Steven Pifer, n.1

²⁸ C Raja Mohan, “Chinese takeaway”, *The Indian Express*, January 29, 2014, < <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/chinese-takeaway-10/> >

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich is quoted in “China, Ukraine agree to strengthen strategic partnership”, *Xinhuanet*, December 5, 2013, < http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-12/05/c_132944795.htm >

³¹ Editorial, “Beijing seeks new alliances with nuclear security pact with Ukraine”, *Want China Times*, December 20, 2013, < <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20131220000045&cid=1701> >

³² Ibid.



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, AVSM, VrC, VM (Retd)

Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.