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# EVOLVING CHINESE NUCLEAR STRATEGY AND CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE

ANUBHAV S. GOSWAMI

## INTRODUCTION

It's been four months since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24. While the crisis will lead to many lessons being drawn, such as the limited effectiveness of economic sanctions, return of conventional war, pitfalls of overemphasising grey-zone manoeuvres, etc., the People's Republic of China (PRC) is likely to be more interested in how Russia has used 'nuclear sabre-rattling' to deter/blunt Western intervention in the conflict. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could find these lessons useful in the context of its commitment to unification of Taiwan, as well as its desire to swing the many territorial disputes it has in the 'first island chain' in its favour. For a successful attempt at reunification of Taiwan through a military invasion, it will be imperative for Beijing that the US stays out of the conflict. To that effect, Beijing may try to expand the role of its nuclear forces from pure 'deterrence' to projected 'warfighting' in order to

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Mr **Anubhav S. Goswami** is Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

deter an American intervention. In other words, Beijing would look to gain and project 'first strike' capability to deter the prospects of a conventional war with the US.

### **NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND CHINA'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN THE 'FIRST ISLAND CHAIN'**

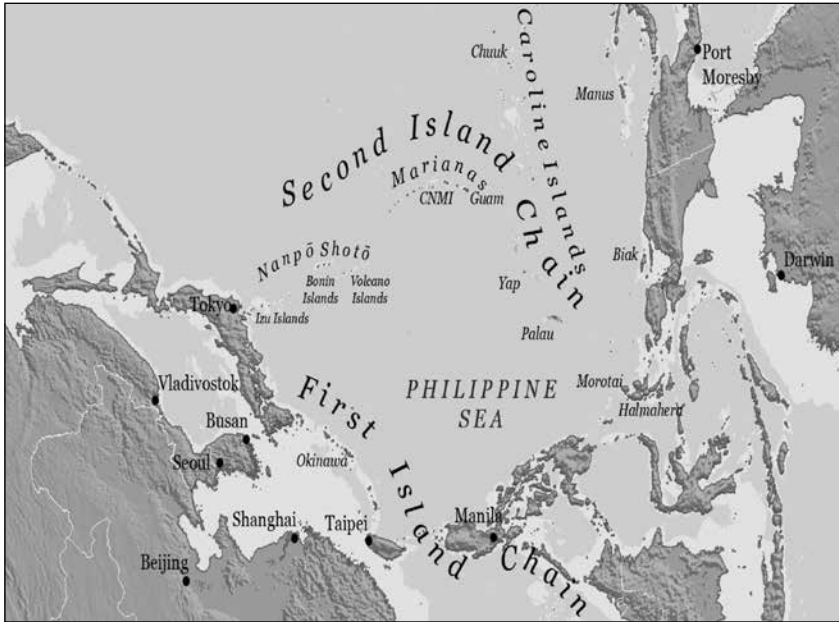
Chinese strategists see American presence in Asia as an impediment to achieving a favourable balance of power. America became ensnared in the politics of Asia after the communist takeover in Mainland China in 1949. To contain the further spread of communism to Northeast and Southeast Asia, the US concluded several defence treaties with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan over the course of the Cold War to protect American political and security planning in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> While the PRC endured American presence as a resident power in its backyard during the Cold War, a resurgent Beijing now feels its interests are incompatible with American coexistence in Asia. For the PRC to stamp its authority in Asia, dominance over the 'first' and 'second' island chains is the key.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, the PRC's 'strategic geography' to her east is limited to the first island chain and second island chain. The 'First Island Chain' (see Figure 1) generally comprises a line from southern Japan, through the Ryukyus and Taiwan, and terminating in the Philippines or Borneo.<sup>3</sup> To its east lies the 'Second Island Chain' which extends from the "Japanese mainland, through the Nanpō Shotō, the Marianas, and the western Caroline Islands, before terminating somewhere in eastern Indonesia".<sup>4</sup> The island chains are of strategic importance for the PRC as leading Chinese scholars on sea power opine that

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1. Mohd. Noor Mat Yazid, "The Cold War, Bipolarity Structure and the Power Vacuum in the East and South East Asia after 1945", *Journal of Global Peace and Conflict*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2014), pp. 121-28.
  2. Joshua Espena and Chelsea Bumping, "The Taiwan Frontier and the Chinese dominance for the Second Island Chain", Australian Institute of International Affairs, August 13, 2020, at <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/taiwan-frontier-chinese-dominance-for-second-island-chain/>. Accessed on June 3, 2022.
  3. Andrew Rhodes, "The Second Island Cloud: A Deeper and Broader Concept for American Presence in the Pacific Islands", Naval War College, Newport RI, United States, October 5, 2019, p. 2, at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1079503.pdf>. Accessed on June 4, 2022.
  4. Ibid.

these ‘chains’ acts as “barriers”, “springboards”, and “benchmarks” for the US-led efforts to “contain China”, and therefore it becomes operationally imperative for Beijing to “break through” the island chains.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: First and Second Island Chains**



Source: Andrew Rhodes, “The Second Island Cloud: A Deeper and Broader Concept for American Presence in the Pacific Islands”, Naval War College, Newport RI, United States, October 5, 2019, at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1079503.pdf>. Accessed on June 4, 2022.

Any attempt to upstage the confines of the island chains will invariably mean PRC has to first win the territorial disputes it has with American allies like Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan in the first island chain, and subsequently negating American presence in the second island chain (Guam) by building strategic presence in the Pacific Island Countries.<sup>6</sup> To achieve her strategic goals in the first island, it is the conventional forces that Beijing relies on for its flexibility and usability in conflict. However, since the

5. Ibid., p. 4.

6. Espena and Bomping, n. 2.

United States has a significant military presence in this part of the world, as well as treaty-bound to defend its allies in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS), Beijing could increasingly come to see the utility of nuclear weapons to deter US intervention in her backyard. PRC's nuclear force, in that sense, could be intended to check the US intervention in order to win conventional conflicts at the first island chain.

### **DEBATES AROUND CHINESE NUCLEAR STRATEGY**

If one studies the views of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping on nuclear weapons, one can infer that in Chinese strategic thinking, nuclear weapons are primarily and probably exclusively a tool for countering nuclear coercion, not a weapon to be used in combat to accomplish discrete military objectives.<sup>7</sup> Their views are well reflected in PRC's nuclear policy which is one of No-First-Use (NFU). Following the October 16, 1964 test Beijing released a statement. "The Chinese Government hereby solemnly declares that China will never at any time or under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons."<sup>8</sup> Based on their nuclear policy, historically, Beijing has emphasised that a small force is all that is necessary; which required little flexibility, as its objective was only one—the capability to decimate a few cities after absorbing a first strike to deter the aggressor. For the PRC, a small number of survivable weapons was enough to retaliate and impose unacceptable damage on an adversary.<sup>9</sup> Beijing's idea of deterrence, then, has not been a question of nuclear equivalency with its adversary, but only the assurance that PRC could retaliate. Based on their focus on the assurance of retaliation and second-strike capability, experts had argued that PRC's nuclear strategy has been one of 'assured retaliation'.

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7. Sanjana Gogna, "An Indian Perspective on China's Nuclear Weapons", New Delhi Paper No. 9 (January 2022), pp. 17-20. Accessed on June 20, 2022.
  8. "Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China", James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, October 16, 1964, at <http://www.nti.org/db/china/engdocs/nucsta64.htm>. Accessed on July 15, 2022.
  9. M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros, "China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure", *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2011): 48-87. Accessed on June 4, 2022.

However, recent evidences of PRC building a field of at least 119 underground silos for the launch of nuclear ICBMs in its north-western Gansu province, as well as incorporation of new penetration capabilities such as HGVs, decoys, or MIRVs to counter the US BMD systems suggest that Beijing's nuclear strategy is in the process of evolution. CCP still claims to be committed to NFU. However, Pentagon's 2020 *China Report* adds that the number of Beijing's ICBMs capable of threatening America will likely grow to 200 by 2025.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, PRC is rapidly expanding and diversifying its nuclear arsenal and, according to 2021 Pentagon estimates, Chinese nuclear inventory is likely to hit 1,000-figure by 2030.<sup>11</sup> According to Chad Sbragia, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for PRC, Beijing's ability to rapidly increase its nuclear inventory "demonstrates a move away from their historical minimum deterrence posture".<sup>12</sup> To Add to Sbragia's concern, US Air Force Secretary, Frank Kendall believes that PRC's "move to add hundreds of new land-based, fixed ICBM silos amounts to their developing a 'first-strike' capability".<sup>13</sup>

However, the most far-reaching change that PRC has made in its force structure has been the incorporation of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). Samuel D. Bell of US Navy observes these changes as:

Historically, the 2nd Artillery (PLA Rocket Force or PLARF) has never possessed the technology or the ability to exchange nuclear blows with a Superpower. The best-case scenario was a one-time, limited retaliatory strike. The no-first-use policy fits this limitation well, as it allows Beijing to utilise their nuclear forces effectively

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10. Kris Osborn, "China's Possible First-Strike Capabilities Are Changing the Threat Equation", *The National Interest*, September 27, 2021, at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/china%E2%80%99s-possible-first-strike-capabilities-are-changing-threat-equation-194302>. Accessed on June 20, 2022.

11. Luis Martinez and Matt Seyler, "China could have 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030: Pentagon", *ABC News*, November 4, 2021, at <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/china-1000-nuclear-warheads-2030-pentagon/story?id=80953429>. Accessed on June 4, 2022.

12. Osborn, n. 10.

13. *Ibid.*

and reap the added public relations benefits. However, the new capabilities inherent in the SSBN will change that basic structure.<sup>14</sup>

With the incorporation of the *Jin-class* SSBN, there is now a clear capability and policy mismatch that might require Beijing to decide whether or not to pursue a change to their no-first-use policy strategy. However, even if CCP pursues some kind of conditional NFU, such a change will never occur publicly. Describing the importance of the no-first-use policy for Beijing, retired PLA General Pan Zhenqiang, argues that NFU has cultural significance for the PRC, “that change of the nuclear policy will tarnish its image in the non-nuclear weapon states, which China has [been] so consistently proud of.”<sup>15</sup> The CCP officials at the highest stage of decision-making understand the importance of NFU to Chinese self-perception, and therefore, would decide against any public change of its nuclear policy.

PRC’s urgency to develop a ‘hedging strategy’ whereby it is avowedly committed to NFU, yet flirting with advanced capabilities that imitates ‘first strike’ must be contextualised at the backdrop of Beijing’s recent aggressive behaviour in the first island chain. It has been repeatedly violating Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) to demoralise the defences of Taipei before an imminent invasion. It is also trying to bolster its disputed maritime claims in the SCS and ECS. For PRC, settling the Taiwan issue and these territorial disputes on the sea are important for establishing its hegemony in Asia. Therefore, it wouldn’t be surprising to note if Beijing’s hedging strategy could suddenly morph into a *credible threat* of ‘offensive’ nuclear option if it is convinced that the US might intervene in PRC’s local wars in the first island chain. The threat of a first strike, regardless of Beijing’s real intentions, is still an effective signal of nuclear blackmailing to deter United States’ willingness to defend its allies and partners.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Samuel D. Bell, “The impact of the Type 094 ballistic missile submarine on China’s nuclear policy”, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey CA, June 2009, at [https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/4700/09Jun\\_Bell.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/4700/09Jun_Bell.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). Accessed on June 4, 2022.
  15. Pan Zhenqiang, “On China’s No First Use of Nuclear Weapons”, Pugwash Meeting: London, United Kingdom no. 279, November 15-17, 2002, at <http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/zhenqiang.htm>. Accessed on July 15, 2022.
  16. Elbridge Colby, “If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 6 (November/December 2018): 25-32. Accessed on June 5, 2022.

Some analysts, including Dingli Shen, deputy director and professor, Center of American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, question the validity of the no-first-use deterrence policy when faced with American precision weapons if Washington decides to intervene:

If China's conventional forces are devastated, and if Taiwan takes the opportunity to declare de jure independence, it is inconceivable that China would allow its nuclear weapons to be destroyed by a precision attack with conventional munitions, rather than use them as true means of deterrence.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, in its effort to forcefully unify Taiwan, Beijing will have to consider the effect of American precision weapons on the former's ability to launch retaliatory strikes. As explained by Bell, retaliatory "launch ability is a step progress that can be attacked at separate critical junctions" which opens up the scope for precision weapons to target nuclear weapon systems, communications grids, as well as decision makers.<sup>18</sup> He further states that:

These weapons may make even a well-hidden SSBN useless, leaving them without launch command and control. Regardless, as it now stands, if conventional precision attacks are made against China's nuclear weapons and their control, China cannot respond with nuclear weapons and remain true to a literal reading of the no-first-use policy.<sup>19</sup>

### **HAS PRC ACHIEVED CREDIBLE 'FIRST STRIKE' CAPABILITY YET?**

Successful nuclear 'sabre-rattling' will only ever be successful, if PRC's offensive options are credible. Beijing knows its ballistic missiles will be tested by US missile defence systems. Therefore, for some time now it has made a conscious effort to develop hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV) to make its retaliatory option more credible.

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17. Dingli Shen, "Nuclear deterrence in the 21st century", *Defense & Security Analysis*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2005): 424. Accessed on July 17, 2022.

18. Bell, n. 14, p. 69.

19. Ibid.



Hypersonic glide vehicles are harder to track and destroy because they fly at lower trajectory and can manoeuvre in flight. Therefore, a hypersonic glide vehicle armed with a nuclear warhead could help Beijing “negate” US missile defence systems.<sup>20</sup> It is due to this reason that the US is taking Beijing’s recently claimed testing of a ‘fractional orbital bombardment system’ missile in August 2021 so seriously.<sup>21</sup> The mission didn’t succeed as intended, but it demonstrated that PRC now possesses advanced payload capability. If Beijing is able to develop hypersonic missile capabilities fully, it will destabilise the current status quo between the US and PRC. After all, Beijing would then have a credible ‘first strike’ option to deter American intervention and *expand the ceiling on nuclear threshold* that will enable her to embark on conventional conflicts in her backyard against American allies.

### **EROSION OF US CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE IN THE FIRST ISLAND CHAIN: IMPLICATIONS?**

Beijing is serious on unifying Taiwan with the mainland. It has made its intention all but clear that annexation by force is very much an option on the table. PRC’s attempt to erode US’ conventional deterrence in the first island chain is directly linked to its annexation plans for Taiwan. A successful annexation of Taiwan, according to Rajesh Rajagopalan, might end all chances of preventing Chinese hegemony in Asia. He writes:

The US could withdraw, disheartened by the pusillanimity of its partners in the region. Or, the US’ partners could decide that the US was incapable of providing a balance to China. And if balancing China was now no longer an option, these American allies could decide that they would be better off buying peace with Beijing. Either way, China will achieve dominance over the region in a manner similar to the US’ position in the Western Hemisphere. India and Japan will be reduced to a position somewhat analogous

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20. Demetri Sevastopulo and Kathrin Hille, “China tests new space capability with hypersonic missile”, *Financial Times*, October 17, 2021, at <https://www.ft.com/content/ba0a3cde-719b-4040-93cb-a486e1f843fb>. Accessed on June 5, 2022.

21. Martinez and Seyler, no. 11.

to Argentina and Brazil, large countries that are nevertheless forced to live a constrained life, with external powers kept away under a Chinese Monroe Doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

Taipei's security is also very much linked to the idea of protection of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) as its geographic location is of great strategic value in the SCS which sees a traffic of one-third of global shipping.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Taiwan's fall will make the objectives of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' redundant. Beijing knows that "if it can seize Taiwan, it will be able to establish authority over strategic SLOCs to disrupt commercial shipping intended for her adversaries, including India. In other words, Taipei's fall will allow PRC to 'weaponize' the strategic value of Taiwan's geographic location in the SCS."<sup>24</sup> Finally, annexation of Taiwan will expose its lucrative semiconductor industry to Chinese aggression. India's import chain of semiconductors will be hit direly, and consequently its economy, if Taiwan, home to over 60 per cent of the world's contract chip manufacturing,<sup>25</sup> is annexed by PRC.

American strategic thinkers are not unaware about this growing erosion of conventional deterrence in the first island chain that is threatening the sustenance of the American alliance architecture in Asia. Elbridge Colby believes that restoration of conventional deterrence is only possible if the US introduces low-yield tactical nuclear weapons to bridge the wide gulf between conventional and all-out nuclear war with PRC. This way Washington can blunt or

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22. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "China's invasion of Taiwan will be a disaster for Asia. India must draw a red line", *The Print*, June 28, 2021, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/chinas-invasion-of-taiwan-will-be-a-disaster-for-asia-india-must-draw-a-red-line/685544/>. Accessed on June 5, 2022.

23. China Power, "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?", CSIS, August 2, 2017, at <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>. Accessed on June 5, 2022.

24. Anubhav Shankar Goswami, "Taiwan's 'Porcupine strategy' for cross-strait deterrence explained", Centre for Northeast Asian Studies, November 2021, at <https://jgu.edu.in/jsia/centre-for-northeast-asian-studies/>. Accessed on June 6, 2022.

25. Arjun Gargeyas, "As China Threat Looms over Taiwan, This is How India Can Keep Global Chip Industry Afloat", *News18*, March 17, 2022, at <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/as-china-threat-looms-over-taiwan-this-is-how-india-can-keep-global-chip-industry-afloat-4883054.html>. Accessed on June 5, 2022.

defeat a Chinese attack on US allies without provoking a nuclear apocalypse.

## CONCLUSION

The United States' dominance in Asia comes from its ability to sustain the post-World War II alliance architecture. PRC's goal is to break that alliance structure by threatening to significantly raise the risk of escalation where it dares the United States by waging conventional attacks against her allies. One of the ways Beijing can raise the risk of counter-attack for the US is by testing Washington's resolve to intervene through nuclear sabre-rattling. Elbridge Colby believes the threat of nuclear use will prompt the United States to stay away from the local fights between PRC and American allies, unless conventional deterrence in the first island chain is restored in US' favour.

With a fully developed 'first strike' capability within its immediate vicinity, PRC will gain greater confidence to pull super-ambitious strategic moves in the SCS and the ECS; and create conditions for conventional warfare in order to seize strategic objectives vis-à-vis her regional challengers. By deterring US intervention through credible 'first strike' threat, Beijing could constrain the scope of any war that may erupt.

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