

Conference on “U.S.-China Strategic Nuclear Dynamics”
Introduction and Key Findings

June 9-10, 2008
Beijing, China

Co-Organized by the
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS),
Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA),
RAND Corporation, and
China Foundation for International & Strategic Studies (CFISS)

Jointly Funded by the
U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) and
U.S. Department of State

Introduction

On June 9 and 10, 2008, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), the RAND Corporation, and the China Foundation for International Strategic Studies (CFISS) jointly convened a unique “track 1.5” conference to discuss strategic nuclear weapons issues in the U.S.-China relationship.

The 2008 conference was the fourth in a series of meetings that CSIS and CFISS began in January 2000, with the first full bilateral conference held in 2004 in Beijing. This series of meetings and conferences serve as an unofficial but authoritative channel for discussing sensitive issues related to nuclear weapons and strategic stability in U.S.-China relations. The conference agenda built on insights gained in prior sessions and an evolving set of policy interests. In prior sessions, we gained some appreciation of the areas of divergence and convergence in U.S. and Chinese perceptions of the nuclear security environment, so on this occasion we sought to probe more deeply with focused examinations of comparative perceptions of nuclear weapons in the Asian security environment and also nuclear terrorism. Based on progress made in previous sessions in understanding evolving thinking in both countries about the nature and requirements of strategic stability, we opted to delve deeper into that topic on this occasion. In addition, we sought to probe Chinese thinking about the implications of the prospective end of U.S.-Russian arms control. Finally, the agenda was rounded out with discussions of the factors that would bear on the next cycle of nuclear policy development.

The U.S. delegation included former and current U.S. government officials as well as U.S. analysts with deep expertise in both U.S. and Chinese nuclear policy. Several U.S. participants were involved in the drafting of the last two nuclear posture reviews. The U.S. delegation was led by commander of U.S. Pacific Command Admiral (Ret.) Dennis Blair and former commander of U.S. Strategic Command Admiral (Ret.) Richard Mies, and included Linton Brooks, former administrator of the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration. The other U.S. participants were drawn from U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations such as: the State Department, U.S. Strategic Command, U.S. Pacific Command, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), University of California, IDA, the RAND Corporation, and CSIS.

The Chinese delegation was composed of government officials, military officers and scholars from think tanks and universities; some members of the Chinese delegation participated in the drafting of China’s national defense white paper. The Chinese side included participants from the National Defense University, the Academy of Military Sciences, the General Staff Department, the Second Artillery Command College, the Foreign Ministry, the Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics and the Institute for Applied Physics and Computational Mathematics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, and Qinghua University.

U.S. participation was sponsored jointly by the Departments of State and Defense. The sponsor in the Department of State was the Regional Affairs Office in the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation. The sponsor in the Department of Defense was the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office in the Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

The conference occurred over two days in Beijing and included substantial time for informal discussions among participants during coffee breaks and meals. In addition to the conference discussions, the U.S. participants also met with other Chinese government officials to discuss issues raised at the bilateral conference. On June 11, the U.S. delegation met with General Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army, at China's Ministry of Defense building.

Summary of Key Findings

The conference discussions focused on three main topics, which are highlighted below in the key findings:

- Perceptions of the security environment
- Next steps in U.S. and Chinese nuclear weapons policy and strategy
- The requirements of strategic stability

Perceptions of the Security Environment

Prior dialogues in 2004 and 2006 illuminated a narrowing of differences in U.S. and Chinese perceptions of each nation's nuclear threat environment. This was most evident in discussions of North Korea and Pakistan. Accordingly, in 2008, we sought to probe further for areas of convergence and divergence.

On the threats posed by nuclear terrorism, the convergence of threat perceptions is accelerating, especially since the last meeting in 2006. Chinese officials and experts see the threat of nuclear terrorism as one among many "important" national interests, whereas for the United States it is vital. Differences of views remain about the causes of terrorism and the groups in China that Beijing deems to be terrorists. The convergence in threat perceptions was manifested in a call by the Chinese for increased bilateral cooperation to develop a more comprehensive defense in depth against nuclear terrorism. Senior PLA participants even spoke about the desirability of joint counter-terror exercises. Chinese participants also enlisted suggestions for more effective Chinese engagement in the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism.

On Asia's nuclear future, the convergence is less pronounced but nonetheless exists on some important issues. Chinese experts share the U.S. view that "Asia is emerging as a major arena of international nuclear politics." They too have rising concerns about the future effectiveness of the nonproliferation regime in Asia, with continued concerns about nuclear proliferation by Japan and in South Asia. There was no indication of a new

willingness, however, to participate formally in the Proliferation Security Initiative, though China continues to support PSI principles. China's expert community seems little concerned about the possibility of Russian withdrawal from the Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) or about India's development of missiles capable of reaching Beijing.

Japan features prominently in China's thinking about Asia's nuclear future. On U.S. extended deterrence to Japan, there is grudging tolerance; as one Chinese participant put it, "China cannot have it both ways - a non-nuclear Japan and no extended deterrence." There is also some willingness to acknowledge a legitimate role for ballistic missile defense in the protection of the Japanese homeland, but there are sharp concerns about the possible deployment of ballistic missile defense systems to defend Taiwan.

On the future of arms control, China's expert community was open to new thinking about future arms control and nonproliferation initiatives. But Chinese experts appear to have done little systematic thinking about the implications of the end of START I regime in 2009 or the future direction or content of possible follow-on U.S.-Russia arms control measures. When asked whether China would respond to deeper U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions by increasing China's forces in a bid for parity, Chinese participants insist that China plans to keep its nuclear arsenal small while making its deterrent capabilities more effective. They re-stated long-standing Chinese interests in the CTBT, FMCT, and a ban on the weaponization of outer space. There was keen Chinese interest in the emerging U.S. debate about whether nuclear abolition is a realistic prospect, along with some marked ambivalence about what it would mean for China to live in world without nuclear weapons but with an America enjoying overwhelming dominance at the conventional level of war.

Next Steps in U.S. and Chinese Nuclear Policy and Strategy

Prior conferences revealed the distrust and misperceptions between U.S. and Chinese experts about each other's nuclear strategy and doctrine. China's expert community viewed the 2001 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review as a surprise and as dangerous. They argued that it increased the salience of using nuclear weapons in conflict, raised the prospect of nuclear war over Taiwan, and sought to undermine China's nuclear deterrent. Similarly, the U.S. defense community remains deeply unsatisfied with Chinese explanations of its nuclear policy and strategy and remains skeptical of statements in China's biannual national defense white papers. With the hope of minimizing misunderstanding and misperception in the next cycle of national nuclear planning, each side was asked, once again, to explain their policies and strategies on nuclear weapons.

The most senior Chinese participants stressed a key message about Chinese nuclear force modernization: China will continue to modernize gradually its nuclear forces to ensure that China retains a credible retaliatory or "counter-strike" capability. China's singular focus in its nuclear modernization is on improving its survivability, reliability, safety and the ability to penetrate missile defenses. Chinese participants stressed that this does not

require a major increase in the size of its nuclear force structure, but that China will respond to the strategic capabilities of other nations as needed.

Chinese experts made a strong case that the sources of continuity in China's strategic policy are deep and abiding. The overall content of China's policy was characterized as "not coincidental or makeshift" and not going to change as China grows wealthier. Whatever more or less the next Defense White Paper might say about matters nuclear, there will be nothing there to indicate a re-making of policy or a re-thinking of key animating concepts. As they argued, these key concepts remain as follows. China will:

- maintain a limited nuclear retaliatory capability to deter possible attacks from other nuclear-armed adversaries;
- implement a policy of no-first-use and negative security assurances;
- exercise great restraint in developing nuclear weapons and keeping its nuclear arsenal to the minimum size in line with the requirements of possessing a secure, survivable, and reliable arsenal that can penetrate an adversary's defenses; and
- never participate in a nuclear arms race and never deploy nuclear weapons on other nations' territories.

China's expert community welcomed information about the background to the Congressional requirement for a periodic nuclear posture review and its role in the U.S. policymaking process. They appreciated information about the legislative mandate for the next U.S. administration to conduct a new nuclear posture review, the interim role of the Congressional Commission on the Future of the U.S. Strategic Posture, and the potential impact of various policy advocates, such as those advocating a recommitment to abolition.

The Requirements of Strategic Stability

Prior conference discussions in 2004 and 2006 revealed that both China and the United States worry about strategic stability but also that they are unclear as to what it requires. Each conference has sought to build a common understanding of the components of U.S.-China strategic stability.

China's expert community clearly views the source of instability in the strategic nuclear relationship as U.S. military policymaking. On one level, Chinese strategists remain deeply uncomfortable with U.S. military predominance in global affairs and the perceived U.S. penchant to use military force to coerce other states to advance U.S. objectives. Many in China fear that U.S. military power, in the future, could be directed at coercing China. On a second level, on nuclear affairs the Chinese concern is that the United States seeks to develop the strategic military tool-kit, as envisioned in the 2001 NPR, with the hope of escaping relationships of mutual vulnerability with other nuclear powers, including especially China, so that it can be free to exercise military power at will. The concepts and policies in the NPR, many Chinese argue, undermine U.S.-China strategic stability because they lower the threshold for using nuclear weapons and

countenance the use of nuclear weapons in a conflict over Taiwan. Most specifically, the Chinese are concerned about U.S. missile defense, ISR, and long-range conventional strike capabilities – all of which undermine their ability to possess a secure second-strike capability. These factors are having a significant impact on the “objective circumstances” for which China’s leaders must account in developing the PLA.

China’s expert community argues further that China’s responses to these U.S. policies are consistent with the traditions of China’s nuclear policy and with the requirements of strategic stability. They see mutual vulnerability as stabilizing, by dampening U.S. temptations to do something rash (or to incite others, as for example Taiwanese leaders, to do something rash). They defend the modernization of China’s strategic forces as the minimum necessary to maintain a credible retaliatory capability. They reject the possibility of any arms race and deny a desire to seek nuclear parity with the United States, under any circumstances. China’s force is designed to “absorb the first blow” and counter-attack, and this requires far fewer numbers than a force designed for preemption or sustained nuclear war-fighting. To promote greater strategic stability, the Chinese urge the U.S. to adopt a no-first-use posture or agree to a bilateral no-first-use accord with China and refrain from identifying China as a target country of U.S. nuclear weapons in the 2009 NPR.

Given this difference of view, it is not surprising that the discussion of transparency was contentious. There is still a considerable gap between the U.S. and China on the need for greater transparency. The Chinese insist that they are fully transparent about their strategic intentions and say there is increased recognition of the need to be more forthcoming in sharing information about their military budget and conventional armed forces, although they maintain they can only do so gradually.

Regarding their nuclear forces, however, the Chinese do not acknowledge the value of enhanced transparency about their nuclear capabilities.. A senior Chinese scientist stated that because China possesses a limited-size nuclear arsenal and is still vulnerable to a decapitating first-strike, it needs to maintain a degree of non-transparency about the size and composition of its nuclear forces. Other Chinese argued that this policy actually contributes to stability, by strengthening deterrence. China’s experts were unreceptive to U.S. arguments that whereas non-transparency served China’s interests well in the past that it does not serve China’s interests well today; that is, the lack of transparency has diminishing returns for China because it generates concerns among China’s neighbors and other nuclear powers. Indeed, some Chinese participants argued that it is the United States that needs to be more transparent. They observed that the 2001 NPR was not publicly released and noted that the scale of U.S. missile defense plans remains unclear despite U.S. statements that it is “not pointed at China.”

There was a second current of Chinese opinion also of note. This was the argument that stability is being undermined by misperceptions about the activities and intentions that each side has of the other. A senior PLA expert argued that the United States significantly misunderstands China’s modernization objectives, its reluctance to be more transparent, the Chinese debate about no-first-use, and the nature of Second Artillery

doctrine. The PLA expert also argued further that many in China also misunderstand U.S. activities and intentions. Based on these arguments, the senior PLA expert argued for a consistent and high-level strategic dialogue between the two sides.

There was also some Chinese receptivity to the argument that the current state of thinking about strategic stability is essentially a stalemate. Each side faults the other. The Chinese maintain that even if the U.S. does not seek to neutralize China's deterrent, its actions are eroding Chinese capabilities, thereby undermining strategic stability. From the U.S. perspective, it is China that is undercutting strategic stability by pursuing what seems to be an ambitious and open-ended modernization program and its lack of transparency. There was some support for the argument that this stalemate works against the objectives of Presidents Bush and Hu who, in April 2006, agreed to initiate an official nuclear dialogue as a confidence-building measure. U.S.-Chinese strategic stability remains a Chinese objective, participants maintained, and there was openness to exploring how to promote greater stability in the strategic military relationship in ways that serve shared political objectives.

Final Observation

Chinese officials, scientists and scholars demonstrated a continued willingness to engage in substantive discussions with their U.S. counterparts about nuclear weapons and strategic stability in U.S.-China relations. As in 2006, when the last round of this conference was held, both senior Chinese nuclear scientists and senior PLA officers (including from the Second Artillery) joined the deliberations. The 2008 meetings addressed in more depth the internal and external dynamics (both within the United States and China) shaping the strategic nuclear relationship between the United States and China. The Chinese delegation continued to be diverse, well prepared and willing to engage a range of sensitive questions. Differences and common areas were both highlighted, with frank discussions about diverging perceptions about each other.

Both U.S. and Chinese participants highlighted the unique value of convening this "Track 1.5" conference. This channel of dialogue generated deep understanding and robust insights on both sides and on issues that are seldom written about or discussed. Experts on both sides also noted that this channel helps to facilitate more effective interactions during the formal U.S.-China defense dialogue on nuclear issues, which just began in spring 2008.