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Deterrent Power of Nascent Nuclear Arsenals:

U.S.-China Security Competition in 1950s and 1960s

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Abstract

Existing research on nuclear deterrence mainly focuses on mature nuclear arsenals, with few studies addressing the deterrent power of nascent nuclear arsenals. This paper argues that the uncertainty surrounding the doctrines guiding the use of new nuclear arsenals effectively deters potential adversaries from considering or initiating conventional attacks. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this research conducts a single case study on China's nascent nuclear arsenal and its role in deterring U.S. aggressive intentions. The stark contrasts between the U.S. attitude towards non-nuclear China during the Korean War and the Taiwan Strait Crisis and its mindset towards nuclear China during the Nixon administration highlight the deterrence effect of nascent nuclear arsenals. This case study contributes to a deeper understanding of how nascent nuclear capabilities can shape international relations and complements existing theories by illustrating the deterrent power of nascent nuclear arsenals.

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Introduction

The devastating power of nuclear weapons and the certainty of their catastrophic consequences succeed in instilling the concept of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear deterrence is a strategy to prevent potential adversaries from launching aggressive actions, which may include conventional or nuclear attacks, by the threat of using nuclear force. No matter how many different deterrence theories people have broken into, the fundamental source of nuclear weapons' deterrent capacity is gained from their capabilities to cause damage.

World War II brought unprecedented nuclear weapons into the public's vision. The lowest estimation of casualties in Hiroshima and Nagasaki is 110,000 in total. Meanwhile, the highest casualty could be estimated to be 210,000.[1] The disturbing destroying power generated by "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" has gathered the whole world's attention on the topic of nuclear weapons.

There is no doubt that the introduction of nuclear weapons changed the calculus of deterrence among states. Indeed, scholars and policy analysts have been debating the attributes of nuclear weapons that lead to deterrence virtually since the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan in August 1945.[2] Numerous books and articles have been written about the "awesome" deterrent power of this new technology.[3] They generally make two arguments—nuclear superiority versus secure second-strike force.

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[1] Alex Wellerstein, "Counting the Dead at Hiroshima and Nagasaki," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, August 4, 2020, https://thebulletin.org/2020/08/counting-the-dead-at-hiroshima-and-nagasaki/.

[2] Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2012).

[3] *The Absolute Weapon* (New York: Harcourt, 1946); Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959); Hermann Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960); Klaus Knorr and Thorton Read, eds., *Limited Strategic War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962); Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966); Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961); and Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (January 1959), p. 211-234; "Strategic Thought in America, 1952-1966," in Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 3-46; Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1989).

In the school of nuclear superiority, deterrence is based on the assumption that one state has a larger and more advanced nuclear arsenal than its potential adversaries. This can include more warheads, advanced delivery systems, and better defensive measures. It has been argued that superior nuclear force can dissuade adversaries from engaging in both conventional and nuclear conflicts by providing a strategic advantage. Some critics argue that striving for nuclear superiority can destabilize by increasing the risk of preemptive strikes and creating security dilemmas that force other states to increase the size of their arsenals. On the other hand, the secure second-strike force school debates that an assured ability of a state to retaliate with nuclear weapons even after suffering a first strike is sufficient for effective deterrence. As part of this strategy, the deterrent power is associated with the survivability of nuclear forces, such as the presence of nuclear submarines (SSBNs), missile launchers, and missile silos that can withstand an initial attack. Dissuading potential adversaries from attacking is the promise of retaliation rather than numerical superiority.

According to Jervis, secure second-strike capability is favored and seen as the foundation of stable nuclear deterrence. The idea of mutually assured destruction (MAD) was born out of the concern about the destabilized nature of the nuclear superiority deterrence strategy.[4] MAD emphasizes that the likelihood of nuclear conflict decreases when both sides have the capacity for assured destruction of the other. This mutual vulnerability creates a powerful deterrent effect, creating stability among nuclear rivals.

With the world entering the second nuclear age[5], considerable regional powers joined the nuclear club. Although no nuclear war has ever happened, some of the nuclear powers have

[4] Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[5] Paul Bracken, "The Structure of the Second Nuclear Age," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, September 3, 2003, https://www.fpri.org/article/2003/09/the-structure-of-the-second-nuclear-age/.

experienced conventional attacks while others have not after becoming nuclear powers. Consequently, MAD has been questioned regarding its capability to deter conventional conflicts. The focal point of deciding whether a deterrence strategy can deter conventional wars has been brought to the use of doctrine.[6] Narang divides nuclear deterrence into three strategy categories, and the most effective one in preventing conventional wars has employed the idea of first-use. The first-use doctrine refers to a state's desire to use nuclear weapons either preemptively or in response to non-nuclear aggression to achieve a better deterrence effect.

However, has the field generally *underestimated* the deterrent power of nuclear weapons? This thesis argues, yes. Broadly speaking, nuclear weapons are even more of a powerful deterrent than the main schools of nuclear deterrence theory suggest. Neither the study of nuclear force types nor the study of nuclear doctrine paid much attention to the deterrent power of nascent nuclear arsenals.

None of the nuclear powers were born with advanced nuclear forces or clear nuclear doctrine; this study investigates whether those early nuclear arsenals had a deterrence effect. Unlike the standard debate in nuclear strategy literature, which focuses on deterring nuclear attacks on homelands, nascent nuclear powers aim to deter the first conventional attacks on their homelands. The nascent nuclear arsenals do not have the secure second-strike force to form MAD. "What deters" in the context of nascent nuclear arsenals is the unknown nuclear doctrine. Potential adversaries may assume that the newborn nuclear power reserves the first-use doctrine to some extent due to its unknown nature. Therefore, they may not want to initiate any attack to

[6] Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Vipin Narang, "What Does It Take to Deter? Regional Power Nuclear Postures and International Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 3 (July 9, 2012): 478–508, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002712448909.

avoid a potential nuclear counterattack. This nascent nuclear deterrence theory significantly alters the strategic calculus within the framework of standard nuclear strategies.

While the main findings in this paper are intended to apply to all nascent nuclear arsenals, the research employs a qualitative single empirical case study of China's early nuclear deterrence effect on the United States to test the deterrence effect of a nascent nuclear arsenal. By analyzing this case, the study found that the Chinese military dimension was taken lightly by the U.S. before China had nuclear weapons. However, after China acquired an early nuclear arsenal, the U.S. expressed significant concern and shifted its attitude towards fostering improved relations with China. Through this case, the dynamics and implications of nascent nuclear deterrence can be thoroughly explored, offering a robust analysis that supports the broader theoretical framework proposed in the paper.

Understanding the deterrent power of nascent nuclear arsenals is vital for future defense planning. Newborn nuclear powers, or states intending to go nuclear, can maintain considerable deterrent capacity without excessive buildup, avoiding outdated strategies. Insights from studying nascent nuclear arsenals can inform the crafting of effective arms control and disarmament agreements tailored to the specific challenges posed by young nuclear states. Additionally, understanding the deterrence capability of early nuclear powers can help countries better comprehend the global security architecture. It is not only countries with awesome nuclear arsenals that have military superiority; those with nascent arsenals must also be considered significant in strategic calculations.

Theory

The deterrent power of a nascent nuclear arsenal lies in the uncertainty of its nuclear doctrine, distinguishing it from the deterrent determinants in other theories. Moreover, the nascent nuclear deterrence mechanism effectively prevents conventional aggression, whereas MAD mostly deters nuclear attacks. Understanding the deterrent capacity of an early nuclear arsenal fills an existing gap in academia and further expands deterrence theory. Before specifically elaborating on the unknown nuclear doctrine deterrence mechanism, this section will define what is considered a nascent nuclear arsenal. Finally, the U.S.-China case will be introduced to illustrate this theoretical framework.

MAD has stressed the secure second-strike force, which is meant to be possessed by both sides of potential adversaries. Such force grants states the ensured capability of inflicting devastating nuclear damage to adversaries' territories after undertaking any level of aggression, including nuclear attack. Therefore, stability could be built when both states in a hostile relationship realize they would face a severe nuclear counterattack if any of them initiated nuclear aggression. The mutual fear of being nuked has constructed the stability under the MAD deterrence structure. However, not only does the stability-instability paradox exist in MAD deterrence, but states also need to spend enormous resources to have a secure second-strike force, which requires advanced military technology.

Studying a nascent nuclear arsenal's deterrent power is important for its existential and conceptual implications. Very few authors have theorized about the deterrence effect of an early nuclear arsenal and assessed its deterrent power in practice. Most nuclear deterrence theorists have studied the difference between mature nuclear arsenals with different forces or doctrines. They hardly gave a threshold when a nuclear arsenal starts to have deterrent power, whether in deterring nuclear or conventional conflicts. This research addresses whether early nuclear

weapons, by their mere existence, should deter conventional conflicts or attack intentions, let alone nuclear attacks, against potential opponents. This study also has indicative conceptual meaning by showing that a newborn nuclear arsenal, even without first-strike or second-strike forces, can form a powerful deterrent in crises and security competition with other rivals. Especially the early nuclear arsenals may have deterrent capacity at the minor conventional conflict level, which can hardly be achieved by MAD.

The assumption about the time horizon of rationality in theories of deterrence doesn't change for this paper. I am assuming a short time horizon for rational decision-making, and that is consistent with most of the nuclear deterrence literature. The short time horizon of rationality refers to decision-makers focusing on immediate or near-term outcomes. In this framework, strategies are developed with a priority on achieving quick results or avoiding imminent escalation of conflicts. The originality of this study is not so much in the time horizon assumption as in unpacking the elements of uncertainty within the assumption of short time horizons.

Two prerequisite steps need to be mentioned to discuss the source of nascent nuclear power's deterrent capacity further. Before a state possesses an early nuclear arsenal, it usually develops its research on achieving nuclear capability and then preserves its new nuclear warheads in secrecy to be officially recognized as a nascent nuclear power by others.

Due to the non-proliferation regime caused by the mass destruction nature of nuclear weapons, the process of researching nuclear weapons is generally secret. Nuclear weapons, the most destructive of all, have the potential to inflict unparalleled human suffering. The extent and duration of radioactive fallout are also unpredictable and uncontrollable. With more states

acquiring these weapons, the risk of accidental detonation increases as well.[7] Consequently, several major multilateral efforts were born trying to stop the proliferation and spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). A total of 191 States have joined the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which is a significant international agreement aimed at curbing the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the technology associated with them.[8] And 112 countries have endorsed the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), whose interdiction principles pledge to halt the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction, their delivery mechanisms, and associated materials.[9] Under such a counterproliferation regime, hiding became one of the main proliferation strategies. States usually carry out their nuclear weapons-building programs in secrecy out of the fear of prevention or punishment if their proliferation activities and capabilities are uncovered. The counter-proliferators could initiate painful sanctions and possibly launch preventive attacks on active nuclear facilities. For instance, in 2003, the U.S. launched a preventive war in Iraq to counter the perceived threat posed by Saddam Hussein's WMD program.[10] Even states that do not hide clear intent to develop nuclear weapons often employ strategic obfuscation to protect the integrity of nuclear research and production facilities.[11]

Uncertainty also exists regarding the location and quantity of the newborn nuclear warheads. Even if a country successfully hides its development of nuclear weapons, it still faces the risk of a preventive war for a certain time after joining the nuclear club. Consequently, the

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[7] Scott D. Sagan, "More Will Be Worse," essay, in *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012).

[8] "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, accessed May 9, 2024, https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/npt/.

[9] "Proliferation Security Initiative," U.S. Department of State, accessed May 9, 2024, https://www.state.gov/proliferation-security-initiative/.

[10] "Final Report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction," The WMD Commission Report, April 28, 2005, https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/wmdcomm.html.

[11] Vipin Narang, "Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation and Their Sources," chapter, in *Seeking the Bomb: Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

new nuclear power often disguises the location and quantity of its nascent nuclear warheads to safeguard them. There are several methods to conceal nuclear weapons and enhance their survivability. These measures include the mass production of nuclear weapons, use of underground facilities, dispersed storage sites, hardened silos, and random movement of nuclear weapons. All these methods introduce uncertainty into the strategic calculations of potential adversaries, reducing the likelihood of a preventive strike. This is known as first-strike uncertainty[12] and is a deterrent against potential preventive attacks on the newborn arsenal. The immense destructive capability of nuclear weapons poses a substantial challenge for any leader contemplating a first strike if there's any doubt about fully neutralizing the adversary's nuclear capabilities. The presence of first-strike uncertainty fosters a perception gap between the opposing sides, leading adversaries to potentially overestimate the nascent arsenal's retaliatory power, which ultimately supports the preservation of nascent nuclear arsenals.

Separating from competing theories, I introduce the concept of "nascent" nuclear arsenals. All theories on studying mature nuclear arsenals are going in the same direction. Existing theories agree that deterrence is maintained through a balance of power and the certainty of devastating retaliation, as seen in MAD. These theories assume stability and predictability in nuclear doctrines, where both sides understand and respect the rules of engagement due to the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear exchange. Instead, this research investigates the deterrent power of nuclear arsenals in their earliest stages, which comes from the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of a new nuclear state's intentions.

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[12] Wu Riqiang, "Certainty of Uncertainty: Nuclear Strategy with Chinese Characteristics," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4 (August 2013): 579–614, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.772510; Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000).

In this context, a nascent nuclear arsenal refers to a new nuclear power that has acquired nuclear weapons and avoided the risk of facing preventive war. At this stage, the nascent nuclear power is strategically recognized by other states as possessing a small number of nuclear weapons. The deterrent power of a nascent nuclear arsenal arises from its ambiguous use doctrine, which should be distinguished from other uncertainties. While some new nuclear powers may declare their intentions immediately after acquiring nuclear weapons, this study assumes they are actually uncertain about when and how to use atomic bombs. States can generally speculate on the doctrines of mature nuclear arsenals based on nuclear postures—whether they maintain a credible first-strike or a secure second-strike force, given the true intentions may not be revealed in public words. A nascent nuclear power, however, keeps its doctrine obscure to others.

The uncertainty of the doctrine for the use of nuclear weapons compels adversaries to operate on a cautious footing, wary of provoking an unpredictable and potentially devastating response. It is important to discuss the nuclear doctrine in detail to understand the benefits of the uncertainty about it. There are three broad categories of nuclear weapon-using doctrine: first, non-first, and third-party extended use. The "first-use" doctrine refers to a policy where a country reserves the right to use nuclear weapons as a first resort in a conflict. This does not necessarily mean that nuclear weapons would be the first weapons used in any conflict, but rather that they could be used preemptively or early in a conflict under specific circumstances. "Non-first use" is a pledge by a nuclear-armed state not to use nuclear weapons unless first attacked by an adversary using nuclear weapons. This policy aims to reduce the risk of nuclear escalation in armed conflicts. The third-party extended use involves the extension of a nuclear umbrella to allies, often referred to as "extended deterrence." Under this policy, a nuclear-armed

state promises to use nuclear weapons in defense of an ally if that ally is attacked, potentially with nuclear or overwhelming conventional forces. This condition is more like a non-first use but depends on third-party nuclear weapons.

The MAD deterrence essentially employs the idea of non-first use. The nuclear arsenals will only be activated when the target state is undergoing severe conventional or nuclear attacks. Differently, the most effective nuclear posture in deterring conventional conflicts is indicating the first-use doctrine.[13] Such a deterrence strategy implies any form of conventional attack on the target state's homeland might trigger the asymmetric use of nuclear weapons. In reaction to different deterrence strategies, the attackers may have a clear picture of the timing they should provoke further or stop escalating to save a full-out war. Nascent nuclear powers, however, are usually too young to have clear guidance regarding their use of nuclear weapons. This uncertainty unintentionally makes it quite challenging, if not impossible, for an initiating state to predict the specific circumstances or threat levels to national security that would make the target state use nuclear weapons. Such unintentional or strategic ambiguity in nuclear doctrine complicates the decision calculus of potential aggressors, who must weigh the possibility of the nascent power's first-use heavily against the perceived benefits of potential military aggression. The nascent power might refrain from using its nuclear arsenal even during a destructive conventional war. However, it may also choose to employ its nuclear capability immediately, targeting the aggressor or the aggressor's allies in response to credible military threats or provocations.[14] This uncertainty can preserve peace since the costs and risks associated with miscalculation become too great to bear. After all, the bomber-carried nascent nuclear weapons

[13] See n. 6.

[14] I am not referring to preemptive war, but primarily to the strategic benefit gained by being the first to launch a nuclear attack in a conflict.

are still capable of inflicting catastrophic damage. If directly dropping a nuclear bomb on the adversary's distant territory is not feasible, conducting a nuclear strike against a closer ally could also serve as a powerful act of aggression.

Overall, the viability of a nascent nuclear arsenal is maintained primarily through secretly building bombs and avoiding preventive strikes by employing first-strike uncertainty. Once others admit the arsenal, it serves as a deterrent to conventional wars, primarily because of the unclear doctrine governing its use. These unknown usage conditions deter potential aggressors who must consider the risks of inadvertently escalating conflicts to a nuclear level.

To manifest the deterrence power of a nascent nuclear power, the U.S.-China is a notable country-dyad case, among all applicable cases, to study. The historical narrative of the U.S. strategic attitude towards China during the 1950s and l960 to early 1970s may illustrate the deterrence effect of a nascent nuclear arsenal. Before China's induction into the nuclear club, the U.S. leveraged the threat of nuclear weapons as a strategic tool to deter Chinese aggression during the Korean War and over the Taiwan Strait. It had first threatened to use atomic bombs against Chinese troops in North Korea on November 30, 1950.[15] This was followed by another threat of nuclear attack against China in the first Taiwan Strait Crisis.[16] The situation escalated further in August 1958 during the second Taiwan Strait Crisis, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched a shelling blitzkrieg against two Taiwan offshore islands.[17]

However, after China acquired nuclear weapons in 1964, the U.S. has never threatened to use nuclear weapons to deter China from any possible aggression again. Instead, the U.S. has

[15]"The President's News Conference," Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, accessed June 27, 2024, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/295/presidents-news-conference.
[16]M. H. Halperin, "The 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis: A Documented History," *Internet Archive*, December 1, 1966, https://archive.org/details/The1958TaiwanStraitsCrisisADocumentedHistory_201712.
[17]"Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed March 17, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china.

positively improved its relations with communist China afterward. It is reasonable to speculate that the Chinese nascent nuclear arsenal has played an important role in deterring U.S. aggression intentions. Accordingly, the specific research question of this study is whether the emergence of China's nascent nuclear arsenal has deterrent power against the U.S.

Methodology

This research conducts a qualitative study, focusing on archival works to do process tracing to test the theory in the selected case. The scope of this paper is limited to a single case study: China's early nuclear arsenal and its influence on deterring U.S. hostility towards the Chinese government. The single case study and research methodology provide compelling evidence, primarily because of the focus on the within-case variation that establishes a strong demonstration proof of the theory that is a crucial test to justify future case study tests.

Specifically, the method in the case is as follows: by dividing the case study into two distinct periods, the 1950s and late 1960s to early 1970s, I can examine the U.S. attitudes toward escalating China-U.S. tensions before China acquired nuclear weapons and after China achieved this capability. Such a research method could isolate the deterrence effect of China's nuclear weapons while maintaining other contextual variables of both countries. Most of the evidence should manifest the U.S. attitude towards China before nuclear and its mindset toward China with a fait accompli nascent nuclear arsenal. Therefore, this study jumps over the U.S. decision-making of initiating preventive war against China and its nuclear facilities. The layout of this case study is divided into three parts: a description of China's early nuclear arsenal, the China-U.S. tension during the Korean War and Taiwan Strait Crises, and the Nixon administration's eased relations with China.

Two types of evidence are being sought to verify the deterrence effect of China's nascent nuclear arsenal: the U.S.'s uncertainty about the Chinese nuclear doctrine and its changing attitude toward China due to its early nuclear weapons. Any information relevant to these two aspects is helpful for this study. The evidence is primarily sought in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* documents. However, it is important to acknowledge that other factors, such as the U.S. desire to draw China in against the Soviet Union, might also influence the U.S. mindset about China. Finding such third-party influences could complicate the analysis and detract from the primary focus of this paper.

If my theory is valid, we should observe that the U.S. showed no military restraint before China acquired nuclear weapons. However, after China developed its own nascent nuclear arsenal, the U.S. became dedicated to improving U.S.-China relations due to concerns about China's emerging nuclear capability. This concern should primarily stem from the uncertainty surrounding China's nuclear doctrine.

China's Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons

President Mao Zedong always advocated that power comes out of the barrel of a gun.[18] This statement reflects the importance that Mao placed on military weapons. Mao's emphasis on the military and even heavy industry resulted from the Chinese nation's nearly 100-year history of humiliation. Chinese officials have publicly stated that the invasion of China by the European powers created a strong desire and determination of the Chinese nation to become independent and powerful.[19] Under the guidance of this thought, China detonated its first nuclear weapons in

[18] "Zhan Zheng He Zhan Lue Wen Ti," in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 2, Ren Min Chu Ban She, 1991, p.7. To avoid any confusion caused by different book editions, all cited page number of *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung* is page of cited chapter.

[19] Zhang Xuebin, "Two 'isms' on the Same Vine," reprinted in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, February 8, 2000.

the Xinjiang desert on October 16, 1964. Showed in the following government statement, the detonation is a major achievement "opposing the U.S. imperialist policy of nuclear blackmail and nuclear threat."[20]

Generally, Mao's decisions regarding nuclear weapons were heavily influenced by U.S. behavior. Initially, Mao Zedong was not alarmed by American nuclear weapons in the late 1940s. In a 1946 interview with a reporter, Mao said that the U.S. atomic bomb was just a paper tiger used to scare people and was not scary. It was the people, not the weapons with new technology, that affected the outcome of the war.[21] Moreover, Mao's strategic plan was clear at that time. He believed there was no need to deploy any means of deterrence against the two main players in international relations. The Soviet Union and the United States would compete for global allies, and there would be no direct war between the two countries. As Mao said, the "vast zone" between the USSR and the U.S. became the playing field between them, and China, as a part of the target zone, could win by mediation.[22]

Although Mao's attitude toward nuclear weapons was one of no need, China's domestic view of nuclear weapons has been quietly evolving, challenging his thoughts. During the Korean War, senior U.S. generals repeatedly considered launching an all-out war against China and using nuclear weapons to bomb Chinese cities on a large scale.[23] The most influential military voice in favor of nuclear weapons was General Douglas MacArthur, commander in the field. General Hoyt Vandenberg proposed using nuclear bombs to destroy the Yalu River dam. Besides

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[20] "The Atomic Bomb, Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China, October 16, 1964," October 16, 1964, https://china.usc.edu/atomic-bomb-statement-government-peoples-republic-china-october-16-1964.

[21] "He Mei Guo Ji Zhe Anna Louise Strong De Tan Hua," in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 4, Ren Min Chu Ban She, 1991, p.4.

[22] John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litae, *China builds the Bomb* (CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), p.5.

[23] Tannenwald, Nina. "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use." *International Organization* 53, 3 (1999): 433-468, p.445.

the Korea War, in March 1955, U.S. Secretary of State Dulles said that U.S. sea and air forces in Southeast Asia were now equipped with new and powerful weapons of precision, including small nuclear missiles.[24] In 1955, *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily) blamed the U.S. for treating atomic bombs as conventional forces, while Premier Zhou Enlai accused the U.S. of brandishing atomic weapons to maintain its position on the Taiwan issue.[25] It was not long after the Formosa Resolution passed that the Chinese press claimed the U.S. threatened to use atomic weapons against Chinese citizens.[26] Despite Mao's view that nuclear weapons were unnecessary as of January 28, 1955, when he received a letter from Sundström, the first Finnish ambassador to China, the nuclear imbalance pushed China towards developing its own nuclear capabilities.[27] During the conversation, when the ambassador mentioned that the world situation was still dangerous and China was threatened, Mao commented that the danger of world war and the threat to China came mainly from the American warmongers. In Mao's view, they "have invaded China's Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait" and want to start an atomic war. He emphasized that the Chinese people do not want war but will resolutely strike back if anyone invades China. Mao made it clear that the U.S. atomic blackmail could not intimidate China. If the United States launched a war of aggression against China with its airplanes and atomic bombs, China would surely be victorious with its "millet and rifles."

Mao was very confident about China's existing military power. He firmly believed that China's huge population, together with the experience accumulated in past wars, was fully capable of coping with the U.S. nuclear blackmail and even nuclear attack. Meanwhile, in the

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[24] United States Policy with Respect to National Security Policy, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. *National Security Policy* Volume XIX 1955/1957, p.85.

[25] Tan Wenrui, cited in *Xinhua* in *Survey of China Mainland Press*, No.974, January 24, 1955, p.2.

[26] "Resolutely Oppose the United States' Provocation of War," *Renmin Ribao*, January 29, 1955.

[27] "Yuan Zi Dan Xia Bu Dao Zhong Guo Ren Min," in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 5, Ren Min Chu Ban She, 1977, p.1.

same year, the Communist Party of China (CPC) initiated a senior-level dialog on the exploration of nuclear weapons. Premier Zhou Enlai invited Bo Yibo, who was in charge of economics, nuclear scientist Qian Sanqiang, Li Siguang, and Liu Jie from the Ministry of Geology to his office for a meeting on the possibilities of exploring nuclear weapons and the current situation in the nuclear field.[28] Mao then followed up at the enlarged meeting of the central secretariat by listening carefully to the scientists' reports on nuclear weapons construction and uranium ore availability.[29] Overall, after the first Taiwan Strait Crisis, Mao acted as a realist, meaning that he intended to build its nuclear arsenal to neutralize the U.S. nuclear threat.[30] In March 1955, Mao stated at the National Congress of the CPC, "We have entered a period…in which we are studying the industrialization of socialism, the transformation of socialism, the modernization of national defense, and the beginning of the study of atomic energy."[31] In 1958, Mao's instruction at the enlarged meeting of the Military Commission to acquire the atomic bomb indicated that China had officially started the full-scale development of nuclear weapons.[32]

On September 21, 1964, a request for a nuclear test explosion was approved by Mao.[33] Finally, on October 16, 1964, China successfully detonated its first nuclear weapon in the desert in Xinjiang.[34] Although China had succeeded in possessing nuclear weapons, it had only succeeded in making a nuclear warhead that could be detonated. It was still a long way from

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[28] Li Jue, Lei Rongtian, Li Yi, and Li Yingxiang, eds., *Contemporary China's Nuclear Industry*, Beijing Press, 1987, p.13.

[29] Ibid.

[30] John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, China Builds the Bomb (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 11–46; Rosemary Foot, The Practice of Power: U.S. Relations with China since 1949 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 168–174.

[31] "Zai Zhong Guo Gong Chan Dang Quan Guo Dai Biao Hui Yi Shang De Jiang Hua," in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 5, Ren Min Chu Ban She, 1977, p.7.

[32] "Zai Jun Wei Kuo Da Hui Yi Shang De Jiang Hua," in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 6.

[33] "Dui Zhun Bei Jin Xing Shou Ci He Shi Yan De Pi Yu," in *Jian Guo Yi Lai Mao Ze Dong Jun Shi Wen Gao* (*Mao Zedong's military writings since the founding of the People's Republic of China*), Vol. 2, Jun Shi Ke Xue Chu Ban She Zhong Yang Wen Xian Chu Ban She, 2010, p.266.

[34] "China Tests First Atomic Bomb; Calls for World Summit Parely on Nuclear Ban," *The New York Times,* Oct 17, 1964.

forming a strategic nuclear posture. The Nuclear Triad consists of bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The periods before nuclear warheads were strategically deployed on ICBMs and SLBMs are referred to as periods of nascent nuclear power in this paper. China has remained at the level of having a nascent nuclear arsenal for a long time. While the number of warheads has been growing, China first deployed its first ICBM in 1980 and its SLBMs in 2016.[35] And China didn't deploy a medium-range ballistic missile until 2000. Therefore, the period from the day China acquired its first nuclear warhead in 1964 until the deployment of ICBMs in 1980 is considered China's initial acquisition phase.

U.S. Attitude Towards Non-Nuclear China

KOREAN WAR, 1950

Korea was divided at the 38th parallel following World War II, leading to the Korean War, which began on June 25, 1950. This division resulted in a communist North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, and a capitalist South Korea, supported by the United States and other Western nations. North Korean forces invaded South Korea in an attempt to reunite the peninsula under communist rule directly due to grievances after the elections of May 1950 in South Korea.[36]

The U.S. reacted quickly to the invasion from the north by presenting the problem to the United Nations (UN). With the resolution passed by the UN Security Council responding to North Korea's continued advancement, the U.S.-represented UN members started to provide

[35] Kristensen, H. M., Korda, M., & Johns, E., "Nuclear Notebook: Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 19, 2023.
[36] Walter Hermes, *United States Army in the Korean War: Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2005), p. 5-9.

military assistance to South Korea. President Truman ordered General MacArthur to provide air cover and air support for the Korean government troops on June 27, 1950.[37] By mid-September, the U.S. Army and Marine forces pushed the Communist Koreans behind the 38th Parallel while they were still resisting. A significant trade-off came to the U.S. horizon at that time–whether keeping the status quo was enough. The U.S. prompted the UN to push northwards of the 38th parallel to destroy the enemy and unify Korea to prevent the North Koreans from reorganizing and invading again in the future.[38]

Although the U.S. had a legitimate reason to go further north, China had different concerns. As *Renmin Ribao* explained why America was intruding on Korea in an exceptional article of July 26, 1950: "To serve as a gateway to aggression for the U.S. on the Chinese and Soviet Union borders."[39] This comment indicates that China had been focusing on the Korean peninsula and worrying about the unknown outcome of such a war by showing up in the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). If this could not stand for the official Chinese leadership's opinion at that time, Zhou Enlai cabled the UN on August 20, 1950, "The Chinese people cannot but be concerned about the solution of the Korean question."[40] Zhou had also expressed his anger about the American "invasion" of the Korean peninsula multiple times since then.[41] Mao Dun, one of the most famous Chinese writers, had also represented the public's voice. *Renmin Ribao* has published his rhetoric: "This mad dog

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[37] Bud Hannings, *The Korean War: An Exhaustive Chronology*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Jefferson, N.C., & London: McFarland & Co, 2007), p. 35-39.

[38] Walter Hermes, *United States Army in the Korean War: Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2005), p. 10.

[39] Liu Ning-i, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Committee to Protect World Peace, in *Renmin Ribao,* July 21, 1950.

[40] Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), p. 92.

[41] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Korea, 1950*, Vol. VII, Doc. 687.

(America) seized Taiwan between its hind legs while with its teeth it violently bites the Korean people. Now one of its forelegs has been poked into our Northeast front."[42]

The U.S. government well realized the worries and results that might happen, as the *National Security Council* (NSC) document showed: "U.N. military action north of the 38th parallel would result in conflict with the Soviet Union or Communist China."[43] Mr. John M. Allison of the United States Delegation to the UN General Assembly reaffirmed on September 18, 1950, "the United States position remained as it had always been, namely, that … an independent and united Korea. There was no disagreement according to Mr. Dulles as to the aim of achieving a free and united Korea."[44] Given that a potential military confrontation against China was in the U.S. consideration and it did recognize the high possibility of that, the U.S. continued to clear public voice which contradicted the Chinese interests, reflecting the U.S. little concern for China's interests and fear of war of China. Moreover, the fundamental interest of the United States when weighing whether to express a position on crossing the 38th parallel was how to ensure the maximum international prestige of the United States among its allies rather than whether it could agree to a war with China. Suppose any war in far east Asia would cause nightmares. In that case, it's the involvement with the USSR, "the U.S. must be on its guard lest the General Assembly irresponsibly lay down political objectives which could not be achieved militarily, unless by victory over Russia in a general war."[45] During a meeting on the Korean issue on September 23, 1950, Dean Rusk, Second Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, pointed out that the National Security Council paper indicated that if the Chinese

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[42] *Renmin Ribao*, August 30, 1950, Radio Peking in English to North America, August 30, 1950.

[43] Steven W. Nerheim, "NSC-81/1 and the Evolution of U.S. War Aims in Korea June - October 1950," Defense Technical Information Center, April 10, 2000, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA378379.

[44] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Korea, 1950*, Vol. VII, Doc. 521.

[45] Ibid, Doc. 528.

intervened, they would continue fighting but attempt to minimize attack on the Chinese.[46] At the Sixth UN Conference two days later, the force was officially authorized to enter north of the 38th parallel to achieve a unified free Korea. A Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) memo in early October again showed that the U.S. was not afraid of Chinese intervention in the Korean War because the latter lacked the essential air and naval support.[47]

During the same period, the U.S. continued to receive "credible intelligence" that Chinese troops had landed on the Korean battlefield.[48] At the end of October, reports of Chinese troops in Korea appeared to be officially confirmed when the war was just about over.[49] With the confirmed changed situation in the battleground, the United States reaction was "maintaining the essence of the standing directive…if a sound drubbing could be administered to Chinese Communist forces, with the war localized within Korea, this could only have a salutary effect in Asia."[50]

Overall, the attitude of the United States towards China during the Korean War is similar to what Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi said many years later: "At the time of the Korean War, we first warned against crossing the thirty-eighth parallel but America ignored the warning. The second time, we warned again, but America occupied Pyongyang. The third time, we warned once again, but America aggressed close to the Yalu River and threatened the security of China."[51] Soon afterward, President Truman's declaration in a press conference on 30 November claimed the U.S. was prepared to use all weapons, including atomic bombs, in war against

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[46] Ibid, Doc. 532.
[47] Ibid, Doc. 665.
[48] Ibid, Doc. 674; Ibid, Doc. 713; Ibid, Doc. 718; Ibid, Doc. 719.
[49] Ibid, Doc. 726; Ibid, Doc. 729; Ibid, Doc. 730; Ibid, Doc. 736; Ibid, Doc. 737.
[50] Ibid, Doc. 744.
[51] Chen Yi, interview of May 29, 1962, *Tokyo Journalist*, June 26, 1962, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), August 13, 1962.

Chinese troops in North Korean territory. This strategic mindset also shows the American leadership's scorn in escalating the war with China.

TAIWAN STRAIT CRISES, 1954-55 AND 1958

The First Taiwan Strait Crisis occurred between 1954 and 1955 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan engaged in an important confrontation following the reduction of tensions in Korea. It was caused by the PRC's desire to seize Taiwan from the ROC, which had retreated after the Chinese Civil War. The crisis began when the PRC began shelling the ROC-controlled offshore islands of Jinmen and Dachen, which are located near mainland China. A mutual defense treaty was negotiated between the United States and Taiwan as a result of the United States intervening to support Taiwan.[52]

On the eve of the outbreak of the First Taiwan Crisis, August 4, 1954, an NSC report on Far East policy planning had already underscored the significance attributed to China's military strategy, recognizing China as a strategically important rival to the U.S., comparable to the Soviet Union.[53] However, this does not mean the United States fears China's military power. At the same time, the U.S. still retains the determination to take the initiative at any time, as the toughest policy against China shows.[54] Additionally, consideration of the use of nuclear weapons once again demonstrates that the U.S. military has no fear of escalating a war with the Chinese military because of its nuclear superiority. The President said on August 5 that "if the

[52] Suisheng Zhao, *Across the Taiwan Strait: Mainland China, Taiwan and the 1995-1996 Crisis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the U.S. Navy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
[53] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: China and Japan, 1952-1954*, Vol. XIV, Part 1, Doc. 248.
[54] Ibid, Doc. 256.

Communists tried an invasion of Formosa by a fleet of junks, this might make a good target for an atomic bomb."[55]

On the contrary, the U.S. policy discussion on China has been interspersed with another voice–avoiding direct war with China or any risky military action that could trigger another world war. The U.S. attitude toward fighting China was no longer as fearless and tough as it had been on the eve of the outbreak of the Korean War. There is no official or private U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan's offshore islands, and in May, the commanding officer of the first fleet was instructed not to retaliate against any fire from Chinese Communists.[56] The August NSC report's various options for treating China stated, "Seek to reduce, by means short of war, the relative power of Communist China in Asia."[57] Such a seemingly weak willingness to deter mainland China is out of concern for the stability of the U.S. global alliance rather than the fear of fighting the PRC. As a result of the different perspectives of its allies, especially the U.K., the U.S. government adopted an intentionally ambiguous policy to keep the Communists guessing as to the true defense status of the offshore islands.[58]

On August 26, 1954, the U.S. received information pointing to concerns that the Chinese Communists might attack the so-called offshore islands (Dachen, Kinmen, etc.) and that the Chinese government had said, "Defend islands come what may."[59] General MacArthur responded unequivocally to this information the next day, stating that the U.S. would use its military force to resist any attempt by the PRC to attack Taiwan. On September 3, 1954, the PRC

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[55] Ibid, Doc. 249.

[56] Ibid, Doc. 259.

[57] Ibid, Doc. 248.

[58] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: China and Japan, 1952-1954*, Vol. XIV, Part 1 Doc. 256; Ibid, Doc. 262; Ibid, Doc. 266; Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the U.S. Navy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 65-67.

[59] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: China and Japan, 1952-1954*, Vol. XIV, Part 1 Doc. 263.

began shelling Jinmen Island. During this time, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) also began to attack the Dachen Islands. In response to the PRC bombing, two voices initially arose within the U.S. government: those who wanted to strongly protect Jinmen Island and assert U.S. prestige in the Far East, and those who believed that protecting the offshore Jinmen Island against PRC was not necessary to protect Taiwan.[60] This unclear hesitation may be because the U.S. does not want to go to war with China again immediately, within a short period after the Korean War, without jeopardizing its core interests, which is protecting Taiwan's homeland in this case. As President Eisenhower "reiterated that the islands were only important psychologically."[61]

Yet this tug-of-war still does not suggest that the U.S. has any military trepidation about China. It continues to look down on China in any potential military confrontation as the Chief of Naval Operations, the Chief of Staff, the U.S. Air Force, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps suggested in early September, "The responsible U.S. commander be given freedom of action to strike when and where necessary…The question of the use of atomic weapons would be presented if and when the need arises, but with the understanding now that if essential to victory, their use would be accorded."[62] Later on, early in March 1955, President Eisenhower agreed with U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's proposal to consider a nuclear strike in defending Taiwan's two coastal positions–islands Quemoy and Matsu.[63]

The crisis eased in May of the same year and was followed by two years of Sino-U.S. negotiations covering many issues, but no agreement was reached on the fundamental Taiwan

[60] Ibid, Doc. 265-280.
[61] Ibid, Doc. 293.
[62] Ibid, Doc. 291.
[63] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: China, 1955-1957*, Vol. XIV, Part 1 Doc. 141.

issue. Although the U.S. did not fight the PLA directly in this conflict, the overall attitude of its top leadership and the three contemplated nuclear strikes reflected the strength of the U.S. military. Although China was given a certain strategic position, the U.S. still carries contempt for China.

Three years later, on August 12, 1958, in the discussion between Secretary Dulles and President Eisenhower before the U.N. General Assembly the following day, Dulles reported that the situation around the Taiwan area was "heating up."[64] This may be a continuation of the first Taiwan Strait crisis. On August 14, Director of CIA Allen Dulles noted the increasing aggressiveness of the Communist Chinese air force over the Taiwan Strait since August 9th at the 376th meeting of the National Security Council. In response to this potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. military brass gave a clear line of response: "The U.S. should support Chinese Nationalist forces, if necessary with U.S. forces, in resisting a Chinese Communist blockade of Quemoy and Matsu (hereafter referred to as the off-shore islands)...in defending against a major Chinese Communist assault on the off-shore islands."[65] The U.S. did not have a major disagreement over whether to defend the outlying islands this time, although it did not make any official statement to expand the Formosa resolution.[66] The following day, acting Secretary of State Herter, in his advice to Secretary of State Dulles on how to handle the conflict, made it clear that if the CCP succeeded in blockading the offshore islands, then the nuclear bombing of mainland military bases would be necessary.[67] And there is a great possibility that the Department of Defense will actively consider the application of nuclear weapons.[68] This

[64] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: China, 1958-1960*, Vol. XIX, Doc. 31.
[65] Ibid, Doc. 33.
[66] Ibid, Doc. 38; Ibid, Doc. 40; Ibid, Doc. 43.
[67] Ibid, Doc. 34.
[68] Ibid, Doc. 35.

shows that the U.S. plan to counterattack the CCP in the second Taiwan Strait crisis is more decisive than the first Taiwan Strait crisis and more inclined to use force.

On August 23rd, the U.S. senior management received the news that the CCP had carried out extremely heavy bombardment on the offshore islands.[69] The second Taiwan Strait Crisis broke out completely. The meeting at the White House on the Taiwan Strait situation and the Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting held on the 25th both put the discussion of the use of nuclear weapons on the table besides concluding reinforcing U.S. air defense forces in Taiwan. Telegram from the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt), also shows a more mature strategy and a stronger determination by the U.S. military to help ROC against PLA.[70] U.S. confidence in handling the second crisis was also higher than the previous one, as mentioned in the intelligence analysis, given "U.S. commitments to defend Taiwan and our estimate that neither Communist China nor the USSR is willing to risk a major war at present, we believe that Communist China will not attempt to seize Taiwan or the Penghus during the next six months at least."[71]

During that time, Christian Herter, the U.S. Secretary of State, was reported to have referred to the conflict as a "first serious nuclear crisis."[72] This reflects the U.S. attitude toward China and its unflagging determination to confront it militarily.

U.S. Attitude Towards Nuclear China

NIXON ESTABLISHED DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH CHINA

[69] Ibid, Doc. 41.
[70] Ibid, Doc. 46.
[71] Ibid, Doc. 47.
[72] M.H. Halperin (December 1966). *The 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis: A Documented History*. Daniel Ellsberg. p. i–xvii.

"Since the beginning of his presidency in early 1969, and even earlier, Nixon had been interested in changing relations with China, not least to contain a potential nuclear threat but also, by taking advantage of the adversarial Sino-Soviet relationship, to open up another front in the Cold War with the Soviet Union."[73] As this quote from the briefing notes, the improvement of U.S.-China relations was not only a significant endeavor given the international situation at the time but also one in which China's early nuclear weapons arsenal played an instrumental role. On February 5, 1969, Henry Kissinger issued President Nixon's directive to the national security services to explore new U.S.-China relations, which opened a new chapter in U.S.-China relations.[74]

In the same month, a *National Intelligence Estimate* stated that "Communist China already has a regional nuclear strike capability in the sense that it could now have a few China could also have some fission weapons in stock."[75] The report also suggests that China would face serious consequences if it were to launch a nuclear strike against its neighbors. Still, it at least suggests that the U.S. recognizes that China's nuclear forces are capable of striking surrounding countries. As early in the Johnson administration, the U.S. was concerned about the Chinese nuclear arsenal and afraid it would launch aggression against its neighbors, which are allies of the U.S.[76] During the same period, the CIA also considered that one of the options for its policy toward China was to maintain a deterrent posture offshore or in the central Pacific in case China

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[73] William Burr, "The Beijing-Washington Back-Channel and Henry Kissinger's Secret Trip to China, September 1970-July 1971, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 66," The National Security Archive, February 27, 2002, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/.

[74] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976: China, 1969-1972*, Vol. XVII, Doc. 4; Ibid, Doc. 5.

[75] Ibid, Doc. 7.

[76] William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle': The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64," *International Security* 25, No. 3 (January 2001): 54–99, p. 56, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560525.

launched any overt attacks on U.S. allies in Asia.[77] In May of the same year, a transcript of the Senior Review Group's discussion of policy toward China indicated that Kissinger "believed that a nation of 700 million people, surrounded by weaker states, could be a security threat no matter what type of policy it pursued."[78] Winthrop Brown went so far as to say that it was assumed that in the face of a China that was likely to expand its influence in the world anyway, détente would better guide its behavior rather than isolation. Although the attitude of the U.S. top management toward China is still under discussion, it is certain that the U.S. side has begun to pay attention to China's strategic military power and has shown signs of easing bilateral relations.

One month after this discussion, on June 26, President Nixon ordered the relaxation of economic controls on China.[79] This is a major signal that the U.S. side has decided to ease U.S.-China relations after a period of discussion. Not long afterward, the president asked the security services to conduct a study of Asia and its policies, the first item of which was China's strategy and capabilities.[80] The Nixon administration's repeated references to China's nuclear capabilities were a clear indication of the strategic importance it attached to China's early nuclear arsenal. During his July 24-August 3 trip around the world, Nixon discussed China with the leaders of Pakistan and Romania. During this time, Nixon expressed a strong desire to establish diplomatic ties with China and, at one point, noted that China's attitude toward other states was a U.S. concern rather than a Chinese internal matter.[81] August 8, a Washington paper mentioned that the U.S. still retained its suspicion that China would use the nuclear threat directly to increase its

[77] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976: China, 1969-1972*, Vol. XVII, Doc. 12.
[78] Ibid, Doc. 13.
[79] Ibid, Doc. 14.
[80] Ibid, Doc. 18.
[81] Ibid, Doc. 20.

control in Asia and Africa.[82] Subsequently, Mr. President commented directly that "in general, any person in a responsible position in the U.S. Government must realize that we should seek on a long-range basis to better relations with Communist China. We cannot leave that tremendous country and people isolated."[83] Nixon also reaffirmed the good meaning of his trade relaxation decision. The interspersed timing of U.S. concerns about China's nuclear threat, primarily about the surrounding countries, and the desire to open up communication with China, combined with the previously expressed views of top U.S. executives that it is easier to alienate than to block, it cannot be deduced that China's nuclear capabilities have played a creditable role in changing U.S. foreign policy toward China.

The U.S. government's assessment of China's nuclear weapons program states, "As time goes on and more weapons systems reach the testing and deployment stage, there will be demands on high quality, scarce resources which will force upon the Chinese some increasingly difficult decisions. They will have to make some choices among various weapon systems...whether to deploy early systems in large numbers or to wait for later systems that might appear more credible as a threat and as a deterrent...the balances to be struck between conventional general purpose and strategic forces, and between intercontinental and regional strategic programs...have not yet defined clearly the composition and size of their force goal."[84] If the analysis before can only infer that China's nascent nuclear weapons have had a transformative effect on U.S. attitudes, this assessment confirms my argument that uncertainty about nuclear use creates a deterrent effect. At least, the report is objective in that the U.S. was affected by China's acquisition of nuclear weapons when the U.S. saw a nascent nuclear

[82] Ibid, Doc. 23.
[83] Ibid, Doc. 31.
[84] Ibid, Doc. 42.

weapons arsenal with so much unknown about it. *National Intelligence Estimate* in October 1971 again pointed out the uncertainty about China's nuclear doctrine, "No elaboration of the rationale for developing a strategic force nor any discussion of strategic doctrine has appeared in China."[85]

At the end of 1969, the Chinese released two U.S. citizens and passed the news back to the U.S. through Pakistan after hearing the U.S. would like to build a connection and intentions to withdraw two destroyers from the Taiwan Straits. This can be seen as a positive response from the Chinese side to the goodwill of the U.S. side to establish contact.[86] Since then, China and the U.S. have communicated many times, either through third-party channels or directly, and the most frequent topic of conversation before the establishment of diplomatic relations has been the proper handling of the Taiwan issue. In January 1970, in a memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon,[87] it is worth noting that the U.S. mentioned its desire for China's participation in disarmament negotiations in future bilateral meetings after President Nixon expressed concern about the Chinese nuclear arsenal in his press conference of January 30.[88] One of the important objectives was that "we (U.S.) believe the Chinese to be a major power and an essential element in the disarmament picture." This attitude contrasts sharply with the U.S. military attitude toward China before it possessed nuclear weapons. During China's non-nuclear era, the U.S. military's attitude was never to fear China's military power–even repeatedly threatening China with military superiority. But the invitation to disarm together then shows that the U.S. has a fear of China's military power, and that fear coincides with China's possession of a nascent nuclear arsenal. A U.S. assessment of China's conventional forces in June remarked a

[85] Ibid, Doc. 168.
[86] Ibid, Doc. 54; Ibid, Doc. 55.
[87] Ibid, Doc. 61.
[88] Ibid, Doc. 74.

regression in military power during the Cultural Revolution[89]–which rules out the possibility that such fear is due to the growing strength of China's conventional forces. A subsequent summary of arms control negotiations also reflected U.S. concerns about the transparency of China's nuclear capabilities.[90]

In April 1971, the U.S. team was formally invited to visit China at the end of the Japanese Table Tennis Championships, an event known as "Ping Pong Diplomacy," a famous historical diplomatic event in which the small ball promotes the big globe.[91] This event is known as "Ping Pong Diplomacy" and is a famous diplomatic event in history in which the small ball pushes the big ball.[92] On July 9–July 11, Kissinger secretly visited Beijing for two days of informal talks with Premier Zhou Enlai.[93] This visit not only laid the foundation for the meeting between the two heads of state and the establishment of diplomatic relations but also opened a new chapter in Sino-U.S. relations.

The Significance of China's Nascent Nuclear Arsenal

The Nixon administration's change in attitude toward China was significantly influenced by concerns about China's nascent nuclear arsenal. Nixon explicitly expressed his concerns about Chinese nuclear weapons as soon as he assumed the presidency. His efforts to improve Sino-U.S. relations were initiated with these concerns in mind. The U.S. government's repeated references to the uncertainties surrounding China's nuclear strategy demonstrated that the ambiguity of China's nuclear doctrine was a major factor in its deterrence effect.

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[89] Ibid, Doc. 83.
[90] Ibid, Doc. 109.
[91] Ibid, Doc. 112.
[92] "Ping-Pong Melts Cold War Rifts," USC US-China Institute, September 27, 2007, https://china.usc.edu/ping-pong-melts-cold-war-rifts.
[93] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976: China, 1969-1972*, Vol. XVII, Doc. 139-144.

Historically, the U.S. had adopted a more aggressive military posture towards China when it was a non-nuclear state, engaging in actions that reflected a lack of concern for Chinese military capability. However, the dynamics changed dramatically once China possessed its nascent nuclear arsenal. Unlike the past U.S. administrations that operated under the assumption that they could engage China militarily without severe repercussions, the Nixon administration's approach was characterized by a greater awareness of the risks posed by China's nuclear weapons. President Nixon recognized that China's nuclear arsenal introduced a significant element of unpredictability and potential risk. This uncertainty made the U.S. more cautious and motivated it to seek improved diplomatic relations to mitigate the threat.

During bilateral relationship negotiations, the emphasis on disarmament invitations further highlighted U.S. apprehensions about China's nuclear capabilities. These diplomatic efforts were not only about fostering better relations but also about reducing the risks associated with misinterpretation or miscalculation in the nuclear realm. This effort further reflected that the U.S. was concerned about the need for more clarity in China's nuclear doctrine.

Overall, the transformation in the U.S. government's attitude before and after China's acquisition of nuclear weapons is a clear indication of the deterrent effect of a nascent nuclear arsenal. It demonstrates how even an early nuclear capability can alter the strategic calculations of a major power, compelling it to pursue more cautious and conciliatory policies to avoid any potential conflict escalation.

Case	Nascent Nuclear Arsenal (IV)	Doctrine Uncertainty	Deterrence Outcome (DV)
Korean War, 1950	no	no	failure
Taiwan Strait Crisis, 1954-55	no	no	failure
Taiwan Strait Crisis, 1958	no	no	failure
Nixon Administration, 1969-71	yes	yes	success

Table 1: Display of China's Nascent Nuclear Arsenal Deterrence Effect

Conclusion

Different from other nuclear deterrence theories, which mostly study mature nuclear arsenals with specific postures, this study investigates the most intuitive and basic deterrent power of nuclear weapons—the deterrence effect of a nascent nuclear arsenal, whose deterrent capacity is determined by the uncertainty of their doctrine. This paper argues that a nascent nuclear arsenal is born with an unknown doctrine, and such ambiguity complicates potential enemies' strategic calculus, making them reluctant to attack because they must assume the worst repercussion of any provocative move—first-use of nuclear weapons by the nascent nuclear power. The case study in this paper verifies this theory by showing the U.S.'s different attitudes towards Communist China before and after acquiring nuclear weapons. While dealing with non-nuclear China during the Korean War and the two Taiwan Strait Crises, the U.S. showed no fear of Chinese military power and even displayed scorn about fighting with China. However, after China gained a nascent nuclear arsenal, the U.S. made a 180-degree turnaround in its attitude toward China during the Nixon administration.

This finding has important implications for future security studies. Understanding the deterrence effect of nascent nuclear arsenals can help policymakers and security analysts better anticipate and respond to the strategic behaviors of emerging nuclear powers. It highlights the

critical role of doctrinal ambiguity in shaping strategic stability and suggests that even a small nuclear arsenal can significantly alter the geopolitical landscape. This insight is particularly relevant for managing relations with current and future nuclear aspirants, helping to develop strategies that prevent escalation and promote stability.

However, some limitations can be addressed in future research efforts. This study employs a single case study to test the theory. Although the theory is solidly confirmed in this context, it must be verified by multiple empirical cases to achieve generality and validity. Examining a broader range of cases across geopolitical contexts and historical periods can provide a more comprehensive understanding of nascent nuclear deterrence. Future research should include comparative studies of various nascent nuclear powers to see if the observed patterns hold consistently. This broader approach would strengthen the generalizability of the findings and offer a more robust theoretical framework for understanding the deterrent effects of nascent nuclear arsenals.

Moreover, any nuclear deterrence theory based on explicitly or implicitly using a first-use doctrine might exacerbate security competition. To mitigate the risk of a first-use scenario, potential adversaries might develop more advanced and precise first-strike capabilities. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate whether the possession of a nascent nuclear arsenal can reduce security competition while deterring conventional attacks. This is because a nascent arsenal lacks the capability to act as an aggressor and serves primarily as a powerful deterrent, as this thesis studied. Alternatively, if holding a nascent nuclear arsenal does not prevent security competition as anticipated in this paper, it is important to study to what extent a nuclear arsenal can both deter the first conventional attack and prevent further security competition. This field requires a more thorough examination.