

STRATEGIC TRENDS RESEARCH INITIATIVE

# UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGY TOWARD NUCLEAR WEAPONS: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

China's quantitative and qualitative improvements in nuclear weapons are advancing it toward nuclear parity with the United States, significantly impacting the strategic calculations in Beijing and Washington. Yet critical gaps remain in understanding how China views nuclear deterrence. Most importantly, there is limited insight into China's nuclear weapons calculations in potential confrontations with another nuclear power. To address these gaps, this study examines Chinese writings regarding past crises between nuclear weapons states—including those in which China was involved—to understand what lessons Beijing took from them and how those lessons inform People's Republic of China (PRC) thinking in future crises.



## FINDINGS SUMMARY

Based on an evaluation of a set of historical case studies, Chinese academics and policymakers assess that the role of nuclear weapons, for the most part, played a minor factor in Beijing's calculus to use force and, similarly, in other countries' decisions to use force. In the cases in which China was directly involved in a military conflict, China crafted a narrative that other countries' nuclear escalation or signaling of intent to engage in nuclear escalation did not greatly influence the willingness of China to de-escalate the conflict. Thus, while China was keenly aware of the presence of nuclear weapons and carefully weighed the risks of possible nuclear retaliation before making the decision to use force in a conflict, the nuclear deterrent of the adversary mattered little in China's decision to use force. On the other hand, in cases where China was not a participant in a conflict—in particular, the Cuban Missile Crisis—Chinese historians came to a very different conclusion. Most assessed that the United States successfully employed nuclear escalation, coercive bargaining, and brinkmanship, forcing the Soviet Union to back down. Chinese academics judged that this success was due to the decision-making process and the strategic balance that favored the United States at the time. Most Chinese analysts thus believed that the strategic balance that favored the United States at the time was a critical factor in the favorable outcome for Washington in that conflict.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used a case study approach to understand Chinese nuclear thinking. The six major case studies include the Korean War of 1950–53, the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954–55 and 1958, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clashes, and the border conflicts between China and India of 2017–20. It was determined that these six cases best captured the breadth of Chinese views on the nuclear deterrent dynamics in terms of historical significance and in terms of actors with different nuclear capabilities. Some, like the Cuban Missile Crisis, had been the subject of in-depth examination by PRC analysts, but of which little had been written in the English language open-source literature. This study utilizes Chinese-language sources, including official PRC government documents, as well as monographs and journal articles written by authors of Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-affiliated think tanks and military research institutions. The report is also informed by insights drawn from a private workshop composed of subject matter experts held in Washington, D.C., in January 2024.

## KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section presents the central findings from the technical report as well as recommendations for DTRA and to the U.S. government.

**Finding:** *Nuclear deterrence mattered little in China's use of force calculus.* China assesses that the historical role of nuclear weapons, for the most part, played a minor factor in its calculus to use force and, similarly, in other countries' decisions to use force. In the cases in which China was directly involved in a military conflict, China crafted a narrative that other countries' nuclear escalation or signaling of intent to engage in nuclear escalation did not greatly influence the willingness of China to de-escalate the conflict. However, an important caveat in this assessment is that almost all cases in this study were sufficiently limited in their aims as to not approach a nuclear threshold. While China was keenly aware of the presence of nuclear weapons and carefully weighed the risks of possible nuclear retaliation before making the decision to use force in a conflict, the nuclear deterrent of the adversary mattered little in China's decision to use force.

**Finding:** *Nuclear coercion against China was ineffective after the onset of hostilities.* In conflicts involving China, Chinese scholars are fairly uniform in their assessment that after the initial use of force in a conflict, nuclear coercion, or "saber-rattling," by the adversary was generally not effective in managing escalation. Chinese scholars generally believe signals by adversaries that threatened China with nuclear weapons lacked credibility, either because of China's judgment of the international opprobrium that would follow or due to domestic factors inhibiting nuclear use on the battlefield. This was especially true in Chinese analysts' eyes during the Korean War and the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises.

**Finding:** *Strategic balance calculus was influential in the outcome of certain conflicts.* Chinese assessments of the Cuban Missile Crisis stand out for their realpolitik flavor, suggesting that the strategic balance between two adversaries before and during a military conflict matters. Most Chinese analysts believed that the strategic balance that favored the United States at the time was a critical factor in the favorable outcome for Washington. Chinese analysts also assessed that U.S. brinkmanship—namely, the imposition of a blockade of Cuba—was a stroke of strategic genius by U.S. president Kennedy that allowed the United States to emerge from the crisis victorious and forced the Soviet Union to de-escalate the standoff and eventually remove its missiles from Cuba.

**Finding:** *Fears of nuclear "blackmail" remain a powerful narrative in modern Chinese thinking.* Preventing the nuclear "blackmail" of China closely followed the deterrence of nuclear aggression as a strategic objective, in large part because Beijing felt itself victimized by U.S. and Soviet nuclear threats at various moments during the early Cold War when it did not have nuclear weapons. Thus, defeating nuclear blackmail constituted an important motivation underlying China's quest for the bomb during the Cold War. Such a psyche also informs modern Chinese nuclear strategy. While there are numerous drivers for China's recent nuclear expansion, historical memories of nuclear blackmail at the hands of nuclear-armed powers likely motivate China's strategy of ensuring and expanding a true second-strike capability.

**Finding:** *Retaining a "minimum means of reprisal" matters to deter adversary behavior.* After 1964, Chinese scholars assessed that a minimum nuclear deterrent, by its very presence and irrespective of specific vulnerabilities, serves to induce caution on the part of stronger rivals like the United States and the Soviet Union even during serious crises. This became evident when the more-powerful Soviet Union was compelled to stay its hand in the face of serious temptations to attack what were obviously inferior Chinese nuclear forces during the acute Sino-Soviet crisis of 1969. Because the "minimum means of reprisal," when combined with the threat of an endless "people's war," proved adequate for effective deterrence against both nuclear attacks and intimidation in the real world of international politics, Maoist China avoided pursuing a maximum nuclear force that was judged to be both wasteful and unnecessary by Chinese strategists at the time.

**Finding:** *China's lack of experience in nuclear escalation may lead to miscalculation.* Most Chinese historians conclude that China successfully emerged from crises having achieved its limited war aims while controlling

escalation in the nuclear domain. However, such confidence may be misplaced and may fail to account for the myriad factors influencing the decision of foreign actors not to retaliate with nuclear weapons. There is a danger that China's confidence in its ability to manage the spectrum of crises could also be applied to a limited set of instances in which China successfully managed a nuclear crisis.

**Finding:** *The potential to misread nuclear signals remains worrisome.* Several assessments by Chinese scholars who expressed skepticism that Chinese leaders received the intended nuclear signaling by the United States raise questions over a "perception gap" within China's strategic bureaucracy. This lends credence to the work of scholars who argue that doctrinal differences between China and the United States have led to deterrence failures, to include during the Korean War. The United States should not assume China has derived the same nuclear deterrence messaging that the United States intends.

**Recommendation:** *Fund studies that involve Chinese historians to guide current U.S. government "red team" thinking on Chinese nuclear escalation.* DTRA should take the lead in funding studies and tabletop exercises that enable the U.S. government and intelligence community to use Chinese history as a guide to inform "red team" thinking. Some red team exercises are divorced from, or not adequately applied to, how China has historically behaved in a crisis with a nuclear-armed adversary. China is keenly aware of its asymmetric disadvantages in the strategic domain vis-à-vis the United States and thus will likely approach a nuclear crisis with the United States with caution and restraint, despite its recent quantitative increase in warheads. Thus, DTRA, in collaboration with the DoD and the intelligence community, should seek more opportunities to fund studies and tabletop exercises that incorporate a wider variety of subject matter experts (SMEs) with a background in Chinese nuclear history.

**Recommendation:** *Fund Track 2 dialogues with Chinese institutions about the risks of nuclear escalation.* DTRA has a unique history of funding Track 2 dialogues on nuclear dynamics with Chinese think tanks and academic institutes. Given this unique history, and while progress on Track 1 dialogues with China on arms control remains stalled, DTRA should consider funding new Track 2 dialogues with Chinese institutions. There exists a large and yawning gap between U.S. and Chinese views on nuclear strategy and arms control. Such an environment breeds miscalculation and misperceptions of the other's actions and motives, which makes strategic stability more precarious. Unofficial dialogues offer avenues to exchange views and, hopefully, gain a better understanding of each other's concerns. They are not a panacea, however, and need to occur in tandem with tangible efforts at modernizing the United States' strategic deterrent capability.

**Recommendation:** *Push for arms control and risk reduction with China.* DTRA should join the various stakeholders within the U.S. government in advocating for arms control with China, bearing in mind that arms control in the future will probably look different from how it evolved with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. An arms control agreement with China will likely not comprise the same form or structure as those between the United States and the Soviet Union. Arms control can be conceptualized much more broadly to include all forms of military cooperation between potential enemies in the interest of reducing the likelihood of a war. An arms control process with China could seek to address not only nuclear weapons but also emerging technologies in the cyber and space domains that are likely to affect nuclear stability.

**Recommendation:** *Invest in more Chinese-language primary source materials.* While this study sheds new light on China's views of nuclear coercion, the continued availability of Chinese-language resources appears more challenging than in the past. This is especially the case for sources from PLA research organizations and CCP reports on how China views nuclear weapons, which, even during the course of this research, were restricted by databases in mainland China. DTRA would benefit from taking the lead to fund additional sources of Chinese-language materials for the U.S. government.