

Pentagon report on China highlights danger of nuclear war

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One sinister aspect of the US Defence Department's 2006 report on the Chinese military released last month is its discussion of nuclear policy.

Overall, the document entitled "Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China" marked a more aggressive US military stance toward China than in previous years. It identified the Chinese regime as a military rival and highlighted its growing defence spending, particularly its investment in advanced military technology (see: "Pentagon report targets China as a military threat").

For the first time since its publication began in 2001, the annual report tried to suggest that China is a growing nuclear threat to the US. In the context of the Bush administration's doctrine of "pre-emptive war", the shift indicates that the Bush administration and Pentagon are themselves preparing for nuclear war.

According to the Pentagon, the "threat" is an alleged discussion underway in Chinese military circles over an abandonment of China's longstanding policy of "no-first strike"—that is, no use of nuclear weapons except in response to nuclear attack.

Peter Rodman, US assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs, told the American Forces Press Service on May 23: "One thing we point to [in the report] this year is their strategic forces. We sense that they are at the beginning of some serious modernisation of their overall strategic forces... We take them at their word that they adhere to the no first use doctrine, but we see these occasional comments as an indication of a possible debate going on among Chinese strategists."

The Pentagon report highlighted a statement by Chinese general Zhu Chenghu in July 2005 as one of the "key developments" in China's strategic policy. Zhu declared that if the US threatened to attack China in a conflict over Taiwan, China would have to "respond with nuclear weapons".

The Pentagon conceded that Beijing has dismissed Zhu's comments as his "personal opinion" and reaffirmed its "no first use" policy during US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's visit to China last October. It nevertheless concluded: "Zhu's remark, however, show that the circle of military and civilian national security professionals discussing the value of China's current 'no first use' nuclear policy is broader than previously assessed."

The report cited several Chinese academics. Chu Shulong, a scholar from Qinghua University, reportedly told the state media in July 2005 that "if foreign countries launch a full-scale war against China and deploy all types of advanced weapons except nuclear weapons, China may renounce this commitment [of no first use] at a time when the country's fate hangs in the balance".

Another academic, Shen Dingli, wrote in a publication *China Security* last year: "If China's conventional forces are devastated, and if Taiwan takes the opportunity to declare de jure independence, it is inconceivable that China would allow its nuclear weapons to be destroyed by a precision attack with conventional munitions, rather than use them as a true means of deterrence."

None of these comments constitutes evidence that Beijing is about to abandon the "no first use" policy announced when China first constructed nuclear weapons in the 1960s. Moreover, far from being an indication of military strength, the remarks about the possible use of nuclear weapons to counter a US conventional attack underscore China's weakness in comparison with the US.

Despite efforts to modernise weaponry and strategic doctrine, much of its hardware is old. Most of China's sophisticated military technology is still heavily reliant on foreign sources, especially Russian. The Chinese army is numerically large but only semi-mechanised; its commanders are inexperienced and the largely peasant Chinese soldiers are poorly trained.

The fact that the Pentagon report has chosen to highlight a few isolated comments reveals a great deal more about the Bush administration's own nuclear policy, than that of China. It should be noted that even in the midst of the Cold War, the US never renounced the first use of nuclear weapons. In fact, it stationed tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and South Korea, alleging precisely what is contained in the Chinese comments: the inability of US and allied forces to withstand a concerted conventional offensive by the Soviet or Chinese military.

Pointing to a possible Chinese threat is a convenient pretext for justifying the Pentagon's extensive efforts to upgrade and modernise its own arsenal to establish an unchallenged nuclear hegemony. An essay in the March/April issue of *Foreign Affairs* entitled "The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy" provided a sobering assessment of the direction of US nuclear policy.

During the Cold War, the prevailing nuclear doctrine was characterised as MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction). With thousands of nuclear weapons based on a variety of platforms, including submarines, warplanes and long-range missiles, neither side was in a position to annihilate the weaponry of the other in a first strike. The survival of even a portion of a nuclear arsenal following an attack meant a devastating retaliation on the aggressor.

The authors of the *Foreign Affairs* article pointed out that sections of the US establishment had never accepted the MAD doctrine and that the Pentagon now appeared to be striving for "nuclear primacy"—that is, the ability to obliterate the capacity of any nuclear-armed enemy to respond to a US first strike. The bulk of the article is devoted to a careful analysis, using publicly available sources, of Russia's ability to withstand and retaliate against a US nuclear first strike. It concluded that, with the decay of the Russia defences, its nuclear-armed submarine fleet and long-range missiles following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US had probably achieved "nuclear primacy".

The *Foreign Affairs* article also makes clear that China's nuclear weapons are even more vulnerable to a US attack. "A US first strike could succeed whether it was launched as a surprise or in the midst of a crisis during a Chinese alert. China has a limited strategic nuclear arsenal. The People's Liberation Army currently possesses no modern SSBNs [ballistic-missile-launching submarines] or long-range bombers. Its naval arm used to have two ballistic missile submarines, but one sank, and the other, which had such poor capabilities that it never left Chinese waters, is no longer operational.

"China's medium-range bomber force is similarly unimpressive: the bombers are obsolete and vulnerable to attack. According to unclassified US government assessments, China's entire intercontinental nuclear arsenal consists of 18 stationary single-warhead ICBMs. These are not ready launch on warning: their warheads are kept in storage and the missiles themselves are unfueled. (China's ICBMs use liquid fuel, which corrodes the missiles after 24 hours. Fueling them is estimated to take two hours.) The lack of an advanced early warning system adds to the vulnerability of the ICBMs. It appears that China would have no warning at all of a US submarine-launched missile attack or a strike using hundreds of stealthy nuclear-armed cruise missiles."

Foreign Affairs has close links to the US political establishment. The article indicates that there is widespread discussion and planning in the top echelons of the Bush administration and Pentagon about a possible first strike on US enemies—whether Russia, China or other nuclear armed countries. Exaggerated accounts of the Chinese "threat" are useful to justify the further development of the US nuclear arsenal.

The greatest danger of nuclear war does not come from China, but from the US. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington has been seeking to use its military superiority increasingly aggressively to offset its long-term economic decline, in particular to establish its dominance over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The Bush administration's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and threats against Iran have antagonised US rivals in Europe and Asia.

The US preoccupation with China reflects deep concerns about Beijing's economic expansion and growing political influence in Asia and globally. The Pentagon's focus on China says more about US preparations for eventual war, including a possible nuclear attack, against the Beijing regime, than it does about China's relatively limited military capacity.



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