

Chinese security analyst questions “no first use” nuclear policy

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In another sign of the mounting tensions in Asia that have been fuelled by Washington, a leading Chinese security expert, Shen Dingli, wrote in the *Global Times* on August 2 that Beijing must significantly increase the size and capabilities of its nuclear arsenal and reconsider its longstanding “no first use” policy.

Shen is an American-educated professor, now head of American Studies in Shanghai’s prestigious Fudan University. His articles frequently appear in the international press as a semi-official voice of the Chinese government on issues such as North Korea and Iran, as well as on the implications of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia.” This strategy aims to militarily contain China with a network of alliances and bases in the Indo-Pacific.

Shen is not known as a hawkish figure. Just two days earlier, in an interview with Japan’s *Asahi Shimbun*, Shen warned that with the US military “rebalance,” deploying 60 percent of its naval and air forces to the Asia-Pacific, “the possibility for a clash only becomes much greater. That would be extremely dangerous.” He added: “For that reason, the two sides should share the ‘principle’ of never engaging in war with the other.”

His *Global Times* comment reflects growing fears within China’s foreign and defence establishment that its relatively small nuclear arsenal and “no first use” policy leave it without an effective deterrent against an increasingly aggressive American military encirclement.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, China possesses about 250 nuclear warheads—compared to America’s 7,700 and Russia’s 8,500. China’s arsenal is only slightly larger than Britain’s 225 warheads, and smaller than France’s 300. Moreover, as well as the number of weapons, the US maintains a vast technological advantage over all its

rivals, with more sophisticated warheads and delivery systems.

In his *Global Times* comment, Shen opposed a nuclear arms race with the US, “but [we] must double our strategic strike forces to compel the opponent to abandon any mistaken notion of armed interventions against our sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

Shen explained that China’s current nuclear policy is based on “minimum nuclear deterrence,” which is to prevent nuclear blackmail—that is, “to ensure a portion of the nuclear weapons survives a large-scale nuclear strike, and is able to penetrate the enemy defence in a counter-strike, delivering an unacceptable retaliation to the enemy.” China’s “no first use” policy also includes a pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.

However, Shen argued that it was time to consider a change, given “the rising external threat.” He pointed to two issues: firstly, reunification with Taiwan, which is blocked by a potential US military intervention, and secondly, China’s territorial disputes in the East China and South China Seas. “Even though our country tries its best to resolve them via negotiation, some opponents, backed by security alliances with the US, are very arrogant, refusing to acknowledge there is a dispute, and attempting to occupy the Chinese territory for a long time,” he wrote.

Obama’s “pivot” has encouraged US allies such as Japan and Philippines to more aggressively assert their claims in maritime disputes with China. US officials have repeatedly declared that they would back Japan in a conflict with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Washington has established new basing arrangements with Australia, the Philippines and Singapore that potentially threaten vital shipping lanes for China’s energy and raw materials imports from the Middle East

and Africa.

These threats, Shen warned, reflected the lack of a sufficient deterrent by China's conventional forces. At present, he explained, "our current nuclear deterrent only aims at countering a nuclear first strike by another party, not threats to our core interests." He argued: "What must be clearly established is that as long as there is a threat to our primary core interests, whether in the form of a nuclear threat or non-nuclear threat, the means for protecting our country cannot start by ruling out some of the state's offensive weapons."

A report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in April concluded that a US-China conflict could quickly evolve into a nuclear one, as a result of the Pentagon's "Air/Sea Battle" doctrine, which involves a massive assault on China's communications and command systems. The paper warned that such a "blinding campaign could increase the risk of a disproportionate Chinese response, including nuclear escalation." In other words, if the US destroyed China's ability to monitor incoming American missiles and thus a potential nuclear strike, Beijing could be forced to unleash its own nuclear weapons.

In a *Wall Street Journal* interview in 2005, Chinese general Zhu Chenghu, warned: "[I]f the Americans draw their missiles and position-guided ammunition on to the target zone on China's territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons." At the time, the Chinese government dismissed Zhu's remarks as the personal opinion of a hawkish military figure. Now, Shen's comments indicate that ending China's no-first strike policy is being actively considered in ruling circles.

The main responsibility for the growing danger of thermonuclear war lies with US imperialism. Since the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, it has repeatedly used its military might to maintain its global dominance over potential rivals. The US has never ruled out the first use of nuclear weapons. Its construction of anti-ballistic missile systems in Europe and Asia is not aimed against "rogue states" such as Iran and North Korea, but at undermining the nuclear deterrent of Russia and China.

Like China, the former Soviet Union maintained a "no first use" policy. Russia, however, is no longer able to maintain conventional and nuclear forces that match those of the US. In response to the US military threat, Moscow changed its nuclear policy in 2010. The

Russian military will now respond with nuclear weapons not only to a nuclear attack, but "also in case of aggression against Russia with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is threatened."

The US preparations for war against China are now forcing Beijing to consider adopting a similar nuclear policy. In his *Global Times* article, Shen argued: "To protect a country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, nuclear states have the right to use all offensive means for national defence."



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