
General Zhu and Chinese Nuclear Preemption

Bruce G. Blair

A leading military strategist in China recently jolted an audience of foreign journalists with a radical vision of China's conduct during a future war with the United States over Taiwan. Maj.-Gen. Zhu Chenghu, dean of China's National Defense University, espoused the view that China would have no choice but to respond with nuclear weapons if the United States attacked Chinese territory with conventional (non-nuclear) forces during such a conflict, a view that contradicts the longstanding nuclear doctrine of China. Zhu outlined a scenario in which China, facing defeat in the conventional phase of combat, would cross the nuclear threshold to launch a massive preemptive strike that would destroy hundreds of American cities.

As discussed later, his view does not constitute a threat but rather a logical conclusion of a thought process. Zhu possesses analytical, though not political, acumen. His remarks were honest, astute, and intellectually stimulating in ways that should contribute to a healthy debate over national security in China and the United States. But the immediate reaction has been almost uniformly negative.

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A Defensive Nuclear Posture

Zhu's remarks stirred behind-the-scenes criticism at home and noisy controversy abroad. Within China, nuclear specialists could not fail to notice that both the magnitude and preemptory character of Zhu's imaginary Chinese nuclear onslaught deviated sharply from deeply rooted tenets of the country's nuclear policy. These almost sacrosanct tenets trace their lineage back half a century to the iconic leader Mao Zedong. Mao's grasp of the apocalyptic nature of nuclear weapons led him to regard even small arsenals as representing "overkill" and endangering humanity. Mao also understood that embarking on a nuclear build-up would trigger a nuclear arms race with one or both of the nuclear superpowers, and thereby incur high economic costs and strategic risks. The logical choice for China, Mao thus concluded, was to build a small arsenal designed to project a threat of retaliation that would inflict intolerable pain on any nuclear attacker. Mao evidently determined that no more than a handful of nuclear bombs reliably delivered against the United States or the Soviet Union were required to achieve an adequate level of deterrence. This determination kept tight reins on China's nuclear program even in the face of a massive build-up in nuclear arms by the Soviets and Americans over several decades of Cold War tension.

The corollary of Mao's pursuit of a minimal second-strike deterrent force meant to project threat was his embrace of a No-First-Use policy meant to project reassurance and foster stability by calming the nerves of potential foes, nuclear and non-nuclear alike. Along with small arsenals, restraint in their use formed the second pillar of China's nuclear policy.

This concise formulation of the extremely limited role of nuclear weapons in China's defense strategy gelled under Mao in the early days of China's nuclear program and remained virtually etched in

stone for many decades. It endured in spite of the turbulence of the Cold War when the nuclear superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, not only vastly expanded their nuclear arsenals but also placed them on hair-trigger alert in order to be constantly prepared to fight a large-scale nuclear war with each other, or with China. China never followed suit, choosing instead to maintain a low level of missile launch readiness and to keep the warheads for the missiles in a separate location in peacetime. China clearly eschewed any nuclear posture that would sow doubt in an adversary's mind about China's intention never to launch a sudden, surprise attack. China sought to convey a clear commitment to a defensive second-strike role for its nuclear forces, believing this posture would bolster both crisis and arms race stability.

China's nuclear program practically ignored the multitude of pressures and threats directed toward China by the Soviet Union and the United States. Both nuclear superpowers developed nuclear war plans against China that assigned thousands of high-yield nuclear bombs to strike facilities in China (and its ally North Korea). Nuclear sabers were rattled especially noisily in China's direction in the late 1960s. The specter of nuclear war between China and the Soviet Union loomed large as their border crisis escalated and the Soviets prepared for a possible preemptive nuclear strike at China's fledgling nuclear force. China's nuclear doctrine held steady through this and other threatening episodes, including recent episodes when the Pentagon reinstated (in January 1998) China as a strategic nuclear target of the U.S. nuclear war plan after a hiatus of almost 20 years. (China had been removed from the nuclear war plan in 1981 after the normalization of China-U.S. diplomatic relations) Several limited nuclear options were created then to enable the United States to suddenly attack China's

nuclear forces, war-supporting industry, and leadership. (These so-called LNOs assign somewhere between 2 and 120 U.S. nuclear weapons per option) A few years later (2001), President Bush's Nuclear Posture Review identified China for the first time in two decades as an "immediate nuclear contingency", an assessment reflecting the Pentagon's estimate of the possibility of rapid nuclear escalation in the event of a Taiwan contingency that pitted Chinese and U.S. combat forces against each other. Yet China never "took the bait" over many decades of turbulent relations with the nuclear superpowers. While the Soviets and Americans amassed nuclear arms and constantly revised their nuclear offensive and defense doctrines with a view to improving their nuclear war-fighting capabilities, China humbly plodded along a well-worn path of low-key modernization of its small arsenal, and adhered to a strict doctrine of No-First-Use. It set an example of moderation and prudence on the moral high ground, and seemingly proved its theory that small defensively oriented arsenals at once provided deterrence, reassurance and stability. For China, its modest program fostered both crisis and arms race stability.

If China's nuclear policy, hand-crafted by Mao and endorsed by every one of his successors, has proved its durability through the stormy decades of the Cold and post-Cold War period, then why would it be suddenly called into question by a senior military officer in charge of China's military think tank? Zhu's unorthodox view toppled both pillars of Chinese policy in advancing the notion that China would have to mount a large-scale preemptive nuclear offensive in the event of conflict over Taiwan. Such a challenge to the quintessence of Chinese nuclear doctrine was bound to irk China's security establishment even if Zhu had mounted it quietly behind the scenes. Which he did not. The general wrestled the conventional wisdom

to the ground in front of foreigners, foreign journalists no less.

The journalistic audience for his controversial view ensured that it was instantly and widely publicized in the West, where commentators and politicians strained to interpret its significance. Some quickly labeled him a hawk whose extremist views did not reflect official Chinese policy. Zhu himself was adamant from the very beginning that he was not speaking for the government or military, and that his view was strictly personal. Other commentators interpreted his hawkish position as reflective of an increasingly hard-line strand in Chinese security policy, while others read it as an ominous sign of a growing threat posed by an ascendant Asian powerhouse that is beginning to flex its newfound muscles.

China-U.S. Relations at a Strategic Crossroads

Because the general's comments lend themselves to political exploitation at a pivotal moment in Sino-American relations, they could very well have seriously adverse consequences for the relationship. The United States stands at a crossroads in its policy toward China. It lacks a strategic vision of the long-term relationship, and the debate over our future relations is presently generating more heat than illumination, more emotion than wisdom. Zhu's seemingly inflammatory comments only throw gasoline onto the fire. They provide grist for a sizable hawkish cadre in the United States; may tip the balance for some undecided moderates to move into the hawkish camp; and will reinforce the trend toward portraying, and treating, China as America's next designated enemy, and toward summoning India to act as a countervailing force to contain China.

Neither the atrophying Russia nor the fading global terrorist threat (notwithstanding the tragic July 7 attacks

on London's transportation network and the Iraq insurgency) compares to an ascending China as a threat. Only the emerging Chinese juggernaut can be made to look menacing enough to justify the one-half trillion dollars of annual U.S. defense spending. Pentagon hawks will be quick to seize upon Zhu's comments to reinforce their growing skepticism toward China rising peacefully, a skepticism bordering on fear-mongering revealed most recently in the U.S. Defense Secretary's latest annual report to Congress, "The Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2005." They will also cite the general's remarks to advance their arguments for shifting the focus of U.S. nuclear war planning away from Russia (not an immediate nuclear contingency according to the 2001 Bush Nuclear Posture Review) to China. Zhu has given new impetus to this growing obsession with China and to assigning more U.S. nuclear forces to China contingencies. The general envisioned China preempting the United States in wartime, but now it will more likely be U.S. nuclear planners who re-double their efforts to devise a new array of preemptive options for potential use against China's opposing forces. Zhu's words will boomerang.

That may well be the unfortunate consequence of Zhu's comments, but it does not mean that Zhu was actually issuing a threat or warning for Western consumption. On the contrary, as noted at the outset of this essay, his view represents the logical conclusion of a thought process. Zhu knows full well that the revolution in military technology has conferred overwhelming superiority on U.S. conventional forces. In a conflict centered on the Taiwan contingency, China's conventional forces would likely be rapidly defeated by a combination of timely, accurate U.S. tactical intelligence and precision-guided munitions. As a result, China would have no choice but to resort to nuclear weapons or abandon the principle of using all

necessary military means to prevent the loss of Taiwan.

Zhu is an astute student of military strategy and a very knowledgeable expert on the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), and could not escape the conclusion that the military balance is so lop-sided today (despite the 13 percent rise in annual Chinese military spending for the past decade) that the only countervailing military instruments for an adversary of the United States today, and for the foreseeable future, are nuclear weapons.

Conventional Power Imbalance and the Nuclear Option

The analogous point has not been lost on the rest of the world where growing numbers of nations seek nuclear weapons to compensate for their relative conventional weaknesses vis-à-vis the United States or other regional adversaries. America's technological revolution in warfare continues to widen the gap of military capabilities in favor of the United States throughout the world. The U.S. cumulative investment in advanced weapons, command and control, intelligence, logistics, transport, and training has translated into overpowering strength vis-à-vis the opposing conventional forces of China or any other particular country. The temptation, and pressure, is to fall back on nuclear weapons to offset the decisive U.S. advantage, as even Russia illustrates. Russia abandoned its No-First-Use policy in 1993, having recognized the weakness of its conventional forces. It codified its reliance on nuclear weapons to protect Russia from threats to its national survival.

Zhu's position is almost identical to Russia's logic in abandoning No-First-Use. One critical difference is that Russia and the United States are roughly equal in nuclear capabilities. If Russia used nuclear weapons preemptively against the United States, the latter could inflict severe punitive damage in retaliation but could not

achieve any meaningful level of escalation dominance. By contrast, the United States could quickly establish nuclear dominance in the event of a Chinese preemptive nuclear attack against the United States. Zhu knows full well that such a Chinese strike would invite the complete destruction of China by U.S. nuclear forces, whose numbers capable of reaching Chinese cities and military facilities total many thousands, as compared to the dozen or so Chinese missiles capable of reaching the continental U.S. Under any imaginable circumstances of a nuclear exchange between them, the United States could destroy China utterly and still retain thousands of nuclear weapons after China expends or loses to attrition its entire small arsenal. This inequality known in the arcane field of nuclear theory as nuclear escalation dominance would deter the disadvantaged rational actor from launching a preemptive attack against the dominant nuclear power.

The general may have discounted this inequality on the grounds that China's nuclear modernization would close the gap and deny the United States any significant theoretical advantage in this balance of power. In fact, the media coverage of Zhu's comments quotes him as saying that hundreds of U.S. cities could be destroyed by Chinese nuclear forces, implying a future large-scale build-up of China's strategic nuclear arsenal. But that number certainly stretches credulity for the present time frame, and even for the next 10-year phase of modernization in which the number of deliverable long-range nuclear weapons is not expected to exceed about 100. A more ambitious modernization plan is technically feasible, but not very plausible. It would entail a fairly crash program that would entail a major change in the relative priority of military modernization versus economic development, which would be highly significant indeed. It would also probably necessitate the restarting of China's fissile materials production facili-

ties (plutonium or highly enriched uranium) because China ceased such production in 1990 and in all likelihood lacks sufficient surplus fissile materials in storage to produce a large new batch of nuclear bombs. China would probably also need to re-design some of its nuclear warheads (especially if multiple-reentry vehicles were developed to enable several bombs to fit inside the nosecone of each missile) and thus would likely have to resume underground nuclear testing. Such a move would repeal China's commitments to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and to a future multilateral treaty to end the production of nuclear bomb-making materials. In sum, China could embark on a crash strategic nuclear program on a scale comparable to the U.S. crash program in the 1960s in which 1,000 Minuteman missiles were fielded in less than eight years. But it would entail an implausibly radical departure from China's current course, and from the canonical principles laid out by Mao Zedong himself.

Regardless of China's future modernization, Zhu's envisioning of a Chinese preemptive nuclear attack implicitly assumes that China would resort to the maximum force if necessary to avoid losing Taiwan. Zhu implicitly takes the position that keeping Taiwan in the one-China fold is an inviolable principle that overrides everything including China's No-First-Use Declaration. That China would resort to all military means necessary, including nuclear weapons, in order to preserve China's territorial integrity (of which Taiwan is a part) seems non-controversial from a Chinese perspective, at least less controversial than saying that China would be prepared to give up Taiwan if China lost a conventional fight with the United States. Zhu's view is consistent with China's policy in saying that China would risk everything under the circumstances.

Zhu's pointing out that this could logically require China to override its No-First-

Use pledge reveals a contradiction in China's current policy, a logical trap that renders China's policy rather untenable, and extremely dangerous. Facing conventional defeat, the temptation to turn to nuclear weapons would expose China to another severe risk. As soon as the initial preparations to prepare Chinese nuclear forces for launch were undertaken, the United States would likely act to beat China to the punch. Given constant U.S. surveillance of Chinese nuclear launch sites, any major Chinese preparations to fire preemptorily would be detected and countered by a rapid U.S. preemptive strike against the sites by U.S. conventional or nuclear forces which maintain much higher launch readiness even in peacetime than do Chinese forces. The United States could easily detect and react inside of the lengthy launch cycle time of Chinese forces, especially the mainstay of the Chinese arsenal — missiles that normally sit in silos without warheads attached to them. The dangerous folly that Chinese nuclear preemption represents is far worse than Zhu's scenario suggested.

Modernized Conventional Forces or Preemption?

To fix the policy and escape a dilemma that could endanger China's very survival, China needs to correct the conventional imbalance with conventional modernization, not with a larger nuclear force placed on higher levels of launch readiness. It would not be surprising if Zhu argues inside China's security establishment for accelerating the modernization of China's conventional forces — lobbying for vastly greater Chinese investment in revolutionary military technology to strengthen China's conventional strength — precisely for the reason that the nuclear scenario Zhu presented to the foreign journalists is so fraught with instability and danger to China. His case would revolve around the convincing point that relying on nuclear

preemption is unwise, to say the least, because it is liable to fail, it is suicidal, and it is not credible policy. And the solution to the predicament is not No-First-Use alone, but rather No-First-Use coupled to a dramatically improved Chinese conventional Army, Navy, and Air Force capable of at least fighting the Americans to a draw over Taiwan. In Chinese military circles, it is difficult to imagine that a Chinese general of Zhu's stature and intelligence would recommend nuclear preemption as a solution to China's predicament, unless he was playing 'devils advocate' in an exercise intended to move his audience in exactly the opposite direction. It is far more believable that he fears that decision-makers would grasp at the straw of nuclear preemption out of desperation after suffering a conventional defeat, and that he believes the key to avoiding a nuclear debacle is to close the gap in conventional capabilities for Taiwan contingencies.

But in any case, Zhu did not make this case to the foreign journalists, and certainly presented a primitive view of China's reliance on nuclear preemption that belied his sophistication in matters of strategy. His logical analytical framework, described earlier, completely escaped his audience and the episode degenerated into a sensational story that ignited a political mini-firestorm abroad. His reputation as an extreme hawk cut both ways depending on whether the general's words were interpreted as representative of insider thinking and planning, or not.

One highly regarded expert, the former Commander of Pacific Command, Adm. (ret.) Dennis Blair, characterized the general as a mad dog in an interview given to the *Washington Post*. But Blair made the ingenious observation that the general's nuclear madness served China's interest insofar as it suggested to potential adversaries that China just might do something crazy such as use nuclear weapons first in combat over Taiwan. Irrational behavior

in the midst of crisis could not be ruled out, or so China's strategists would like the United States to believe because it would bolster China's ability to deter the United States from entering the fray. An irrational impulse to resort to nuclear weapons, however suicidal, is among the many factors that may induce an opponent to back away from a fight. You may not wish to fight with a foe that appears to be willing to commit suicide. Other factors that induce caution and restraint include the risks of unauthorized or inadvertent nuclear escalation. Along with decision-maker irrationality, they comprise a venerable concept in the theory of nuclear deterrence – the "threat that leaves something to chance." This concept, conceived by the famed academic theoretician Thomas Schelling, who almost certainly has been read thoroughly by military scholars at China's National Defense University, has been frequently invoked to rescue rational deterrence from its own contradictions and paradoxes.

It seems doubtful to this writer that Zhu's comments were intended by him or by the Chinese government to plant uncertainty in the minds of potential adversaries about China's willingness to use nuclear force to defend its national integrity. This outspoken general was almost certainly not speaking for the Chinese government or military, as he contends. Unfortunately, however, his senior position in the premier think tank of the Chinese military would inevitably mean that his comments could be interpreted as reflecting insider thinking and planning. Despite his disclaimer, the general and China became lightning rods for criticism, much of it politically motivated. Fairly or not, his words were construed widely as reflecting official policy or at least contingency planning in military circles.

U.S. Nuclear Ambiguity

By casting a dollop of doubt on China's

commitment to No-First-Use, the general invited a fresh round of political exploitation by China critics, many of whom are quick to condemn other countries for their alleged nuclear sins without looking into the mirror of American nuclear policy. U.S. policy has never endorsed No-First-Use, and in fact during the past decade the United States has expanded the roles and missions of U.S. nuclear weapons to deal with non-nuclear threats around the world. The United States has gone farther than any other nuclear weapons state to broaden the circumstances under which nuclear weapons might be employed, and to expand the list of targets and countries they would be used against. The United States traditionally has tried to keep potential foes guessing about its nuclear intentions. It has raised this game to an art form during the past decade, and certainly applies it to China and Taiwan contingencies.

In pursuing a policy of nuclear ambiguity about the circumstances in which U.S. nuclear weapons might be used, Washington has not ruled out their use against China during a conventional war over Taiwan. It is fair to say that Zhu's view in which China would depart in a de facto sense from its No-First-Use policy is comparable to current U.S. policy toward Taiwan contingencies. If Zhu's comments create somewhat more ambiguity about China's nuclear policy for a Taiwan conflict, regardless of whether or not the Chinese government seeks to create more ambiguity, then Zhu puts China in the same league with the United States and all the other nuclear powers whose policy is similarly flexible.

Zhu's notion that a U.S. attack on Chinese military warships or other dispersed assets of the People's Liberation Army would be regarded as an attack on Chinese territory is also no more provocative than American views on the thresholds of aggression. Critics who have been taken aback by this notion and who portray it as

provocative should understand that homeland territory per se is not the only critical threshold. In U.S. planning, attacks on U.S. Armed Forces abroad including ships and airplanes as well as foreign-based troops, and attacks on allies or on critical U.S. interests anywhere all cross the line into acts of aggression that could trigger U.S. military responses including nuclear responses in some cases. Thus, during the Cold War a Soviet attack on a German unit in NATO would have represented an act of belligerence that would have been met with U.S. military action. This is one of the reasons why the U.S. quarantine of Cuba during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis was so dangerous. American leaders feared that a hostile encounter between U.S. ships enforcing the quarantine, and Russian ships trying to breach it, would quickly engulf the two countries in war.

Managing the Taiwan Issue

This writer very much appreciated Zhu's candor and found the diversity of opinion that his comments revealed to be refreshing and encouraging of greater openness in China's deliberations on security issues. Zhu's failure to anticipate the impact of his comments which practically invited sensational journalism and political bomb-throwing unfortunately will have adverse repercussions. That is largely due to the extreme politicization of military policy discourse and debate that now exists in the United States. Cheap shots, double standards, dishonesty, ignorance, lack of scientific integrity and disrespect are all too commonplace. Zhu should have been circumspect in the situation. But if offered the choice between a circumspect and a free-wheeling discussion of nuclear policy with an intellectual Chinese general, the free-wheeling option is unquestionably preferable.

The principals in this episode got burned by the exaggerated reaction abroad, and an interesting and vital discussion has been

side-tracked if not terminated. If it can be re-started, the agenda for discussion should emphasize the risks of escalation of a Taiwan crisis and ways to reduce those risks. The Taiwan situation is an accident waiting to happen that could rapidly escalate to large-scale conflict. China is fully committed to defend its vital interest in Taiwan remaining part of one China, and the United States is committed by law to defend Taiwan in the event of conflict. Even low-level tactical hostilities, perhaps initiated inadvertently, could begin to spiral out of control under the circumstances of unflinching commitments on both sides to counter each other. Neither China nor the United States should be confident in its ability to manage a full-fledged crisis involving large-scale military operations between two militaries operating in close pr-

oximity. Recall how poorly the small-scale EP-3 crisis was managed. The command and control of the far-flung forces in the region leave much to be desired on both sides. Overlaying this inherently volatile confrontation with a new nuclear uncertainty – preemptive Chinese nuclear attack (Zhu’s vision) would seem to add another inflammatory ingredient to the boiling cauldron. It arguably would increase the danger of full-scale nuclear war erupting in the event of a conflict over Taiwan.

It would be very worthwhile to take up this issue of crisis instability in the strait, and to consider how best to prepare to manage a crisis to prevent escalation. Zhu and his colleagues must have a briefcase full of ideas that this writer and many others are eager to hear, and debate.