

The Revival of Nuclear Competition in an Altered Geopolitical Context: A Chinese Perspective

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A central element of the Cold War was the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, both superpowers seeking nuclear quantitative superiority and the ability to offer nuclear umbrellas to their allies, vying for leading influence in the world. Among states and observers today, there is a growing concern that nuclear competition will once again shape the global order.

In its 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the United States accused Russia and China of challenging American power, influence, and interests and of expanding their own influence. According to this report, “great power competition returned. China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally.”¹ The position of the United States was that China and Russia were expanding their power (and influence) and the United States had to respond.

To understand the future of nuclear competition, this essay considers the evolution of the pattern of power in the world since the end of the Cold War. If the United States, Russia, and China plan to expand their power as indicated in the NSS, nuclear weapons and other strategic capabilities would become tools for power expansion and a Cold War–type nuclear arms race would return.

Even if the United States, Russia, and China do not plan to expand their power, misperceptions could still cause a power competition: worrying or assuming the others are seeking to expand their power and reacting accordingly. In this case, nuclear-armed states may have new nuclear competition, but it would not be directly associated with power expansion. The patterns of nuclear competition would be qualitatively more complicated while quantitatively less intensive than the Cold War nuclear arms race.

The end of the Cold War three decades ago brought enormous and immediate changes to the world, including shifts in the global conventional military force structure and the geopolitical landscape. The changes came so unpredictably, the international community spent years absorbing the end of the war's long-term effects, some of which extend into today: for instance, a struggle between a unipolar U.S. dominance on general political and economic issues and bipolar nuclear arrangements between the United States and Russia.

In this period, the global power distribution experienced significant changes,

States suddenly gained a huge military surplus over all other countries. As a consequence, the United States began its three-decade expansion of power.

Some of the expansion was conducted through peaceful military means, for example, absorbing former Soviet allies into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The U.S. power expansion in this way has been quite successful and sustainable. The United States also attempted to use war as a way to expand its power, for example, in the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East, but most of these efforts failed. The major resistance to U.S. power expansion by war, as noted in the 2017 NSS, came from the social instabilities of targeted countries, rath-

some important nuclear arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation institutions; it has been considering withdrawing from some military deployments abroad; and it threatens its allies with the removal of military protections if they do not pay higher prices for them. This double-faced policy shows that the United States is losing interest in expanding its power, but is also allergic to any sign that other countries may actively challenge the U.S. hegemonic position.

The two faces of U.S. policy on power competition may lead to two different paths. If the United States, Russia, and China each believe the others are challenging their power and thus engage in a power competition, the world situation in the coming decade would become more confrontational and dangerous and the role of nuclear weapons may grow. If they come to understand that power expansion is not a major problem among them, the shadow and the paradigm of power competition would recede from the center of big-power relations. Before taking one of these divergent paths, we need to manage carefully these nuclear weapon relations to avoid nuclear confrontation and conflict.

Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and signed it after the treaty was concluded. During the Obama administration, China was an active participant and

calculation behind this number is that most Chinese nuclear weapons would likely be destroyed by a preemptive nuclear strike or stopped by rival missile defense, but the few surviving nuclear weapons would be sufficient for deterrence. The criterion is much smaller than the criterion for deterrence set by then– U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, which requires a few hundred surviving retaliatory nuclear weapons to threaten unacceptable damages. The Chinese criterion of a few retaliatory nuclear warheads is accepted by most Chinese strategists and has been a guiding principle in China’s nuclear weapons policy.

A problem with this criterion, however, is that it does not have any redundancy or hedge. Damages caused by a few detonated nuclear warheads may be unaccept-

expansion; 2) big powers seeking to expand their power; 3) the importance and use of non-nuclear factors, such as space and cyber technologies; and 4) the presence of multiple players in the new nuclear order.

If big powers want to use their nuclear weapons to expand their power, there will be an intensive nuclear arms race as we saw in the Cold War. If nuclear weapons are treated only for security purposes, the world nuclear order would be very different. However, there is no explicit demarcation between nuclear weapon policies for power and those for security because the two policies have some overlap. But it is still possible to find useful characteristics for one of the two policies. The Cold War gives us a lot of experience and lessons on this issue.

The number of nuclear weapons in a country is an important indicator of the weapons' purpose. Nuclear weapons have nonlinear effects of destruction, so the security meaning of the total number of nuclear weapons is not important when the number of retaliatory warheads is larger than the McNamara criterion. If a country regards its nuclear weapons as tools for a hegemonic purpose, it would not tolerate other countries (whether allies or rivals) having more nuclear weapons than it does. This was the situation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War: neither wanted the other to have quantitative nuclear superiority, resulting in an intensive nuclear arms race. After the United States and the Soviet Union began their strategic limitation and reduction process in 1972, a parity has always been a number-one requirement in their negotiations. If nuclear-weapon states—the five states officially recognized as possessing nuclear weapons by the NPT, including the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China— or other nuclear-armed states do not have the ambition to expand their power and to seek a hegemonic status in the world, they would not have the ambition to increase the size of their nuclear arsenal to such a level.

Another way to expand power over a country's sphere of influence is by offering nuclear umbrellas to allies. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union provided extended nuclear deterrence to their allies and therefore strengthened their own influence. After the Cold War, under its expansionist policy, the United States continued to develop more military alliances and to offer more extended nuclear deterrence to new allies. This trend seemed to end recently, however. If any nuclear-weapon state or nuclear-armed state offers nuclear umbrellas to more allies, it is an indicator that the state may want to expand power.

Today, the United States maintains a hegemonic position; it does not have to increase the number of its nuclear weapons. But a concern that other countries might challenge its hegemonic position keeps the United States sensitive to the numbers of nuclear weapons in other countries. Russia is a declining former superpower. It is difficult for Russia to wield the influence of its nuclear weapons to expand its power because it does not have the necessary conventional military or economic resources to support such an expansion. Russia may consider a large

number of nuclear weapons as a way to protect its shrinking sphere of influence, but that has not stopped NATO growth eastward.

China has repeatedly stated that it would not engage in a nuclear arms race with any country. The number of Chinese nuclear weapons is far below the numbers in the United States and Russia, and there is no possibility for China to reach a nuclear parity in the coming decades, even if it had the ambition to do so. The interpretation is that China will not seek a large number of nuclear weapons for hegemonic purposes.¹⁰

After the end of the Cold War, the United States offered a nuclear umbrella to its new allies and expanded its power. In recent years, the United States has not developed any new military alliances or offered any new nuclear umbrellas. Its extended nuclear deterrence is now more about maintaining its power than expanding it. Conversely, Russia lost most of its allies after the end of the Cold War. Its nuclear umbrellas cover very few countries and are only useful in maintaining Russia's influence over a very small region. China does not offer a nuclear umbrella to any foreign country. It does not have any intention to do so in the future. This suggests that China has no interest in power expansion via the influence of its nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons may naturally have some deterrent influences useful to maintaining the status quo, but they do not necessarily generate influence to change the status quo. If a country wants to use the influence of its nuclear weapons for compelling purposes, it must develop a strategy to link its nuclear weapon use to conventional conflicts. The idea is to use its conventional military force to compel the enemy and use its nuclear weapons to deter possible conventional responses from the enemy. The United States formally issued its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review to threaten the use of low-yield nuclear warheads in conventional conflicts.¹¹ The same document accuses Russia of taking an escalation and de-escalation strategy that would have similar compelling effects for other countries. The U.S. and Russian nuclear strategies suggest that they may use their nuclear weapons for compelling purposes in regional situations. China's no-first-use strategy constrains itself from linking its nuclear weapon use to conventional conflicts. Therefore, it cannot make use of the compelling effects of nuclear weapons.

The United States is becoming reluctant to further its power expansion; Russia and China do not have such ambitions either. If these countries understand one another, they would not seek competition for power. Yet they may worry about power challenges from their rivals and perceive some behaviors of their rivals as power expansion, whether accurate or not. They may take defensive measures to resist perceived power challenges. As a consequence, their competition may escalate, following the pattern of power competition. This is similar to a security dilemma: a country takes a measure to defend its power while other countries see it as power expansion and respond to it with countermeasures.

The evolution of power competition in the future may proceed in the following

involve cyber weapons.

of their countries, to express their concerns over power challenges from other countries, and to clarify misunderstandings. This would help explain the nature of competition among countries. If power competition is not a central element in the relations among nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-armed states, they would have a better chance to develop cooperation on nuclear issues.

The nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-armed states may develop or revive their cooperation in the following four categories. The first category of cooperation would be on nuclear security against nuclear terrorism. President Obama proposed and developed international cooperation on this issue, and it is far from gone. The nuclear-weapon states and other international members should continue to make joint efforts to secure nuclear materials and facilities around the world to prevent nuclear terrorism. China would be happy to join the cooperation if it can be maintained or revived.

The second category of cooperation would be the prevention of accidental nuclear war. Various new technologies may add difficulties in nuclear decision-making and increase the risks of accidental nuclear war. For example, a cyber operation that aims to disable an enemy's nuclear weapons could mistakenly trigger the launch of the enemy's nuclear weapons instead. Cyber operations could also create false alerts in the rival's decision-making process and the rival may mistakenly launch a nuclear attack in retaliation. Nuclear-weapon states should have discussions at governmental or nongovernmental levels to understand

The fourth category of cooperation would be on strategic stability. This includes many topics, such as strategic reductions and missile defense. The P5 had some good cooperation in this category. For example, the P5 states have a working group on nuclear disarmament terminology and one on the verification of deep nuclear reductions. The two working groups had good cooperation and produced some important products.¹⁸ China should work with other nuclear-weapon states to explore new solutions on possible limits on missile defense and on deep strategic nuclear reduction. The limits on missile defense could be about the number of

