Nuclear First Strike: Consequences of a Broken Taboo; China’s Nuclear Future

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George Quester’s *Nuclear First Strike: Consequences of a Broken Taboo*, is a thought-provoking speculative analysis. His first chapter appeared in modified form as an essay in the Spring 2005 issue of the *Naval War College Review*. With well over three decades of experience in the field of security studies and deterrence theory, Quester backs up his examination of this speculative topic with very impressive credentials that span the disciplines of analysis, writing, and teaching. Quester has taught at a number of universities and colleges and is currently a professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland.

Having chosen his topic well, Quester could not fail to deliver a fresh, insightful piece of scholarship. The book is solidly framed on a structure that identifies a range of potential nuclear crises and propagates each through the various phases of use decision-making, from pre-use considerations to post-response international reactions. Essentially, Quester divides the spectrum of use into seven generic scenarios along functional lines as follows: ambiguous use, use involving little or no collateral damage, use under conditions of compromised or uncertain command and control, government-directed nuclear use with weak international reaction, government-directed nuclear use with strong international reaction, full nuclear warfare, and limited nuclear warfare. Clearly, since the third and fourth generic scenarios differ only in the international responses they evoke, he probably ought to have combined them—they diverge temporally (that is, through the phases of use decision making) rather than functionally.

Quester then sequentially evolves these representative scenarios of use through the crisis phases that he envisions: pre-use considerations and use itself, likely world reactions, likely U.S. public reactions, and appropriate U.S. policy responses. He rightly makes and adeptly demonstrates the valuable point that in analyzing possible U.S. policy responses, we should be careful to avoid limiting...
our examination to the case per se but rather look also to the potential prece-
dents set by such use. He also doc-
ments his background material and speculations quite well and extensively—
a distinct strength of the book.

One curiosity is that he did not choose
to carefully examine the specific case of
nuclear escalation between the United
States and China in a Taiwan Strait con-

flict. Such a scenario not only would have
to rank fairly high on the probability-
of-occurrence spectrum but also receive
a good deal of attention, and would
have benefited from Quester’s insight-
ful analysis.

There may be one other way in which this
otherwise very useful book could have
been improved. Quester’s decision to cut
his speculative analysis “horizontally”—
essentially handling each nuclear use
decision phase separately, while span-
nning the entire range of scenarios
within each phase—does not help the
management of this complex topic. A
“vertical” cut, in which each scenario is
played out from cradle to grave before
moving to the next, would have been
more helpful to the reader. His result-
ing digressions and diversions into
other scenarios and other crisis phases
become confusing at points, detracting
slightly from the otherwise enjoyable
readability of his style.

In *China’s Nuclear Future*, Paul Bolt
and Albert Willner have edited an ex-
ceptional volume, which should be read
by both nuclear strategists and China
experts. Bolt is a professor of political
science at the U.S. Air Force Academy,
having also taught in China, and
Willner is a colonel in the U.S. Army

and chief of the Liaison Affairs Section
at the American Institute in Taiwan.

The volume presents valuable scholar-
ship across quite a range of issues under
the umbrella of China’s nuclear weap-
on future: strategy, doctrine, force de-
velopment, political perceptions, and
the Taiwan issue. Though all seven
chapters are strong, three in particular
stand out as exceptionally valuable to
researchers: Evan Medeiros on Chinese
nuclear strategy and doctrine, Ronald
Montaperto on the effects of Beijing’s
political perceptions, and Brad Roberts
on possible future paths for China’s nu-
clear force and doctrine.

Evan Medeiros marshals substantial
new Chinese-language materials to
probe the history, development, and fu-
ture evolution of China’s nuclear doc-

trine. His historical outline of the
maturation of strategic doctrine within
China and its subcommunities of inter-

est is well researched, crisp, and accu-
rate. Equally important, however, the
historical context sets the stage for his
argument that China’s deterrent strat-

ey ought to be looked at, not in typi-
cally Western terms, such as “minimal”
or “limited,” but rather as embodying
the Chinese decision to maintain an
“effective” and “sufficient” posture.

This is a highly informative, well writ-
ten, and thought-provoking chapter,
but it is possible that the distinctions
raised in the deterrent terminology may
be more of a semantic than substantial
nature. Clearly, this is an issue ripe for
further research, and the field would be
well served by more of the same schol-
larly, analytic thinking from Medeiros.

In Ronald Montaperto’s chapter on the
effects of Chinese perceptions upon the
nuclear weapons program, particular
attention is devoted to how U.S. actions
and policy might affect the direction of
force planning and doctrine.
Montaperto keenly states China’s overarching political dilemma as: “How does a rising nation committed to achieving reunification and a world class level of economic development so order its external relations that it is able to achieve its objectives and not provoke the opposition of a suspicious great power that possesses overwhelming comprehensive national power?” Four particular issues are claimed as critical in defining the evolving character of the China-U.S. relationship: counterterrorism, Taiwan, participation in international and multilateral organizations, and proliferation and arms control. Arguably, this short list should include missile defense, which strikes directly at the credibility of China’s deterrent, in turn striking at U.S. freedom of action, U.S. intentions vis-à-vis China, and the nature of the bilateral relationship. Nevertheless, Montaperto makes the most salient point in the chapter when he concludes that both the Taiwan issue and the future character of the U.S. nuclear posture (including missile defense) strike directly at Chinese vital interests. On these matters, Montaperto claims, Beijing will not compromise, putting these two issues in a transcendent category of their own in the bilateral relationship.

With characteristic clarity, Brad Roberts outlines both the broad paths open to China’s nuclear force over the coming decades and identifies the external and internal factors that will drive the decision making in choosing what Beijing calculates is the appropriate path. This chapter is perhaps the best in the book, giving the most accurate assessments regarding the current shape of the Chinese force, as well as the motivators and challenges to its evolution and maturation.

Roberts makes the good point that regardless of external stimuli, such as U.S. development of missile defense, the Chinese force will modernize along a certain predictable baseline. Beyond that baseline, the greatest driver to the size and character of China’s future nuclear force will be the exact character of the coevolving U.S. national missile defense architecture. Since that architecture’s final shape is uncertain, so is, to a large extent, the final shape of China’s nuclear force.

Finally, Roberts lays out three broad paths along which the Chinese nuclear force may evolve: one defined largely by modernization and incremental response to U.S. missile defense, another in which China “sprints” to a window of maximum strategic leverage (particularly with an eye to a Taiwan conflict) vis-à-vis the not-yet-fully-mature “new triad” of the 2003 Nuclear Posture Review, and a third that would posture China for Eurasian nuclear superiority and avoid any near-term competition with the United States. Roberts concludes by offering a bit of very penetrating advice on dissuasion: a prudent course for the United States, especially with respect to missile defense, might be characterized by some amount of transparent restraint, attempting in the process to engender reciprocal restraint by China in its nuclear force evolution.

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