

China's nuclear dilemma

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An expert assessment of China's nuclear weapons strategy highlights the risk of escalation to nuclear war from a conflict beginning with conventional weapons, due to the unusual structure of the nation's military. The new study, previously only available in Chinese, appears in the latest edition of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, published by SAGE. The authors believe that this is the first comprehensive non-governmental study on how China's nuclear-war plan was developed.

John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, of Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), which Lewis co-founded, conclude that China's unique deployment of modern conventional ballistic missiles had a decisive effect on its war plan. Jiang Zemin, Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) head from 1989 to 2004, first highlighted the relationship between the "conventional sword" and the "nuclear shield" as China's unique dual deterrent. The CMC considers conventional missiles to be one of the multiple means to bolster the nation's strategic deterrent. The possibility of combining or sequentially launching conventional and nuclear missiles is deemed a fundamental source of political and military strength – but also generates critical uncertainties:

"The basic dilemma for the war planners stems from the deployment of the two types of missiles on the same Second Artillery bases with fundamentally different capabilities and purposes," Lewis and Xue say.

The article notes that Beijing's nuclear missiles exist to deter a nuclear first strike on China, and are only to be used in extremis. At the same

time, the conventional weapons on the formerly all-nuclear bases must be ready to strike first and hard. Targeted enemies and their allies will not immediately be able to distinguish whether any missiles fired are conventional or nuclear.

This means that those enemies may justifiably launch on warning and retaliate against all the command-and-control systems and missile assets of the Chinese missile launch base and even the overall command-and-control system of the central Second Artillery headquarters. In the worst case, a self-defensive first strike by Chinese conventional missiles could end in the retaliatory destruction of many Chinese nuclear missiles and their related command-and-control systems.

"That disastrous outcome would force the much smaller surviving and highly vulnerable Chinese nuclear missile units to fire their remaining missiles against the enemy's homeland," Lewis and Xue warn.

"Escalation to nuclear war could become accelerated and unavoidable." Policies that have led to conventional and [nuclear weapons](#) doubling up at the same base could cause, rather than deter, a nuclear exchange.

Chinese military planners tend to take the view that launching conventional weapons from nuclear bases might deter any direct response, because the victim of that attack would fear the consequences of retaliating against bases that have nuclear and not just conventional weapons. This fear—that a conventional response might trigger a Chinese nuclear counter-retaliation—could, in the eyes of Chinese experts, deter such a response, preventing escalation.

Beijing's overall defence strategy has evolved significantly in recent decades. According to the authors, China's revolutionary leader Mao Zedong directly shaped the policies for the Second Artillery, the nation's strategic missile forces. China's nuclear strategy—dominated by military considerations—is sensitive and is rarely elaborated in public. Step by

step, the ever-more complex command-and-control mechanisms of the People's Liberation Army adopted and refined new roles for its nuclear and conventional missiles to support peacetime diplomacy, to manage military crises, and to pursue combat readiness. Nuclear deterrence strategies finally came of age in 2006 with the official endorsement of the terms 'nuclear deterrent force' and 'strategic deterrence' in a defence white paper.

The early 1990s saw the introduction of new, short-to-medium range conventional missiles. These did not go to the regular armed forces, but instead were added to the Second Artillery, which manages nuclear capabilities, because the Second Artillery had the proven leadership, management and logistical systems to rapidly deploy conventional missile launch sites and support facilities. To this day, nuclear and conventional missiles are both managed and launched from Second Artillery's nuclear bases.

More information: "Making China's nuclear war plan" By John W. Lewis and Xue Litai published September 14 2012 in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

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