U.S. nuclear strategy, Missile Defence and the Taiwan Strait

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Nuclear weapons play a critical role in the defense capabilities of the United States, its allies, friends. They provide credible military options to deter a wild range of threat, including WMD and large-scale conventional military force.

Nuclear Posture Review 2002

I. Never say never again- the new U.S. nuclear strategy

Since the fall of Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States has been pursuing a foreign policy of “primacy”- precisely speaking, a policy of “hegemony”- which intends to exploit, consolidate and expand the U.S. national interests in the world. The debates on this foreign policy focus but only on the modalities of “hegemony” and not the policy itself. The central question in this context is: Should the United States work inside the multinational institutions to pursue this goal or work outside them.1

To attain this goal, the Bush administration developed a new security strategy, which presents the new concepts of the U.S. defence policy. The most important document is Quadrennial Defense Review 2001 (hereinafter QDR 2001). The new concept in this review is to shift the basis of defence planning from a “threat-based” model that has dominated strategic thinking in the past to a “capabilities-based” model for the future. To be concise, the U.S. military strategy will from now on concentrate on the adversaries who would have capabilities to launch an attack on the United States, regardless of where the threat might come, whom the adversaries might be or where a war might occur.2 As a result, the countries, which possessed the capabilities to attack the United States, his allies and friends, would be targets for U.S. military actions, especially the so-called “rouge states” and other great powers.

To be sure, there are many kinds of power to implement this new strategy, including economic power, social power, cultural power and last but not least military power. Yet military power still plays a crucial role in international politics because states coexist in an order of anarchy in international system. The United States, as other sovereign countries in the world, has the right, even the duty, to use military forces alone if the nation’s vital interests are at stake. Just as the Clinton administration put it unequivocally: “We will do

what we must to defend these interests, including when necessary and appropriate, using military unilaterally and decisively.3

Among all weapon systems in military forces, nuclear weapons are termed “absolute weapons” because they have so a destructive effect that no other conventional weapon systems can ever reach. And what is worse, there are no effective defence systems against a nuclear attack until now, especially when nuclear weapons choose a missile delivery system. Since the first use of nuclear weapons in 1945, the utility of this absolute weapon remains deterrent, namely the threat of punishment by nuclear retaliation. In other words, the utility of nuclear weapons lies in its non-use. In this sense, Thomas Schelling has made a clear difference between conventional weapons and atomic weapons: this is the use of force and threat of use.4

The goal of nuclear deterrence is just not to wage a war, but to avoid a war and reach a peace. The deterrence utility of nuclear weapons cannot work successfully until the nuclear weapons are not used. In order to make this kind of threat more credible to deter an adversary, states must always determined to demonstrate its capabilities and resolve to use nuclear weapons if they want to protect their vital interests.

For the present, the nuclear force of the United States is second to none among all nuclear powers. According to Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist, the United States possesses around 7,650 nuclear warheads, including 540 ICBMs, 384 SLCMs and 115 bombers. Further, there are 3,000 intact warheads are retained in reserved or inactive stockpiles. In comparison, Russia owns 4,850 nuclear warheads and China has only 400.5

The other key factor of deterrence is the resolve, because the deterrence relies on the punishment with retaliation in the future. It has more with intention and perception to do as with capability. The difficult part of this strategy is to communicate intentions and influence perceptions between adversaries. Thomas Schelling indicates:

“As a rule, one must threaten, that he will act and not he may act, if the threat fails. To say that one may be act is to say one may not, and to say this is to confess that one has kept the power of decision– that one is not committed.”

The best policy to demonstrate resolve in military relations is to make security commitment in alliance. In this regard, the United States claims to use nuclear weapons to protect its vital interests. Based on the QDR 2001, the Nuclear Posture Review (hereinafter NPR) put it very clearly as follows:

Nuclear weapons play a critical role in the defense capabilities of the United States, its allies, friends. They provide credible military options to deter a wide range of threat, including WMD and large-scale conventional military force. These nuclear capabilities possess unique properties that give the United States options to hold at risk classes of targets that are important to achieve strategic and political objectives. Nuclear attack options that vary in scale, scope, and purpose will complement other military capabilities.

In this context, the United States specify the commitments to its “allies and friend” in terms of critical role of nuclear weapons in the defence capabilities in order to demonstrate the resolve to use nuclear forces.

Moreover, the U.S. Department of Defence’s Quadrennial Defense Review 2001 also honours the American international commitment, including

- Security and well being of allies and friends;
- Precluding hostile domination of critical areas, particularly Europe, Northeast Asia, The East Asia littoral, and the Middle Eastland Southeast Asia.

This document also indicates that U.S. alliances, as well as its bilateral security relationships, are a centrepiece of American strategy. The U.S. National Security Strategy 2002 continues to emphasize the importance of international security commitment and articulate four goals in this new strategy:

- Assuring friends and allies;
- Dissuading future military competition;

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9 Ibid. p. 5.
\* Deterring threats and coercion against US interests; and
\* Defeating any adversary decisively if deterrence fails.

Although the United States has announced in 1978 and 1995 again that the U.S. will not use its nuclear force against countries without nuclear weapons unless the non-nuclear weapon state had joined with a nuclear weapons possessor state in an attack on the United States or its allies. But on February 22, 2002, the State Department spokesman Richard Boucher has also stated, “if a weapon of mass destruction is used against the United States or its allies, we will not rule out any specific type of military response.”\(^\text{11}\) This kind of “negative security assurances” do specify who the U.S. would not attack, these also imply who it might attack.\(^\text{12}\) Taken together, The United States possesses the absolute nuclear capabilities and demonstrates the security commitments to protect friends and allies in its important strategy documents. Until now, the United States seems to fulfil the basic requirements for an effective nuclear deterrence. The next step is to ask a question: What if deterrence fails? If deterrence fails and the enemy starts to attack, one must defend or pre-empt.\(^\text{13}\) After the end of Cold War, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), their delivery systems, and the challenges from the so-called “rouge states” and other great powers become the most important security issues for the United States. For this reason, the missile defence system seems be the best answer to the challenges of ballistic missile attacks from adversaries. Therefore, missile defence are a central component of the NPR and the Bush administration’s framework to transforming deterrence.

**II. Pursuit of absolute security- The Missile Defence**

According to the Rumsfeld Report 1998, the emerging intercontinental-range ballistic missile (ICBM) threat to the USA appears to be real, acute and imminent. Shortly after the release of this report, North Korea launched a three-stage Taepo Dong missile over Japan. This surprise launch seemed convince the U.S. intelligence community and confirmed the assessment of

\(^{13}\) Pre-emption means to use military action to forestall the use of weapons of mass destruction when this threat by an adversary is imminent. The Bush administration has elevated pre-emption concept in his National Security Strategy into official U.S. doctrine. A full discussion of this concept is beyond the scope of this paper.
this report. A new release of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) made the following assessment:

“Most Intelligence Community agencies project that before 2015 the United States most likely will face ICBM threats from North Korea and Iran, and possibly from Iraq, in addition to the longstanding missile forces of Russia and China.”

For this reason, the President Bill Clinton signed the *Missile Defense Act of 1999* which states: “It is the policy of the United States to deploy as soon as is technologically possible an effective National Missile Defense System capable of defending the territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack (whether accidental, unauthorized, or deliberate).”

President George W. Bush announced that December 2002 that the United States will deploy elements of a limited national missile defence system by September 2004. In June 2002, he also withdrew the United States from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), which had prohibited Washington and Moscow from deploying national wide defence against long-range ballistic missiles. Since the withdrawal, it seems that there are no more legal obstacles for the Bush administration to pursue a policy of absolute security.

The Bush administration has made it clear that the mission for missile defence is to protect the United States, its deployed forces oversee, and his allies and friends against ballistic missile attacks. An effective missile defence system will be able to intercept ballistic missile of any range in all phase of their flight. The U.S. pursues effective defences against attacks by “small numbers of longer range as well as defences against attacks by larger numbers of short- and medium-range missile.”

As Robert Powell observe, missile defence can make U.S. more resolute. As a result, “the United States become more likely to oppose a nuclear adversary and more willing to tolerate a higher risk if other state does not back down.”

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17 NPR, p. 25.

If this observation is correct, then the adversaries of the U.S. would either try to emulate and construct a similar defence system or to counter it, if possible both. Since a well-functioned missile defence system will neutralize any missile attacks from the enemy and give the U.S. more freedom to take military actions without fearing of nuclear retaliation. Among the five established nuclear power, the United Kingdom and France are U.S. alliance partner; Russia possessed enough nuclear warheads to penetrate U.S. missile defence system. The only great power that concerns the U.S. nuclear strategy and missile defence most is the People’s Republic of China.

III. China’s Connection

Since the end of the Cold War, the strategic focus of the United States has shifted from Europe to East Asia. The growing economic importance and ongoing military modernization of the People’s Republic of China as “strategic competitor” concern the Washington policymaker most. Without specifying the People’s Republic of China, the QDR 2001 claims that Asia is gradually emerging as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition. The possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region. In fact, this kind of security competition will still intensify due to the lack of effective security regimes and multilateral institutions.

To settle the requirements for nuclear strike capabilities, the NPR differentiates three kinds of contingencies, in which the United States must prepare for the use of nuclear weapons. These contingencies can be categorized as immediate, potential and unexpected. In terms of China, the NPR claims that “due to the combination of China’s still developing strategic objectives and its ongoing modernization of its nuclear and non nuclear forces, China is a country that could be involved in an immediate and potential contingency.” In fact, China has been a potential target for the first-use of U.S. nuclear weapons. The occasion could be an on-going conventional conflict involving China or even a pre-emptive nuclear attack on that country.

Beijing has been critical of this kind of statements in NPR, because this document for the first time discusses the conceivable use of nuclear weapons by the United States in the event that America is drawn into any future military conflict between Taiwan and China. And because the U.S. missile defence system aimed at defending “small numbers of longer range as well as

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19 QDR 2001, p. 4.
defences against attacks by larger numbers of short- and medium-range missile.” There is no country in the world, which suits this indication at best.

Why does the new U.S. military strategy matter to China? First, China did not have the means to attack the continental United States until its first ICBM, the DF5 entered the service in 1981. At present, China has only around 20 ICBM (DF5/5A) which can reach U.S. homeland. If the United States should launch a nuclear first strike, the survivability of these missiles would be low. More the worse, it is not likely for China after suffering the first strike to attack the U.S. if the missile defence system functions. In this sense, China could be nuclear blackmailed by the United States. Second, if Taiwan and other U.S. allies in Western Pacific is integrated in this missile defence system, China could loose its best instrument to put pressure on Taiwan. Taiwan could be more assertive in terms of independence. That is the last thing that Peking wants to see. From China’s point of view, the planned missile defence project is at best an overreaction to the threat of rouge states or terrorist, and most plausibly a veiled attempt to neutralized China’s nuclear retaliatory capability.

These reasons can explain why China has been opposing the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and the U.S. missile defence system, especially its deployment on Taiwan. Obviously, Peking cannot wait and see the realization of U.S. missile defence project. As some scholars observe:

“Beijing will almost certainly regard the plans for the deployment of NMD as a challenge to its own nuclear deterrent. As a result, Chinese decision-makers may even now have begun worst-case planning to offset what they perceive to be an emerging threat.”

China has been modernizing its modest nuclear forces for 20 years and will continue to do so regardless of the actions of other nations. But external developments, such as U.S. nuclear and pre-emption strategy and missile defence will surely influence the speed, quality and quantity of this modernization. Peking’s initial response to U.S. missile defence was signalled by its October 1999 announcement of a program embarking an additional 9, 7 billion dollar to enhance it second-strike capabilities.

Among all factors, the future political development in Taiwan will play a most important role in the military modernization in China, because China must prepare a war with the United

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26 Ibid. 59.
States in the event of military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Until now, China does not preclude the possibility to use military force against Taiwan for the purpose of unification. The enduring cross-Strait tension will continue to influence the Sino-U.S. relation in the future.

IV. Taiwan Strait

For the present, the central security issue in East Asia is: Is China a status quo power. With some rigorous criteria, Alastair Iain Johnston makes following conclusion:

“it is hard to conclude that China is a clearly revisionist state operating outside, or barely inside, the boundaries of a so-call international community, Rather, to the extent that one can identify an international community on major global issues, the PRC has become more integrated into and more cooperative within international institutions than ever before. Moreover, the evidence that China’s leaders are actively trying to balance against U.S. power to undermine an American dominated unipolar system and replaces it with a multipolar system is murky.”

Indeed, Johnston’s observation is not deniable for the most part. China is more integrated into international institutions ever before. But there is no effective security regime or institution, regional or global, which can deal with Taiwan issue. China insists that Taiwan belongs to one of his provinces. And the integrity of China’s territory should not be doubted and challenged by third party. U.S. defence planner also assume that the wish to deter the United States from any future intervention over Taiwan is a key factor guiding China’s strategic modernisation drive. In short, China opposes any foreign intervention over Taiwan issue, especially armed intervention. Due to the fact that China has been developing economically and militarily very rapidly in the last decade, the competition between China and the U.S. in Western Pacific has become harder ever before. This kind of competition will be persistent, substantial and unstable if Taiwan remains flashpoint between the two great powers.

The mutual military exchange between Taiwan and the United Stated has been intensified since the Taiwan Missile Crisis in 1996. This intensification of military cooperation helps the U.S. balance China’s military power projection. It is worth noting that The “Foreign Relations Authorization Act (FRAA), Fiscal Year 2003”, signed into law in October 2002, for the first time states that, for the purposes of transfers of defence articles, Taiwan “should be treated as though it were designated a major non-NATO ally” (MNNA). This designation is a specific

term that allows much closer military cooperation, including the sale of specific weapons which reserved normally only for other countries. Australia and Japan are also MNNA countries.  

This stipulation comply in deed with Taiwan Relations Act which states that the U.S. will provide defence articles and services necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defence capability. Further, the Act specifies “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargo, is a threat to the peace of and security of the Western Pacific and of grave concern to the United States”.

After all, Taiwan is legally no alliance partner of the United States. The U.S. treated Taiwan as ally only in terms of arms sales, not necessarily in terms of defence obligation, which a formal alliance should fulfil. Since the U.S. has been pursuing a policy of “strategic ambiguity” toward China for a long time, a China’s attack on Taiwan cannot automatically lead to direct military assistance of the United States. That is to say that the U.S. does not assure Taiwan, he will intervene, but only he may intervene. Therefore, it cannot preclude that the U.S. may not intervene, should Taiwan be attacked.

In addition, the strategic importance of Taiwan for the United States can also be questioned. It is hard to imagine that the United States, with his nearly 100,000 service members in Western Pacific, could not maintain his military preponderance in this region in the absence of Taiwan. The lost of Taiwan could mean that it would be much more difficult for the United States keep his military dominance and the U.S must be more militarily engaged in this region. But it does not necessarily mean that the U.S. cannot any more protect its vital interest in this region. As Charles Glaser and Fetter observe, U.S. interests in regional conflicts generally “are not truly vital, making it hard to justify pursuing foreign policies that increase the probabilities of attacks with weapons of mass destruction against U.S. cities.”

The real importance of Taiwan for the United States may not really strategic or military, but political and moral. Should Taiwan be taken by China through military force, the U.S. military commitment and therefore credibility toward regional allies such as Japan and Korea would be seriously damaged if not obsolete. If a democratic and free Taiwan should be annexed by a dictatorial communist regime in China, the United States cannot claim any more

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in international community that values of democracy, freedom and human rights are universal and therefore should always be pursued and defended. This kind of humiliation to the U.S. and even to the international community would be unprecedented and intolerable. If necessary, China will not hesitate to attack Taiwan even if this act would damage China’s image and economy. One of the Chinese military is quoted: “But if you compare the Olympics and the sovereignty of our country’s territory, sovereign territory always take precedence…. The price of reunification will be paid if necessary. We’re prepared, and we can pay it.”

The apparent re-election of Mr. Chen Shui-bian, a pro-independence leader, as Taiwan’s president in March 2004 sends a strong message to Beijing and Washington. Four years ago, he got 39 percent of the vote, this time his share rose to a fraction over 50 percent. Although the opposition KMT-PFP coalition challenges the election result, Chen’s support has obviously increased. There is a trend that the proportion of the population in Taiwan that considers itself as “Taiwanese” instead of “Chinese” has been increasing. The political isolation of Taiwan by China’s strong opposition in international community has provoked Taiwanese. The people in Taiwan will continue to consolidate his own identity as Taiwanese. Peking and Washington should accept and face the decision of Taiwanese in this presidential election and respond accordingly in the future.

For the both sides of the Taiwan Strait, the status quo in Taiwan remains the best scenario, namely a de facto independence of Taiwan. Any unilateral action to challenge this status quo may incur the intervention of the United States. It is not likely that Taiwan will declare de jure independence to provoke China into using military force for so called “reunification”. But China does not, or to some extent cannot, exclude the use of force against Taiwan. For the United States, the abandonment of “strategic ambiguity” toward China is indispensable to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. If so, the U.S. can demonstrate its capability and resolve over the issue of Taiwan. This demonstration sends China a message that the U.S. will act, if Taiwan attacked. This unequivocal commitment toward Taiwan would not only contribute to the security of Taiwan, but also to the peace and stability in East Asia.

V. Conclusion

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Since the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S.-China relationship seems more cordial and constructive than at any time over the last decade. China needs capital and technology from the United States for sustaining its rapid economic growth. The U.S. needs China’s support for the war on international terrorism and nuclear crisis in North Korea. They are in substance only “partner of convenience” for each other. The structural differences between them, including basic values, global economic and political competition, are unlikely to overcome in the short term. Moreover, the strategic and military competition for dominance in East Asia would be harder. Taiwan would be a great variable in this context.

The current U.S. security policies will no doubt influence China’s defence planning. According to the “threat-based” model of U.S. defence policy, China is one of the countries that are capable of attacking the United States, its allies and friends. Therefore, China might be the target of U.S. military action. The NPR clearly describes the situations, under which the U.S. nuclear forces might be used against China. The U.S. nuclear force is second to none among all nuclear powers. The United States is firm in their resolve to use nuclear force for defending its allies and friends in contingencies. It is needless to say that the combination of nuclear offence and missile defence will make the U.S. military commitment to its allies and friends more plausible and credible.

Taiwan lies strategically between two great powers in Western Pacific at this crucial juncture. The current U.S. military strategy will stir Chinese defence planner to accelerate its military modernization in order to counter U.S. military power. Moreover, the U.S. has been upgraded the military cooperation and enlarged the weapons sales toward Taiwan since 1996. Currently the U.S. plans to sale long-ranged early warning radar to Taiwan worth up to $ 1.78 billion to Taiwan. China has protested against this decision. This arms sale is one of the stages for the U.S. to integrate Taiwan into a missile defense system in East Asia. If this advanced radar systems are deployed in Taiwan, the U.S.-Taiwan relation would be a quasi-alliance. China could hardly accept this kind of military cooperation.

This move will be interpreted by China as sign of provocation if this trend continues. In this sense, the U.S. should not on the one hand put Taiwan in this dangerous situation by its tough military policy toward China and strengthen its military relation toward Taiwan and on the other hand remain ambivalent about its resolve to defend Taiwan. The United States should not only make it clear that both side of the Taiwan Strait not change the status quo other than peaceful means; the U.S. should further declare that It will act, not it may act if military

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33 Reuters (April 1, 2004) „China scolds U.S. for radar sale to Taiwan“
conflict in the Taiwan Strait breaks out. In doing so, the U.S. could continue to play a role of “strategic balancer” in this region and the goal of peace and stability in this region could be maintained.
References


