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**NEOCLASSICAL
REALISM AND THE
UNDERDEVELOPMENT
OF CHINA'S NUCLEAR
DOCTRINE**

Paolo Rosa



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Introduction: Competing Explanations for the Underdevelopment of China's Nuclear Doctrine

Abstract This chapter analyses the different explanations of China's nuclear doctrine and their limits. When China tested its first atomic bomb and entered the exclusive club of nuclear states, it could learn from the other countries about the complex debate on nuclear doctrine: deterrence stability versus instability; counterforce strategy versus countervalue strategy; general war versus limited nuclear war; strategic employment versus tactical use; etc. All of these cases notwithstanding, Beijing chose not to elaborate on the development of a military doctrine about targeting and employment. A first explanation for the underdevelopment of China's nuclear doctrine is based on a rational model. A second group of explanations takes into consideration the role played by the traditional political-military culture in the development of China's nuclear doctrine. The third group of explanations focuses on the communist leaders' belief systems.

Keywords Action-reaction · Strategic culture · Mao's military thought

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it aims to explain why China, after having launched a crash programme in the mid-1950s to develop a nuclear deterrent, did not formulate a clear operational doctrine with respect to the targeting and employment of nuclear weapons until

the mid-1980s. Second, it aims to contribute to the development of a neoclassical realist approach to the study of international relations by demonstrating its utility in explaining the formation of a state's military doctrine. I will employ neoclassical realism to shed some light on the puzzling development of China's nuclear doctrine.

1.1 THE UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF CHINA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

China tested an atomic bomb in 1964, and three years later tested a thermonuclear bomb; meanwhile, it also developed a small arsenal of ballistic missiles with nuclear capacity. These rapid developments notwithstanding, Beijing did not devise a nuclear doctrine on targeting and employment for several decades. There is a general consensus on this point among scholars.

China's present political leaders have inherited a *realpolitik* world view [...] A *realpolitik* world view and a confidence in the status and military value of nuclear weapons ought logically to lead to a more or less coherent nuclear doctrine that stresses the operational utility of nuclear weapons. One of the puzzles in the Chinese case is that for about 30 years after China exploded its first nuclear weapon, there was no coherent, publicly articulated nuclear doctrine. (Johnston 1996b: 549, 552)

[...] the first three decades of China's approach to nuclear modernization and doctrinal development raises several important questions [...]. First, why did China maintain such a small and vulnerable nuclear force structure for so long, given that it undermined China's ability to deter nuclear aggression? Second, why did China not develop a detailed operational nuclear doctrine? Why, in particular, did China not pursue nuclear war-fighting concepts (and associated force structures) as a response to its nuclear and conventional inferiority? (Fravel and Medeiros 2010: 48–49)

One can see general trends in Chinese thinking about nuclear weapons, particularly a pervasive belief that nuclear weapons are primarily instruments of political coercion, as well as the related view that small numbers of weapons would suffice to neutralise larger arsenals used in this manner. However, China would not develop a formal nuclear strategy and operational plans until after Mao's death in 1976 and the deployment of the first ICBM in the early 1980s. (Lewis 2014: 14–15)

Chinese political and military leaders did not begin to debate these thorny issues and to develop a more nuanced doctrine until the mid-1980s, in a completely changed domestic environment. This late development is a puzzling issue to address. The usual explanations for the underdevelopment of China's nuclear doctrine are not completely satisfying. They shed light on some aspects of the problem but are wanting on other important dimensions of the issue.

Arguments based on the "infant" nature of the Chinese deterrent in the 1960s do not take into account that in the US, the debate on nuclear weapons and their use was immediately articulated. After an initial hesitation, when the radical nature of nuclear weapons was not understood and they were considered as simply more powerful conventional bombs, the debate developed in a very sophisticated manner.

In 1957, Henry Kissinger analysed the possibility of waging a limited nuclear war. He attacked Eisenhower's strategy of massive retaliation that confined the strategic arsenal to the role of deterrence, with a divorce between military force and diplomacy. The only way, according to Kissinger, to get out of this deadlock was to bring nuclear weapons back into American policy as an active tool, and not only as an instrument of deterrence. Their use should be limited so that the survival of the nation was not jeopardized by the risk of an atomic holocaust.

In 1958, Albert Wohlstetter examined the false assumptions in the American policy of deterrence. The problem, according to Wohlstetter, was that the so-called balance of terror was far from automatic: it was not assured by the mere possession of nuclear weapons. Two states were effectively discouraged from attacking each other only if they had a "second strike" capability such that their nuclear weapons could survive a surprise attack by the enemy and launch a devastating blow against its territory. If a state did not have a survivable arsenal, it may have an incentive to (or induce enemies to) strike first to destroy the nuclear capability of counterpart.

In the early 1960s, Herman Kahn elaborated on the "unthinkable". He devised a ladder of nuclear escalation with forty-four steps that was divided into six thresholds. The third threshold was the most important because it marked the transition from an armed confrontation in which nuclear weapons were not used to one in which they began to be used, even if only against limited military targets. According to Kahn, the ability to fight at all levels of violence by using nuclear weapons in a selective way could strengthen the credibility of deterrence (Kahn 1965).

All of these studies and research were not classified and were well known to Chinese policymakers.¹ Moreover, Chinese leaders were well acquainted with the subtleties of the Soviet Union's (USSR) strategy. The USSR had a different approach to nuclear strategy vis-à-vis the US (Snyder 1977; Holloway 1984; Rice 1986), and had developed its own doctrine about targeting and employment. Marshal Sokolovskii's classic textbook elaborated on war in the nuclear age and the use of atomic weapons as a deterrent or tactically on the battlefield. As Sokolovskii put it:

A future war in which the basic instrument of violence is the nuclear weapon – a weapon of mass destruction – would lead to immeasurably more casualties and devastation. With the rapid development of productive forces, science, and technology, the instruments of war have become so powerful that the chances of attaining the most decisive political goals in armed combat are enormously improved. [...] In the study of the nature of these wars, Soviet military strategy assumes the theoretical possibility of the following fundamental types of war in the recent epoch. *World War* [...] *Small imperialist wars* [...] *national liberation wars*, *civil wars*, and other popular wars [...] The distinguishing feature of weapon development under current conditions is the appearance of *qualitatively new types of weapons and military equipment* and their rapid and massive introduction into the armed forces. This has led to a pronounced improvement in the latter's combat capabilities, a radical break in the organizational forms of armed forces and the methods of conducting military operations on every scale. Military strategy and the art of war as a whole have undergone a revolution. [...] In modern warfare, nuclear weapons can be employed for various missions: strategic, operational, and tactical. (Sokolovskii 1963: 274, 282–283, 295, 297)

In the case of France, whose deterrent (*Force de frappe*) arose in the same period as the Chinese arsenal,² and whose programme's evolution was in many respects very similar to that of China's,³ it is possible to see the timely development of a nuclear doctrine. Due to the small size of its stockpile, Paris immediately adopted an articulated nuclear doctrine: the

¹Jeffrey Lewis argues that Chinese political leaders were influenced by P.M.S. Blakett's optimistic view of nuclear balance (Lewis 2007: 13).

²The first French nuclear test took place on February 13, 1960, and the first Chinese test was on October 16, 1964.

³Both countries developed their nuclear arsenal without significant foreign assistance.

“dissuasion du faible au fort” (weak-to-strong deterrence) (Yost 1985). It was based on the choice of a countervalue strategy (the main targets of French weapons were civilian targets)⁴ and specific operational policies: the deterrent was based on a triad of nuclear weapons delivered by bomber, ground-launched missiles, and submarine-launched missiles. At least one of the four strategic submarines should always be on patrol to guarantee a second strike capability and devastating damage to the possible attacker.⁵

To sum up, when China tested its first atomic bomb and entered the exclusive club of nuclear states, it could learn from the other countries about the complex debate on nuclear doctrine: deterrence stability versus instability; counterforce strategy versus countervalue strategy; general war versus limited nuclear war; strategic employment versus tactical use; etc. All of these cases notwithstanding, Beijing chose not to elaborate on the development of a military doctrine about targeting and employment. The main explanations offered for this decision can be assembled into three loosely defined groups. They present partial explanations of the case because they leave several aspects under-explained.

1.2 “EXISTENTIAL DETERRENCE” AND MINIMUM MEANS OF REPRISAL

A first explanation for the underdevelopment of China’s nuclear doctrine is based on a rational model. It interprets the Chinese nuclear posture as a logical response to external threats through a policy of “deterrence by punishment” based on a secure second strike capability.

The neorealist analysis assumes that the international environment is characterised by anarchy, i.e., there is no central authority capable of ensuring order and security. Therefore, states must defend their interests alone (*self-help* system) (Waltz 1979). In such an international system, the following threats may occur: the strengthening of an old enemy; the emergence of a new enemy; the building of an aggressive alliance; the development of new weapons systems; and the weakening of an ally. The responses to these threats can be of two types: external balancing,

⁴Originally, the targets were Soviet cities, but later, with the development of the *tous azimut* strategy, the identity of the targets became more underspecified.

⁵The submarine component of the French nuclear triad entered service in December 1971.

which is aimed at forging a military coalition; and internal balancing, which is aimed at strengthening national power through an increase in military expenditures and a qualitative change of weapons. The development of a nuclear arsenal results from this type of logic: states decide to equip themselves with nuclear weapons either to compensate for an inferiority in conventional military power or to respond to the development of nuclear weapons by a foreign country (Sagan 1996/1997).⁶

Policymakers act as a compact group that is able to establish a coherent national policy. The bureaucracy has a subordinate role as the mere implementer of the will of the political leaders. Organized social actors and public opinion cannot affect strategic choices. Foreign policy decisions are interpreted as if they were the result of the preference of a unitary actor who seeks to maximise its power or security, and not as the result of pressure from below by actors pursuing parochial interests: industries seeking public contracts, politicians who want to help their constituency, and research laboratories that try to “sell” their latest technological invention.

The increasing power of a country prompts a more sophisticated articulation of employment and targeting doctrines because a greater role played on the international stage multiplies the number of contingencies to use such weapons.

Applying this framework to the development of nuclear weapons, it can be deduced that from a neorealist perspective, the choice of a country to start a nuclear programme is always determined by a political-military logic: to strengthen security. Thus, the poorly defined strategy followed by Chinese leaders would be neither an attempt to deceive opponents by keeping the doctrines of targeting and employment wrapped in a veil of ambiguity nor the result of poor hardware development that forced the PRC to make a virtue of necessity. As Nie Rongzhen—one of the main communist leaders involved in the Chinese nuclear programme—states in his memoir:

For more than a century, imperialists had frequently bullied, humiliated and oppressed China. To put an end to this situation, we had to develop sophisticated weapons such as the guided missile and atomic bomb, so that

⁶This is the classic action-reaction logic: the US and Soviet arsenals spurred the development of China’s bomb, which spurred the development of India’s bomb, which then spurred the development of Pakistan’s bomb.

we would have the *minimum means of reprisal* if attacked by imperialists with nuclear weapons. Moreover, in the course of preparing the 12-year programme and developing sophisticated weapons before this, we had become keenly aware that the pursuit of guided missiles and atomic bombs would advance us in many other branches of modern science and technology. Therefore, instead of discontinuing the project, we should brave the difficulties and move ahead. (Nie 1988: 702, *italics* added)

Beijing's policymakers would adhere, more or less consciously, to a concept of "existential deterrence".⁷ For approximately thirty years, China followed a policy of nuclear deterrence based on the idea that the mere presence of a small arsenal was enough to deter an enemy from attacking the country. Such a policy is based on a number of assumptions (Buzan, Herring: Chapter 10):

- Deterring a nuclear attack is not particularly difficult. Nuclear weapons, and especially thermonuclear weapons, are so powerful that a small quantity of them can produce a devastating effect and scare enemies.
- The employment doctrine requires a limited number of devices that are capable of ensuring a retaliatory second strike.⁸
- The selected targets are civilian/industrial centres because the main goal is not to defeat the enemy on the battlefield but to dissuade him from using his nuclear bombs (countervalue strategy).

This approach produces a particular nuclear posture that is based on a set of policy choices (Sauer 2009). The nuclear warheads deployed are few in number and not very accurate because they are mainly designed for use against soft targets. It is not necessary to try to balance every increase in quantity or quality of the opponent's weapons: a state can adopt a more relaxed attitude towards arms race, and a low-alert posture because the safety of the deterrent makes useless to "launch on warning" according to the logic of "use it or lose it". Finally, such a strategy implies that

⁷"As long as each side has thermonuclear weapons that *could* be used against the opponent, even after the strongest possible preemptive attack, existential deterrence is strong, and it rests on uncertainty about what could happen" (Bundy, quoted in Freedman 1988: 184).

⁸"All that is required is the availability of some nuclear weapons that *could* be used in anger" (Freedman 1988: 184).

a country will use its weapons only in response to an opponent's attack (no-first-use policy) and not on the battlefield (no war-fighting strategy).

China's nuclear doctrine seems to fit well with the model of minimum deterrence (or existential deterrence) described above.⁹ As Jeffrey Lewis writes:

Among the five states authorized under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to possess nuclear weapons, China has the most restrained pattern of deployment: the People's Republic of China (PRC) deploys just eighty or so operational warheads exclusively for use with land-based ballistic missiles. China's declared nuclear doctrine rejects the initiation of nuclear war under any circumstances. The PRC does not maintain tactical nuclear forces of any kind, and its strategic forces are kept off alert, with warheads in storage. The stability of this posture over time and through changes in threat perception suggests that restraint is the result of choice and not expediency. (Lewis 2007: 1)

However, the Chinese posture presents several features that confound neorealist types of explanations. Neorealism theories maintain that China's rise to a world power would result in a greater sophistication of its nuclear doctrine and weapon modernization.¹⁰ As I will demonstrate, however, China elaborated its nuclear doctrine at a time when the country was still largely underdeveloped and slowly recovering from the economic and political disasters of the Cultural Revolution.

Moreover, a strategy of minimum deterrence in the late 1960s was not particularly safe for China, given the limited size of its arsenal and its conventional inferiority compared with the Soviet Army (Powell 2015). Beijing's leaders feared a possible Soviet surprise attack to destroy their small arsenal.¹¹ This option was seriously taken into consideration by the Chinese leadership, as the episode of "Order no. 1" in the fall

⁹The concepts of minimum deterrence and existential deterrence are similar (Sauer 2009).

¹⁰This is not the position of all neorealist theories but only of the offensive variant (Mearsheimer 2001).

¹¹The American administration also envisaged the possibility of destroying China's infant arsenal in the early 1960s (Burr and Richelson 2000/2001). It even toyed with the idea of a collaboration with Moscow to curb China's nuclear program. Averell Harriman wrote to Kennedy on January 23, 1963: "To my mind, the most important matter in the interest of our security which you touched upon was the question of attempting to prevent Red

of 1969 amply demonstrates. Lin Biao—apparently bypassing the normal political chain of command—alerted the Chinese arsenal because of rumours about an imminent Soviet attack (Nie 1988: 747–753).¹²

It is also very puzzling from a neorealist perspective that stronger inputs to develop a nuclear doctrine occurred during less dangerous times. It occurred at a time (mid-1980s) that, regarding external threats, was certainly less dangerous than the decade after the first nuclear test, when the PRC was engaged in a dual conflict with the US in Indochina and the USSR on its north-eastern border.

In the case of China, the relationship between external changes and national responses seems to go in the opposite direction vis-à-vis neorealist expectations. “Despite major changes in China’s external security environment, economic resources, and technological capabilities, its approach to nuclear strategy and force structure has been relatively consistent since the 1960s” (Fravel and Medeiros 2010: 52).

1.3 TRADITIONAL STRATEGIC CULTURE AND THE ART OF AMBIGUITY

A second group of explanations takes into consideration the role played by the traditional political-military culture in the development of China’s nuclear doctrine. These studies analyse the influence of the

China from obtaining nuclear capability, and the possibility of working with the Soviets to this end”. *Letter, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs W. Averell Harriman to President John F. Kennedy, 23 January 1963, Secret, enclosed with letter from Harriman to Evelyn Lincoln, 23 January 1963* (National Security Archive, hereafter NSA: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB38/document5.pdf>). A few days later, General Curtis LeMay recommended the following list of direct measures to strangle China’s nuclear programme: “(1) Conduct covert aerial reconnaissance flights over Communist China. (2) Support infiltration, subversion, and sabotage by Chinese nationalists throughout Communist China and by South Koreans against North Korea. (3) Conduct increasingly severe maritime control measures up to and including blockade. (4) Support a Nationalist Chinese invasion of mainland China. (5) Support a South Korea invasion of North Korea. (6) Conduct small scale conventional air attacks against CHICOM’s [Communist China] nuclear or other facilities. (7) Deliver a tactical nuclear weapon on a selected CHICOM target”. General Curtis E. LeMay, *Acting Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Secretary of Defense, “Study of Chinese Communist Vulnerability,”* 29 April 1963, with report on “*Chinese Communist Vulnerability*” attached, *Top Secret* (NSA: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB38/document6.pdf>).

¹²For an in-depth analysis of this incident, see Lewis and Xue (2006: Chapter 3).

Seven Military Classics on the country's contemporary nuclear posture.¹³ The assumption behind them is that a country's cultural traditions affect the way it interprets international events—a conflictual or peaceful image of international relations—and the reaction of policymakers—accommodating behaviours and defensive or offensive strategies.

The Chinese strategic culture is the result of different traditions of thought that amalgamated over time, creating a complex system of principles, symbols and behavioural attitudes. The first tradition was Confucianism, an expression of a philosophy of order; while the second was “Legalism”, a tradition more closely oriented to behaviours consistent with realpolitik tenets (Deillos 1994; Johnston 1995; Ching 2004; Ivanhoe 2004).¹⁴

The Confucian culture dominated Imperial China beginning with the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–24 AD). Zhang Tiejun defines Confucianism as a form of “cultural moralism”, i.e., a vision of social relations centred on normative standards and not on selfish interests (Zhang 2002). In this tradition, decisions on domestic and foreign policies are assessed according to their compliance with the Confucian principles rather than their ability to ensure the fulfilment of the national interest. War is considered an aberration vis-à-vis the normal functioning of international relations.

Confucianism has a positive image of men, who are depicted as beings capable of living in harmony. Confucius believed that every person had a role to play. The main social relations were those between rulers and ruled, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, teacher and student, and among friends. The relationship between father and son was considered the most important because it served as a model for the relationship between rulers and subjects.

¹³The Seven Military Classics are Sun Zi's *Art of War*, written in approximately 500 BC; Wu Qi's *Art of War*, written not long after by the student of a disciple of Confucius; Sima Rangju's *Methods*, written by a military officer of the state of Qi, dated from approximately the third century BC; Wei Liao's *Art of War*, whose date is uncertain but probably dates from the end of the fourth century BC; Jiang Ziya's (Tai Gong) *Six Secret Teachings*, from the last Warring States period (late third century BC), although according to Ralph Sawyer, it may date from a much earlier period of the Chou dynasty; Huang Shi Gong's *Three Strategies*, dating from a period roughly similar to that of the previous text; and *Questions and Replies between Tang Tai Zhong and Li Wei Gong*, dating from the tenth century AD (Sawyer 1993).

¹⁴This section draws on Rosa (2014).

Confucian teachings included a list of moral and political prescriptions: love others; do what is right and not what produces personal gain; always follow the principle of reciprocity in interpersonal conduct; and govern through moral example and not with the use of force. From these basic tenets came the idea that military force is a tool to be used in a very careful way and only against governments that are guilty of immoral behaviour or that have committed grave injustices.

The second tradition, “Legalism”, was similar to Western *realpolitik*. It dominated, according to Iain Johnston, the operational level of military policy.¹⁵ In many cases, political actions guided by considerations of *realpolitik* and power logic were cloaked in a language and a moralistic rhetoric that belonged to the Confucian model (Johnston 1995).

In the realist model, war is viewed as a natural element of international relations due to the inherent wickedness of man and his unbridled pursuit of power and wealth. The image of the other that results from this vision is negative. If people are moved by a lust for power, it is inevitable to expect aggressive behaviour from them. It follows that the best policy is to attack preventively. The order of strategic preference will rank offensive actions first, defensive actions second, and accommodation policies last. In the *Seven Military Classics*, to the exclusion of Huang Shi Gong’s *Three Strategies*, which presents strategic preferences consistent with the Confucian model (policies of accommodation ranked first, defensive strategies second, and offensive actions third), non-military strategies are ranked last among the best options to ensure the security of the state (*ibid.*: 148).

By drawing on the study of the classical military doctrines of ancient China, especially from some concepts in Sun Zi’s *Art of War*, Lin Chong-pin (1988) has tried to explain some of the more puzzling features of contemporary Chinese nuclear doctrine.

According to Lin, the influence of ancient Chinese military thought on contemporary China’s strategy should be traced neither to such popular concepts as the primacy of man over technology, which is a recurring theme in Maoist writings and speech, nor to the primacy of defence over offence, which is another classical tenet of contemporary

¹⁵The idea that China is characterized by a strategic culture that is strongly marked by a realist conception of international politics is shared by many scholars. See, among others, the works of Johnston (1995, 1996a), Christensen (1996), Nathan and Ross (1997), Swaine and Tellis (2000), and Wang (2011).

Chinese strategy,¹⁶ nor to the primacy of deception, which can be traced to the Sun Zi's *Art of War* principle of "subdu[ing] the enemy without fighting". Lin argues that the "three commonly observed Chinese strategic themes described above are valid yet somewhat limited in conveying the Chinese strategic tradition. A more comprehensive conceptualization is needed" (Lin 1988: 22). He proposes a different list that he believes can shed some light on the puzzle of Chinese military strategy in general and on its nuclear doctrine in particular. The list includes the following:

- An extra-military and extra-combative emphasis.
- Integrated dualism.
- Flux and fluidity.
- Negativism and minimalism.

The first couple refers to all of the elements that can affect the outcome of a war but that are not directly controlled by a strategist, such as the domestic environment, the weather, and the terrain conformation. It also includes all of the techniques used to defeat an enemy that are not strictly military in nature: deception, the use of fire, flooding, etc. Linked to these concepts is the theme of "integrated multiplicity", i.e., the awareness that a winning strategy requires an approach that employs all of the state's possible instruments: political, military, economic, cultural, and psychological. These principles can be found in Maoist thought, which stressed the decisive role of a multi-pronged strategy to successfully wage wars against more powerful enemies (Tsou and Halperin 1965).

The second concept, *integrated dualism*, includes two dichotomous couples: orthodox and unorthodox methods and the couple of defence-offence (Lin 1988: 26). The relationship between orthodox and unorthodox methods is a central topic in Sun Zi's *Art of War* and Sun Pin's *Military Methods* (Sawyer 1993). In Chapter 5, on "Strategic military power", Sun Zi elaborates on the change, during a military campaign, from orthodox to unorthodox methods. Sun Pin dedicates a full chapter (no. 30) to the relationship between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy. The endless alternation between offence and defence is considered to be a persistent trait of China's style of warfare.

¹⁶The defensive nature of China's strategic culture is symbolized by the Great Wall. The conflict with Vietnam in 1979, even if initiated by Beijing, was labelled as a counter-offensive triggered by Vietnam's attack of Cambodia, which was an ally of China. Another example is the commitment of the PRC to renounce the first use of nuclear weapons in case of conflict. See Scobell (2003).

The twin concepts of flux and fluidity refer to the idea—underscored many times by Sun Zi—that armed forces should behave as water, always changing shape, adapting to the terrain and circumstances and never offering the enemy a clear point of reference. According to Lin, Mao used military strategies inspired by these principles in the battles of Liao-Sheng and Beiping-Tianjin in the fall of 1948.

Lin’s last strategic concept couple is that of *negativism* and *minimalism*. “Broadly speaking, negativism is the manipulation of negative forces into positive results, and minimalism is the management of minimum resources for maximum yield” (Lin 1988: 31).

According to Lin, these strategic principles affect contemporary Chinese military thought, even in the realm of nuclear policy. The strategic ambiguity surrounding China’s nuclear doctrine would be the result of the application of the concepts of extra-military means, integrated dualism, flux and fluidity, minimalism and negativism to the management of weapons of mass destruction. These old principles have produced five features of China’s nuclear doctrine (ibid.: Chapter 3):

- Manipulation of ambiguity.
- Extra-military emphasis.
- Leapfrogging.
- Aversion to military build-up (minimalism).
- Management of negative factors.

The first characteristic of China’s nuclear doctrine refers to the diffuse practice of secrecy about the dimensions of the nuclear stockpile and the policy of concealment of the delivery and basing systems. “Secrecy and concealment regarding strategic weapons pervade all nuclear powers. However, Chinese insistence on, or even obsession with, this approach is apparently greater, certainly no less, than that of any counterparts” (ibid.: 69).

Together with secrecy and concealment, China’s attitude towards nuclear weapons is marked by the strategic use of leaks about the composition of its arsenal and its employment principles with the goal of confounding its rivals. This attitude is a direct offspring of Sun Zi’s maxim, “The essence of warfare is but the art of ambiguity” (quoted in Lin 1988: 69).¹⁷

¹⁷In Sawyer’s translation of Sun Zi, the sentence is: “Warfare is the way [Tao] of deception” (Sawyer 1993: 158).

In the case of nuclear devices, according to Lin, the extra-military emphasis translates into a greater political role attributed to these weapons vis-à-vis their military role. As a case in point, Lin quotes the role played by the Chinese space programme. The political leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stressed the purely civilian nature of the launch tests and the rocket designs and downplayed the military meaning that the rockets could have as delivery vehicles for nuclear warheads.

Another example of this logic resides in the symbolic meaning attached to nuclear weapons, which are considered more as a marker of national greatness and technological prowess than as military instruments to use on battlefield. Moreover, advances in military technology are evaluated for their contributions to civilian industry and economic growth.

Leapfrogging refers to another important feature of China's nuclear posture: the inclination to skip the intermediate passage in technological development and move directly from a peasant army to a modern nuclear force, "from muskets to missiles" (Jenks 1982). A good example of leapfrogging is the Beijing leaders' decision to first test a nuclear device using uranium as the fissile material instead of plutonium, notwithstanding the greater complexity required for the management of this type of warhead. According to Lin, leapfrogging is an offspring of the ancient military classics' concept of fluidity (Lin 1988: 71).

The last two strategic concepts that characterise China's nuclear posture are those of minimalism and negativism. Minimalism can be traced to the reluctance of Chinese leaders to follow an escalation logic by increasing the stakes of a war or the intensity of a battle or by enlarging the territory involved in a fight. China's relaxed approach to the arms race and to the search for military parity with other nuclear states can also be considered an expression of this attitude. The "minimum means of reprisal" logic, analysed in the previous section, would be a product of this traditional concept. The limited number of nuclear tests conducted by China—compared with the number of tests conducted by the US and the USSR—can be viewed as another indicator of this strategic principle.¹⁸

According to Lin, all of the main tenets of China's nuclear doctrine embody the principle of negativism. China's employment doctrine is

¹⁸In the period from 1945–2013, China conducted 45 nuclear tests, the US exploded 1054 nuclear devices, the USSR 715, the United Kingdom 45 and France 210 (<http://www.ctbto.org/nuclear-testing/history-of-nuclear-testing/nuclear-testing-1945-today/>).

generally expressed in a negative way: it does not state when China will use nuclear weapons, but when it will not use them (the “no-first-use” principle). Nuclear weapons are considered in a negative way as a type of weapon that should be eliminated as soon as possible.

The conclusion that Lin draws from this analysis is that “[t]hese characteristics are demonstrably conceptual extensions of past tradition. Moreover, they seem to stand apart from the approaches of the other nuclear powers” (ibid.: 73).

Cultural studies are very useful for explaining the elements of persistence and continuity in China’s strategic behaviour, even in the field of its nuclear posture. However, they also present some weaknesses. First, it is always methodologically very hazardous to trace a causal relation between variables that are so distant in time (past cultural traditions and current nuclear doctrine); and second, cultural variables are more apt to explain continuity than change, so they are at odds in explaining the difference between the two periods analysed in this study.

1.4 MAOIST MILITARY THOUGHT AND THE DOWNPLAYING OF MILITARY TECHNOLOGY

The third group of explanations shares the attention on ideational factors with the second group, but it focuses more on the communist leaders’ (especially Mao Zedong) belief systems than on the traditional military thought in imperial China.

Many studies have highlighted the central role played by the doctrines of Mao Zedong in explaining China’s nuclear programme and its lack of attention on the development of a doctrine of employment and targeting. Mao’s attitude towards military technology was ambivalent. On the one hand, he thought that wars could be won only by politically motivated soldiers and that technology played a minor role in determining the outcome of a conflict. On the other hand, he had a high consideration for military power.

As a good realist, Mao possessed a strongly confrontational vision of international politics (Johnston 1996a). In the 1937 essay *On Contradiction*, he provides an overview of the dynamics of conflict within and between societies.¹⁹ The presence of contradictions, fights,

¹⁹This section draws on Rosa (2010: Chapter 5).

and struggles between men is considered a universal condition. Mao identifies different types of contradictions: between the proletariat and the peasantry, between workers and capitalists, between the petty bourgeoisie and the big capitalists, and between poor countries and rich countries. Moreover, he distinguishes between primary and secondary contradictions. Leaders must identify major and secondary contradictions and focus on the first. In a given historical period, a political leader can postpone the contradictions between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie to create a united front against big capitalists and landlords. Internationally, China can ally with non-socialist countries to fight a primary enemy. This approach leads to a distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions. The latter can be resolved in a peaceful manner, while the first requires a relentless class struggle.

As far as the image of opponents is concerned, they are viewed as warmongers that fuel international conflicts. They are considered to be rational actors whose conduct may be affected by a strong policy. Adequate knowledge of the laws of social dynamics makes possible an accurate prediction of their behaviour and to shape events in a direction that is consistent with national interests.

Regarding the role of violence, it is considered to be essential and effective. Mao stressed a strategy of “active defence” that included the possibility of offensive actions to strike the enemy first. The military instrument occupies a special place in Mao’s doctrines, as evidenced by the statement, “the power grows out from the barrel of a gun”. As he notes:

According to the Marxist theory of the state, the army is the chief component of state power. Whoever wants to seize and retain state power must have a strong army. Some people ridicule us as advocates of the “omnipotence of war”. Yes, we are advocates of the omnipotence of revolutionary war; that is good, not bad; it is Marxist. The guns of the Russian Communist Party created socialism. We shall create a democratic republic. Experience in the class struggle in the era of imperialism teaches us that it is only by the power of the gun that the working class and the labouring masses can defeat the armed bourgeoisie and landlords; in this sense, we may say that only with guns can the whole world be transformed. (Mao, Various years: 225)

This awareness of the importance of military force led Mao to invoke tight political control of the Party over the Armed Forces. In short, Mao’s belief system appears to be similar to that of a person convinced

that the essence of politics is struggle. He had a great propensity to choose a confrontational strategy and to implement it with confrontational tactics (Feng 2005).

The attitude of the People's Republic of China (PRC) towards nuclear weapons was strongly influenced by the doctrines of Mao Zedong regarding political/military affairs. Mao's position changed over the course of the years from strong scepticism about the utility of nuclear weapons to substantial support for their development.²⁰ Although Mao, as a good realist, gave great importance to military instruments, his approach to nuclear weapons was complex and nuanced. In an interview in 1946 with the American journalist Anna Louise Strong, he downplayed the importance of nuclear weapons, comparing them with "paper tigers" and repeating that the deciding factors on the battlefield were well-armed and motivated men.²¹ The public underestimation of nuclear weapons partially reflected an objective assessment of the arsenals of the two superpowers after World War II. By late 1950, this assessment was more pessimistic, although an attitude of scorn resisted (Halperin and Perkins 1965).

If nuclear weapons were to be despised from a strategic point of view, given that the development of history was in favour of the progressive forces and hostile to the imperialist powers, they should not, however, be underestimated from a tactical point of view because of their great destructive capacity. Chinese policymakers took into serious consideration the balance of power and judged China's weakness on the world stage in a realistic way. This consideration prompted the modernization of China's military arsenal and diplomatic manoeuvres that were intended to curb the risk of an external conflict. A symbolic element also entered the process of re-evaluation of nuclear weapons: due to their hallmark of superpower status, the PRC needed these types of weapons to regain its position as a great power.²²

²⁰On Mao Zedong's thoughts about atomic weapons, see the classic study by Alice Langley Hsieh (1962). A more in-depth analysis of Mao's ideas and role in the development of China's nuclear program is in Chapter 3.

²¹"The atom bomb is a paper tiger which the US reactionaries use to scare people. It looks terrible, but in fact it isn't. Of course, the atom bomb is a weapon of mass slaughter, but the outcome of a war is decided by the people, not by one or two new types of weapon" (Mao, Various years, 100).

²²On the symbolic dimension of the nuclear option, see Sagan (1996/1997).

The importance attributed to man over technology and the necessity of despising atomic weapons strategically (even if seriously considering them tactically) led Mao not to elaborate on operational concepts very much. In the end, the military doctrine that led Mao was that of the “People’s War”, and weapons of mass destruction did not fit well with this type of strategy.

As Ralph Powell noted (1965), Mao’s statement on “paper tigers” rested on several arguments: ideological, practical and psychological. From the ideological point of view, Mao’s thesis resulted from his optimistic belief about the direction of history. Marxism–Leninism was based on the idea that revolutionary forces were on the rise, and the imperialist nation was on the verge of decay. Because of the contradictions between the reactionary cliques and their people, the policymakers in capitalist states could not count on the support of public opinion, and because this support was essential to prevailing in a political-military struggle, decadent capitalist states were doomed to be defeated. This fact in addition to the strategy of the “People’s War” represented a sort of “spiritual atomic bomb” that was much more powerful than an actual atomic bomb. This argument was advanced by Lin Biao in 1966 in his apologetic pamphlet “Long Live the Victory of People’s War”:

However highly developed modern weapons and technical equipment may be and however complicated the methods of modern warfare, in the final analysis, the outcome of a war will be decided by the sustained fighting of the ground forces, by the fighting at close quarters on battlefields, by the political consciousness of the men, by their courage and spirit of sacrifice. Here, the weak points of US imperialism will be completely laid bare, while the superiority of the revolutionary people will be brought into full play. The reactionary troops of US imperialism cannot possibly be endowed with the courage and the spirit of sacrifice possessed by the revolutionary people. The *spiritual atom bomb* which the revolutionary people possess is a far more powerful and useful weapon than the physical atom bomb. (Lin 1966: 57, *italics* added)

According to Powell, the second argument behind the “paper tigers” thesis was a practical one. The most likely type of conflict that Chinese leaders imagined—guerrilla wars between national liberation movements and imperialist powers—did not seem very suited for waging with weapons of mass destruction. “The US is prevented from using its nuclear weapons against revolutionaries by American and world public opinion,

by the frightened opposition of US allies, by the lack of appropriate targets in many areas, and by the fact that often forces are intermingled and there are no clear battle-lines” (Powell 1965: 58).

Beijing’s leaders also considered nuclear weapons to be useless for attacking China’s mainland. This viewpoint was expressed in secret military documents that repeated the official stance that China could not be defeated by an attack that employed nuclear, chemical or bacteriological weapons. This belief resulted from “China’s great land mass, her vast population and the dispersal of her industrial centres” (ibid.: 59). In the end, the downplaying of nuclear weapons rested on the “man-over-weapon” argument.²³

In addition to ideological and practical considerations, psychological factors also worked in favour of the concept of “paper tigers”. According to Powell, this type of logic was the most important because it served to reassure the Chinese people and other communist leaders who faced an enemy that was seemingly more powerful and that was armed with “unthinkable” weapons.

Mao Zedong’s thought on military matters is very important for explaining China’s attitude towards nuclear doctrine. However, it do not explain the changes under Deng Xiaoping, although Deng had ideas about nuclear weapons that were substantially similar to those of Mao (Fravel and Medeiros 2010).²⁴ To understand the real impact of Maoist thought on the development of China’s nuclear doctrine, it is important to consider the way in which it shaped domestic politics and, indirectly,

²³In a speech in January 1961, Marshal Ye Jianying stated: “Although atomic bombs are very powerful, they can only be used to destroy centres and the economic reserves of the opponent during the strategic bombing phase. After that, they are used principally as fire-power preparations for assault. However, the army and regular weapons are necessary to terminate war, to destroy the enemy, to occupy positions, and to win a victory. To rely on the army and regular weapons is to rely primarily on man. The final conclusion thus rests on man” (quoted in Hsie 1964: 83–84).

²⁴“Some people abroad say that technology decides everything. Don’t place blind faith in that. Of course, we cannot afford to neglect technology. However, the notion that electronic computers can take over all the command functions is absurd—then men would have no active role at all. Experience shows that, even if the enemy were to come now, we would be able to fight him with our present weapons and eventually win the war, provided we persevered in the people’s war. With such a huge population, once our people and army unite as one, no enemy can destroy us”. *Speech at a plenary meeting of the military commission of the Central Committee of the CPC, December 28, 1977* (Deng, Various years).

the strategic debate in Beijing. The changes between the Maoist and the Dengist eras did not result from different thinking about nuclear weapons by the two leaders, but from the fact that Deng did not let his security beliefs become enmeshed with domestic political games, thus restricting the scope of strategic debate.

1.5 ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

All of the models analysed above have pros and cons. Neoclassical realism combines many elements of these models in a coherent/unitary framework.²⁵ In the following chapters, after a short presentation of the history of China's nuclear programme, I will use a neoclassical realist model of military doctrine formation to explain the development/underdevelopment of China's nuclear doctrine. The book is organised as follows. In Chapters 2 and 3, the main theoretical explanations for the development of military doctrine and the evolution of China's nuclear programme are examined. Chapters 4 and 5 analyse two empirical case studies: the first is a case of nuclear doctrine underdevelopment, and the second is a case with a more sophisticated articulation of a nuclear doctrine.

Chapter 2 describes some of the major explanations of military doctrines. In particular, three approaches are analysed: The balance of power model; the organisational model; and the strategic culture approach. The balance of power model emphasises the role of international factors to explain the development of military doctrines. It emphasises the international structure, the distribution of power and the role played by external threats and action-reaction logic in stimulating the development of military doctrines. The organisational model stresses the role played by organisational culture and bureaucratic interests. According to this perspective, military doctrine is considered to be more a response to the parochial interests of military services than a strategic response to a security threat. The strategic culture approach stresses the importance of socially embedded images of international politics and war for the development of military doctrine. It focuses on the ideational basis of the choices of states with regard to

²⁵For a recent study that combines different types of variables to explain China's nuclear posture, see Fravel and Medeiros (2010). The main limitation of Fravel and Medeiros' analysis—whose conclusion is largely consistent with present book—is that it lacks a clear theoretical framework to link and rank the different variables (ideational and structural, international and domestic) taken into consideration.

the use of force and the management of external threats. After a review of these approaches, a neoclassical realist model is advanced. It is based on the classical realist tenet that states are the most important actor in international politics, and external threats, as determined by changes in the balance of power, are the main input to the development of military doctrines. At the same time, it combines propositions from other approaches with this classical realist argument. To explain a particular response to an international event, it is necessary to take into account the elites' perception of the balance of power (which can be biased by several factors) and the domestic constraints (elite fragmentation, societal cohesion/fragmentation, regime vulnerability) that impinge on foreign policy decision-making. Readers who are not interested in theoretical issues can skip this chapter and go directly to Chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, a brief history of China's nuclear programme is presented. It focuses on three topics: first, the role of Mao's thought in China's nuclear policy; second, the main steps in the development of China's nuclear arsenal; and third, the elaboration of the "no-first-use" doctrine that for approximately three decades represented China's only declared nuclear policy.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyse two critical periods in the development of China's nuclear doctrine. Chapter 4 analyses the period from 1964 to 1971, which followed the first nuclear test. This period was characterised by a very dangerous international environment (the Indochina War, the clash with the USSR on the Ussuri River, and paranoia about a possible Soviet decapitation nuclear attack), a complicated domestic situation (Cultural Revolution and the fall of Lin Biao) marked by hard factionalism, and a strategic debate captured by domestic struggle so that the development of the nuclear doctrine was a sort of continuation of "factionalism by other means".

Chapter 5 analyses the development of China's nuclear doctrine during the period from 1978–1989. These years were characterised by a more relaxed international situation, although Chinese leaders were still worried about the implications of particular ominous events for national security: the disastrous Vietnam War of 1979, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the launching of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) by the Reagan Administration. Domestically, the post-Maoist period was characterised by a form of soft factionalism, a return to a "normal" pattern of politics, and greater elite stability. The strategic debate centred on the evolution of the concept of the "People's War" into that of the

“People’s War under modern conditions”. The nuclear doctrine was characterised by a more articulated elaboration of targeting and employment concepts and included ideas about war-fighting and tactical nuclear weapons.

The conclusion (Chapter 6) provides a summary of the main research findings.

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A Neoclassical Realist Approach to Military Doctrines

Abstract This chapter describes some of the major explanations of military doctrines. In particular, three approaches are analysed: The balance of power model; the organisational model; and the strategic culture approach. The balance of power model emphasises the role of international factors to explain the development of military doctrines. It emphasises the international structure, the distribution of power and the role played by external threats and action-reaction logic in stimulating the development of military doctrines. The organisational model stresses the role played by organisational culture and bureaucratic interests. The strategic culture approach stresses the importance of socially embedded images of international politics and war for the development of military doctrine. After a review of these approaches, a neoclassical realist model is advanced.

Keywords Military doctrine · Nuclear doctrine · Neoclassical realism

A nuclear doctrine is part of a nation's military doctrine, i.e., the set of beliefs and norms that regulates the use of weapons. Nuclear doctrine refers to the principle underlying the selection of targets and how nuclear weapons are employed. Military doctrines are influenced by several factors: the international situation; the interest and subculture of military organizations; and policymakers' images of war and international politics.

2.1 MILITARY DOCTRINE AND NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

The Atlantic Alliance (NATO) defines military doctrine as follows: “Fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application”.¹ Every nation elaborates its military doctrine/doctrines. Military doctrines are strongly influenced by the strategic situation, cultural traditions and other domestic factors. Maoist military doctrines resulted both from the ancient military thought of imperial China and from Mao Zedong’s approach to war and international politics, which itself was influenced by Leninist philosophy and historical contingencies (Powell 1968).

The language used in Chinese official texts to define military thinking is very complex. By borrowing from Soviet terminology, China’s policy-makers distinguish between military doctrine, military science and military strategy (Tan Eng Bok 1984).² To avoid confusion, in this study I use the terminology of Barry Posen, not the official terminology used by national military services. Posen defines military doctrine as follows: the subcomponent of grand strategy that deals explicitly with military means. It addresses the question of *what* means shall be employed and *how* they shall be employed. Military doctrine reflects the judgements of professional military officers and civilian leaders concerning what is and is not militarily possible and necessary (Posen 1984: 13, 14).

Nuclear doctrine is a subcomponent of military doctrine that includes the beliefs, principles, and operational concepts concerning what types of nuclear device to produce (e.g., ground-launched missile, bomb, submarine-launched missile), when and how they are employed (i.e., strategically or tactically), and against what types of target (i.e., civilian or military targets).

Military doctrines are important because they affect many dimensions of military behaviour. As Posen states, military doctrine affects the offence/defence/deterrence balance. Some military doctrines are more

¹AAP-6(V) NATO *Glossary of Terms and Definitions* (<https://fas.org/irp/doddir/other/nato2008.pdf>).

²Soviet definition of military doctrine included both the socio-political dimension of war and the military-technical aspects of security policy (Odom 1988/1989). In this study, the concept of military doctrine mainly refers to the second aspect. On the different terminologies used by Chinese military policymakers, see also Shambaugh (2002: 56–60).

defence-oriented: they privilege an approach to war and military affairs that stresses the dominant role of cautious strategies and passive defence. Conversely, an offensive doctrine underlines the virtues of mobility, preventive/pre-emptive attacks, outflanking manoeuvres, encircling and so on. The “cult of the offensive” on the eve of First World War is an example of such a type of military doctrine. The cult of the offensive refers to the fact that (Van Evera 1984):

- The military prefers offensive strategies and elaborates plans centred on offensive actions.
- Offensive actions are deemed superior to defensive actions because they can achieve a quick victory through striking a decisive blow.
- Offensive actions are considered the best method for addressing threats to national security.

The Maoist doctrine of the “People’s War” stressed a strategy of active defence based on luring the adversary deep into Chinese territory to exploit the knowledge of the terrain and the support of the people to defeat a militarily superior force.

After World War II and the development of nuclear weapons, the balance between offence/defence/deterrence tilted towards the last term. Because of the destructive power of nuclear weapons, nuclear doctrine elaborated on changing the probability of a war more than the probability of winning a war (Huntington 1961).

Military doctrines also affect the relationships among the different components—military, political, economic, cultural—of a national grand strategy (Posen 1984). Maoist military doctrine stressed the multifaceted nature of military strategy. For many years, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has been considered to be a “political” army more than a professional army, and it has often been used for economic and political/revolutionary tasks (Gittings 1967).

Finally, military doctrine affects the balance between innovation and stagnation (Posen 1984). Many military doctrines are characterized by a conservative attitude that tends to discourage military innovation, concerning both weapons development and operational concepts. Military services are very reluctant with regard to changing their routines and traditional procurement methods. They prefer minimal civilian intrusion in their affairs and autonomy, and normally, only a dramatic event, such as a defeat on the battlefield, can produce a change in behavioural routines and doctrines.

2.2 INTERNATIONAL SOURCE OF MILITARY DOCTRINE: THE “BALANCE OF POWER” MODEL

The development of military doctrine is influenced by the position of a state in the international system and by the level of conflict. The balance of power and the emergence of military threats can stimulate policymakers to devise new methods to cope with external events.

Wilhelmine Germany's position in the middle of Europe favoured the elaboration of a highly offensive military doctrine based on a two-front war: the notorious Schlieffen Plan. It resulted from the perception of a strategic predicament that could be solved only using a very risky military behaviour that envisaged attacking on both the western front and the eastern theatre.

Strategic position is not the only determinant of military doctrine. As Gunther Rothenberg states, the delicate position of Germany was clearly evident to the Prussian General Staff. However, the response of General Helmut von Moltke the Elder was very different compared to the risky plan later developed by Alfred von Schlieffen (Rothenberg 1986). Moltke was not convinced that Prussia could defeat France first and then move troops to the eastern front to defeat the Russian armed forces. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, he realized that a *blitzkrieg* was very hazardous and was not very likely to succeed. Thus, he proposed a prudent strategy based on limited attacks on the two fronts to build strong defensive positions. Schlieffen modified Moltke's plan. He developed a new strategy centred on striking a decisive blow to the west that aimed to knock out France and then move troops against Russia, which was slower to mobilize.

Germany's offensive military doctrine was the result of the perception of a change in the balance of power between Berlin, Paris, and Moscow. However, the different responses of Moltke and Schlieffen also illustrate how leaders' personalities, their different evaluations of the strategic situation, and the different domestic climates (the Schlieffen plan appeared in a period characterized by the cult of the offensive) can affect the final result.

The very different position of insular countries such as Great Britain and the United States can explain their insistence on a naval doctrine and the importance attributed to the control of sea-lanes. Prussia, encircled by powerful enemies, developed a sort of garrison state and devised

a very aggressive military doctrine. The UK and the US, defended by the sea and with no vital interest threatened, could allow a more relaxed doctrine and give less importance to the development of a standing professional army. As Stephen Krasner writes about the US:

The weakness of the American polity is deeply embedded in the country's history. America has never needed a strong state. The political, social, and economic imperatives that have enhanced the role of the state in Japan and continental Europe have been much less compelling in the United States. First, with one minor exception (the war of 1812), the United States has never been confronted with foreign invasion. Second, American society has been unusually cohesive, and dominant social values have been congruent with the needs of a modern economy. Third, the American economy has performed extraordinarily well without much direct government intervention, and the abundance generated by the economic success has mitigated the demands placed upon the state. (Krasner 1978: 66)

This strategic position affected not only the strength of political institutions—producing a weak state—but also military doctrine, with a prominent role played by the prophets of naval power, such as Alfred Thayer Mahan (Crowl 1986).

Mao's doctrine of the "People's War" was partially the result of the balance of power between the Red Army and Chang Kai-shek's nationalist army. Mao adapted communist military strategy to the reality of power relations in China. His analysis of the strategic situation was more correct than the analysis of Moscow's advisers, who proposed a strategy based on the classical occupation of cities. The clash between Li Lisan and Mao's line was a clash between an orthodox doctrine that pretended to apply to China the strategy that resulted in the victory of the Russian revolution and a doctrine based on the analysis of the actual conditions in China that had been developed in the 1930s and 1940s to fight, first, Guomindang and, then, Japan.³

To summarize how the international position/balance of power affects military doctrines, Posen states that (1984: 78–79):

³“Actually, there is little in the principles, strategy and tactics of Maoist military doctrine that is original. Mao was deeply influenced by the heroic literature and the military classics of China's past. He is also indebted to the Marxist-Leninist military tradition and especially to the writing of Lenin. *Yet Mao's military concepts have also been heavily influenced by the long military experience of his own Communist Party*” (Powell 1968: 247, *italics added*).

- Expansionist powers prefer an offensive doctrine.
- The prospect of great damages leads to a preference for an offensive doctrine that shifts the burden of war onto the adversary's territory.
- An encircled state can prefer a pre-emptive/preventive doctrine.
- States without allies prefer an offensive doctrine to use their military power as a diplomatic bargaining chip.
- Weak states and status quo states favour defensive doctrines.
- Defeats on the battlefield can stimulate military innovation and integration between the different elements of the grand strategy.

2.3 DOMESTIC SOURCES OF MILITARY DOCTRINE (1): THE ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

“Military doctrines are in the day-to-day custody of military organizations. Such organizations have a large part of the responsibility both for the construction of military doctrine and for its execution in wartime [...] certain attributes of modern military organizations affect their attitude to offense, defence, and deterrence; to political-military integration; and to innovation” (ibid.: 42). Military organizations have different conceptions of national security and propose different military doctrines.

One of the main factors influencing the support for one type or another type of military doctrine is concerned with parochial interests. According to *Miles's law*, “where you stand depends on where you sit” (Allison 1971; Halperin 1974). The role influences the way that actors see both the problems and the solutions to address them. People tend to identify with their organization (which determines their careers) and its interests. The behaviour of policymakers reflects the interests of the organization for which they work. Doctrines that translate into an increase in the organization's budget, a strengthening of its role, and an improvement in staff morale or that allow the single military service strict control over the management of policies are favoured (Halperin 1974: 28–58).

For Posen, military organizations support offensive doctrines because these doctrines reduce the uncertainty arising from a strategy that leaves the opponent to make the first move (the attacker decides how, where and when to move; in other words, the attacker defines the characteristics of the battlefield). Offensive doctrines also justify greater autonomy from civilian authorities and encourage the growth, in terms of size and budget,

of armed forces. Furthermore, organizational interests prompt a doctrine that is less inclined to innovation and that is poorly integrated with the other components of a national grand strategy (Posen 1984: 58).

The pivotal role of the infantry in the Chinese military structure contributed to the persistence of the doctrine of the “People’s War”. For a long period of time, the Navy (PLAN) and the Air Force (PLAAF) played an ancillary role in China’s armed forces (Shambaugh 2002).

The main support for the Eisenhower policy of massive retaliation, which was formulated in a climate of great concern for the growth of the federal budget, was from the Air Force, which, with its ability to deliver atomic bombs to targets, was the only military organization able to ensure strategy implementation. The *New Look* doctrine resulted in a reduction in appropriations for the Army and the Navy and in an increase in funding for the Air Force (Snyder 1962).

In the case of the *New Look* doctrine, military organizations pushed for a highly offensive doctrine. In other cases, however, the interests of military organizations can promote the emergence of a defensive doctrine. Elizabeth Kier studied the influence of the organizational subculture of the French Army on military doctrine between the two world wars (Kier 1995). She focuses on how the different organizational subcultures of the armed forces, and the interaction between them and domestic political dynamics, favoured a shift from a preference for an offensive doctrine, which had been dominant until the First World War, to a defence-orientated doctrine thereafter.

According to Kier, the reason the French military supported a defensive doctrine after World War I is to be found in the internal political debate on the societal role of the armed forces and in the manner in which the organizational culture of the military services affected their response to this debate. In the late 1920s, the political forces of the centre-left enacted a law for the reduction of military service to one year, forcing the army to reform its military doctrine. For Kier, the choice of a defensive strategy was not predetermined by external structural factors (as neorealism would expect). It was the organizational culture of the French military to push them toward this type of solution. The choice made by France’s leaders to shorten military service was a response to internal problems that had no connection to the German threat. As Kier notes:

Despite the compelling strategic environment, French policymakers responded to domestic, not international factors when deciding on the organizational structure of the army. The reduction in the term of conscription to one year responded to the left's fear of domestic threats, not to German capabilities or alliance diplomacy. The army reacted to this decision within the constraints of its organizational culture. Instead of choosing an offensive doctrine as posited by functional arguments, the French army adopted a defensive doctrine. (Kier 1995: 72)

French officers were convinced that a one-year military training would not produce a soldier who would be able to perform offensive actions.

Kier's study shows that military organizations are not necessarily inclined to support offensive doctrines. In response to particular domestic political events, military organizations may opt for a defensive doctrine. By having to cope with an army of poorly trained conscripts, the French General Staff chose the only path that its organizational subculture indicated as correct: the adoption of a defensive doctrine. This consideration warns against approaches that do not take into account the interplay between domestic politics and other factors.

2.4 DOMESTIC SOURCES OF MILITARY DOCTRINE (2): STRATEGIC CULTURES

An early study on the cultural sources of military doctrine is that by the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1946). Benedict's research, which was funded by the Military Intelligence Service of the US government, aimed for a better understanding of how a country that was culturally distant from the United States waged war. The work of Ruth Benedict was centred on the idea that cultural traditions influence a country's approach to international politics, war and the use of force. Although this idea fell into disuse during the post-war period for diverse reasons (e.g., theoretical, methodological and practical), in the mid-1990s, international relations (IR) scholars have resumed analysing the ideational/cultural basis of the international behaviour of states (Katzenstein 1996; Checkel 1998; Farrell 1998).

The introduction of the concept of strategic culture facilitated the systematic analysis of the relationship between culture and security policies (Johnston 1995; Desch 1998; Lantis 2009; Zaman 2009). Johnston differentiates three generations of studies on strategic cultures. The first

generation includes studies that were conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s on the behaviour of the US and USSR in the field of nuclear doctrine.

In the early 1970s, there was a major shift in US nuclear doctrine concerning the principles of target selection (Freedman 1989: Chapter 25). The new policy allowed the possibility of using nuclear weapons not only as a tool of deterrence but also for limited attacks on an enemy's military targets. This revision was driven both by the need—more or less felt by all administrations—to provide policymakers with a greater number of viable options if deterrence should fail and by the process of nuclear weapons modernization (O'Sullivan 1990: 177). The new nuclear doctrine, established in memorandum NSDM-242, was announced in March 1974 during a congressional hearing with Secretary of Defence James Schlesinger (Cordesman 1982: 14). The core of the Schlesinger doctrine was the concept of "limited strategic options": the nuclear arsenal would be used against non-military targets with a low population density and military targets in the territory of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. The premise of this review was that a restrained American behaviour on the nuclear battlefield would be matched by a similar behaviour by the Soviets.

Against the theoretical postulates of the Schlesinger doctrine, i.e., Soviet leaders would act in a manner similar to their American counterparts, in 1977, Jack Snyder published a work on Soviet strategic culture. Snyder argued that it was wrong to think that Soviet leaders would tackle nuclear issues in the same way as American leaders. Russian leaders were not abstract actors seeking to maximize their payoff, according to the formal logic of game theory, but "politicians and bureaucrats who have developed and been socialized into a strategic culture that is in many ways unique and who have exhibited distinctive stylistic predispositions in their past crisis behavior" (Snyder 1977: 4).

Two other social scientists helped pave the way for the study of strategic cultures: Ken Booth and Colin Gray. The first focused on the relationship between ethnocentrism and strategy. For Booth, the concept of strategic culture includes national traditions and values, socially shared attitudes, and behavioural patterns related to the problem of the use of force (Booth 1979). These elements have a cultural dimension because, over time, they resist changes in military technology and the international system. Ethnocentrism generates a sort of "cultural fog" that can mislead military planners.

In an article on the American military style, Colin Gray highlighted the importance of studying strategic culture. “In the late 1970s, American defense commentators ‘discovered’ something they really had known all along—that the Soviet Union did not appear to share many of the beliefs and practices that are central to the American idea of international order” (Gray 1981: 21). According to Gray, the strategic culture provides the context within which security issues are debated and defence policies are processed; knowledge of the strategic culture helps better understand why certain military decisions are made.

According to Johnston, this generation was plagued by two errors: an unrigorous definition of the concept of strategic culture and an overdeterministic approach. The second generation of studies in the late 1980s was characterized by an instrumental vision of ideational factors. This generation considered culture to be a simple expedient that was employed to hide the real motivations of actions (Klein 1988). The problem with this approach was that it missed the possibility of rhetorical entrapment, that is, the fact that political elites can be constrained by the words and myths that they use.

The third generation of studies on strategic cultures appeared in the 1990s in the wake of the constructivist turn in IR, and it was characterized by a greater methodological rigour and a more careful specification of the independent and dependent variables. This generation has three main characteristics. First, it attempts to avoid overdeterministic affirmations. Second, it is interested in comparing and empirically testing hypotheses that are derived from different models.⁴ Third, the studies performed by the third generation share a similar conception of culture: “culture either presents decision makers with limited range of options or it acts as a lens that alters the appearance and efficacy of different choices” (Johnston 1995: 42).

Thus, if military doctrines are the subcomponents of a grand strategy that addresses the question of *what* means shall be employed and *how* they shall be employed, then strategic culture is an important theoretical tool to explain how states develop their specific military doctrines: whether they are oriented more towards an offensive strategy or a defensive strategy; whether the strategy is more or less integrated with the other components—economic, political, cultural—of a nation’s

⁴See Glenn et al. (2004).

grand strategy; and whether it is more or less prone to innovation or stagnation. Because a strategic culture is relatively stable for a prolonged period of time, it is very useful in explaining a conservative attitude, despite change at the international structural level. However, this approach has some problems explaining changes in military doctrine when no particular dramatic event, which would be able to modify the basic cultural tenets of an actor, is at work. Thus, in the case of Chinese nuclear doctrine and its modification in the mid/late 1980s, the strategic culture approach has little to say because there was no significant change at the level of the political-military culture of Chinese policymakers between the two periods analysed in this study.

One way to solve this puzzle is to systematically consider all the variables underlined by the approaches analysed above: international variables; domestic variables; and ideational variables. This task is what neoclassical realism attempts to do by reinserting unit-level variables, such as domestic politics and the perceptions of elites, into the balance of power model.⁵

2.5 A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST FRAMEWORK OF CHINA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE FORMATION

Neoclassical realism emerges as a reaction to the incapacity of neorealism (or structural realism) to offer a theory of foreign policy and explain what states do and why. It is true that some scholars have attempted to show that is possible to develop a foreign policy theory using neorealist assumptions (Elman 1996), but leading neorealists, and Kenneth Waltz *in primis* (1979), have insisted that this theory is mainly concerned with international politics (i.e., recurring patterns of state interactions), not foreign policy (i.e., the external behaviour of a single state).

Neoclassical realism starts from an established realist position: the main actors in international politics are states, and their behaviours are stimulated by changes in the balance of power. To this basic tenet it adds several specifications: between the change in the balance of power and state (re)action there is not a direct link; there are many intervening

⁵A strong argument for an eclectic approach that considers variables from different levels of analysis is in Sil, Katzenstein (2010).

variables, located at the unit level (individual and domestic variables), which affect how a government responds to international events.

William Wohlforth's (1987) work on perception and balance of power moved in this direction. He analysed the perception of national power on the eve of WWI, showing that European policymakers misperceived the strength of Russia. In particular, French, English and Italian policymakers inclined to overrate Russian power, whereas Central Empires tended to underrate it. Thus, according to Wohlforth, the perception of elites is "clearly an important medium- and short-term explanatory variable. In some ways, it links long-term changes in the distribution of power with short-term perceptual explanation of the onset of war" (Wohlforth 1987: 381).

Many studies published by scholars during the 1990s used an approach that criticized neorealism's disinterest in unit-level variables.⁶ Randall Schweller's study on revisionist states is a case in point (Schweller 1994, 1998). Starting with the incapacity of neorealism to explain when states choose a balancing or bandwagoning strategy, Schweller introduced a unit-level factor to understand states' different behaviours. In 1994, he developed a typology, reprised and refined in his book on the balance of power between the two world wars, which classified states according to two dimensions: power (i.e., great, middle, and small powers) and international goals (i.e., from a minimum goal of defence to a maximum goal of world hegemony). In this manner, he was able to group states according to their inclination towards a status quo goal (i.e., lions, owls/hawks, and doves) or a revisionist goal (i.e., wolves, foxes, jackal) or based on indifferent interests (i.e., ostriches, lambs) (Schweller 1998: 84–89).

Introducing unit-level variables, Schweller departed from the neorealist tenet that only systemic pressures are important in explaining international behaviour. For Schweller, ideological factors were very important in understanding states' attitudes towards world affairs. Fascist ideology was critical in explaining the foreign policy of major revisionist states (e.g., Hitler's Germany, a wolf) and minor revisionist states (e.g., Mussolini's Italy, an example of a jackal).

⁶For an in-depth review, see Rose (1998).

Another important example of a study that uses an approach that anticipates neoclassical realism is Fareed Zakaria's *From Wealth to Power*. The main argument of Zakaria concerning the rise of the US as a world power is that the weakness of American political institutions prevented/retarded the possibility of extracting social resources that could be transformed into political influence at the international level. The state-society relationship, and how it affects the government's reaction to international events, represents an important research area in contemporary neoclassical realism.⁷

Thomas Christensen's study on Sino-American relations in the 1950s follows an approach that is consistent with the neoclassical realist attention to studying the interplay between systemic and unit-level variables (Christensen 1996). Christensen analyses how the domestic turmoil produced by the Great Leap Forward prompted an international crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1958. According to Christensen, the main problem with the industrial crash program envisioned by the Great Leap Forward was that it demanded great material sacrifices from the people. The program engendered a sharp increase in the price of goods and a general worsening of living standards due to the massive shift of investment from the consumer sector to heavy industry. Mao believed that this problem could be overcome with a return to the revolutionary fervour that characterized the years of the anti-Japanese War and the civil war, when people, motivated by a political cause, worked hard without any material compensation. Because, in 1958, there were no conditions that could justify the sacrifices that the Great Leap Forward required, Mao had to create them. He decided to militarize the society by launching the "everyone a soldier" mass campaign. To have people be willing to accept sacrifices, an external enemy that could produce a "rally round the flag" effect was needed. The creation of an international crisis functioned to create popular support for the policy of the Great Leap Forward. Prime Minister Zhou Enlai declared that the bombardment of Jinmen "had two steps: the first was to recover the offshore islands; the second, to liberate Taiwan. Later, after we began shelling Jinmen, our bombardment played a role in mobilizing the people of the world, especially the Chinese people [...] if we need tension, we can shell Jinmen and Mazu;

⁷On this point, see Taliaferro (2006).

if we want relaxation, we can stop shelling”.⁸ The propaganda machine of the CCP was put to work to convince the Chinese people of the connection between Guomindang and the American threat and support for the Great Leap Forward.

As Gideon Rose—who coined the term “neoclassical realism”—sums up:

Its adherents [to neoclassical realism] argue that the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressure must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level: This is why they are neoclassical. (Rose 1998: 146)

Since the publication of Rose’s article, neoclassical realism has developed a sweeping research agenda.⁹ In the “manifesto” by Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman and Jeffrey Taliaferro (2009), the main characteristics and the variables that need to be taken into consideration are presented in detail.

The neorealist approach identifies three groups of variables to be taken into account to explain foreign policy decisions: systemic factors (i.e., balance of power); domestic factors (i.e., state-society relations, elite cohesion/fragmentation, regime vulnerability, and strategic cultures); and individual factors (i.e., policymakers’ perceptions and misperceptions). Domestic and individual factors represent the transmission belt between the change in the balance of power (i.e., international windows of opportunity and vulnerability) and the (re)action of states. As Schweller puts it, only in the case of a strong coherent fascist state can scholars expect governments to behave as a billiard ball, reacting to the moves of other actors, according to the neorealist’s previsions (Schweller 2006: Chapter 5). States actually are strongly divided along political, economic, ethnic, and cultural dimensions; the perceptions of elites can be biased by

⁸ *October 05, 1958 Meeting Minutes, Zhou Enlai’s Conversation with S.F. Antonov on the Taiwan Issue (excerpt)* (Wilson Center/Digital Archive, International History Declassified, hereafter WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117018>).

⁹ See Finel (2001/2002), Schweller (2004a, b, 2006), Lobell et al. (2009, 2012), Rathbun (2008), Devlen and Özdamar (2009), Kitchen (2010), Toje and Kunz (2012), and Ripsman et al. (2016).

several factors, from wishful thinking to groupthink; governments may not have the capacity to extract from society the resources that are needed to respond to international inputs; the vulnerability of the regime prevents bold action that can jeopardize its stability; the strategic culture affects elites' perceptions of available options and their efficacy. All these things considered, to explain specific foreign policy decisions, it is necessary to analyse both change at the international level and the characteristics of policymakers and their domestic environment.

In neoclassical realism, the most important systemic factor is the balance of power, i.e., the distribution of material resources at the international level. The anarchical nature of the international system, the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the actors (e.g., democratic states, authoritarian states, liberal regimes, theocratic regimes, etc.),¹⁰ the distribution of power (i.e., unipolar, bipolar or multipolar), and the level of conflict are all important factors in explaining states' behaviours. However, as neoclassical realists state, systemic factors alone cannot explain why states adopt a particular decision in a particular moment. To understand this fact, it is important to reintroduce individual and domestic variables.

Changes at the international level can affect foreign policy decisions only if they are perceived and framed by policymakers. The perceptions of elites can be correct but can also be either overly optimistic or overly pessimistic. This phenomenon can be the result of processes of self-delusion, motivated/unmotivated biases, attempts to seek relief from decisional stress that results from values trade-off, or other psychological mechanisms, such as cognitive consistency and groupthink.

In the case of cognitive consistency, the balance between cognitive factors and emotional factors drives people to interpret a particular action using the overall assessment of that actor as a benchmark. Decision makers positively consider the actions of a state about which they have a good evaluation and negatively consider those of a country who they despise (ignoring the actual content of the action). Moreover, there is a process of interaction between the manner in which policymakers judge information and the manner in which they judge the source from which

¹⁰This is a point underlined by Raymond Aron (1966), who is considered to be one of the main sources of inspiration for neoclassical realism (Battistella 2012).

it comes: people believe information from sources that are considered in a positive manner and disregard information from discredited sources (Jervis 1976, 1989).

Groupthink occurs in highly cohesive groups that are characterized by social homogeneity, relative isolation, and strong leadership and who find themselves in a situation of decisional stress. In these cases, it is easy for a number of symptoms to emerge, which can produce an underestimation of external threats or an overestimation of the probability of success (Janis 1982).

Policymakers' perceptions represent an intervening variable that filters both the effects of systemic factors on policy and the input from the domestic environment. The strength of elite cohesion is critical at the domestic level. Because of their strategic culture, role, and parochial interest, different policymakers can propose and support different strategies to cope with external events. Regime vulnerability, power competition, and politicians' interest in maintaining power can spur both overreaction and underbalancing.¹¹ Decisions that can be rational, from the international perspective, can be completely irrational, from the domestic perspective. "The unusual complexity of this two-level game is that moves that are rational for a player at one board (such as raising energy prices, conceding territory, or limiting auto imports) may be impolitic for the same player at the other board" (Putnam 1988: 434). Some external threats pose a greater risk to regime stability than to national security.

Other domestic variables that are important in explaining a state's behaviour are linked to the availability of power resources and a state's extractive capacity: some state can easily translate societal resources into instruments of power projection (strong states); other states (weak states) are captured by societal interests and cannot translate potential power into actual power (Rosa 2006). Strategic cultures can produce an overemphasis on military instruments or, conversely, on non-coercive diplomatic tools. Domestic interest groups can try to affect decisions according to their parochial interests, complicating the formulation of a coherent national foreign policy. The neoclassical realist approach is sketched in Fig. 2.1.

Neoclassical realism seems particularly valuable to understand China's military behaviour: it takes into account both the systemic pressures

¹¹On overreaction caused by domestic processes, see Hagan (1995). On domestic sources of underbalancing, see Schweller (2004b, 2006).

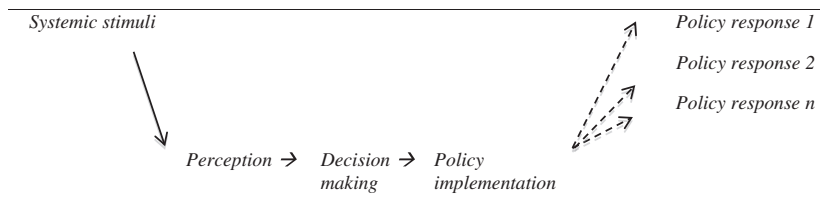


Fig. 2.1 A neoclassical realist explanation of foreign policy decisions (*Source* Ripsman et al. 2016: 31)

stemming from changes in the international balance of power and the domestic influences that a contentious political system such as China’s (especially during the Cultural Revolution) exercise on decisions about how to respond to external events.¹²

To explain the development of China’s nuclear doctrine, it is necessary to consider the international environment in which Mao’s decisions concerning atomic weapons matured, Chinese policymakers’ perceptions of the balance of power, and the domestic constraints within which they decided. Given the particular nature of the communist regime, which was centred on the dominant position of the Party/State, the dynamics of elite politics and the vulnerability of the regime are the most important variables between systemic factors and the reaction of the state. Variables related to social cohesion and the role of interest groups or the extractive capacity of the state are less significant.¹³

Even after the changes introduced by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, the elitist nature of Chinese politics has remained unchanged (Pye 1981; Unger 2002; Bo 2007, 2010). As Joseph Fewsmith writes: “The picture of the Chinese politics laid out above suggests that important changes in state-society relations, in the role of ideology, in the impact of norms and institutions and in the broader political atmosphere have not so much changed the fundamentals of Chinese politics and the rules of the game, as conditioned their exercise” (Fewsmith 2002: 272).

The implication is not that things are always the same: the patterns of elite coalition-building change according to the degree of internal

¹²On this point, see in particular Christensen (1996) and Ross (2009).

¹³On this point, see Rosa (2008).

cohesion and the distribution of power (Dogan and Higley 1998; Dittmer 2002). Foreign policy decisions under Mao were made differently vis-à-vis the period of the reforms. Throughout Mao's time in power, the foreign policy of China was Mao's foreign policy. In the period from 1949 to 1966, all major international initiatives (e.g., the Korean War, the split with the USSR, the nuclear programme, the Sino-Indian conflict, and the "third front" policy) stemmed from Mao or had his strong approval (Bachman 1998). Politics in China, until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, resembled a "palace game" in which leaders attempted to guess Mao's true intentions to position themselves on the winning side, i.e., the side supported by the dominant leader (Teiwes 1990). This situation was the result of an elite structure characterized by a strong ideological consensus and a vertical distribution of power resulting from the special position occupied by Mao Zedong (Teiwes 1990; Goldstein 1991). The power of Mao was a combination of tradition (his resemblance to emperors of ancient dynasties), charisma (Mao was regarded as the most brilliant political and military strategist), and formal authority (based on control over the armed forces) (Teiwes 1984).

During the years of the Cultural Revolution, politics was characterized by hard factionalism (Nathan 1973; Goldstein 1991: 34–66; Tsou 2002). This situation resulted from two processes: the weakening of Mao's ability to control the CCP and the emergence of increasingly sharp divisions among the various components of the party, which culminated in armed clashes between Red Guards and other factions. If, in the previous period, foreign policy decisions were the result of a top-down process in which Mao represented the ultimate arbiter, then, in the 1966–1976 period, the process was more similar to a competitive model in which the final choice was the result of the formation of complex political alliances between various factions vying for power and in which Mao's role was that of the "decisive weight" rather than that of the supreme decision maker.

Since 1978, the model of elite politics prevalent in China can be described as a moderate factionalism based on a rough balance between political players (Bo 2007, 2010; Zhao 1992; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Rosa 2014). It is characterized by a new consensus internal to the elites and by a greater dispersion of power. The implication is that, while not fading, the struggle between factions has transformed. "With

Table 2.1 A neoclassical realist explanation of China's nuclear doctrine formation

<i>Balance of power</i>	<i>Intra-elite relations</i>	<i>Regime vulnerability</i>	<i>Policymakers' perceptions</i>	<i>Policy outcome</i>
Non-threatening/ threatening	Conflictual/ non-conflictual	High/low	Non-consistent/ consistent	Under-developed nuclear doctrine/ a better articulated nuclear doctrine

the exception of the remnant Orthodox 'leftist' and neo-Maoists, the parameters of elite factionalism have narrowed and a more centrist consensus across a range of policy issues is evident" (Shambaugh 2000: 181). In this new phase, foreign policy decision making includes a greater number of actors with multiple interests at stake and with resources coming from political-bureaucratic constituencies. The dominant leader, at the summit, plays a key coordinating role.

The different patterns of elite politics that dominated the Chinese political system during the two periods considered in this study (1964–1971 and 1978–1989) have decisively affected the capacity of policymakers to develop a nuclear doctrine. The two periods are not very different regarding international predicaments, even if the second period was noticeably less dangerous. The most striking difference relates to the domestic environment: the first period is characterized by hard factionalism and a "winner-take-all" logic. In this conflict-prone domestic environment, nuclear doctrine is captured by factional struggle. The second period is characterized by forms of moderate factionalism (a renewed cohesion and more harmonious intra-elite relations); thus, even if Deng Xiaoping's ideas concerning the Bomb were not very different from Mao's ideas, the domestic climate allowed a freer debate concerning nuclear weapons, the rules of employment and targeting.

The complete model is outlined in Table 2.1. The independent variable of the model is¹⁴:

- Systemic factor: Balance of power.

¹⁴The model draws heavily on Schweller (2004, 2006).

The intervening variables are:

- Domestic factor (1): Intra-elite relations resulting from elite cohesion *plus* power distribution.
- Domestic factor (2): Regime vulnerability.
- Individual factor: Consistent/non-consistent policymakers' perceptions of external threats and of correct strategies.

The dependent variable is:

- Nuclear doctrine development/underdevelopment.

Independent variables. The systemic factor is defined mainly in terms of changes in the balance of power and the threats they generate. Because military doctrines are elaborated to cope with external military menaces, analysing a country's strategic situation is important to understand how policymakers react to international inputs. The dire international predicament of the PRC in the years of the Cultural Revolution, when it confronted a two-front military menace, i.e., the US in Indochina and the USSR on the northern border, is analysed in this study. The balance of power—centred on the making of the US-USSR-PRC strategic triangle—was particularly threatening for China, which was the weakest of the three poles.

From a neorealist perspective, this situation should produce a strong and well-articulated nuclear doctrine and not a simple “no-first-use” declaratory policy. As Robert Powell aptly puts it:

More generally, a militarily weak but resolute state that already has nuclear weapons will be advantaged by a doctrine, posture, and force structure in which the potential risk rises rapidly as more power is brought to bear [...] In order to deter a militarily stronger adversary from threatening its vital interests, [a state should eschew] a no-first-use nuclear doctrine [...]. This in turn require[s] the operationalization of nuclear weapons as ‘usable war-fighting instruments’. [...] A state that expects to be weaker but more resolute than its adversary has an incentive to adopt doctrines and deploy forces that make the use of force riskier and thus easier to transform a contest of military strength into a test of resolve. (Powell 2015: 25, 32)

Conversely, a neoclassical realist approach expects that, to understand China's development of a nuclear doctrine, it is important to consider whether the intervening variables—domestic and individual—converge to uphold a specific response.¹⁵ This study's hypothesis is that, in the first period, they did not converge.

During the second period, even if the balance of power was less threatening for China (but still dangerous due to the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR, the poor performance of the PLA during the Vietnam War of 1979, and the development in the early 1980s of Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative, which could strike a mortal blow to China's small nuclear arsenal), a more relaxed domestic climate allowed a better articulated strategic debate on nuclear doctrine.

Intervening variables. The intervening variables related to the domestic environment are as follows: the level of elite cohesion, i.e., the power struggle between the different components of the Chinese leadership; the regime vulnerability; and elite's perception.

Intra-elite relations result from two processes: the presence of division inside elites along cultural, ideological, political, and economic dimensions (Schweller 2006: 54); and the vertical or horizontal nature of power relations. Chinese elite in the aftermath of the revolution was characterized by strong ideological unity. There were recurrent campaigns of purge and rectification; however, the normal activities of the party were not so dramatic, and even a purged leader could re-enter the political game after a session of more or less harsh self-criticism (Teiwes 1990, 1993). The Yan'an spirit was the dominant note in the CCP, indicating a sense of brotherhood and strong consensus regarding ends and means among the main political actors. Elite cohesion suffered a serious downturn during the Cultural Revolution and was partly reaffirmed only in the post-1978 period after the denouement of the leadership succession issue.

With regard to intra-elite power distribution, at one pole, power can be concentrated in the hands of one leader; at the other pole, power can be completely dispersed among several actors. In China's elite politics, the 1949–1965 period approximated the pole of power concentration, with Mao occupying an undisputed position. The second

¹⁵This line of argument draws from Steven Lobell's idea that policymakers are not free to decide on foreign policy when "constraints and inducements that emanate from systemic, subsystemic, and domestic levels" do not converge (Lobell 2009: 64).

period, 1966–1976, was characterized by a fragmentation of power among several factions, with the Red Guards playing the role of political maverick. The third period, 1978–the present, demonstrated a more even distribution of power among the main political leaders, with Deng Xiaoping occupying a position of prominence.

The combination of low cohesion and power diffusion during the period of the Cultural Revolution produced a highly conflictual pattern of intra-elite relations. High cohesion *plus* a moderate power balancing (Bo 2007) within the elites during the reform period produced a less conflictual domestic environment. As Schweller states: “when the elite is fragmented, it is highly unlikely that the state will be able to construct a coherent and effective balancing strategy” (Schweller 2006: 55). Similarly, it is difficult for policymakers involved in a power struggle to elaborate a sweeping nuclear doctrine.

The second domestic intervening variable is regime vulnerability.

In the most basic sense, the concept of government or regime vulnerability “asks what is the likelihood that the current leadership will be removed from political office”. Specifically, do the governing elite face a serious challenge from the military, opposing political parties, or other powerful political groups in society? Are such groups threatening to prematurely remove the current leaders from office? Have they done so in the recent past? (ibid.: 49)

In his analysis, Schweller also considers the elite-mass relationship, under the concept of regime vulnerability. In the case of the PRC, due its authoritarian nature and the paramount role of the Party/State, this aspect of regime vulnerability is less important compared to intra-elite opposition.

When policymakers’ legitimacy and stability are challenged and elites attempt to arrange an inclusive compromise concerning the issues on the table, domestic politics pushes towards a low-profile foreign policy (Hagan 1995). China’s nuclear doctrine during the turbulent period of the Cultural Revolution, when the regime threatened to fall apart, is a case in point. The “politicization” of nuclear weapon, with its possible negative effect on the Maoist doctrine of a “People’s War” and, in turn, the role of Mao himself, was the result of the power struggle that was unravelling the social fabric of China. In the second phase, after the difficult transition following the death of Mao and the arrest of the

Gang of Four, the consolidation of the regime and the downsizing of the cleavages within the elite “liberated” the nuclear doctrine from the constraints of political struggle.

Policymakers’ perceptions (the individual intervening variable) relate to the image of international politics held by the main leaders. Policymakers’ perceptual consistency “is the most proximate cause of a state response or nonresponse to external threats” (Schweller 2006: 47). I attempt to analyse how Chinese politicians considered the strategic scenario during the two periods by taking into account the images held by Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao, Deng Xiaoping, Nie Rongzhen and other important leaders who were involved in the nuclear programme. The concept of policymakers’ perceptions runs parallel to Schweller’s concept of elite consensus. It includes the following research questions (ibid.: 48):

- Is there a consensus on the presence of an external threat?
- Is there a consensus on the nature of this threat?
- Is there a consensus on the type of response to be adopted?
- Is there a consensus on the domestic repercussion of the strategy selected?

Dependent variable. As stated above at the outset of the chapter, nuclear doctrine refers to the beliefs, principles, and operational concepts concerning what types of nuclear device to produce, when and how they are employed (strategically or tactically), and against what types of target (civilian or military targets).

From the above analysis, several propositions can be inferred. The neorealist baseline proposition is:

- P 1. The emergence of an external threat will push a state to develop/deploy its best weapon system and elaborate a military doctrine tailored to the characteristics of the external threat and weapons capacity.

The neoclassical realist propositions are:

- P 2. The emergence of an external threat will push a state to develop/deploy its best weapon system, according to the state extraction capacity, and elaborate a military doctrine tailored to

the characteristics of the external threat if domestic conditions— intra-elite relations, elite consensus and regime stability—do not trump security considerations.

- P 2.1. If domestic environment is characterized by a unified elite, a consensus on the source and nature of external threat, and regime stability, the most likely result will be the innovation of military doctrine.
- P 2.2. If domestic environment is characterized by a conflictual elite, lack of consensus on the source and nature of external threat, and regime vulnerability, the most likely result will be the preservation of the old military doctrines or their marginal fine-tuning.

The study's general hypothesis is that, international predicaments notwithstanding, China's domestic politics prevented the possibility of articulating a clear and detailed nuclear doctrine during the first period, when such a doctrine was more necessary (P 2.2). Conversely, in the 1978–1989 period, the change in elite politics (a shift from hard factionalism to soft factionalism) and the reduction in the regime's vulnerability to domestic turmoil supported the development of a more nuanced nuclear doctrine. Thus, the second period is expected to be characterized by clearer statements concerning deterrence/war-fighting options, target selection and rules of employment for nuclear weapons (P 2.1).¹⁶

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¹⁶This is a case of intentional selection of observations, in particular of “selection on the dependent variable”, to see whether the observed change of values of the dependent variable is associated with the expected variations of the independent variable (King et al. 1994: 141–142).

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China's Nuclear Programme: Origins and Progress

Abstract In this chapter, a brief history of China's nuclear programme is presented. It focuses on three topics: first, the role of Mao's thought in China's nuclear policy; second, the main steps in the development of China's nuclear arsenal; and third, the elaboration of the "no-first-use" doctrine that for approximately three decades represented China's only declared nuclear policy.

Keywords Nuclear weapons · Nuclear test · No first use

The development of China's nuclear arsenal was influenced by several factors: Mao's thoughts on military technology and nuclear weapons, the leaders' nationalist attitude, the strategic situation of China in the 1950s—during which Beijing's policymakers experienced the risk of nuclear blackmail in repeated international crises (Korea, Indochina, and the Taiwan Strait)—and the complex relationship with the Soviet Union.

3.1 MAO AND THE BOMB

The top-down and centralized nature of the Chinese policy-making process affected the decision on the atomic bomb. The protagonists were a small group of senior leaders of the CCP (Lewis and Xue 1988: 246–247).

Over all, dominated the figure of Mao, who was chairman of the CCP Central Committee and head of the Central Military Commission. He had the final say on all strategic decisions. There was, then, Chen Yi, who, as a member of the Politburo, intervened repeatedly in favour of atomic weapons. Another prominent leader was He Long, also a Politburo member, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission and director of the National Commission for the Defence Industry, who was in charge of overseeing the production of armaments. Luo Ruiqing, chief of the General Staff, was in charge of coordinating the research and the production of armaments. A decisive role, especially in the implementation phase, was played by Nie Rongzhen, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and director of the Defence Science and Technological Commission and, since 1958, in charge of the whole nuclear programme. Finally, Premier Zhou Enlai coordinated the various organisations involved in the programme. “These leaders drew up the initial plans, accepted a coalition with the scientists, identified and empowered the operating managers and systems, and set the tone of high adventure” (ibid.: 221).

In this group of policymakers, the role of Mao and his ideas about military technology played a prominent role (Hsieh 1962). As stated in Chapter 1, Mao’s ideas about the nuclear bomb were ambivalent. Bombs were a paper tiger, but at the same time, they should be considered seriously tactically. According to the Chinese “great helmsman”, nuclear weapons could not change the outcome of a war or the course of history, but, because they were a symbol of national greatness and technological prowess, China should produce and deploy them.

The first statement of Mao on nuclear weapons was made in a meeting with communist cadres on August 13, 1945 in Yan’an, immediately after the two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan.

[...] Can atom bombs decide wars? No, they can’t. An atom bomb could not make Japan surrender. Without the struggles waged by the people, atom bombs by themselves would be of no avail. If an atom bomb could decide the war, then why was it necessary to ask the Soviet Union to send its troops? Why didn’t Japan surrender when the two atom bombs were dropped on her, and why did she surrender as soon as the Soviet Union sent troops? Some of our comrades, too, believe that the atom bomb is all-powerful: that is a big mistake [...] The theory that “weapons decide everything”, the purely military viewpoint, a bureaucratic style of work divorced from the masses, individualist thinking, and the like: all these are bourgeois influences in our ranks. (quoted in Hsieh 1962: 1–2)

This statement was followed the next year by the famous interview with Anna Louise Strong, when Mao repeated his position on nuclear weapons and compared them to paper tigers.

As reported by Alice Hsieh, in the early 1950s, Chinese leaders did not have a clear doctrine on nuclear weapons. In this period, they limited themselves to the deprecation of these weapons as an immoral and criminal instrument, supporting the international campaign to ban them. This attitude began to change after the outbreak of the Korean War, when Beijing adopted an official position on nuclear weapons, which can be summarized in the following way (ibid.: 2–3):

- Nuclear weapons are cruel weapons that should be banned.
- Nuclear weapons are not effective policy instruments.
- Their power is limited to that of a few thousand tons of conventional explosive, which is incapable of changing the course of a war but is too powerful to be used on the battlefield.
- Due to its vast territory and the dispersion of its population, the atomic bomb would not be very effective against China.
- Ground troops remain the most important military instrument to win a battle.
- In the end, the atomic bomb is also controlled by the socialist camp, i.e., by the USSR.

According to Hsieh, in 1951–1954, there was a sort of blackout in China about nuclear weapons. This blackout aimed to alleviate the anxiety of the Chinese people and soldiers engaged in the Korean War. During this period, the only official references to these types of weapons were of propagandistic nature, following diligently Moscow's indications. Only in 1955 did Beijing begin to elaborate an articulate position. However, even in this case, China's position reproduced that of Moscow: a communist state could survive a nuclear war, and an American nuclear attack on Chinese soil would produce a similar retaliation by the USSR against the US's territory.

This reticence about nuclear weapons was affected by Mao's attitude toward military technology and nuclear weapons. A cursory analysis of a scattered sample of his writings confirms this point. For example, in his *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* of 1936, Mao rejected the idea that a war can be won with a single decisive blow. He wrote:

Thus, the four principal characteristics of China's revolutionary war are a vast semi-colonial country that is unevenly developed politically and economically and that has gone through a great revolution; a big and powerful enemy; a small and weak Red Army; and the agrarian revolution. These characteristics determine the line for guiding China's revolutionary war as well as many of its strategic and tactical principles. It follows from the first and fourth characteristics that it is possible for the Chinese Red Army to grow and defeat its enemy. It follows from the second and third characteristics that it is impossible for the Chinese Red Army to grow very rapidly or defeat its enemy quickly; in other words, the war will be protracted and may even be lost if it is mishandled. (Mao, Various years: 200)

A similar argument can be found in *On Protracted War*, of 1938:

Many people are talking about a protracted war, but why is it a protracted war? How is one to carry on a protracted war? Many people are talking about a final victory, but why will the final victory be ours? How shall we strive for a final victory? Not everyone has found answers to these questions; in fact, to this day, most people have not done so. Therefore, the defeatist exponents of the theory of national subjugation have come forward to tell people that China will be subjugated, that final victory will not be China's. On the other hand, some impetuous friends have come forward to tell people that China will win very quickly without having to exert any great effort. But are these views correct? We have said all along that they are not. (Mao, Various years: 114)

According to Hsieh, this idea of a protracted war—matured during the years of the revolutionary war—accompanied Mao for all his life and affected his vision of warfare even in the thermonuclear era. The issue of protracted war joined that of “men-versus-technology” in downplaying the role of nuclear weapons. On the role of weapons, Mao wrote that:

This is the so-called theory that “weapons decide everything”, which constitutes a mechanical approach to the question of war and a subjective and one-sided view. Our view is opposed to this; we see not only weapons but also people. Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things that are decisive. The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale. Military and economic power is necessarily wielded by people. (ibid.: 143–144)

Ten years after the victory over Japan, Mao repeated this thesis in his work on *The Present Situation and Our Tasks*:

[...] our strategy and tactics are based on a people's war; no army opposed to the people can use our strategy and tactics. On the basis of a people's war and of the principles of unity between army and people, of unity between commanders and fighters and of disintegrating the enemy troops, the People's Liberation Army has developed its vigorous revolutionary political work, which is an *important factor in winning victory over the enemy*. (Mao, Various years: 162, *italics added*)

If from a strictly military perspective, Mao was not a strong advocate of nuclear weapons, from a political-symbolic viewpoint he was their greatest supporter. As Jacques Hymans wrote: "Sometimes emotions are short-lived, but Mao's emotional fervour for the bomb remained constant because it grew out of his strongly oppositional nationalist conception of Chinese identity: his commitment to subdue imperialist 'barbarians' and restore China to its natural place atop the international hierarchy after a century of humiliations" (Hymans 2012: 134). Particular international events (e.g., the Korean War, the Indochina crisis, and the Taiwan Strait crisis) help one to understand the precise timing of the decision; however, according to Hymans, it actually resulted from a strongly embedded nationalist feeling.

In his analysis of different motivations for going nuclear, Scott Sagan recognizes nationalism as a strong force behind the decision to develop atomic bombs (Sagan 1996/1997). Sometimes, the decision to go nuclear does not represent a response to a security threat but a symbolic choice that is used to demonstrate the "grandeur" of a country. France's *force de frappe* is a case in point, but the Chinese and Indian decisions to build a bomb also present strong elements of nationalism and national pride for technological prowess as a primary drive.¹

¹This logic is similar to the logic of institutional mimicking used by Martha Finnemore to analyse the worldwide diffusion of the Western model of an armed forces. Being that the Western state is regarded as a form of a "modern" political organization and enjoys broad legitimacy at the international level, all the other countries that aspire to obtain analogous recognition attempt to develop similar political structures. "Even the state defence apparatus, the component of the state that realism would expect to be most constrained by task demands imposed by a self-help world, exhibits this kind of isomorphism. First, virtually all states have defence ministries even when they face no external threat. Further, virtually all

Hymans states that the nationalist component in Mao's thoughts on the atomic bomb was so strong that he was even ready to accept a delay in the development, production, and deployment of the first atomic device, if this guaranteed that the new weapon was a completely Chinese-made bomb with no dependence on Soviet assistance (Hymans 2012: 136).²

The outbreak of the Sino-Soviet rift partially resulted from the clash between two opposite nationalisms. Beijing accused Moscow of "great power chauvinism", and Moscow accused Beijing of not recognizing the prominence of Khrushchev's Russia in the international socialist movement.³ Mao had long elaborated on nationalism and its potential contradiction with the spirit of proletarian internationalism. In 1938, he wrote in *The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War*:

Can a Communist, who is an internationalist, at the same time be a patriot? We hold that he not only can be but also must be [...] Chinese Communists must therefore combine patriotism with internationalism. We are at once internationalists and patriots, and our slogan is, "Fight to defend the motherland against the aggressors." For us, defeatism is a crime, and to strive for victory in the War of Resistance is an inescapable duty. For only by fighting in defence of the motherland can we defeat the aggressors and achieve national liberation. And only by achieving national liberation will it be possible for the proletariat and other working people to achieve their own emancipation. The victory of China and the defeat of the invading imperialists will help the people of other countries. Thus, in wars of national liberation, patriotism is applied internationalism. (Mao, Various years: 196)

states have tripartite military structures, with an army, air force, and navy—even landlocked states. Finally, weapons acquisition patterns, particularly among developing states, is often driven by symbolic (and therefore cultural) considerations" (Finnemore 1996: 336–337). On the role of nationalism in the decision of going nuclear, see also Etel Solingen's analysis of the inward-looking political coalition and their support for the development of nuclear weapons (Solingen 2009).

²On this point, see the next section.

³Mao was prepared to be Stalin's number two, but he was in no way willing to be Khrushchev's number two (Zagoria 1962). "[...] after Stalin death, Mao already felt that he should have a greater voice on questions concerning not only matters between Beijing and Moscow but also the fate of the entire international Communist movement" (Chen 2001: 68). On Chinese nationalism and its role in foreign policy, see Peter Hays Gries (2004).

The relevance of the nationalist theme in Mao's political thought was at the base of the different attitude of the Chinese leadership towards the revolts in Poland and Hungary in 1956. The Poland case was considered a revolt against the Soviet's "great power chauvinism", and, as such, legitimate. The Hungary revolt was considered an attack against the communist system and, accordingly, to be cracked down upon (Chen 2001: 68–69). This was a good example of Mao aptly handling the dialectic between patriotism/nationalism and internationalist duties. According to Stuart Schram, Mao's capacity to conjugate nationalism and revolution allowed him to strengthen his political position vis-à-vis other Chinese leaders—as Chen Duxiu—who was unable to penetrate the deep nationalist feeling of traditional Chinese society (Schram 1963).

Due to this political background, it is not surprising that nuclear weapons—whose symbolic/political meaning was more evident than their military utility—soon became a priority for Mao. This point is strongly supported by Lewis and Xue, who state that China's decision to launch a nuclear programme resulted both from the perception of security dangers and a traditional nationalist sentiment.

Nevertheless, the revolutionary elite under Mao Zedong came to power in 1949 with beliefs that may well have led to the nuclear weapons decision, even without the unbroken chain of crisis. The leadership's nationalistic ideology and concepts of force and diplomacy shaped its perceptions of the enduring dangers to China and to the restoration of China's international position [...] the decision to acquire a nuclear arsenal rested on fundamental national interests as much as on the immediate security threats. (Lewis and Xue 1988: 35)

Thus, goals such as the defence of national sovereignty, avoiding being bullied by foreign great powers, and the restoration of past greatness after the "century of humiliation" loomed large on Mao's attitude toward nuclear weapons and help to explain his contradictory attitude: a persistent disparaging of their military utility/effectiveness and his stubborn support for a *Chinese* bomb.⁴

⁴In November 1957, during the Moscow conference of Communist parties, Mao repeated his *mantra* on the secondary role of nuclear weapons, that they could not prevent the progress of the socialist system. Sending a shudder through his audience, he said that in the event of a nuclear war, "even if one-half of the population in the world died, another half would survive. Moreover, imperialism would be destroyed, and the entire world would be socialized. After some years, there would be 2.7 billion people again".

3.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAMME⁵

Following a series of international events, the Chinese leaders, in the winter of 1954–1955, decided to embark on a costly programme to develop nuclear weapons. The Korean War forced Mao and the other members of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party to consider the possibility of having to wage a war with a nuclear power. Against the American technological superiority, the strategy of a “people’s war” did not seem appropriate, as it would involve a too high number of casualties in the Chinese ranks. Many Chinese leaders were concerned about the risk of an atomic escalation of the conflict, and only the authority of Mao was able to overcome various difficulties and objections.⁶

The Indochinese crisis in the mid-fifties brought to light other critical aspects of China’s strategic predicament. The defeat of France and the request to use nuclear weapons to prevent it did not go unnoticed in Beijing. Moreover, the new US administration adopted a security policy in which the role of nuclear weapons was increased. The US was also meddling in Chinese affairs by deploying two aircraft carrier task forces in the Taiwan Strait. Things continued to get worse when, in January 1955, President Eisenhower in a message to Congress called for the immediate adoption of a joint resolution authorizing him to use force to defend Taipei’s regime. “Faced with both the treaty and increased American threat to use nuclear weapons against them, however, the Chinese did change their policy. They resolved to acquire nuclear weapons of their own” (*ibid.*: 34).

The veiled nuclear threats by the US during the Korean War, the Indochina War, and the crisis in the Taiwan Strait prompted Chinese policymakers to develop an atomic bomb to avoid nuclear blackmail. “Not to be bullied” was an overriding goal in Mao’s thinking. “In today’s

⁵Some parts of this section draw from Rosa (2014). For an in-depth analysis of the development of China’s nuclear programme, see Lewis and Xue (1988, 1994) and Lewis and Hua (1992).

⁶“Lin [Biao] was at least repeating what many in the populace and the army ranks were grumbling about: the great gamble of making war on a nuclear-armed nation. In the final analysis, as expected, Mao’s unwavering stand on the nuclear issue ended the argument. Within days, the time for decision arrived, and at the moment of truth in early October, no one raised the nuclear question” (Goncharov et al. 1993: 167).

world, if we don't want to be bullied, we have to have this thing", Mao said to his comrades during a meeting of the CCP's Politburo on April 25, 1956.⁷ As Nie Rongzhen remarked:

While we were still healing the war wounds after the founding of the People's Republic, some major powers in the world had already completed modernization and entered the so-called atomic and jet age. On the top of this, we learned in the war to resist US aggression and aid Korea how much we suffered from backward techniques and equipment. And we were still faced with the threat of a new war of aggression, which would be a contest of steel and technology. The imperialists dared to bully us precisely because we were backward. To extricate ourselves from this passive position, we had to advance as rapidly as possible and therefore must develop science and technology energetically. (Nie 1988: 661)

To achieve this goal, on January 1956, a 12-years science programme was launched. The programme included a section dedicated to military technology. New institutions, research laboratories, and organisations were established. In the field of nuclear weapons, the programme followed a two-pronged path: on the one end, organisations for the study and production of fissile material were set up; they were under the control of Song Renqiong, from the Second Ministry of Machine-Building. On the other end, Beijing started research on the development of atomic bombs and guided missiles (*ibid.*: 683–684).

The schedule for the implementation of the programme was daunting. To accelerate the development of nuclear weapons, a leapfrogging strategy was adopted. "Specifically, we would ensure the priority of scientific research over production and of sophisticated weapons over conventional weapons [...] Regarding atomic energy, efforts would be focused on the construction of nuclear fuel production bases and on the research, development and trial production of atomic bombs to accomplish the task in about four years" (*ibid.*: 704).

The Chinese leaders were aware of the enormity of the enterprise and of the country's structural limits. At this time, China's leaders placed great confidence in Soviet technical assistance to overcome the initial

⁷ *Talk by Mao Zedong at an Enlarged Meeting of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Politburo (Excerpts)*, April 25, 1956 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114337>).

hurdles.⁸ In his report to the State Council of January 31, 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai had stated that: “This is a new issue for China. We are now in the atomic age. We have to understand atomic energy, whether used for peace or war. We have to master atomic energy. We are far behind in this area, but, with Soviet help, we have the confidence and determination that we can catch up.”⁹

Zhou devised a comprehensive programme to develop atomic energy both for peaceful goals and for military use. It included political initiatives aimed to combat nuclear weapons of imperialist nations and measures to spread nuclear knowledge in China. The programme listed the following actions as necessary¹⁰:

- Launch a world campaign against nuclear weapons.
- Launch an educational campaign in the field of atomic energy.
- Reorganize the Academy of Science.
- Organise courses on the peaceful use of atomic energy.
- Educate students and spread popular pamphlets on the topics.
- Implement all the necessary measures to guarantee the utmost secrecy of the programme.

Zhou’s statement revealed elements of both pragmatism and deference to Maoist thought. In analysing the role of the atomic bomb, he repeated the *mantra* that people should not be scared by them (therefore, the education campaign), and, at the same time, that it was necessary to have them in the Chinese arsenal to avoid coercion by imperialist powers.

The central role the USSR played in the development of the Chinese nuclear programme was evident in the request advanced one year later to Moscow for technical assistance. On January 15, 1956, China asked the USSR to discuss the possibility of helping Beijing in its nuclear ambition. The request centred on three main points: assisting China in building a

⁸On nuclear cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, see Lewis and Xue (1988: 60–72).

⁹*Address by Zhou Enlai at the Plenary Session of the Fourth Meeting of the State Council (Excerpt)*, January 31, 1955 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114333>).

¹⁰*Ibid.*

pilot plant; sending Soviet technicians to educate Chinese personnel; and allowing Chinese personnel to study in the USSR.¹¹

At the outset, the deal with Moscow proceeded well, and the main obstacle to cooperation derived mainly from the technical underdevelopment of China's industrial base. This fact produced stops and delays. Nie Rongzhen, who supervised the whole programme, expressed this concern in a letter to Zhou Enlai:

The atomic energy industrial development plan has yet to be decided, and especially unclear is the issue of what to do after manufacturing enriched uranium. As a result, it is necessary to make a great number of revisions to the atomic energy agreement concluded and signed by Comrade [Li] Fuchun in Moscow on August 17 of last year. The Soviet side, however, is still moving forward in accordance with the agreement. Based on [my] discussion with [Soviet economic adviser to China] Comrade [Ivan] Arkhipov, to avoid pointless losses, our government needs to propose a postponement in the implementation [of the agreement] to the Soviet government before the Soviet side will consider [the matter].¹²

Following the concern of Nie, Zhang Wentian, first vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, wrote to the Soviet Chargé to illustrate the difficulties of China. In the letter, he asked for a revision of the "Agreement on the Provision of Technical Assistance from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the People's Republic of China in Establishing an Atomic Energy Industry," due to the economic predicament of the PRC. The reason advanced by Chinese policymakers for delay was that Beijing was to launch its second five-year plan, and, accordingly, it was necessary to make some amendments to adapt the Sino-Soviet agreement to the new situation.¹³

¹¹ *Request by the Chinese Leadership to the Soviet Leadership for Help in Establishing a Chinese Nuclear Program*, January 15, 1956 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110398>).

¹² *Handwritten Letter from Nie Rongzhen to Zhou Enlai on the Development of the Atomic Energy Industry*, July 11, 1957 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114340>).

¹³ *Letter from Zhang Wentian to the Soviet Chargé Concerning the Development of the Atomic Energy Industry*, August 12, 1957 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114341>).

The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations after the XX Congress of the CPSU and the détente between Washington and Moscow complicated the role of Soviet assistance to the Chinese atomic programme. In the late 1950s, the interests of Moscow and Beijing began to collide (Zagoria 1962; Lüthi 2008). If during the rule of Stalin, Moscow was able to direct with an iron fist the relations within the socialist bloc, this was much more difficult for his successors. Mao took advantage of the process of de-Stalinization launched in the late February 1956 to reclaim his leadership role and the primacy of China in the international socialist camp.

Moscow was looking for detente with the West. Khrushchev spoke openly of peaceful coexistence between the socialist and capitalist blocs and rejected the theory of the inevitability of war.¹⁴ On the negotiating table with the United States, a stop to the proliferation of nuclear weapons was one of the main issues, and it meant the suspension of nuclear assistance to Beijing. Khrushchev's behaviour—beyond the risks arising from the presence of nuclear weapons—was dictated by the need to focus more on a policy of investment in consumer goods to improve the living standard of the Russian people. Mao, on the other hand, after the launch of Sputnik in 1957, believed that there was a clear shift in the military balance in favour of the socialist bloc and judged as improper a relaxation of the international situation. The Chinese enthusiasm for the alliance with the Soviet Union cooled further when Moscow's support for some Chinese initiatives was revealed to be lukewarm—if not totally missing—as in the case of the crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1958 or the confrontation with India in 1959.

The immediate cause of the rupture between the two countries was the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), which questioned the same model of Soviet development hitherto followed by the Chinese leaders. Moscow railed against the Great Leap, considering it economically wrong and because it saw the people's Communes as an attempt by China to overtake the USSR's leadership in the socialist camp. Ultimately, the root of the conflict was the inability of Mao to accept

¹⁴At the outset, Mao was not completely against arms control measures. In February 1958, he stated: "In my opinion, the issues of arms reduction and atomic weapons sooner or later will have to be resolved, since it is inconceivable to think that anything can come out of fighting an atomic war". *Conversation of Mao Zedong with Soviet Ambassador Pavel Yudin (Excerpt)*, February 28, 1958 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114342>).

a bipolar system dominated by the USSR and the US, in which China was forced to act as a sparring partner. The Great Leap was an attempt to accelerate the development of China's national power (Christensen 1996: Chapter 6).¹⁵ As Lorenz Lüthi puts it, the clash was also political-ideological: with the Great leap forward, the PRC was entering a phase of “revolutionary Stalinism”, even as the USSR was following a more moderate course of “bureaucratic Stalinism”.

The end of Soviet assistance—that followed the split between the two socialist states—strongly affected the Chinese nuclear programme. Beijing's leaders denounced the arms control measures of Moscow and Washington as an imperialist conspiracy of the two superpowers, aimed to strengthen their hegemony over the rest of the world and to prevent the access of other states to nuclear weapons. Zhou Enlai stated that “since many countries are developing them, surely China has to do the same. We would hope nuclear weapons could be banned, but until then, we will still have to develop them” (quoted in Zhu 1997: 41).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the bases of the nuclear non-proliferation regime were set up, with the signing in 1963 of the Treaty Banning Nuclear Tests in the Atmosphere (LTBT: Limited Test Ban Treaty) and, in 1968, of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Beijing considered these treaties as instruments to curb the development of its nuclear arsenal and opposed both. The reasons for opposing the LTBT were affirmed by Premier Zhou Enlai during a meeting with African politicians:

¹⁵The launch of the Great Leap Forward affected in several ways the development of the nuclear programme. First, the euphoric mood aroused by the Great Leap affected the expectations about the possibility of building a Chinese atomic bomb. Second, the Great Leap started a nationwide campaign to discover uranium in Chinese soil. “In the spirit of the Great Leap Forward, the Second Ministry in mid-1958 issued the slogan ‘the whole people should engage in uranium mining’ (*quanmin ban youkuang*). The challenge was quickly taken up in Hunan, where the provincial Bureau of Metallurgy in July called for a Great Leap in the production of all types of non-ferrous metals. [...] The use of local methods cost a great deal, wasted uranium, caused a major depletion of raw materials used in processing uranium, such as soda and acids, and produced serious pollution because of the near-absence of environmental protection equipment. But the Chinese recall the pluses as well as the drawbacks of the episode. [...] The major advantage was that, in the quest for nuclear weapons, mass-based methods produced the first 150 tons of uranium concentrates. [...] The timely acquisition of this uranium is credited with shortening the race for the bomb by one year. In this limited sense, the first Chinese bomb was a ‘people’s bomb’” (Lewis and Xue 1988: 87, 88).

Why is there no complete prohibition on nuclear testing? They say they want to take a step at a time. This sounds good, but this is duplicitous. With the United States so aggressive after signing, where is there any intention of a total prohibition [of nuclear weapons]? If there is no intention to fight, and no willingness to prohibit [nuclear weapons], what is the purpose? The purpose is to use this [situation] to carry out nuclear blackmail. Towards whom? Towards countries that do not have nuclear weapons, especially small, weak countries, Asian, African, and Latin American countries.¹⁶

The position toward the NPT was similar, as a statement by a Chinese leader at the UN testifies:

The so-called NPT is a conspiracy concocted by the USSR and the US to maintain their nuclear monopoly. By it, they not only try to restrict other countries in their efforts to develop nuclear force for self-defence but limit their peaceful uses of nuclear energy. While the two superpowers are further intensifying the vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons, they seek to limit the horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons. They praise the NPT as a major measure in overcoming the threat of nuclear war. This does not convince others. There is no reason to impose the NPT on other countries arbitrarily. (quoted in Zhu 1997: 43)

The strong opposition to the emerging regime of non-proliferation notwithstanding, the PRC followed a more restrained behaviour in the nuclear field compared to the behaviour of other nuclear states, unilaterally complying with some mandates of the regime.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Zhou Enlai's Discussion with a Kenyan African National Federation Delegation (Excerpt)*, September 5, 1963 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114355>).

¹⁷ In the second half of the 1960s, with the development of a robust national arsenal and the risks of the proliferation of nuclear weapons by countries hostile to China, like India, Beijing's interests began to move towards a policy of opposition to nuclear proliferation. While not adhering to the NPT, Beijing declared its willingness to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, its commitment not to help other countries in developing such weapons, and its support of the creation of Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones. In other words, in this period, China, while refusing to join the NPT, which it considered a symbol of American imperialism and Soviet revisionism, agreed to follow a line of conduct compatible with the obligations of the Treaty. In 1973, China signed—the first among the five declared nuclear weapons states—the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which established a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in Latin America. In 1984, after years of foot-dragging, Beijing adhered to the requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), responsible for ensuring the

The Sino-Soviet conflict and the Soviet-American cooperation in the field of arms control forced China on an autarkic path in the development of an atomic bomb. Mao tried to see a positive aspect in the break-up of the technical cooperation with the USSR, noting that this assistance had put a heavy burden on the shoulder of the PRC that “would be a difficult debt to repay”.¹⁸ To this consideration was added the feeling of unwelcomed dependence that the Soviet assistance was creating. Nie Rongzhen denounced strongly this risk in a letter to Mao. Nie wrote that any possible cooperation with Moscow in the field of nuclear weapons should be postponed pending the solution of the ideological dispute between the two communist parties. He stressed the risk that Soviet technical help could push China on a development course that was not completely consistent with its domestic economic requirements. Thus, strategic and economic considerations intertwined in Nie’s arguments about proceeding on an independent policy. On this point, Nie had the full support of Zhou Enlai, agreeing with a policy of self-reliance because of the increasing gap with Moscow.¹⁹

The realization that cooperation with the USSR was no longer possible led to new measures to accelerate the program for the construction of a nuclear device. At a meeting of the CCP’s Central Committee (CC) on July 16, 1961, a crash programme was launched. It was aimed at focusing the entire nation’s energy on the development of nuclear

peaceful use of nuclear energy. In the same year, Chinese policymakers drew up the “doctrine of the three noes”: no support, encouragement or assistance to other states in developing nuclear weapons. In 1990, a Chinese delegation attended the conference on the revision of the NPT in Geneva, claiming, for the first time, that the NPT had played a positive role in combating nuclear proliferation and preserving the peace. Finally, in 1992, Beijing officially adhered to the NPT. See Zhu Mingquan (1997), and Medeiros (2007).

¹⁸ *Mao Zedong’s Talk at the Beidaihe Central Committee Work Conference (Excerpt)*, July 18, 1960 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114351>).

¹⁹ *Report by Nie Rongzhen to Mao Zedong Regarding Science and Technology (Abridged)*, July 3, 1960 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114348>). Zhou Enlai responded to Nie: “Base ourselves on independence, self-reliance and autarky [...] Regardless of what we acquire, what we study, and what we purchase, or how much [is involved], we must principally rely on our own intensive study. If we don’t engage in intensive study, not only will we not be able to create our own unique inventions, but, furthermore, we also will not be able to make practical use and develop what we have acquired, studied and purchased”. *Some Remarks by Zhou Enlai on a Report by Nie Rongzhen*, July 11, 1960 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114349>).

energy and atomic weapons.²⁰ The decision included a comprehensive package of interventions, both at the institutional level (building up the role of the Second Machine-Building Ministry, in charge of the nuclear industry) and at the technical level:

- The CCP's CC ordered the transfer of technical personnel from several ministries to the Second Machine-Building Ministry and the transfer of 14 factory and mine directors and of 78 cadres to the nuclear programme.
- The CCP's CC ordered the Education Ministry to guarantee the Second Machine-Building Ministry all students required.
- A technical school of the Third Machine-Building Ministry was moved to the Second Machine-Building Ministry.²¹
- Specialized workers from the Coal Ministry were reassigned to the Second Machine-Building Ministry.
- Many factories with high-tech instruments were put under the control of the Second Machine-Building Ministry to carry out experiments and tests.
- The Second Machine-Building Ministry was ordered to prepare plans for expanding its activity in the field of nuclear research.
- To strengthen the physical safety of the people involved in the nuclear programme, the Central Committee approved "the establishment of an administration bureau for radiological hygiene, health and protection in the Health Ministry".²² A direct connection was set up between the Second Machine-Building Ministry and the Health Ministry.
- To guarantee the security of the programme, all activities were classified as military matters.²³

²⁰"In order to stand on our own feet, make a breakthrough in atomic energy technology, and speed up the development of our country's atomic energy industry, the Central Committee believes it is essential to further narrow the scope of activity, concentrate our strength, and increase support in various related areas for the development of the atomic energy industry". *Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Decision with respect to Several Issues Concerning Strengthening Atomic Energy Industrial Infrastructure*, July 16, 1961 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114353>).

²¹The Third Machine-Building Ministry oversaw the aviation industry.

²²*Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Decision with respect to Several Issues Concerning Strengthening Atomic Energy Industrial Infrastructure*, July 16, 1961 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114353>).

²³Ibid.

In sum, all the better national resources were dedicated to the development of the Chinese Bomb. These tremendous efforts produced remarkable results. The lead-time between the decision to launch the nuclear programme in the winter of 1954–1955 and the development of a functioning nuclear device was less than ten years. The timing of the explosion was based on political considerations. Zhou Enlai wrote to Mao Zedong one month before the test, listing the possible alternative dates and their technical and political implications, and waited for his approval.

A Central Committee 15-member special commission held two meetings this month on the 16th and the 17th, discussing the nuclear explosion and other related issues. They are urgently waiting until the Chairman's return to report in person, so the Central Committee can make an early decision, hoping [to meet with you] no later than the 24th. If the decision is for an explosion this year, the best time would be between the middle ten days of October and the first ten days of November, with the preparations taking at least twenty days. If the decision is for a test explosion next year in April or May together with continuous aerial bombing practice, winter preparations will also be needed in October. If the nuclear explosion is put off based on strategic considerations and is linked with the second round of new base construction and the production of missiles and nuclear warheads, a policy decision is also needed. [...] After you have decided what to do, please have Lin Ke or Xu Yefu tell [Luo] Ruiqing and me by phone.²⁴

The first test at the Lop Nur site was carried out on October 16, 1964, marking China's entry into the exclusive club of the nuclear weapons states. An implosion-type device was exploded from the top of a tower, producing a yield of 22 kilotons.²⁵ Zhang Aiping, deputy director of the Defence Science and Technology Commission, was the highest political leader on the spot to record the test, together with several hundred scientists and technicians (Nie 1988: 710). After asking confirmation from the scientists that a nuclear explosion had actually happened, Zhang immediately communicated the positive outcome of the test to the central leadership in Beijing.²⁶

²⁴ *Letter from Zhou Enlai to Mao Zedong on the Nuclear Explosion*, September 21, 1964 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114356>).

²⁵ <https://www.ctbto.org/specials/testing-times/16-october-1964-first-chinese-nuclear-test/>. On June 17, 1967, just three years after the first atomic test, China detonated its first hydrogen bomb.

²⁶ The text of Zhang Aiping's call is fully reported in Lewis and Xue (1988: 188).

The news from Lop Nur was hailed with a great manifestation of joy and pride. It was communicated to the Standing Committee of the Second National People's Congress on the day after the explosion. As Nie Rongzhen writes, it was considered by the CCP's leadership as "a great victory for the policy of self-reliance pursued by the Communist Party of China and an eloquent demonstration of the Chinese people's aspiration and ability" (ibid.: 711).

Paralleling the building of warheads, in the same period, China started a programme for the construction of delivery means: both missiles and submarines. According to John Lewis and Hua Di, missile production proceeded without a clear strategic idea (Lewis and Hua 1992). The Chinese military-industrial complex laid the foundations for the development of missile capability between 1956 and 1981. In this period, the first generation of ballistic missiles was developed and deployed. Missiles were put under the command of the Second Artillery, the branch of the People's Liberation Army that manages nuclear weapons. After 1982, China began to develop second-generation missiles: these were smaller and with solid-fuel propulsion, so they were easier to make operative and also usable on submarines for underwater launch.

Like the other two programmes, nuclear submarine (SSBN: Strategic Submarine Ballistic Nuclear) development suffered from the sudden interruption of the technical assistance of the USSR. The nuclear submarine programme grew out of the euphoria of the Great Leap Forward, when technological and economic goals set by the Chinese leadership were very ambitious. The decision to start the SSBN programme was taken in the spring of 1958, during a meeting of the Central Military Commission. "Shortly after the opening of the Central Military Commission conference in May, 1958, Marshal Nie Rongzhen, the leader of weapons research and development, convened a separate symposium to explore the potential of R&D on a nuclear-powered missile submarine" (Lewis and Xue 1994: 4).

After years of slow growth, in recent years, the PRC proceeded to modernize its nuclear arsenal. As stated by Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris: "China is the only one of the five original nuclear weapon states that is quantitatively increasing the size of its nuclear arsenal, although the pace is slow. The arsenal's capabilities are also increasing as older missiles are replaced with newer and more capable ones" (Kristensen and Norris 2015: 77). Modernization efforts focus on ground-launched ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles, and cruise missiles.

In the 2010s, the PRC deployed approximately 160 warheads mounted on ground-launched ballistic missiles of types DF-3A (Dong Feng), DF-4, DF-5A, DF-15, DF-21, DF-31 and DF-31A (Table 3.1). The oldest of these missiles have more than forty years of service (DF-3A), are liquid-fuelled, and highly vulnerable. Because of their long launching time, they are about to be decommissioned and replaced by the modern, solid-fuelled and more accurate DF-21. Other missiles, such as the DF-31, have also been deployed in the past 10 years. The DF-31 is an intercontinental ballistic missile mounted on mobile vehicles, with a range between 7000 and 11,000 km and able to carry warheads of up to three hundred kilotons. In 2015, the PRC commenced the deployment of a modernized ICBM DF-5B, whereas the status of the DF-41, an alleged intercontinental missile with MIRV capability, is not clear.

Parallel to the modernization of ground-launched missiles, Beijing proceeded, albeit in a less consistent way, with the upgrading of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM Julang 1 and 2: JL-1 and JL-2). According to estimates, 48 nuclear warheads are mounted on SLBMs. The PRC had great difficulty in developing a reliable SSBN system (Lewis and Xue 1994). The old Xia class SSBN has always been plagued by great technical problems that inhibited its operational capacity. It is likely to be replaced by the new Jin class submarines, capable of launching the JL-2 missile, with a range of over 7000 km. The Jin class submarines are equipped with twelve launch tubes. According to analysts, the PRC currently have deployed four Jin class nuclear submarines, but it is not clear if the JL-2 missile is already operational.²⁷ This is why the number of 48 warheads in Table 3.1 is in parentheses.

Finally, about twenty warheads are carried by bombers, including the obsolete H-6, which came into service in the early 1960s and has since been continuously modified, after failed attempts by Beijing to buy a more modern bomber from abroad. In the upgraded versions H-6H and H-6 M, the bomber has been adapted to carry cruise missiles with both conventional and nuclear capability (DH-10, DH-20).²⁸

Despite these efforts, the Chinese nuclear arsenal remains limited, with fewer warheads than those of the other declared nuclear powers. As Fravel and Medeiros put it (2010: 87):

²⁷<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/china/jl-2.htm>.

²⁸<http://www.sinodefence.com/airforce/groundattack/h6.asp>.

Table 3.1 China's nuclear forces (*Source* Kristensen and Norris 2015: 78)

<i>Type</i>	<i>NATO designation</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Year deployed</i>	<i>Range (km)</i>	<i>Warhead x yield (kilotons)</i>	<i>Number of warheads</i>
<i>Land-based ballistic missiles</i>						
DF-3A	CSS-2	?	1971	3100	1 × 3300	?
DF-4	CSS-3	~10	1980	5500+	1 × 3300	~10
DF-5A	CSS-4 mod 2	~10	1981	13,000+	1 × 4000–5000	~10
DF-5B	CSS-4 mod 3	~10	2015	<13,000+	3 × 200–300	~30
DF-15	CSS-6	~100	1990	600	1 × ?	?
DF-21	CSS-5 mod	~80	1991	2150	1 × 200–300	~80
DF-31	1, 2	~8	2006	7000+	1 × 200–300?	~8
DF-31A	CSS-10	~25	2007	11,000+	1 × 200–300?	~25
DF-41	CSS-10 CSSX-20	n.a.	?	?	?	?
Subtotal		~243				~163
<i>Submarine-launched ballistic missiles</i>						
JL-1	CSS-NX-3	n.a.	1986	1000+	1 × 200–300	n.a.
JL-2	CSS-NX-14	(48)	(2015)	7000+	1 × 200–300?	(48)
Subtotal		(48)				(48)
<i>Aircraft</i>						
H6	B-6	~20	1965	3100+	1 × bomb	~20
Fighters	?	?	?		1 × bomb	?
<i>Cruise Missile</i>						
DH-10	CJ-10	~250?	2006?	1500?	1 × ?	?
DH-20?	CJ-20?	?	?	?	1 × ?	?
Total						~183 (230)

To use the language of Hans Morgenthau, one might characterize China's emphasis on developing only a small, credible arsenal as a "prudent" foreign policy. Chinese leaders have believed that nuclear weapons were basically unusable on the battlefield and that once mutual deterrence was achieved, a larger arsenal or arms racing would be costly, counterproductive, and ultimately self-defeating.

3.3 THE DOCTRINE OF "NO-FIRST-USE"

The progress of China's nuclear arsenal, after a rush start, advanced at a slow pace. This resulted both from technical difficulties and from apparently little concern for the large imbalance vis-à-vis the other nuclear

weapon states and the vulnerability of the stockpile. The small size and vulnerability of the arsenal started a debate about the actual role of nuclear weapons in PRC's security policy and what type of policy of deterrence the PLA was pursuing: a second-strike capability strategy (deterrence by retaliation/minimum deterrence) or some form of "limited deterrence" based on the possibility of using nuclear weapons against selected military targets (war-fighting capability). Chinese policymakers contributed to this confusion, avoiding for years the formulation of a clear doctrine, limiting themselves to stating an official position of "no-first-use".

The doctrine of no-first-use was launched by Mao in the aftermath of the first atomic test and remained for a long period the only public statement on the topic. On October 16, 1964, immediately after the successful test at Lop Nur, an official statement on nuclear weapons was issued: "The Chinese Government hereby solemnly declares that China will never at any time or under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons" (quoted in Lewis and Xue 1988: 242). It was the first presentation of the no-first-use doctrine. Actually, Chinese leaders, such as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Chen Yi, had already publicly declared China's position on no-first-use in previous years,²⁹ but the meaning of this position acquired a completely new meaning after their first nuclear test and the entry of the PRC into the nuclear club.

The lack of a clear doctrine regarding the use of nuclear weapons was very evident in the perception of the US intelligence service, which wondered about the Chinese nuclear doctrine and despaired for the lack of written documents from which to infer China's position. In a CIA report on the Chinese military doctrine, American analysts lamented that, contrary to the sector of conventional weapons, on which there existed many speeches and documents from which it was possible to envisage PRC's military doctrine, the sector regarding nuclear weapons presented nothing comparable.

Most of what can be said has to be very tentative and speculative. When the Chinese leaders decided sometimes in the mid-fifties to embark on a program to develop and produce nuclear weapons and strategic missile delivery systems, they may have had no very clear idea of just how they would employ these systems. They may not have developed much doctrine beyond the conviction that the possession of such weapons was essential if China

²⁹On this point, see Lewis and Xue (1988: 194).

was to join the ranks of the leading military powers [...] the only thing the Chinese have said about their nuclear-use doctrine is that they have a firm no-first-use policy and, in light of the overwhelming nuclear superiority of the US and USSR, this is probably a realistic statement of intent.³⁰

The official position was repeated in many statements by Chinese authorities in the following years. In August, 1971, a statement by China's Government, reported by the *New China News Agency* (Xinua), affirmed that:

The Chinese Government's stand on the question of nuclear weapons has always been clear. First, the Chinese Government has consistently stood for the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. Second, the Chinese Government has declared on many occasions that at no time and in no circumstances will China be the first to use nuclear weapons. Third, the Chinese Government has consistently stood for the convening of a summit conference of all countries of the world to discuss the question of the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons and, as the first step, to reach an agreement on the non-use of nuclear weapons.³¹

Since then, the doctrine of no-first-use has remained the official nuclear position of the PRC. Time and again, debates surfaced in Western academic and policy circles about an alleged change in this doctrine. However, the mainstream interpretation is that this doctrine even today represents the lode star of the Beijing nuclear posture.

In 2011, Stephanie Spies—a researcher at the *Center for Security and International Studies* in Washington—reported on the difficult negotiation on nuclear issues between American and Chinese policy-makers, because Beijing continued to proclaim its compliance with the doctrine of no-first-use, while “US officials refuse to acknowledge such a pledge as credible and continue to accuse their Chinese counterparts of maintaining secrecy over the country's nuclear program”.³²

³⁰ *US Central Intelligence Agency, excerpt from draft report on Chinese military strategy, circa 1970–71* (NSA: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB26/docs/doc04.pdf>).

³¹ Statement reported in Defense Intelligence Agency, “*Soviet and Peoples Republic of China Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy and Strategy*,” March 1972 (excerpt) (NSA: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB26/docs/doc14.pdf>).

³² <http://csis.org/blog/chinas-nuclear-policy-no-first-use>.

This scepticism resulted from the fact that—according to American policymakers—a declaratory policy is not a reliable indicator of the actual nuclear posture of a country.³³

Taking a sceptic position vis-à-vis the persistence of the no-first-use doctrine is John Acton from the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.³⁴ According to him, the lack of any reference to this doctrine in the Chinese *Defence White Paper* presented in 2013 is proof of Beijing's abandonment of it. For Acton, the fact that in the past, the no-first-use doctrine had always been mentioned in the white papers (up to the 2011 edition) is strong evidence that its absence in the 2013 edition could not be considered a simple bureaucratic error or omission. In China, language receives particular attention, especially when directed towards a foreign audience.³⁵ Acton states that this omission represents a departure from the classical nuclear position and a possible ominous message to the US: "So China may intend the new language in its white paper to send a signal: that in a future crisis, if it concluded that the United States was about to attack its nuclear arsenal with conventional weapons that were backed up by missile defences, China might use its nuclear weapons first".³⁶

Rebutting Acton's argumentation, Gregory Kulacki and Taylor Fravel reaffirmed the PRC's adherence to the no-first-use doctrine. In an article for *The Union of the Concerned Scientist*, Kulacki writes that the arguments of Acton are very feeble, to say the least.³⁷ According to him, if the inference of a change in Chinese nuclear doctrine is based on the assumption that a bureaucratic error is impossible, then other official Chinese statements that repeat the validity of that doctrine should not be lightly dismissed. He reported that eight days before the

³³This fact, of course, is true also for American declaratory policy, as David Rosenberg has shown in his analysis of the US Nuclear SIOP (Single Integrated Operational Plan) in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Rosenberg 1983).

³⁴J. Acton, "Is China changing its position on nuclear weapons?", *New York Times*, April 18, 2013 (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/19/opinion/is-china-changing-its-position-on-nuclear-weapons.html?_r=0).

³⁵On the importance of language in China's foreign policy, see the classical study by Harry Solomon (1995) on Chinese negotiating behaviour.

³⁶*New York Times*, April 18, 2013 (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/19/opinion/is-china-changing-its-position-on-nuclear-weapons.html?_r=0).

³⁷G. Kulacki, "China Still Committed to No First Use of Nuclear Weapons", April 23, 2013 (<http://allthingsnuclear.org/china-still-committed-to-no-first-use-of-nuclearweapons/>).

publication of the white paper, a Chinese official publication tackled the issue of no-first-use, confirming its validity. State Councillor Zhang Junan confirmed China's no-first-use doctrine in a statement at the UN's Conference on Disarmament. The same position was supported by another Chinese policymaker, Pang Sen, Director General of the Department of Arms Control of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the NPT committee for the 2015 Review Conference (April 22, 2013). Pang said that:

Nuclear weapons states should abandon the deterrence doctrine based on the first use of nuclear weapons [...] China has adhered to the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time or under any circumstances and made the unequivocal commitment that we will unconditionally not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states or nuclear weapons free zones.³⁸

In the same vein as Kulacki's article is Fravel's rebuttal of Acton's thesis.³⁹ According to him, a change in the no-first-use-doctrine, deeply rooted in the strategic tradition of the PRC since Mao's years, should be accompanied and preceded by an intense political and strategic debate and clearly stated in public documents and speeches, not communicated in such a cryptic manner. It was a change in the format of the white paper that produced the alleged omission. He adds that:

To be clear, Chinese strategists have debated the merits of dropping or altering its no-first-use policy. The debate was especially intense during the mid to late 2000s. Some participants in the debate suggested that no-first-use might not apply in certain situations that would be seen as equivalent of a "first use," including conventional strikes on China's nuclear forces or facilities as well as strikes on strategic targets like the Three Gorges Dam or the top Chinese leadership. In the end, however, a high-level decision was made to maintain the no-first-use policy and the internal debate concluded without any change to China's position.⁴⁰

³⁸Pang Sen, quoted in Kulacki.

³⁹Fravel, "China Has Not (Yet) Changed Its Position on Nuclear Weapons", April 22, 2013 (<http://thediplomat.com/2013/04/china-has-not-yet-changed-its-position-on-nuclear-weapons/?all=true>).

⁴⁰Ibid.

Acton's article produced an official rebuttal from the PRC as well. Major General Yao Yunzhu, Director of the *Centre on China-America Defence Relations* of the Academy of Military Science, in an article entitled *China will not Change its Nuclear Policy* (April 22, 2013),⁴¹ explains that the omission was due to a change in the format of the white paper vis-à-vis past editions (confirming Fravel's arguments). Specifically, it resulted from the omission of a section on "National Defence Policy", that in the past defence white papers was the place where the statement on the no-first-use doctrine was included. However, she adds, in the section on the "Building and Development of China's Armed Forces", the Chinese position of no-first-use is plainly stated, even if with a slightly different language compared to past editions.

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Nuclear Doctrine as a Continuation of Factional Politics by Other Means, 1964–1971

Abstract This chapter analyses the period from 1964 to 1971, which followed the first nuclear test. This period was characterised by a very dangerous international environment (the Indochina War, the clash with the USSR on the Ussuri River, and paranoia about a possible Soviet decapitation nuclear attack), a complicated domestic situation (Cultural Revolution and the fall of Lin Biao) marked by hard factionalism, and a strategic debate captured by domestic struggle so that the development of the nuclear doctrine was a sort of continuation of “factionalism by other means”.

Keywords Factionalism · Cultural Revolution · Strategic debate

After the first test of a nuclear device in 1964, the PRC stated a declaratory policy of no-first-use. Beijing apparently renounced formulation of a more sophisticated nuclear doctrine. This was at odds with the particular international predicament of the PRC: a threat from the US and the USSR, two nuclear-armed states—hostile towards China—that were also considering the possibility of using their nuclear arsenals to destroy the infant Chinese deterrent capability.¹ In such a situation of nuclear

¹General Curtis E. LeMay, Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Secretary of Defence, “*Study of Chinese Communist Vulnerability*,” April 29, 1963, with report on “*Chinese Communist Vulnerability*” attached, *Top Secret* (NSA: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB38/document6.pdf>).

and conventional inferiority, a no-first-use doctrine was not rational. At the same time, China was entering a highly troubled period domestically with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. The domestic environment, characterized by hard factionalism, an unstable regime and a lack of consensus among the elite regarding the external threat, prevented an in-depth debate about the employment of nuclear weapons and their targeting rules.

4.1 THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION: THE INDOCHINA WAR, THE SOVIET THREAT AND THE 1969 MILITARY CLASHES

Between 1964 and 1971, China—after a decline of its national power—slowly began to recover its international rank. This small change notwithstanding, its position, compared to that of its main enemies, US and USSR, was very critical. In 1964, China's relative power index was half the index of American power and approximately 2/3 of the Soviet power. In 1971, China's power improved compared to the US, but remained the same compared to the USSR (Table 4.1).

The second half of the 1960s was the most critical period for China's national security due to the overlap of internal and external crises. The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 had serious repercussions on the international behaviour of China: on the one hand, it contributed to diplomatic isolation, with the leadership completely absorbed by domestic affairs; on the other hand, it favoured a militant diplomacy that alienated the sympathies of many nations.

The situation worsened in 1969, when the conflict with the Soviet Union, which hitherto had remained purely verbal, escalated to border clashes along the Amur and Ussuri rivers. To escape this critical situation of international isolation, strategic encirclement and internal instability,

Table 4.1 COW's national power index (composite index of national capabilities, US 1964=100) (*Source* <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/national-material-capabilities>)

	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971
PRC	54.2	53.7	54.2	51.7	51.2	52.2	55.2	55.6
USSR	82.2	80.8	81.7	81.7	83.7	83.2	85.2	85.7
US	100	99	102.8	102.4	100.5	97	88.6	83.1

Mao—supporting the line of Zhou Enlai and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—began a policy of rapprochement with the US.

The long conflict with the Soviet Union, which had begun in the late 1950s, reached a point of maximum virulence in March 1969, when a military confrontation broke out (Robinson 2003). In previous years, numerous minor incidents had occurred along the Ussuri River and were mostly caused by Chinese initiatives. The first serious military accident occurred on March 2. During this clash, 38 Russian soldiers were killed. Two weeks later, on March 15, the military clashes were repeated, and this time they were much more violent, as the two sides were better prepared and more heavily armed. The severity of the situation was demonstrated by Mao's order of a partial mobilisation of the people on the same day:

Mao Zedong: Every county should establish a [militia] regiment, this should be done all over the country. In a big county, three battalions should be established; in a middle-size county, two battalions; and in a small county, one battalion. During peacetime, they will stay in the locality; when the war breaks out, they will supplement the field army. When the war breaks out, it will not be enough to rely upon the annual conscription [...]

Mao Zedong: The northeast, the north, and the northwest should be prepared. Once we are prepared, if the enemy does not come, that does not matter. We are now confronted with a formidable enemy. It is advantageous to have the mobilization and the preparation. The Soviets know that we will not invade their country as it is so cold there. We will try to gain mastery by striking the enemy only after he has struck. Our nuclear bases should be prepared, be prepared for the enemy's air bombardment.²

In the followings months, the number of troops on the two fronts grew considerably—with the deployment of different regiments—and both sides engaged in heavy exchanges of artillery fire. The Soviets left the Chinese troops to advance, then counterattacked. Russia suffered approximately sixty casualties, whereas China saw approximately 800 casualties. Between the months of April and August, several clashes occurred, with China enduring heavy fatalities.

²Mao Zedong's *Talk at a Meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group (Excerpt)*, March 15, 1969 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111241>).

There are three main explanations for the Chinese behaviour during the March incidents (Robinson 2003; Goldstein 2001). The first refers to brinkmanship logic: border skirmishes between two countries marked by deep enmity inadvertently escalated to a military conflict of greater intensity. The rivalry was exacerbated by a negative domestic political climate (during the Cultural Revolution, the Soviet Embassy in Beijing was attacked by Red Guards). The limits of this explanation lie in the fact that it neglects the precise instructions given by Mao to the PLA about how to conduct the attacks. These orders would betray a specific pre-determination by the Chinese.

The second explanation—which, according to Thomas Robinson, is less reliable—holds that the attack was organized by Mao to show China's ability to resist the USSR, in order to facilitate a rapprochement with Washington.

A third explanation is offered by Lyle Goldstein (2001). According to him, the 1969 clashes with the USSR were the result of a diversionary logic. Because of the domestic turmoil provoked by the Cultural Revolution, Mao tried to shift the attention towards an external enemy (Moscow) to produce a “rally-around-the-flag-effect” and to reconstruct the social fabric lacerated by domestic disputes.

A variant of the domestic political explanation is that offered by Allen Whiting. Whiting believes that the attacks were caused by the intention of the PRC to deter the Soviet Union from intervening in its domestic affairs, exploiting the leadership weakness produced by the confusion of the Cultural Revolution (Whiting 2001: 118).³

At the time of the events, these different explanations were reflected in the American intelligence analysis of the China–USSR military clash.

Mass campaigns geared to war preparation are nothing new in Communist China, and the campaign which now appears to be building up is, like its predecessors, probably undertaken for a variety of reasons. Among these

³The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by Warsaw Pact forces was an ominous reminder that this could really happen. As Chen Jian puts it (2001: 243): “During the height of the Cultural Revolution, and especially after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, Beijing charged that the Soviet Union had become a ‘social imperialist country’. Consequently, both in the Chinese Communist definition of the ‘main contradiction’ in the world and in Chinese propaganda, ‘Soviet social-imperialism’ gradually replaced ‘US imperialism’ to become the primary and most dangerous enemy of the world proletarian revolution”.

is the need to promote internal unity at a time of social and political upheaval. Political disunity, continued factional fighting, and disputes over personnel and policies continue to plague Communist China's new power structure. The Chinese also want to blacken the Soviet image abroad by portraying the USSR as an aggressor, a device which is particularly relevant on the eve of Moscow's bid for unity at the international conference of Communist parties. But neither of these explanations is sufficient in and of itself. As in the autumn of 1965, when Peking feared expansion of the Vietnam war and launched similar "war preparations", the Chinese are probably now acting out of combination of real fear of Soviet intentions and sober calculations that national consciousness of the Soviet danger must be made manifest to Moscow and the world as an element of Chinese deterrence of the threat.⁴

If the strategic predicament on the northern border was worrisome, no less dangerous was the situation on the Vietnam-China border. The escalation in Vietnam pushed China on a collision course with the United States. Beijing indirectly participated in the conflict by providing technical and material aid to Hanoi. In 1967, there were approximately 170,000 Chinese soldiers in Vietnam. The operations were aimed at contrasting two types of threat: American air raids on North Vietnam and the risk of an invasion.

To signal the seriousness of its pledge to North Vietnam, Beijing launched verbal warnings accompanied by troop movements along the border. Other actions taken by the Chinese were the deployment of aircraft near the border, the construction of landing fields for the Vietnamese Air Force, the establishment of a coordination mechanism between the radar systems of the two countries, and joint military exercises (Whiting 2001: 114).

In July 1965, Beijing sent 20,000 soldiers of the military engineers corps to Vietnam. In the following months, the level of involvement gradually increased, with the sending of troops and anti-aircraft units designed to repair the damage caused by the American bombing. At the end of the decade, the Chinese presence amounted to almost 200,000 soldiers. Overall, between 1965 and 1968, approximately 320,000

⁴U.S. State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research: Intelligence Note, "Communist China: Peking Inflates Soviet War Threat", June 3, 1969 (NSA: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.4.pdf>).

Chinese soldiers alternated in Vietnam. The PRC's casualties were 1500 dead and 4200 injured. As Whiting notes (*ibid.*: 115):

These deployments were purposely visible to US intelligence. In addition to bolstering North Vietnam's defence, they served to dissuade Washington from a decision to invade the North. In 1950, Beijing had failed to put military force in North Korea for deterrence—not crossing the Yalu until the American forces had advanced towards the border. By positioning sizeable forces in North Vietnam to back up Vietnamese defence against invasion, Beijing counted on credible deterrence to avoid another Korea. As a result, Washington was forced to accept stalemate in South Vietnam.

The PRC worked hard to prevent its involvement from provoking a direct confrontation with the US. Beijing refused to deploy aircraft and pilots in Vietnamese territory and never publicly acknowledged the presence of its troops. The same caution in retaliating to the trespassing of the American aircraft into Chinese territory was dictated by desire to avoid an armed confrontation with Washington.

A more general view of China's strategic predicament in the aftermath of the first atomic test can be obtained by looking at the data on international conflict from the *Correlates of War* dataset (Jones et al. 1996). During the Cold War, the China was one of the countries more involved in militarized interstate dispute (MID), second only to the US. Washington was involved in approximately four MIDs per year, whereas Beijing took part in 2.74 MIDs per year (Johnston 1998). As the data collected by Johnston shows (1998: 11), China's participation in MIDs peaked during the period 1964–1968. With only the exception of territorial conflict (type 1), which reached its maximum value soon after the power seizure and was linked to the necessity of completing state consolidation after the civil war, foreign policy conflicts (type 2) and regime change conflicts (type 3) were at their apex during the hottest years of Cultural Revolution (1966–1969). This linkage between “enemy without and trouble within” was considered the most dangerous to the regime's survival (Whiting 1975; Fravel 2005, 2008).

The international balance of power was even more ominous if the growth of the nuclear stockpile of the two superpowers is taken into account. In the second half of the 1960s, the American arsenal registered a slight decrease due to the *détente* with the Soviet Union,

but the Soviet arsenal of nuclear weapons skyrocketed, and this escalation was partially linked to the necessity of balancing the Chinese threat. Moreover, in the same years, Washington and Moscow were negotiating a treaty on the development and deployment of an anti-ballistic missile defence system (ABM). US policymakers justified the development of an ABM system mainly to counter the Beijing's deterrent. This position was clearly expressed by Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara:

One of the other uses of an ABM system which we should seriously consider is the greater protection of our strategic offensive forces. Another is in relation to the emerging nuclear capability of Communist China. There is evidence that the Chinese are devoting very substantial resources to the development of both nuclear warheads, and missile delivery systems. As I stated last January, indications are that they will have medium-range ballistic missiles within a year or so, an initial intercontinental ballistic capability in the early 1970s, and a modest force in the mid-70s.⁵

Thus, from the viewpoint of Chinese leadership, the period following the development of the atomic bomb was a time of maximum danger. From a simple neorealist position, the absence of a serious debate about how to employ the strategic arsenal, and the declaration of a no-first-use doctrine—in presence of more powerful enemies—was a very risky military posture (Powell 2015). The only way to solve this puzzling behaviour is to look at the domestic constraints on the strategic debate. The international and domestic inputs did not converge towards a similar direction (Lobell 2009), so the Chinese policymakers were not free to respond to external threats in a consistent way.

4.2 THE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT: “POLITICS IN COMMAND”

The period between 1964 (the year of the first nuclear test) and 1971 (the year of rapprochement with the US) was probably the most dangerous for the PRC because of the double threats from the US and the USSR. It is, however, also the most dramatic from the point of view of the domestic events (Teiwes and Sun 1996; MacFarquhar 1997;

⁵Robert McNamara, *Department of State Bulletin*, October 9, 1967 (<https://archive.org/stream/departmentofstat571967unit#page/442/mode/1up>).

Harding 1997; Unger 2002; MacFarquhar and Shoenhals 2008). From 1966 to 1971 (the year of Lin Biao's death), Chinese leadership experienced very high stress and the regime stability was deeply shaken. Intra-elite relations were characterized by harsh division along cultural, ideological, political, and economic dimensions; at the same time, the transformation of power relations undermined the capacity of Mao to control the situation. The outcome was a highly conflictual political elite. This fact produced both a reduced level of attention for international politics and an inclination to look at external events through the lens of their impact on the domestic power struggle.

The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution was a shock to Western analysts. They were convinced that China's political system was similar to the Soviet Union's, i.e., a totalitarian model based on six features:

- An elaborated guiding ideology.
- A single mass party.
- A paramount leader.
- A system of terror.
- A monopoly on the means of communications and violence.
- A central direction and control of the economy through state planning.

Many of these traits of the Soviet model were present in the PRC. Ideology (Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong thought) was the cornerstone of China's leadership action in all sectors of state intervention.

The second feature, a single mass party, was typical of the Leninist system. The CCP was a party forged during the civil war and the anti-Japanese War. It was tightly linked to the army and controlled all power centres.⁶ The power of the CCP was based on (Teiwes 2000):

- the power to nominate (Nomenklatura system);
- control of mass media;
- control of ideological orthodoxy; and
- command of the “gun”.

⁶“According to leninist principles, party is the paramount authority of political system. It defines general guidelines, establish ‘political line’ that frames all sectorial policies and can order all other institutions to adapt to its orders” (Teiwes 2000: 113).

The last element, “command of the gun”, was paramount in Mao’s thought. The great importance he attributed to the role of military power pushed him to stress the necessity of maintaining a tight political grip on military power.

The role of a paramount leader was a central tenet of the PRC’s political system. Mao had a special position of undisputed prominence in the central leadership, based on traditional beliefs (Mao was considered the founder of a new dynasty of rulers), charismatic element of the personality (Mao was seen as the most brilliant political and military commander),⁷ and bureaucratic instruments of leverage: the control of the PLA (Teiwes 1984).⁸

At the economic level, at least until the launch of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, the PRC was characterized by a process of “sovietization”.

According to Benjamin Schwartz (1960), the main point of differentiation between the Chinese and the Soviet models was the absence of a systematic use of terror to control and eliminate political enemies. Until the launch of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese politics was based on a set of formal and informal rules that ensured a smooth operation of the political system. Purges were used in a moderate way and recourse to harsh instruments of repression was limited (Teiwes 1984, 1993). Even during the years of the Cultural Revolution, there was not a mass terror. “The Cultural Revolution was not characterized by the great purge trials and mass executions of the Stalin period. Most victims of the Cultural

⁷The charismatic nature of Maoist leadership was essential, according to Frederick Teiwes, to explaining the lack of reaction and the passive attitude of the old comrades vis-à-vis the personal attacks during the Cultural Revolution: “Undoubtedly many factors influenced the refusal to fight. The previously noted fear that a direct attack on the regime’s founder would severely damage the system served as a restraint. Another factor of some significance was the apparent belief or the hope within leading circles that, the vandalism of the Red Guards notwithstanding, Mao would ultimately act within the bounds of propriety toward long-standing comrades. Other considerations included the fact that the course of the movement would take was not clear at the outset [...] Yet certainly, as at Lushan, more than fear and calculation were involved. Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and the others undoubtedly felt a sense of duty as they stepped off the political stage. Once again, charisma based on the revolutionary *cum* nationalist victory of 1949—with its traditional overtones of founding a dynasty as well—carried the day” (Teiwes 1984: 71).

⁸Mao, when stepping down from all the main party positions, never relinquished his role as chairman of the Central Military Commission, which is the party organization that controls military power.

Revolution survived the movement and secured their political rehabilitation after the death of Mao and the purge of the Gang of Four” (Harding 1997: 243).

To sum up, the totalitarian image of Chinese politics rested on the assumption of a monolithic power structure based on a high level of consensus on goals and means. The pivot of the structure was the charismatic figure of Mao, who was the final arbiter of all main decisions.

The havoc produced by the Cultural Revolution forced China’s watchers to reevaluate their assumptions. In 1973, Andrew Nathan published an article in *The China Quarterly*, proposing an alternative analytical model to understand Chinese politics: the factional model.⁹ He summarized in several propositions the main characteristics of the Chinese factional politics:

- In political struggle, factions observe limits of coexistence, so struggles are rarely dramatic.
- The initiative of a faction tends to cause the formation of defensive alliances between the other factions.
- Alliances between factions change over time depending on the interests and circumstances.
- Alliances between factions are dictated more by special interests than ideological factors.
- Public policies are usually decided through a long and complicated process of consensus-building.
- Interactions between factions are characterized by alternating cycles of consensus and conflict.
- To weaken an opposing group, factions try to discredit their members, remove them from positions of power or co-opt them.
- The clashes between factions, even if politically motivated, are coloured by an ideological language.

⁹A faction is a social relation based on a “clientelistic tie”—a social exchange—between a political leader (who offers goods: tenure, money, security, etc.) and another actor (who offers political loyalty and support) (Nathan 1973). On the pervasiveness of factionalism in Chinese society, see also Pye (1981), and Unger (2002). For Lucien Pye, factionalism is the result of historical features of Chinese society: the search for security by politically weak peoples. For William Whitson, it is the result of the compartmentalization of the Red Army during the civil and anti-Japanese Wars: the strong links between the field armies and their commanders were the roots of the following factions (Whitson 1973).

- Factions rarely question the respective legitimacy and show an attitude of complicity and civility.
- The factionalism encourages a certain immobility and stability of the political system and the decision-making process.

Nathan's work started new research on Chinese politics, but at the same time, he was criticized for his soft representation of factional politics as a sort of polite game based on a code of civility. The idea that the stake in factional politics was not so high, that factions did not try to eliminate one another and accepted a mutual coexistence, simply missed the mark of the domestic struggle during the Cultural Revolution. As scholar Tang Tsou puts it, politics in China during these years was not based on a moderate factionalism, but resembled more a "winner takes all" model, where the winner wins everything and the loser loses everything: political position, influence, reputation, freedom, and, in extreme cases, even his own life. Tang Tsou notes that (2002: 123):

Of Nathan's fifteen characteristics of factional politics (or the informal rules of conflict and conflict resolution, as I would prefer to call them), several were flatly contradicted by events. The existence of a "code of civility" was disproved by the public struggle meetings staged by the Red Guards against "Peng, Lu, Luo, and Yang", and against Wang Guangmei and Liu Shaoqi, as well as the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Marshal He Long and Liu Shaoqi. These and many other event contradict Nathan's remarks about the lack of "severity of treatment" against losing factions by the victorious one.

During the Cultural Revolution, even the stability of the regime was deeply shaken. The turmoil provoked by the unleashing of the Red Guards and hard factionalism risked jeopardizing the efficacy of the government and the political stability of the country. One of the main results of the first three years of the Cultural Revolution, sanctioned at the 9th CCP national congress in 1969, was the rise of military influence in political life (Domes 1968). This fact resulted both by the necessity of Mao leaning more and more on the PLA to control the society and by the rise of Lin Biao and his associates from the 4th Field Army in the 9th Central Committee.

As for the past cases, the appointment of Lin as heir apparent soon provoked a suspicious attitude in Mao.¹⁰ Mao resented Lin's attempts to strengthen his position and was very angry at the way Lin had managed the nuclear crisis in the October of 1969: the notorious case of the "Order Number One" (Lewis and Xue 2006: Chapter 3; Xu 2015).¹¹ During that year, rumours of possible air strikes against Chinese nuclear bases became more and more insistent. These facts pushed key CCP leaders (Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Lin Biao) to disperse among the anti-atomic shelters to avoid the possibility of a decapitation of the central leadership. The complex situation heavily stressed the Chinese political and military chain of command. The Second Artillery, which controlled the deterrent, following orders by Defence Minister Lin Biao, placed nuclear weapons in a state of high alert. The initiative greatly disappointed Mao, who thought that Lin was exceeding his competence (Lewis and Xue 2006: Chapter 3).

Lin's order was the outcome of a rising escalation between the PRC and the USSR. The severity of the situation was demonstrated by the fact that, in August, Soviet officials probed American reaction to an eventual Soviet nuclear strike against Beijing.¹² The event was reported by Chinese information agencies. In September, rumours about Soviet military build-up along the Chinese border increased the alarm of Chinese leadership, culminating in the order of evacuation from Beijing in mid-October and the subsequent nuclear alert.

It has been long debated whether Lin Biao issued the order of war readiness with or without Mao's authorization, but the most important point is that Mao was greatly disappointed by Lin behaviour. Apparently, it was the same name "Order Number One" that deeply irritated Mao, possibly because it seemed to portend a superiority of Lin over Mao in

¹⁰For a convincing explanation of this attitude towards successors, based on structural characteristics of Chinese politics and not on Mao's personality, see Huang Jing (2008).

¹¹For a different view that tends to minimize the Lin-Mao conflict on this occasion, see Teiwes and Sun (1996: 114).

¹²On the real danger of a Soviet preventive attack against the Chinese nuclear arsenal, see the documents available at <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/index2.html>.

the chain of command.¹³ As Xu Jinzhou puts it, this “incident was but one in a series of events that led to the split between Mao and Lin” (Xu 2015: 191). According to MacFarquhar and Shoenhals, Mao’s anger towards Lin was a symptom of his concern for the rise of military power in China. “Whatever the reason for Mao’s wrath, had the Chairman not worried hitherto about the militarization of the Chinese polity, this episode translated the institutional reality into potential personal danger. Even a leader less paranoid than Mao could legitimately been worried” (MacFarquhar and Shoenhals 2008: 320).

The struggle between Mao and Lin reached its apex in the late 1971, when, following an alleged directive to kill Mao (the culmination of an escalation of tension between Mao and Lin Biao), Lin and his relatives tried to flee to the USSR, crashing their aircraft in Mongolian territory (MacFarquhar 1997).

In early 1970, the Lin situation was very delicate indeed. Lin realized that Mao was changing his opinion about him and was demoting all Lin’s allies from their positions of power. Mao’s campaign of “throwing stones, mixing in sand, and digging up the cornerstone” was a multifaceted attack against Lin’s strongholds. The strategy consisted of forcing Lin’s allies to do self-criticism (throwing stones), replacing Lin’s allies with people loyal to Mao (mixing in sand), and reorganizing the military structure to weaken the position occupied by Lin’s allies, rotating and changing soldiers’ assignments (digging up the cornerstone).

At a central meeting of the CCP, convened on April 26, 1970, to discuss the purge of Chen Boda (another ally of Lin), Zhou Enlai formally accused Lin’s principle allies, Huang Yongsheng, Wu Faxian, Ye Qun, Li Zuopeng, and Qiu Huizuo, of serious political errors and factionalism. In the followings months, many cadres loyal to Mao were added in the main political position to replace or neutralise Lin’s allies. In the autumn, a restructuring of the Beijing military region—which was crucial for the power struggle at the top of the CCP—was launched (*ibid.*: 267).

¹³As reported by Lewis and Xue: “Zhou (Enlai) summoned General Huang and four member of the CMC Administrative group and demanded to know the background of the order and its current status. Who, he asked, had named the directive ‘Vice-Chairman Lin’s No. 1 Order’, and why had they permitted secret military orders to reach the street? Whose name would be put on a possible No. 2 Order since Lin’s name has been given to the first one?” (Lewis and Xue 2006: 68).

Roderick MacFarquhar maintains that Lin realized his fate was doomed and, accordingly, tried a political coup against Mao (organized by Lin's son, Lin Linguo, a deputy director of the PLA General Office). The failure of the coup provoked the dramatic effort of escape and Lin's death on September 13, 1971. After the fall of Lin, all the military officers linked to him were removed from positions of power.

In such a conflictual domestic environment, it was very difficult to disentangle strategic issues from the domestic struggle and to elaborate a sophisticated nuclear doctrine. The nuclear doctrine in this context was nothing but a continuation of factional politics by other means. The same nuclear programme was under attack by the Red Guards and radical faction. As Marshal Nie Rongzhen recalls in his memoirs (1988: 729):

Our scientific research was seriously undermined by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four during the ten years of turmoil: the “Cultural Revolution” that began in the second half of 1969. Many intellectuals (particularly those who formed our scientific research core) and leading cadres were persecuted, research programmes and plans had to be suspended. It was indeed distressing to see how much of our precious time was wasted and how the narrowing gap between us and the world's advanced scientific levels was widened again. On the top of all this, Lin Biao, the Gang of Four and their ilk often wilfully created trouble to shut down projects which had been successfully completed.¹⁴

What Nie omits in his memoirs is that during these years, Lin Biao and the Gang of Four were backed by Mao himself. To insist on the elaboration of a nuclear doctrine meant to defy Mao's theory of “People's War” (and his critiques of a purely military point of view and of the superiority of technology over men)¹⁵ and, accordingly, his very leadership.

¹⁴At that time, the US intelligence community believed that the strife provoked by the Cultural Revolution had slightly retarded the implementation of the nuclear programme: “It would be reasonable to assume from these reports that the Cultural Revolution has at least lapped at the edges of the weapons program, and may indeed have penetrated deeply and perhaps disruptively into it. The extent of its interference with the program, however, and the duration of any deleterious effects are impossible to determine”. *US Department of State. Director of Intelligence and Research*, May 3, 1968 (NSA: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB26/docs/doc10.pdf>).

¹⁵See Chapters 1 and 3.

Such an action was an infringement of one of the most important prudential rule of Chinese politics during the Maoist era: “[D]o not cross the paramount leader” if you want to survive in politically troubled water (Teiwes 1984).

4.3 THE STRATEGIC DEBATE DURING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION: FACTIONS AND FOREIGN POLICY ATTITUDES

In 1966–1971, China’s elite perception of external threats and of the best strategy to cope with them was not consistent. During the first decade of the PRC, Chinese foreign policy was Mao Zedong’s foreign policy (Bachman 1998), and this was sufficient to assure coherence and support to national grand strategy. In the turbulent period of the Cultural Revolution, strategic debate was captured by factional politics. Mao’s role was always decisive, but he had to manoeuvre between the different group to have his preferences prevail. “Mao occupied the unique position as the ‘core’ and practiced the traditional tactics of divide and rule, using the Lin Biao ‘faction’ and the Gang of Four ‘faction’ first to balance and then destroy the rising power of Liu Shaoqi and others leader who did not share his visions” (Tsou 2002: 113).

Even if there is not a consensus among scholars about the real content and stakes of the strategic debate, it is a widespread belief that a hot dispute between several actors was going on. This dispute centred on three questions: what was the main threat; what was the best strategy to manage it; and what kind of military preparedness was necessary.¹⁶

During the Cultural Revolution, there were three main factions in the field of foreign policy (Gottlieb 1977). The first was represented by the radical wing of the CCP, whose main exponents were Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, and other leading figures of the party, such as Chen Boda, who ran the propaganda apparatus, and Kang Sheng, who was a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. Internationally, they believed that both the US and the USSR represented a serious threat to China’s security that should be combated through political and ideological struggle, fomenting riots in Third World countries.

¹⁶On this point, see Zagoria (1968), Ra’anana (1968), Yahuda (1972), Harding and Gurtov (1971), Gottlieb (1977), Gurtov and Hwang (1980).

The second group was represented by the military, led by Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing. It considered the US to be the main threat and believed that the best way to address this threat was through modernization of the Armed Forces.

Finally, there was the moderate faction, whose leading representatives were Zhou Enlai and diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who regarded the Soviet Union as the greatest threat and, for this reason, were favourable to a relaxation of tensions with the US. The role of Mao was ambivalent, trying to mediate between the different factions and supporting at different times one position or another. In the end, he sided with the moderate faction, tilting the balance in favour of the policy of rapprochement with America.

The first round of debate started in 1965–1966 and culminated with the purge of Luo Ruiqing.¹⁷ In these two years, the problem of the ideological clash with the Soviet Union married with the conflict in Vietnam and the possibility of a direct military confrontation with US troops. In particular, on the table was the issue of formation of a united front with Moscow to support North Vietnam.

Mao, for ideological reasons, was not ready to compromise with the Soviet revisionist to help North Vietnam in its struggle against imperialism. Conversely, some communist leaders were worried that the intransigent anti-Soviet attitude of Mao could jeopardize Chinese security, pushing the country on a route towards collision with the US, without the support of Moscow. Chen Yi was one of the main supporters of this preoccupation. In an article published in the *Peking Review* on January 7, 1966, he stated:

US imperialism is the enemy of the Chinese people; it is also the common enemy of the people of the whole world. It is subjecting nearly every country to its threat, control, interference or aggression, with the aim of attaining world hegemony. For this purpose, it has built up the biggest war machine in human history. [...] The Soviet Union is the largest European socialist country. If it really wanted to help the Vietnamese people, if it really wanted to support and help their struggle against US aggression and for national salvation in an effective and all-round way, it could have taken all kinds of measures in many fields to immobilize forces of the United States and constantly exposed the US plots of peace talks. But the Soviet leaders have not done so; on the contrary, they have in fact been giving

¹⁷The following section is mainly based on Gottlieb (1977).

the United States every facility, so that it can concentrate its forces against Vietnam and continuously spread smokescreen of peace talks to becloud world opinion.¹⁸

In an interview with members of the Japanese Communist Party, Mao repeated his sceptical attitude towards Moscow. He stressed that in the event of an attack by US troops on China, the USSR would have exploited the situation to invade China (Gottlieb 1977: 36). The upcoming conflict with the US in Vietnam's territory did not abate Mao's acrimony against the USSR, and Mao even refused to attend to the 23rd Congress of the CPSU in Moscow. The demise of Khrushchev in 1964 was not enough to alleviate the Chinese leader's negative attitude towards Moscow's ruling elite. The formula "Khrushchevism without Khrushchev" signalled that the struggle against Soviet revisionism was still on the track. Thus, the Vietnam War's outbreak notwithstanding, in many important political circles in Beijing, the USSR still represented the main enemy.

The position of Lin Biao in this first phase was one of mediating between the different positions. Even if he recognized the threat of the USSR, he apparently did not want to entirely alienate the possible support of Moscow with the prospect of a final confrontation with Washington.

Planning to wage a modern war with the most advanced military power (the US) in Vietnam or a more traditional guerrilla warfare against an invading USSR required different military formats that could affect delicate internal balances. The domestic implication of the different foreign policy positions on the table was the main cause of the purge of PLA Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing (Harding and Gurtov 1971; MacFarquhar and Shoenhals 2008: 20–27; Harding 1997). In substance, Luo was victim of Mao's strategy to regain his grip on the main political institution, purging those men who apparently obstructed his relationship with the party (Peng Zhen, Deng Xiaoping, Li Dingyi), the state (Liu Shaoqi) and the military (Luo Ruiqing, Yang Shangkung).

Luo Ruiqing's position in the PLA contrasted directly with that of Lin Biao, who represented the radical voice in military establishment. Luo supported a professionalization of the PLA and demanded a reduction of political work in the military training programme. The main division between Luo and Lin (supported by Maoists) was about the war in

¹⁸ *Peking Review*, January 7, 1966 (available at: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1966/PR1966-02c.htm>).

Vietnam and the risks that Chinese involvement in the Indochina peninsula could produce. Luo advocated a build-up of defence apparatus and a comprehensive strategy to cope with the US threat. As far as nuclear weapons were concerned, Luo advocated a change in military organization, a modernization of equipment and the end of China isolation. The radicals opposed this position.

The party leadership retaliated by launching a propaganda campaign against the “purely military” viewpoint. In his report to a conference on political work in the Army, held in January 1966, General Hsiao Hua (head of the Army’s Political Department) maintained that primitive weapons wielded by the people would always prevail over more modern “counter-revolutionary” weapons, and emphasized the party’s “absolute power” over the Army.¹⁹

Mao was worried by nuclear programme less for its strategic implications than for its domestic political repercussion, as evident by the euphoric atmosphere that resulted after the fourth test on October 27, 1966, at Lop Nur.

The New China News Agency announced on Oct. 27 that China had “successfully conducted a guided missile-nuclear weapon test” over her own territory. The announcement said that the guided missile “flew normally and the nuclear warhead accurately hit the target at the appointed distance, effecting a nuclear explosion.” This was China’s fourth nuclear test, and the first time she had disclosed that she possessed a guided-missile delivery system for nuclear weapons.

Describing the complete success of the test as “a great victory for Mao Tse-tung’s thought,” the Peking announcement said that the Army, China’s scientists and technicians, and “broad sections of workers and functionaries,” all “propelled by the great proletarian cultural revolution,” had “enthusiastically responded to the call of Comrade Lin Piao and held high the great red banner of Mao Tse-tung’s thought.”²⁰

¹⁹ *The “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.”—Abolition of Military Ranks.—Purge of Communist Party, Press, and Universities.—Dismissal of Mr. Peng Chen, Mr. Lu Ting-yi, and General Lo Jui-ching.—Proposed Reform of Educational System.—“Anti-Bourgeois” Campaign by “Red Guards”* (<http://www.keesings.com/article/19273>).

²⁰ *Fourth Nuclear Test.—Firing of Guided Missile with Nuclear Warhead* (<http://www.keesings.com/article/55435>).

According to Harry Harding and Melvin Gurtov, Mao's opposition to Luo's programme was the main cause of his purge. However, his opposition did not stem from the substance of military modernization but because these reforms "required a number of domestic policy decision inconsistent with Mao's plan and the interests of other groups" (Harding and Gurtov 1971: vi).

A strong opposition to Luo's reforms came from the military organizations that had suffered from the change in military expenditure appropriations. In particular, the General Political Department was a bulwark of the opposition to Luo's reforms involving a reduction of the political role of PLA.

The main source of opposition was Mao and his allies in the PLA, Lin Biao *in primis*. For Mao, it was important not to reduce the political role of the PLA. Luo's reforms, reducing the political/ideological training of soldiers and military cadres, made the armed forces less susceptible to Mao's control and thus their use as a political instrument in domestic affairs. Mao needed a political tool to carry on his internal struggle, not a professional army to ensure external security. By purging Luo, Mao achieved two important goals: first, he eliminated from the political arena a senior player with strong relations in the PLA and with the old guard of the CCP; second, by attacking Luo, Mao provided a strong signal to the party that the campaign of rectification would proceed unabated (Harding 1997: 165).

The second stage of the strategic debate occurred in 1967–1968. During this period, the three faction began to better articulate their reciprocal position: the radicals, who were mostly silent during the previous two years on foreign policy issues, were now more vociferous in prompting their position about a double threat. Lin Biao was caught between the position of radicals and that of the military he represented.

The moderates put forward with a stronger voice their preoccupation with the Soviet threat and the necessity of a relaxation of the tensions with Washington. From Mao's point of view, the revisionist threat in this dramatic phase of the Cultural Revolution was more dangerous than the US threat, which was considered less ideologically insidious.

The main bone of contention in this period was the issue of who was the major threat to Chinese national security. Both the rapid escalation of the war in Vietnam and the Soviet military build-up on the North China border were ominous behaviours to the Chinese leaders. During 1967, Moscow implemented many political and military initiatives that made

relations with Beijing more and more tense (Gottlieb 1977: 49–51). In the winter of 1967, the USSR launched a global strategy to isolate China inside the international communist movement and began to strengthen the garrison in the far east of Russia. The Soviet military presence on the Chinese border amounted to approximately 250,000 soldiers. At the same time, the USSR retaliated against the attack of Red Guards on Soviet diplomats with raids on the Chinese embassy in Moscow. In the summer of the same year many articles were published in Soviet official newspapers that incited the Chinese people to get rid of Mao. China responded in the tone to these initiative, building-up its military apparatus on the Soviet border and heightening the level of alert and readiness of troops.

The deterioration of relations with the USSR strengthened the position of those leaders that considered the time ripe for a rapprochement with the US. A strong attack by members of the radical factions was launched against this possibility. In an article published in the *Peking Review* on 7 April, which was addressed against the disgraced Liu Shaoqi, a leading representative of the radical faction stated:

Chairman Mao called on us to cast away illusions, to give the enemy tit for tat and fight for every inch of land, whereas this person [Liu Shaoqi] energetically spread illusions about peace with US imperialism and its lackey and impudently wrote articles in newspapers in which he expressed gratitude for US imperialist “help” to China and begged for “peace” from US imperialism in an attempt to benumb the fighting will of the people [...]. Chairman Mao said that as our enemies were sharpening their swords, we must sharpen ours too.²¹

The harsh position of the radicals against the US imperialism was reaffirmed many times during the following months. At the same time, their attitude towards Soviet revisionism was stiffening too. The attack against Soviet revisionism was strongly elaborated in another article published in the *Peking Review* in the summer of the same year, entitled “Brezhnev’s Renegade Features Revealed More Clearly”.

²¹ *Peking Review*, April 7, 1967 (available at: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1967/PR1967-15.pdf>).

In the face of this mass of shocking facts, the people of the world will think over in real earnest: the Soviet revisionist clique of renegades has embarked upon selling out everyone it can, some today and others the following day. How can any people be sure that it will not be their turn next? These renegades have been doing one rotten thing one day and another the next day. What are they not capable of doing? Whoever still harbours illusion towards the Soviet revisionist clique and allows himself to be fooled by its false phenomena, failing to recognize its essence, will one day find himself sold out [...] *Brezhnev, Kosygin and their like are enemies of the Soviet and the world's people, incorrigible renegades and puppet emperors who have sold themselves to the U.S. imperialist overlords* (italics added).²²

The conclusion was that there was not a major difference between American imperialism and Soviet revisionism: both, even if in different ways, represented a deadly menace for China. This double threat should be managed using the classical Maoist strategy of the “People’s War”.

At the same time that the radicals were advancing their image of a double enemy and a double strategy against the US and the USSR,²³ the moderates were elaborating on the necessity of a rapprochement with the US. An article published by an anonymous “Observer” in the *People’s Daily* on April 30, 1967 rejected the analysis put forward by the radicals and the idea of a two-front military strategy against the US and the USSR. The point of departure was still the identification of the main enemy. Following a typical Maoist analysis, the observer distinguished between main and secondary contradictions.

Chairman Mao teaches us: “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is the question of the importance for the revolution”. We must unite with our real friend in order to attack our real enemies. This is a question on which there must be no ambiguity. Innumerable facts in the international class struggle in recent years have shown that the Soviet revisionists, who are a pack of traitors and scabs, have played their role of undermining the revolutionary struggle of the peoples, a role which can be played neither by imperialism, nor the reactionaries of all countries, nor the Right-wing social democrat parties in the capitalist countries.²⁴

²² *Peking Review*, July 16, 1967 (available at: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1967/PR1967-30.pdf>).

²³ In their opposition to the US, radicals were supported by the military of Lin Biao.

²⁴ *Peking Review*, May 5, 1967 (available at: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1967/PR1967-19.pdf>).

From this passage, it was clear that the analysis suggested—albeit in a convoluted way—that the most dangerous enemy was the Soviet Union. As Gottlieb summarizes, even if the observer was not directly supporting a strategy of a united front with the US against the USSR, “it nevertheless left the door open for this possibility” (ibid.: 59).

The third period of the strategic debate—1969—was characterized by the intensification of US involvement in the Vietnam War²⁵ and the outbreak of military clashes between China and the USSR. The debate ended with Mao’s decision of the rapprochement with Washington.

During the 1968–1969 period, many analyses underlined the growing difficulties of the US in Vietnam and the rise of the Soviet threat. The US was depicted as a giant with clay feet, whereas Moscow was depicted in black colour and as lusting for a showdown with Beijing. In the middle of this mess of analysis, the report of the Four Marshals was presented on July 11, 1969.²⁶ The report, commissioned by Mao himself, made a general evaluation of the international situation and of the PRC-US-USSR relations. In its conclusion, the report did not support a policy of rapprochement with the US, but it presented a more optimistic view of the strategic situation vis-à-vis the dominant view in the CCP. According to the report, there was no imminent danger of an attack and China should focus on building up its economy and political tasks: “We should make full use of time and strengthen preparations in all respects, ‘making revolution, while promoting production, promoting our work, and promoting war preparation.’ We must promote the continuous great leap forward of our industrial and agricultural production, build China into an unshakable proletarian country with stronger economic power and stronger land, naval and air forces.”²⁷

Eventually, Mao’s support for the position of the moderate faction of relaxing tensions with the US was decisive. According to MacFarquhar and Shoenhals, it is not clear when Mao decided to pursue rapprochement with Washington, joining the less pessimistic evaluation of the four marshals’ report. They consider the “Order Number One” incident to

²⁵In early 1968, approximately 500,000 US soldiers were deployed in Vietnam.

²⁶The four marshals were Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, Chen Yi and Xu Xiangqian.

²⁷*Report by Four Chinese Marshals, Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen, to the Central Committee, “A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation” (excerpt), July 11, 1969 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117146>).*

have played a catalytic role in convincing Mao that a confrontational strategy (as those proposed by radicals and Lin Biao) could produce a militarization of the Chinese society, violating one of the most important tenet of Mao's political thought: never let the Army control the Party (MacFarquhar and Shoenhals 2008: 320).

The different perceptions and strategies within the leadership—especially for their implications for domestic priorities and power struggles—affected in a negative way the elaboration of a nuclear doctrine. The difficulty of singling out a main enemy was deleterious for the selection of possible targets of a nuclear (counter)attack. In a period when the China's nuclear arsenal was very small, with fewer than ten warheads,²⁸ not specifying the targets was not a very prudent strategy.

4.4 THE IMPACT ON NUCLEAR DOCTRINE: THE LACK OF OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS

Mao was not really interested in the operational aspect of nuclear weapons. The basic national strategy remained that of the “People's War”, whose main tenet was the decisive role of politically motivated soldiers. To make the new weapons consistent with the dominant military doctrine, it was necessary to downsize their role and not to elaborate too much on the operational definition of targets and mode of employment.

In Mao's view, as in Zhou Enlai's and Deng Xiaoping's view as well, nuclear weapons should be used only to deter a possible nuclear attack and not on the battlefield in a war-fighting mode. The strategy of the “People's War”, based on the idea of luring the enemy deep into Chinese territory to exploit the advantage of fighting in a well-known and friendly theatre, was not consistent with the idea of using atomic bombs in a tactical way. The doctrine of the “People's War” was premised on the idea that future war should be waged in Chinese territory; thus, it was nonsensical to plan for a nuclear battlefield. In this period, “[f]ew Chinese leaders' statements assessing the wartime utility of nuclear weapons are available. What is most notable is the absence of such statements (along with any serious effort to develop theatre nuclear weapons or robust command and control systems for their use)” (Fravel and Medeiros 2010: 62).

²⁸See figures in Lewis (2007: 54).

In such a dramatic domestic environment, the few supporters of a more sophisticated nuclear doctrine were not free to express their views, as doing so would mean contradicting Mao's position. As said previously, Mao's position on the strategic debate was strongly affected by the domestic consequences that the choice of a particular posture could have. The build-up and professionalization of the PLA, as advanced by leaders such as Luo Ruiqing, contrasted with Mao's idea of a "political" army to be used, first of all, for domestic tasks: the building of a socialist/communist society, using the PLA both to defeat the revisionist and as a model for the rest of the society.²⁹

The key military organizations were hesitant in elaborating on the operational requirements of an effective nuclear deterrent. As Fravel and Medeiros write (2010: 66–67):

Following China's first successful nuclear test in 1964, the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution that started in 1966 limited the attention and resources within the PLA devoted to all aspects of military development, including its nuclear doctrine. During this period, the PLA's professional military education institutions and research organizations established in the 1950s, such as the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) and the Military Affairs Academy (one of the predecessors to the National Defence University), ceased effective operations. According to Song Shilun, a former president of the AMS, "[M]ilitary research was in a state of paralysis" at this time. Not only did research and writing on strategy within the PLA come to a virtual halt, but a generation of officers received no formal military education on strategy or doctrine. In turn, this created a lack of knowledge and expertise that persisted into the 1980s, a decade after the formal end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

In addition, China's nuclear and missile scientists dominated the country's development of nuclear strategy. Although most of this coterie

²⁹The Lei Feng campaign is a case in point. In 1963, Lei Feng became the subject of a political propaganda campaign, "Follow the examples of Comrade Lei Feng". Lei was portrayed as a model soldier and a good communist, and the masses were encouraged to emulate his altruism, modesty, political diligence, and devotion to Mao. The restoration of strong political control over the PLA began immediately after the dismissal of marshal Peng Dehuai in 1959 and the rise in the military ranks of Lin Biao. Lin, following Mao's directive, immediately intensified the political education of the troops, in contrast with Luo Ruiqing, who was supportive of military training. In 1964, after three years of intensive political education, the campaign "to learn from the PLA" was launched (Gittings 1967: 254).

was formally part of the PLA, they were distinct from operational war-fighting units within the Chinese military. China's leading weapons scientists exercised such influence over nuclear strategy by directly interpreting the requirements suggested by Mao's and Deng's ideas and expressing them in China's nuclear and missile procurement plans. The operational arms of the PLA under the General Staff Department had little role in these processes.

The establishment in 1966 of the Second Artillery—the organization in charge of the nuclear weapons inside the PLA—was not sufficient to create a political/bureaucratic constituency capable of stimulating a different approach to nuclear doctrine.

The Second Artillery grew out of several organizations established in the 1950s and 1960s to manage the nuclear programme (Allen and Kivlehan-Wise 2005). After the launch of the nuclear programme, one of the most important decisions was to establish an organization for the management of delivery vehicles, especially missiles.³⁰ In 1958, a base for the testing of missile technology, named Northwest Comprehensive Missile Test Base (NCMTB), was established in Gansu province. The NCMTB was organized in four main bodies that managed the technology for surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air-missiles, air-to-air missiles, and the activities of the three test sites.

Paralleling the advancement of the nuclear warheads, the programme for the development of delivery systems was also proceeding speedily. In December 1957, the Central Military Commission decided to build a new organization for the management of missile technology near Beijing. This was the precursor to the Second Artillery corps and was named the “Special Artillery corps”. In the meantime, an organization for training personnel on missile technology was set up in the Hebei province: the PLAAF 15th Aviation School. In mid-1959, Chinese leaders decided to disband the school and to establish two new missile battalions that absorbed the function of the former unit.

In June 1966, Chinese established the “Second Artillery corps”. It merged the functions of all former sparse organizations charged with the goal of managing missile technology for the delivery of atomic warheads. Xiang Shouzhi, a military leader from the Sichuan province who joined the CCP in 1936 and participated in the Long March, was appointed

³⁰The following section on the Second Artillery is mainly based on Allen and Kivlehan-Wise (2005), and Lewis and Xue (2006: 174–178).

commander of the new unit. Li Tianhuan, an officer from the Public Security Force, with close links to Lin Biao, was appointed political commissar. Due to the affiliation of these two men, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution was immediately transferred to the new institution. As reported by Lewis and Xue (2006: 177):

The rise and fall of Xiang Shouzhi, the first commander of the Second Artillery, illustrates the damage inflicted by the resulting dissension on the missile command. In the first year, the missile headquarters had no designated commander at all, and the CMC only formally appointed Xiang to that post on July 4, 1967. It took him some forty-three days to disengage from his post as deputy commander of the Artillery Corps and to report to his new assignment. By that time, however, the power struggle was escalating, and Lin Biao, Mao's chief Lieutenant who then ran the CMC's daily affairs, labelled Xiang an enemy and plotted to disgrace him. Lin told his wife to phone Li Tianhuan, the political commissar of the Second Artillery, and to tell him, "Xiang Shouzhi is not our man. He came to the Second Artillery in order to gobble up your forces [that is, Li's supporters]. You should report to us. Chief Lin will append a note to his transmittal letter in your report to dismiss him from office".

Lin Biao manoeuvred to force Xiang—whom he did not trust, as Xiang was considered a man of the moderate faction³¹—out of the office. In October 1969, Xiang was forced to the countryside—deprived of all military responsibility—where he remained until the death of Lin Biao.

Personnel in the Second Artillery were unable to consult studies and research on nuclear strategy.

These did not exist. The missileers called periodically for achieving longer ranges, better accuracies, improved reliability and operability, and more rapid deployment capability, but these calls were never tied to any particular strategic requirements. The soldiers of the Second Artillery and their comrades in the First Academy merely imagined that nuclear strategy was a matter to be debated and decided upon by leaders in the Central Military Commission. With other pressing demands at hand and with no research institute to help them, however, these leaders never considered, let alone issued document on, nuclear strategy until the mid-1980s. (Lewis and Hua 1992: 20)

³¹During the civil war, Xiang served in the second Field Army under Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping.

All these events curtailed the capability of the Second Artillery to offer an organizational base for the elaboration of an operational military doctrine. “The Second Artillery was treated as a technical branch of the PLA tasked with managing China’s nuclear forces, not developing strategic concepts or determining force requirements [...] According to the AMS history, the Second Artillery began to research ‘nuclear strategy theory’ only in the early 1980s” (Fravel and Medeiros 2010: 67).³²

The Academy of Military Science (AMS) did not have a substantially different destiny. The AMS was founded in 1958 with the goal of providing an institutional centre for military research and studies.

The AMS researchers write reports for military leadership, ghost-write speeches for top military leaders, and serve on temporary and permanent leading small groups as drafters of important documents like the Defence White Paper. The AMS also conducts analysis on foreign militaries, strategy and doctrine, and has consistently taken the lead role in the study of the future of warfare. (Gill and Mulvenon 2002: 623)

The AMS was under the direct control of the CMC and the General Staff Department. It was heavily involved in the hard factional struggle of the Cultural Revolution; thus, it was not in the right position to advance a “technical” point of view on the nuclear doctrine issue. During these turbulent years, as David Shambaugh reports, the AMS virtually ceased to function (Shambaugh 2002: 114).

The Military Affairs Academy—the antecedent to the National Defence University—was not in a better situation. Its mission of educating senior officer corps and produce studies and research on strategic issue was very hard to implement during a period in which all that was required was to be loyal to Mao and to learn his *Red Book* teachings (Gill and Mulvenon 2002: 223).

Thus, during this period, “the politics in command” principle and the hard factionalism that was unravelling the Chinese leadership blocked the possibility of a free debate on nuclear doctrine. All the main actors

³²“Thus, throughout its first decade, the Second Artillery struggled in near chaos to establish its professional military credentials and become a viable strategic force. Its senior officers wasted these years mostly jockeying for survival or launching political attack on their opponents, real or imagined. Even as Mao fretted about an ‘inevitable’ war with the Soviet Union and pressed the military to build a powerful strategic arsenal, his policies fostered indiscipline and indecision” (Lewis and Xue 2006: 178).

involved in the nuclear programme were caught—either directly or indirectly because of their personal relations with political, bureaucratic and military leaders—in a domestic factional struggle. Many of them tried to shield the nuclear programme from the more adverse consequences of the Cultural Revolution, and they were partially successful in these efforts (Nie 1988). However, the conflict-prone domestic environment, the division among the elite regarding the main external threats and the best way to address them, and the disruption of military organizations that could offer a more professional viewpoint on nuclear doctrine, all contributed to the inability to approach the issue in a serious way.

As John Lewis and Hua Di put it, the nuclear programme in this period, because of domestic dynamics, was mainly prompted by technological imperatives. Because, for Mao, atomic weapons did not change the nature of warfare, it was not deemed necessary elaborate too much on nuclear doctrine. The “People’s War” remained valid in the nuclear age and did not need a deep revision. To propose a different doctrine was to defy Mao’s thought and, accordingly, his position of power.

Policymakers involved in the nuclear programme were not explicitly instructed about how to use the new military technology. Before the Soviet split, they were only charged with the goal of building delivery vehicles capable to reach several targets in Japan, Philippines, US pacific bases, and US continental territory. After the split with the USSR, new technical requirements were introduced to be able to hit Soviet territory (Lewis and Hua 1992). Weapon designers were, accordingly, forced to work without a clear military leadership and had to use as baseline for their work not the strategic effectiveness of a policy but its domestic/ideological repercussions. In such a situation, it was obvious that there were few stimuli to elaborate a clear nuclear doctrine. The risk was that such a doctrine could be used as an instrument of political struggle: to label their proponents as supporters of a purely military point of view, as capitalist roaders, as followers of the omnipotence of technology, and, worst of all, as enemies of Mao.

According to Lewis and Hua, however, “[a]lthough their [of nuclear planners] world was essentially technology driven, a strategic retaliatory doctrine was implicit in target selection, and after Mao’s death in 1976, the more adventurous strategists began to make that doctrine explicit and to explore its ramifications for Chinese military and foreign policy” (ibid.: 20).

Table 4.2 The making of China's nuclear doctrine during the Cultural Revolution

	<i>Balance of power</i>	<i>Intra-clite relations</i>	<i>Regime vulnerability</i>	<i>Policymakers' perceptions</i>	<i>Policy outcome</i>
1964–1971	Highly threatening	Conflictual	High	Non-consistent	Under-developed nuclear doctrine

To sum up, notwithstanding the international predicament and a detrimental balance of power that required a better articulation of target selection and employment doctrine of atomic weapons, the domestic environment during the 1964–1971 period was not supportive of such an attitude (Lobell 2009). International and domestic factors pushed in different directions, and the result was that policymakers had no incentives to embark on a politically dangerous doctrinal endeavour. Proposition P 1 is clearly inconsistent with the empirical evidence. Proposition P 2.2 is consistent with the empirical evidence (Table 4.2).

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Elite Stability and Nuclear Doctrine Formulation, 1978–1989

Abstract This chapter analyses the development of China’s nuclear doctrine during the period from 1978 to 1989. These years were characterised by a more relaxed international situation, although Chinese leaders were still worried about the implications of particular ominous events for national security: the disastrous Vietnam War of 1979, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the launching of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) by the Reagan Administration. Domestically, the post-Maoist period was characterised by a form of soft factionalism, a return to a “normal” pattern of politics, and greater elite stability. The strategic debate centred on the evolution of the concept of the “People’s War” into that of the “People’s War under modern conditions”. The nuclear doctrine was characterised by a more articulated elaboration of targeting and employment concepts and included ideas about war-fighting and tactical nuclear weapons.

Keywords Elite stability · Military modernization · War-fighting

In the 1980s—even if the international situation was less ominous compared to the Cultural Revolution period—several threats worried the Chinese leadership: the Sino-Vietnam War in 1979 exposed the weakness of the PLA; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reminded Beijing

of the northern threat; the American Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) programme was a potential mortal blow to the small Chinese deterrent. Because of a more relaxed domestic environment and a greater elite stability (a halt to this situation occurred in 1989 with the Tiananmen square incident, which deeply shacked regime stability), the strategic debate about how to respond to these events and the formulation of military doctrine proceeded in a more consistent way and generated new ideas about targeting and employment.

5.1 THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION: THE VIETNAM “LESSON”, THE SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN, AND THE SDI

Between 1978 and 1989, China’s international position was quite stable. Notwithstanding a slight decrease in its power, the gap vis-à-vis the two superpowers was smaller than the previous decade. This was mainly due to the sharp decline of USSR power at the end of the 1980s. In 1978, the PRC had a power index that was approximately 30 points less than the power index of Moscow. In 1989, the power index gap was 13 points. Conversely, the PRC position, compared to the US position, registered a worsening due to the recovery of American national power during the Reagan years. In 1978, Washington had a power index 11 points higher than Beijing’s power index. In 1989, the difference between the power indexes of the US and the PRC was 21 points (Table 5.1).

During this period, Beijing had to cope with several external events that posed a serious threat to its military security. The disastrous war with Vietnam in 1979 forced a rethinking of military doctrine. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 evidenced the expansionist nature of Moscow’s foreign policy. Finally, Reagan’s military build-up and the launch of the SDI represented a severe threat to the Chinese nuclear deterrent.

Table 5.1 COW’s national power index (composite index of national capabilities, USSR 1978 = 100) (Source <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/national-material-capabilities>)

	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
PRC	69.8	68.6	68.6	68.6	68	68	64.5	63.4	63.4	61.2	62.2	63.4
USSR	100	98.2	98.8	99.4	100.5	100.5	96	99	98.2	97.6	96	76.2
US	80.2	79	76.7	79	74.4	76.2	76.2	77.3	76.7	76.2	77.3	84.9

On February 17, 1979, war broke out between Vietnam, recently reunited, and the PRC. It was short but intense. The causes of the conflict between the two former allies were linked to different international political developments of the 1970s. By attacking Hanoi, Beijing intended to achieve two objectives: the strengthening of China's regional position and the strengthening of its role vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union, of which Vietnam was a close ally (Tretiak 1979).

Three factors precipitated the crisis that resulted in the “self-defence counterattack” of the PRC. At the beginning of 1978, the Vietnam government adopted a series of economic measures and discriminatory policies against the Chinese community present in its territory. These measures led to the confiscation of property and the deportation of approximately 250,000 Chinese people. In September, after repeated remonstrations, Beijing issued three strong notes of protest regarding the treatment of the Chinese nationals. These were followed by a speech by Zhong Xidong (delegate for the problem of the Chinese nationals in Vietnam) the following month.¹

A second contentious factor regarded border disputes, which added a decade-long dispute over the control of the islands in the South China Sea.² In August, Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the USSR.

Finally, in January of 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and overthrew the government of the Khmer Rouge that was allied with the PRC. According to Daniel Tretiak, the occupation of Cambodia was the decisive factor that prompted the intervention because it signalled the emergence of a strong competitor in Southeast Asia that could contest Beijing's regional leadership.³

¹ *Chinese Protest Against Vietnam*, September 7, 1978 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118419>); and *Chinese Government Delegation's Leader Statement at 8th Session of Sino-Vietnamese Negotiation*, October 5, 1978 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118420>).

² In 1974, the PRC had seized the Xisha islands from South Vietnam. It had decided to act at that time in order to end the operation before Hanoi completed the reunification of the country (Christensen 2006: 71–72).

³ Actually, the tension between China and Vietnam preceded the 1978 events, as is proven by a document by Deng Xiaoping in which he recalled how Vietnam's president Ho Chi Minh considered China a threat. “There have been some problems in the relations

The decision to teach Vietnam a “lesson” was made at different times (*ibid.*: 749). In the fall of 1978, it was decided to mobilize the army along the Vietnamese border. In December, a high-profile Chinese delegation visited some border towns, with the aim of communicating Beijing’s rising concerns for territorial violations. At the end of December, during a meeting of the party dedicated to economic issues, the option of intervention in Vietnam in the case of an occupation of Cambodia was discussed. The fall of Phnom Penh made the decision inevitable.

The leaders in Beijing had sent many signals to those in Hanoi to make it clear that—in the event of an invasion of Cambodia—PRC intervention was inevitable. Probably the misinterpretation of these signals derived from the fact that “Hanoi still appeared, at points, to believe that a fraternal socialist country would never attack it. This belief was reinforced by the perception that most Chinese were opposed to the war and that there would be pressure from the Chinese population to stop the war” (Kenny 2003: 228). Between late January and early February, Deng Xiaoping went to the United States and Japan to prepare the international community for the impending attack.

The war lasted for a few weeks. On March 5, after the capture of Lang Son—strategic for threatening Hanoi—Beijing announced the end of the offensive and the withdrawal of troops. Even if the war had been declared to impart a lesson, the stubborn defence of the Vietnamese and the heavy losses suffered by the PLA, suggested to many observers that perhaps the real lesson had been taught to Beijing. China’s loss, according to unconfirmed sources, was approximately 25,000 men. Many shortcomings emerged during the clashes, such as bad communications between military departments and logistical difficulties. The negative management of the war against Vietnam precipitated a hot debate in China regarding the necessity of modifying the old doctrine of a “People’s War”.

between our countries. Some of them emerged when President Ho was still alive. We have to say that we are not at ease when we get to read Vietnamese newspapers and know [Vietnamese] public opinion. In fact, you stress the threat from the North. The threat from the North for us is the existence of Soviet troops at our northern borders, but for you, it means China”. *Minutes of Conversation between Deng Xiaoping and Le Duan*, September 29, 1975 (WC/DAIHD: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111268>).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan rang another alarm for Chinese policymakers about their strategic predicament. The conflict began with the invasion of the country in December 1979. Moscow was willing to depose the Afghan President Hafizullah Amin and replace him with Babrak Karmal, considered a more reliable politician by the Soviet leadership. The military intervention of the USSR led to a resurgence of the Afghan guerrillas who waged a long campaign against Soviet forces and their local allies. The anti-Soviet resistance was supported by nations such as the United States, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China and the United Kingdom, which provided military aid and logistical and political support.

China's reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was of great concern. The aggressive move by Moscow's leaders increased the Chinese policymakers' convictions of the dangerous and expansionist nature of the Soviet "bear". A government statement on December 30, 1979 strongly condemned the Soviet action:

Recently, the Soviet Union brazenly made a massive military invasion of Afghanistan, grossly interfering in its internal affairs. This armed intervention wantonly violates all norms of international relations. It not only encroaches upon the sovereignty and independence of Afghanistan but poses a grave threat to peace and security in Asia and the whole world. The Chinese Government vigorously condemns this hegemonistic action of the Soviet Union and firmly demands the cessation of this aggression and intervention in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of all Soviet armed forces. [...] The current Soviet armed aggression in Afghanistan is a big show of Soviet hegemonism. People have come to see more clearly the source of the main threat to world peace and the true nature of this so-called "natural ally" of the Third World.⁴

On December 31, the Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zhang Haifeng, summoned the Soviet ambassador in Beijing, stating that "Afghanistan is China's neighbour and therefore the Soviet armed invasion of that country poses a threat to China's security".⁵

⁴"China Condemns Soviet Military Invasion of Afghanistan", *Beijing Review*, January 1980, no. 23 (<https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1980/PR1980-01.pdf>).

⁵Ibid.

As Gerald Segal observed (1983), Chinese policymakers in this period identified three types of menaces from the northern border:

- A general invasion by the Soviet Union, supported by domestic political opposition groups.
- A limited war, based on the occupation of marginal peripheral areas inhabited by minorities.
- A nuclear war, centred on a surgical Soviet strike aimed to wipe out Chinese deterrent forces.

In the second part of the 1980s, the relations with the USSR improved markedly. All the three conditions set by the Chinese government to restore a constructive atmosphere between the two socialist states—after almost thirty years of tense relations—were in part fulfilled by the new Soviet ruling elite led by the secretary of the CPSU Gorbachev. The withdrawal from Afghanistan began in February 1989 after the signing of the Geneva agreements. The second condition laid down by Chinese policymakers, i.e., the ending of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, occurred during the same period. Finally, the third condition, the reduction of the Soviet military apparatus deployed on the PRC border was implemented at the end of the decade. This improvement of diplomatic relations was dramatically marked by the visit of Gorbachev to China in the spring of 1989, concurrent to the events in Tiananmen Square.

If the 1980s witnessed a marked improvement in relations between the USSR and the PRC, the relationship became a little cooler with the other side of the strategic triangle: the US (Dittmer 1992). One of the reasons for this change was the more militant policy of the Reagan administration, which was welcomed for its anti-Soviet tone but considered critically for its anti-communist character. Another element of tension was the support of the Reagan administration for Taiwan. A third element of preoccupation was the launch of the SDI that impinged directly on the Chinese deterrent capability.

On March 23, 1983, Ronald Reagan officially launched the SDI project (Cirincione 1998). The American president was personally convinced of the need to make nuclear weapons obsolete, and to this end, he established two study groups to examine the problem. The first of these groups, directed by James Fletcher, a former head of NASA, proved very influential and produced a final report that served as the basis for the ballistic defence system development. The Fletcher Report made the point

about the state of missile technology, outlined the architecture of the future strategic defence and indicated the concrete steps to achieve it.

The launch of the SDI programme was followed with worried attention by Chinese policymakers. Already in the late 1960s/early 1970s, the ABM programme was justified as an anti-China system. The risk in the 1980s was that the operational limit of the system against the huge Soviet arsenal could transform the SDI in an anti-Chinese deterrent system. In the eyes of Beijing's policymakers, the SDI could make ineffective the PLA counter-strike capability and—stimulating a Soviet build-up of offensive weapons to compensate for the American strategic shield—indirectly worsen the strategic position of China (Garver 1986).

The first Chinese reactions to the Reagan announcement of the SDI was cautious and presented a non-unanimous analysis of its meaning for the international strategic balance, in general, and the Chinese deterrent, in particular. According to Garver, both a defensive and an offensive interpretation were present in the Chinese assessment. However, according to him, the offensive interpretation, underlined also by Glaser and Garret in an article published in *Problem of Communism* (1985), was the dominant one.

After interviewing Chinese analysts at a variety of research centers in Beijing for two weeks in September 1985, Bonnie Glaser and Banning Garrett concluded that this “aggressive” interpretation of US motives was the dominant Chinese view. “Most Chinese analysts,” Glaser and Garrett concluded, view the SDI as an American attempt to achieve clear nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union and understand such “superiority” to mean a first strike capability. My own review of the Chinese media confirms Glaser and Garrett's finding. (Garver 1986: 1226, 1227, 1228)

Chinese experts' negative view of the SDI was followed in 1985 by public condemnation by important Chinese policymakers, first, the premier Zhao Ziyang and then, the paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, who in an article published in the *Beijing Review* in August 1985, expressed strong condemnation: “The Strategic Defence Initiative, otherwise known as the ‘Star Wars’ plan, must not be implemented, said Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. The plan, which emphasizes the use of weapons in space, Deng said, would cause a critical change in the arms race”.⁶

⁶“‘Star Wars’ Must Be Avoided”, *Beijing Review*, August 12, 1985, no. 32 (<https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1985/PR1985-32S.pdf>).

Thus, even if the debate in China was complex and articulated and some even considered the SDI as a useful counterbalance to Soviet hegemony, in the end the “[...] Chinese analysts [were] apparently in unanimous agreement that the SDI threatens to open the door to developments that could fatally undermine China’s nuclear retaliatory capability” (Garver 1986: 1220).

5.2 THE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT: DENG, ELITE STABILITY AND MILITARY MODERNIZATION

The period 1978–1989 was characterized by a certain stability of the elite. This was the result of the defeat of the radical wing of the party and the consolidation of a pragmatic elite centred on the figure of Deng Xiaoping. This was not a predetermined outcome, as the transition from the Mao era to the post-Mao era was not smooth, and the risk of victory by the supporters of the Cultural Revolution could not be excluded. From 1976 to 1978, events remained in flux, and the situation was all but clear.

Elite instability had a strong impact on Chinese foreign policy. Before the opening of China to the world economy in the late 1970s, there had already been an attempt to start a new foreign policy during the last years of Mao. In 1974, Deng presented a dossier in which it emphasized that the concept of self-reliance—which represented the pivot of Maoist foreign economic policy—was not synonymous with autarky: it had a certain flexibility that allowed cautious opening measures to modernize the country. It was a first timid attempt to exit the isolationist policy that had characterized the period of the Cultural Revolution.

In 1976, this document was used during a political campaign—called “criticizing Deng” (*Pi Deng*)—launched to discredit and weaken Deng Xiaoping’s power position. The *Pi Deng* campaign was orchestrated at a time of great confusion, caused by the death of Zhou Enlai and the gradual deterioration of Mao’s health. In this period, the struggle between the radical and moderate factions for the power succession deepened. Ann Fenwick writes (1980: 208):

This campaign should be viewed, at least in part, as the creation of members of the leadership who felt increasingly threatened by the trend of events that had begun in the early 1970s. Evolving policies and the imminent rectification campaign threatened to undermine their position in the

succession contest. [...] *Pi Deng* involved a power struggle of unprecedented urgency and magnitude that almost certainly contributed to the politicization of policy decisions in all areas.

On the table, there were two distinct policy lines reflecting different visions of society. The first line was headed by Deng and other representatives of the moderate wing of the party, who felt that a policy of opening up was necessary to achieve as quickly as possible the nation's modernization. On the other hand, there was the line of the radicals who insisted on an autonomous development programme centred on the isolation of the country from the world market, which they considered a source of corruption and a distortion of the road towards socialism.

The first attack on the policy of opening up began in March 1976 with an article in the *People's Daily* signed by the vice president of the Tsinghua University (ibid.: 209). The attacks intensified in April, coinciding with the new purge of Deng. The substance of the criticism was that the policy of opening up would not only result in a decrease in the independence of the country, considered vital to national security, but would also force China to adapt to the cyclical trends of capitalist economy. Supporters of the *Pi Deng* campaign suggested that the granting of rights to foreign companies related to the extraction of minerals from the Chinese soil would entail a loss of sovereignty. Furthermore, the excessive importance given to imports was considered as a testimony of a naive belief in the superiority of foreign products compared to those manufactured at home. During the campaign, many historical analogies were used in a derogatory way to discredit Deng. He was compared to those Chinese rulers of the last Qing dynasty that had allowed foreign powers to enter China to plunder its raw materials.

The transition period between the death of Mao and the return to power of Deng Xiaoping after the *Pi Deng* campaign was characterized by even greater instability. It was marked by two cycles of domestic conflict. First, the fight was between the radical wing, on the one hand, and a coalition between the old guard who had survived the Cultural Revolution and the beneficiaries of the Cultural Revolution, on the other. The second phase of the transition process was characterized by the breakdown of the coalition of the beneficiaries of the Cultural Revolution and the old guard led by Deng (MacFarquhar 1997).

In the aftermath of Mao's death, the situation in China was very complicated. The new paramount leader, Hua Guofeng, had no real power

base inside the party. His main source of legitimacy was very weak, indeed, resulting from a controversial appointment from a dying Mao. Hua controlled neither the party, torn between radical and moderate groups, nor the PLA, which after the tragic demise of Lin Biao in 1971, was under the control of leaders of the old guard, such as marshal Ye Jianying, who had a strong personal relationship with Deng Xiaoping.

Hua Guofeng and his main ally Wang Dongxing, the so-called beneficiaries of the Cultural Revolution (i.e., people who even if not allied with the radical faction of the Gang of Four, had climbed the ladders of power thanks to the purge of the old guard's comrades), were considered as suspect by Deng and his supporters. However, the most immediate threat, after the demise of Mao, both for the beneficiaries and the old guard (the "survivors" of the Cultural Revolution), was how to contain the power ambitions of the radicals. Thus, the political circumstances pushed these two factions to band together to smash the common enemy.

The alliance between Hua Guofeng and Ye Jianying guaranteed that the main sources of hard power were under their control. In fact, Wang Dongxing was the chief of Mao's bodyguards, an elite corps that could be used to attack the radical wing.⁷ Ye Jianying assured the support of the military. Immediately after the death of Mao, this group did not hesitate to move first, by arresting the Gang of Four (Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen, and Yao Wenyuan) and neutralizing their supporters. As a contemporary observer noted, the arrest was very smooth and bloodless (Han 1994: 413):

An emergency session of the Politburo was to take place in the Great Hall of the People that evening. Their presence [of the Gang of Four] was required. Since Wang Dongxing had been their ally, they did not suspect him. [...] As they passed through the swinging doors into the entrance lobby, they were apprehended and led off in handcuffs. A special 8341 unit then went to Madam Mao's residence at No. 17 Fisherman's Terrace and arrested her. That night Mao Yuanxin was arrested in Manchuria, and the propagandists of the Gang of Four in Peking University and in newspaper offices were taken into custody. All was done with quiet and efficiency. In Shanghai, the Gang's supporters received a message to come to Beijing "for a meeting".

⁷The Unit 8341 had approximately 8000 personnel and was highly trained, with the mission of protecting the CCP leadership.

They came and were arrested. Thus, without shedding a drop of blood, the plans of the Gang of Four to wield supreme power were ended.

Even in the stronghold area of the radicals, Shanghai province, there were no serious manifestations of protest against the action—a sort of coup—by the beneficiaries/survivors coalition.

Once the common enemy was eliminated, the coalition of beneficiaries and survivors broke up, and the old guard, whose support in the party and the army was stronger, quickly acted to remove from power the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries were considered usurpers of power. They had used the purge of the main leaders of the CCP during the most dramatic years of the Cultural Revolution to advance their political careers. The alliance with the survivors was an interest-based alliance and not a value-based one. It was the main common enemy, the Gang of Four, who pushed the two factions into a coalition. When that threat disappeared, the ultimate showdown between the two groups was inevitable.

Hua Guofeng's position in the party was not comparable to the position of the main leader of the old guard, Deng Xiaoping, whose personal network in the party and the army was at the root of his power. Thus, after the elimination of the radical faction, it was only a matter of time before the old guard would recall to Beijing the disgraced Deng and launch an attack against Hua Guofeng and his supporters.

Hua realized that his position was not very stable and tried to build it up, elaborating on Mao's ideology. The result was the so-called "whateverism": "Whatever policy Chairman Mao decided upon, we shall resolutely defend; whatever directives Chairman Mao issued, we shall steadfastly obey" (quoted in MacFarquhar 1997: 313). The "whatever" faction was immediately under fire from the old guard. Chen Yun, a member of the first generation and old comrade of Deng Xiaoping, attacked the "whatever" faction and strongly asked for a return to power of Deng Xiaoping. The attitude of the other two leading members of the veterans, Ye Jianying and Li Xiannian, was mixed. They were old comrades of Deng Xiaoping, but, at the same time, they realized that the support of Hua had been critical for smashing the radical faction. According to MacFarquhar, their ambivalent feeling was also dictated by the awareness that with Deng Xiaoping out of power, there was no one to shadow their political role. This mixed feeling notwithstanding, in the end, the solidarity of the veterans prevailed, and Deng was recalled to Beijing and attended the work of the third plenum of the 10th Central

Committee in the summer of 1977, regaining all his political positions: “Party vice-chairman and member of the Politburo Standing Committee; vice-chairman of the MAC [Military Affairs Committee]; vice premier; and PLA chief of staff” (ibid.: 315).

The following years were marked by the rapid consolidation of Deng’s power and the marginalization of the “whatever” faction. As MacFarquhar puts it (ibid.: 317):

The manner in which Deng Xiaoping turned the tables on Hua and the whatever faction is an illustration of the mysterious nature of power in the PRC. Hua was supreme leader in all branches of Party and state, Deng was not. The whatever faction was in power; Deng’s supporters were not. Yet, in the relatively short period between the Third Plenum of the Tenth CC, in July 1977, and the Third Plenum of the Eleventh CC, in December 1978, those power relations had been turned around. The method appears to have been the mobilization of elite opinion through the press.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Hua Guofeng no longer had an influential position in the party, and Deng was the new paramount leader of the CCP. His closest collaborators, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, were appointed to the main positions of the party and the state, respectively. The soft purge of the “whatever” faction started a period of regime stability that lasted until the Tiananmen incident.

This stability affected Chinese foreign policy. When Deng returned to Beijing in the aftermath of the smashing of the Gang of Four, his political position was not very stable, and this fact conditioned his international behaviour. On critical issues such as the attitude towards the USSR and the problem of Taiwan, Deng’s actions were strongly constrained by his domestic position. Reminding the difficulties of the first half of the 1970s and the *Pi Deng* campaign, Deng Xiaoping was very cautious in proposing a radical departure from the ongoing course of Chinese foreign policy. As Robert Ross underlines, in the late 1970s, Deng’s foreign policy was not very different compared to Hua Guofeng’s foreign policy. “Despite his credentials, he could not afford any criticism” (Ross 1989: 223). This circumspect attitude was evident in the management of Sino-America relations that in this period, due to the issue of Taiwan, was tilting towards a negative attitude. “In the context of heightened domestic political struggle, not only could Deng not compromise on the Taiwan issue, but neither could he even appear conciliatory” (ibid.).

With the strengthening of his domestic position in late 1978, Deng's room for manoeuvring expanded, and he could launch a policy of "reform and opening up" at the third plenum of the 11th Central Committee. The total victory of Deng over the "whatever" faction reduced his anxiety for the domestic repercussions of his foreign policy choices. This fact emboldened him to pursue a more assertive foreign policy that included the formal normalization of diplomatic relations with Washington and a more militant policy towards the USSR. In his first moves on the international chessboard, Deng remarked on his pro-American position and the necessity of building a coalition against Moscow. As Ross notes, "Deng carried China's anti-Soviet posture to a level not seen since the Cultural Revolution, thus starkly depicting China's pro-NATO alignment against Soviet Hegemonism" (ibid.: 224).

The victory over the "whatever" faction does not mean that, in early 1980, Deng was not confronted by other political leaders. Member of the old guard and important political leaders who helped Deng to return to power, such as Li Xiannian and Chen Yun, were very critical of the sharp criticism of Soviet Union and the too pro-American foreign policy of Deng Xiaoping. Accordingly, Deng was forced to moderate his position and adopt a more balanced foreign policy. The result of this change of international posture was the launch of the so-called "independent foreign policy", which, basically meant that, heretofore, China should have been less aligned with the Western position and less negative in its attitude towards the USSR.

An important consequence of the political change in Chinese politics in the late 1970s was the modernization of the Armed Forces. In the programme of the "Four Modernizations" (agriculture, industry, science, and defence), the necessity of the Armed Forces' modernization was ranked last. This fact did not mean that military power was less important for Deng and the new leadership than for Mao, but that Deng believed that to build a militarily powerful China, the development of the other three sectors came first. In the fall of 1979, the Chinese Minister of Defence stated that:

The modernization of national defence cannot be divorced from the modernization of agriculture, industry, science and technology and, in the final analysis, is based on the national economy. [...] Blindly pursuing large-scale and high speed development in building national defence will invariably and seriously hinder the development of the national economy and

harm the base of the defence industry. Subsequently, “haste makes waste”. (Xu Xiangqian quoted in Pollack 1983: 8)

In this process of modernization, Deng underlined two issues in particular: the combat capacity of the PLA and the ageing of military cadres.

First, we must raise efficiency. This means increasing combat effectiveness and efficiency in general. Second, structural reform will make it possible for us to select more capable people for promotion—this is one of its important features. With the bloated organization we have had, it has been virtually impossible to train and promote able people. For years we have been talking about the need for younger cadres in the army and about promoting outstanding young cadres faster. But we have to admit that our work in this respect has been far from ideal. If the problem is not solved, we will have failed in our duty. Is there anyone sitting here who is under 60? I doubt it.⁸

Thus, the first half of the 1980s was marked by a gradual but important process of modernization of the Armed Forces that included all aspects of military policy: from the reduction of personnel to the upgrading of defence industry and equipment (importing the most advanced foreign technology); from conventional weapons to nuclear ones; and from the military doctrine of a “People’s War” to the new doctrine of a “People’s War under Modern Conditions” (Lovejoy and Watson 1986).

5.3 THE STRATEGIC DEBATE: PEOPLE’S WAR UNDER MODERN CONDITIONS

The perception of external threats during the period of the Cultural Revolution was contradictory. During the period of reforms, the elite had a more consistent view of the international situation. This perception was both less pessimistic than the previous one and more widespread within the elite compared to the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, which were characterized by a heated strategic debate regarding the identification of threats, the best strategy to address them, and the internal repercussions of the courses of action selected.

⁸Deng Xiaoping, *Speech at a Forum of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the CPC*, July 4, 1982 (Deng, Various years).

In the first half of the 1980s, a mild positive view of the world situation prevailed in Beijing. This view was expressed by Deng Xiaoping in various statements, in which issues of concern were outweighed by the identification of positive trends. In 1982, Deng, with the consent of all the Chinese political elite, launched a reorientation of foreign policy aimed at redefining the international behaviour of Beijing, until then too unbalanced in favour of the United States. The recognition of the danger of Reagan's anti-communism, combined with America's selling of modern weapons to Taiwan, and at the same time, the perception of growing difficulties of the USSR in the Afghanistan quagmire were the international sources of the so-called independent foreign policy. This position amounted to a sort of renewed "third-worldism". In August 1982, Deng declared:

We are by no means pessimists. We simply want to point out that the danger of war exists. We have said that while the factors bringing about war have increased, the factors for preventing war are also growing. With reference to the United Nations, we can see that after World War II, a positive factor in international politics has been the rise of the Third World. The Third World member countries in the United Nations have increased. The importance of this change must be recognized. Hegemony may continue to run rampant. However, the days are gone when hegemonists wilfully decided the destiny of people all over the world.⁹

In 1984, Deng and his main collaborators accentuated their idea of a foreign policy based on "peace and development" as the main instrument of China's participation in international politics. In an official statement on July 18 of that year, the Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang issued a major speech in which—instead of quoting the classic themes of Marxism–Leninism and Mao's conflictual vision of history—he underlined the positive role of China in world politics and the importance of mutual cooperation (Hamrin 1994: 104). The position was remarked by Deng the following spring:

Generally speaking, the forces for world peace are growing, but the danger of war still exists. Not much progress has been made in the talks on control of nuclear arms and of weapons in outer space. That is why for many years, we emphasized the danger of war. Recently, however, there have been some changes in our views. We now think that although there

⁹Deng, *China's Foreign Policy*, August 21, 1982 (Deng, Various years).

is still the danger of war, the forces that can deter it are growing, and we find that encouraging. The Japanese people do not want war, nor do the people of Europe. The Third World countries, including China, hope for national development, and war will bring them nothing good. The growing strength of the Third World — and of the most populous country, China, in particular — is an important factor for world peace. So from the political point of view, a stronger China will help promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and in the rest of the world as well.¹⁰

This positive assessment was destined to grow increasingly stronger over the years. The internal crisis of the Soviet Union—as a result of the problems of leadership succession after the death of Brezhnev—accentuated the Chinese perception of the growing difficulty of the USSR and the significant reduction in the risk of a global nuclear conflagration.

The first change is in our understanding of the question of war and peace. We used to believe that war was inevitable and imminent. Many of our policy decisions were based on this belief, including the decision to disperse production projects in three lines, locating some of them in the mountains and concealing others in caves. In recent years, after careful analysis of the situation, we have come to believe that only the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, are in a position to launch world war. But neither dares do so yet.¹¹

The shift of the perception of the world situation from an inevitable conflict between progressive and reactionary forces to one in which the odds of this type of risk receded resulted in a readjustment of China's military doctrine, which hitherto had been based on the idea of a general war on the Chinese territory.

An important event that pushed for a change in the assessment of the international strategic situation and the need to revise the Chinese military doctrine was the war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s. The course of the conflict convinced the Chinese leaders that now the possibility of an all-out war between the superpowers was remote, and the greatest risks came from a high-intensity local war fought along the

¹⁰Deng, *Peace and Development Are the Two Outstanding Issues in the World Today*, March 4, 1985 (Deng, Various years).

¹¹Deng, *Speech at an Enlarged Meeting of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, June 4, 1985 (Deng, Various years).

border. The ensuing strategic debate produced the new doctrine of a “People’s War under Modern Conditions”.

The change in military doctrine was also a result of a change in the domestic environment that made it possible to debate the principles of Maoist military thought. In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese leadership experienced a great dilemma: how to preserve a link with Mao’s legacy—which was essential for the legitimacy of the regime and its policies—and, at the same time, modify policies to make them more attuned to current times. “Deng’s ingenious way out of the dilemma was to declare that Mao himself had sanctioned such a departure by stressing the necessity of ‘seek[ing] truth from facts’” (Joffe 1987: 556). In December 1979, Defence Minister Xu Xiangqian stated (quoted in Joffe 1987: 558):

In particular, we must [...] study the enemy, take the actual conditions of the enemy and ourselves into consideration and find out the laws for directing a people’s war under present-day conditions. We must whip up a high tide of studying military science with emphasis on the strategy, tactics, science and technology on modern warfare.

Another important step on the way to reforming the Maoist doctrine of a “People’s War” was taken in the early 1980s, after the consolidation of Deng’s power. The publication of an important document on the *Resolution on the History of People’s Republic*, adopted by the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on June 27, 1981, was instrumental in opening the way to the possibility of revising Maoist doctrine. By listing the successes and the mistakes of Mao, the *Resolution* was used to remove the *aura* of the inviolability of Mao’s political tenets. This was a pivotal condition to reform Chinese military policy. The *Resolution* was particularly sharp in its assessment of the Cultural Revolution and the role that Mao played in it.

The “Cultural Revolution”, which lasted from May 1966 to October 1976, was responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People’s Republic. It was initiated and led by Comrade Mao Zedong [...]

The history of the “Cultural Revolution” has proved that Comrade Mao Zedong’s principal theses for initiating this revolution conformed neither to Marxism-Leninism nor to Chinese reality. They represent an entirely erroneous appraisal of the prevailing class relations and political situation in the Party and state [...]

Chief responsibility for the grave “left” error of the “Cultural Revolution”, an error comprehensive in magnitude and protracted in duration, does indeed lie with Comrade Mao Zedong.¹²

This negative judgement notwithstanding, Mao’s role was partially saved, stating that the principal responsibility for the most negative effects of the Cultural Revolution was to ascribe to the Gang of Four and the other members of the radical factions (Lin Biao), and that, in the end, the positive things achieved by Mao were more important than his mistakes.¹³

Once the role of Mao was set in the right place and the cult of personality that had characterized the Cultural Revolution was condemned, it was possible also to change some of the policies more strictly linked to the Great Helmsman. This was feasible thanks to the new centrist consensus emerging in China, with the political marginalization of the last ultra-leftist and nostalgic Maoists (Shambaugh 2000).

The translation of this reform in the field of military policy was explained by Song Shilun, commander of the PLA’s Academy of Military Science. In an article published on August 16, 1981, he presented the basic feature of the new doctrine of a “People’s War under Modern Conditions”. According to Song, the new military doctrine was based on four main pillars (quoted in Joffe 1987: 559).

First, in the case of an attack, the PLA should not abandon its defence position to the enemy and allow the attacking troops to penetrate in depth into Chinese territory. The PLA’s main duty should be to defend the position, cities, and military installations by trying to block the onslaught by the enemy. The Maoist idea of losing important strategic areas to the enemy could not be accepted in modern war. The risk was that an enemy would limit itself to seizing part of the Chinese territory, abstaining from launching a general war in which the traditional strategy of a “People’s War” could have an effective result.

Second, the change in the art of warfare means that the PLA could no longer be centred on the leading role of the infantry. A combined joint operation had an increasingly greater role in modern warfare, and

¹²*Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China* (available at <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>).

¹³This was an expedient resembling that of Mao about Stalin after the XX CPSU Congress and the launch of the process of destalinization.

the weight of sophisticated technology was increasingly more decisive to changing the outcome of a battle. This meant that the PLA strongly required technological modernization.

Third, in addition to greater stress on technology, the “People’s War under Modern Conditions” doctrine—according to Song—put a major emphasis on the importance of logistics, a branch of military science neglected in Chinese tradition. This was partially a result of Maoist ideas that troops should rely on the support of people.

Fourth—and this was perhaps the strongest difference vis-à-vis the Maoist tradition—the new doctrine required a clear division between military tasks and civilian ones. The idea of a *political* Army was no more possible in modern times. Military planners should focus more on the tasks of the defence of national security from external threats and less on political work or becoming involved with elite politics dynamics, as during the Cultural Revolution period.¹⁴

This change in military doctrine affected nuclear strategy, too. According to Joffe, the most important change regarded the role of tactical nuclear weapons. If the main military strategy was to lure the enemy deep into Chinese territory, a doctrine contemplating the tactical use of nuclear weapons on national territory was not feasible (if not suicidal). With the development of a doctrine that tried to stop the enemy on the border, the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield assumed a different and significant role.

5.4 THE IMPACT ON NUCLEAR DOCTRINE: CONSIDERING LIMITED NUCLEAR WAR-FIGHTING OPTIONS

The second half of the 1980s was marked by a surge in articles and documents on nuclear doctrines. The ambivalent nature of the operational reality of the Chinese nuclear posture notwithstanding—a minimum deterrence or a more complex strategy envisaging limited strikes on the battlefield—it is a fact that in that period, contrary to the lack of a serious debate on nuclear targeting and the rule of employment of the previous era, there was a deluge of official or semi-official documents tackling these topics.¹⁵ This is even more significant for our analysis

¹⁴Harlan Jencks (1984), contrary to Joffe, emphasizes the element of continuity in the new military doctrine more than the element of change.

¹⁵The following section is mainly based on the works by Johnston (1995/1996, 1996b). See also Lewis and Hua Di (1992), Lewis (2007, 2014), and Fravel and Medeiros (2010).

because the international strategic situation of China was not so dire as during the years of the Cultural Revolution.

As Johnston convincingly shows, during these years—at all levels of the Chinese nuclear community—there was a great activism in elaborating new ideas about the employment of such weapons.¹⁶ Ideas about intra-war deterrence, nuclear war-fighting, and counterforce limited strikes surfaced in the Chinese policymaking circles. These changes in the strategic debate and the surge of documents and position papers about operational aspects of nuclear strategy were not the results of technological progress because many of the proposals debated overreached the material capability of the PLA (Johnston 1995/1996: 23 ff.).¹⁷

The debate started in China in the second half of the 1980s presents many traits in common with the nuclear debate in America in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. The main issue debated in this period was: what if deterrence fails? Or, in other words, the problem of intra-war deterrence. The classical study by Herman Kahn, *On Escalation*, was a tentative theorizing of how to manage a nuclear crisis, by avoiding the sharp alternative between surrender and Spasm War (an indiscriminate use of nuclear weapons against civilian targets) (Kahn 1965). The response to this dilemma was that the climb to extremes should be controlled, by gaining a situation of escalation dominance, i.e., the ability to fight at all levels of a conflict from a position of superiority.¹⁸ The escalation dominance allows policymakers to move to the opponent's shoulders the burden of deciding whether it is worthwhile to run the risk of escalating the conflict (ibid.: 290). The logic of the escalation dominance was the basis of the search for a strategic military superiority at the conventional and nuclear level (Freedman 1989: 218).¹⁹

As Buzan and Herring put it (Buzan and Herring 1998), the different positions about deterrence can be summarized in a confrontation between a “difficult school” and an “easy school”. The difficult school of

¹⁶This does not mean that the official doctrine of no-first-use was shelved. As David Rosenberg shows in the case of American nuclear doctrine, there is no straight relationship between declaratory policy and operational planning (Rosenberg 1983).

¹⁷On the technological-driven explanation of military doctrines, see Evangelista (1988), and Buzan and Herring (1998: Chapter 8).

¹⁸Kissinger (1957) also stated a similar position.

¹⁹For a contrary position stressing the difficulty of using in a controlled way nuclear weapons, see Brodie (1959).

deterrence is based on the idea that the mere presence of nuclear weapons does not guarantee the dissuasion of a prospect attacker because the elevated level of destruction of these weapons can produce a form of *self-deterrence* that dramatically degrade the credibility of the deterrent. Thus, if the easy school of deterrence underlines concepts such as minimum/existential deterrence, second-strike capability and countervalues targeting, the difficult school, conversely, put the accent on concepts such as war-fighting options, damage limitation, and counterforce strategies. The first posture needs a limited number of warheads and delivery systems, with a low level of accuracy; the second envisages a more sophisticated and differentiated arsenal with the capacity to hit hardened point-targets.²⁰

In Chinese official documents—both public and with limited internal circulations—many of the concepts linked to the difficult school of deterrence can be singled out. In 1987, the General Staff Department of the PLA elaborated on the idea of waging a nuclear war (Johnston 1995/1996: 9). The positive evaluation of the international situation expressed in Deng Xiaoping strategic decision of 1985—which remarked the idea of a not so ominous international political landscape and the low probability of a major conflict between superpowers—was not sufficient to completely eliminate the possibility of a limited conflict in which nuclear weapons could be used. Accordingly, “China’s military had to be prepared to fight under nuclear and chemical warfare conditions” (*ibid.*).

In 1988, a study elaborated by the National Defence University stated that “nuclear weapons not only cannot be pushed off the stage of warfare but rather will develop continuously; the question is how to develop the role they will play in future wars” (quoted in *ibid.*). Other analyses, published in the same period, underlined the necessity for China’s Armed Forces to modernize their arsenal both to improve its international status and foreign image and to build-up its war-fighting capability and the plans for a tactical use of nuclear weapons.

Many of these analyses were expressed by researchers and not by policymakers, so their role in the security policy making process is uncertain. However, the difficulty in China to distinguish between private opinions

²⁰The position of the two schools also has ethical implications. The easy school says that using more accurate, miniaturized device against military targets multiplies the chances that they can be used. The difficult school say that leaving to policymaker only the choice between surrender or all-out nuclear war is very dangerous and immoral.

and official statements—because of the close relationship between state organs and think tanks—makes the division between scholarly analysis and policy recommendation very hard.²¹

The second half of the 1980s showed an increasing interest in and a blossoming of a specialized literature on nuclear issues and the role of deterrence in Chinese military doctrine. According to Johnston, Western China watchers presented three different views of the Chinese deterrent posture. The first one was the classical conception fixed in the words of Marshal Nie Rongzhen about China's nuclear weapons as an example of a "minimum means of reprisal". The second school of thought was characterized by the idea that Chinese strategists actually felt a slight bit of discomfort about the idea of using nuclear weapons only as a retaliatory instrument, leaving the enemy to move first. This "second view contends that Chinese strategists have never genuinely accepted minimum deterrence, but instead lean towards some form of limited war-fighting or flexible response" (*ibid.*: 11). A third view attributed the main features of Chinese nuclear strategy to a deliberate choice of ambiguousness and flexibility, rooted in the teachings of ancient military classics.²²

Johnston is convinced that in the second half of the 1980s, Chinese strategic debate was gradually tilting towards the second position, commencing to debate a nuclear doctrine that presented many traits typical of a nuclear posture based not only on the passive role of atomic

²¹On the role of China's think tanks and their role in Chinese foreign-policy making, see Gill and Mulvenon (2002) and Shambaugh (2002). As Gill and Mulvenon note (2002: 618, 623): "PLA think tanks and research organs can be divided along a number of useful typological axes. First, the institutional affiliation of a given unit is a highly correlated indicator of the focus and even world-view of a given research organ. For instance, the Academy of Military Sciences seems much more focused on the future of warfare than the National Defence University, whose mandate is primarily to educate the senior officer corps about the world. Further, the political officers from the General Political Department's Centre for Peace and Development see the world in a very different way from the intelligence officers at the China Institute for International Strategic Studies. Second, PLA-related think tanks and research organizations can be identified roughly by mission, including intelligence analysis, weapons research and arms control, exchanges, and research. In some cases, one will find overlap and shared responsibilities of these missions across the various institutions [...] [their] activities indicate that a significant amount of interaction occurs between military and civilian strategists".

²²For a more detailed description of these three interpretations of Chinese thinking about deterrence, see the first chapter.

weapons as a pure retaliatory (deterrence) instrument but also as a defence instrument to be used on the battlefield according to the military necessity of the moment. As he notes (*ibid.*: 12):

In the last few years, however, in a range of newly materials published in “internal circulation” military journals and books, one can now discern the outlines of a rough consensus about nuclear doctrine, a consensus that is closer to the second group of Western analyses. Around 1987, the Strategic Missile Forces began to redress the neglect of research on doctrine by starting up a nuclear campaign theory (*zhanyi lilun*) research program that focused on detailed operational issues. Around the same time, the Chinese Navy’s Military Studies Research Institute conducted studies on the use of SLBMs for retaliation singly or in coordination with the SMF’s ICBMs. Out of these and other research programs has come an emerging agreement that China should rely on what is now termed “limited nuclear deterrence” (*you xian he weishe*). Chinese strategists now explicitly distinguish “limited deterrence” from “minimum deterrence” and from what they sometimes call “maximum deterrence” (e.g., counter-force war-fighting doctrines of the United States and the Soviet Union).²³

These seeming changes in Chinese nuclear doctrine were reflected in the introduction into official debate of many concepts about nuclear strategy associated with the “war-fighting school” of deterrence. The “war-fighting” strategy had already been long debated in the Western circles of strategists, arms controllers and weaponizers stirring up much controversy and criticism for its presumed aggressive nature and negative effect on the arms race (Freedman 1989: Chapter 25).²⁴

As Johnston notes, the idea that the nuclear revolution had changed in a dramatic way the Clausewitz’s view of war as a continuation of politics by other means was prevalent in the Western nuclear community but not in the Chinese one. In the nuclear age, according to the critics of Clausewitz, the close link between war and foreign policy cannot be considered as a foregone condition because an absolute war—in the nuclear

²³For a critical assessment of this position, see Lewis (2007). He is more convinced of the consistent position of Chinese policymakers on a minimum (or existential) posture.

²⁴The necessity of developing the capacity of destroying point and hardened military targets was one of the main stimuli for the introduction of MIRV technology, which multiplied exponentially the number of warheads and delivery systems in the arsenals of the two superpowers (Cordesman 1982).

age, a nuclear war—can completely destroy the two opponents and prevent the achievement of any political goals.

This pessimist view of the war/politics nexus in the nuclear age was far less relevant in communist tradition. As demonstrated by many analysts, a clear distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons was not present in Soviet strategic thinking. Soviet policymakers planned their war considering the possibility of using these devices on the battlefield. As Jack Snyder noted, Soviet policymakers were not as restrained in contemplating the use of nuclear weapons as their American counterparts (Snyder 1977). For Soviet military and civilian policymakers, forms of moderation prior to the use of nuclear weapons were possible, but once the nuclear threshold was crossed, there would have been no limitation in employing the nuclear arsenal. This position was a far cry from the formulations on the ladders of escalation set forth by American scholars. Unlike the United States, where the main theories regarding the use of nuclear weapons had been conceived by scholars coming from academic circles, in the USSR, the military enjoyed a dominant position in this sector. “Historically, the military’s monopoly on expertise has extended not only to hardware but also to the elaboration of strategic doctrine. And understandably, their perspective on strategic problems has tended to follow the ‘narrow logic of military efficiency’” (ibid.: 30).

This position, according to Johnston, was present also in the Chinese nuclear debate in the second half of the 1980s. “In contrast to U.S. proponents of the assured-destruction concept of deterrence, most of the Chinese strategists who write on nuclear questions explicitly reject the notion that nuclear weapons have overturned Clausewitz’s axiom that warfare is the continuation of politics” (Johnston 1995/1996: 13). This point was reflected in several publications²⁵:

- “Preliminary Investigation of Questions Concerning the Basic Theory of Deterrence” (*Dui caijun jiben lilun wenti de tantao*), included in a reader published in 1987.
- “The Invention and Use of Nuclear Weapons cannot Change the Political Nature of War” (*He wuqi de faming he shiyong gaibian bu liao zhanzheng de zhengzhi benzhi*), published by *The National Defence University* in 1988.

²⁵All the followings quotations of Chinese texts are from Johnston (1995/1996, 1996).

- “Is Nuclear War not the Continuation of Politics?” (*He zhanzheng bu zai shi zhengzhi de jixu le mai?*), published in *Chinese Military Science* in 1989.
- “Nuclear War Cannot Change the Basic Principle that ‘War is a Continuation of Politics’” (*He zhanzheng be keneng gaibian “zhanzheng shi zhengzhi de jixu de yuanli”*), published in *Chinese Military Science* in 1990.
- “Thoughts on the Relationship between Nuclear War and Politics” (*He zhanzheng yu zhengzhi guanxi de sikao*), published in the same period.
- “So-called ‘Logic of the Nuclear Age’ and Present World Reality” (*Suwei he shidai luoji yu dang jin shijie xianshi*), published in an issue of *World Economy* in 1990.

All these analyses share the view that it is necessary to distinguish between the causes of war and its use as a tool of statecraft. The introduction of nuclear weapons had not necessarily changed the basic political nature of war, i.e., that it is waged to pursue political goals: national security, territorial aggrandizement, hegemonic ambitions, etc. Nuclear weapons are just another instrument in the tool-kit of policymakers, and if they can be used in a controlled way—avoiding holocaust—they can be useful to achieve foreign policy goals. As Johnston summarizes (*ibid.*: 14):

The predominant view appears to be that the nuclear revolution does not by itself eliminate the possibility that the state (including China) can use nuclear weapons in wartime for achievable political ends. Chinese strategists rebut the normative argument that nuclear weapons are unusable with a descriptive argument that exhibits little sensitivity to the paradoxes of nuclear deterrence or to its technical and political fragility.

The acceptance by Chinese military planners of the possibility of a nuclear war-fighting strategy was closely linked to the idea of intra-war deterrence. Intra-war deterrence means that nuclear weapons are used in a selective way after the crossing of the nuclear threshold. In the Chinese debate, the necessity of preparing for this type of contingency stemmed from the inferiority of the PLA in the conventional sector compared to the two main enemies: the US and the USSR. Even if, according to Johnston, Chinese policymakers and analysts were not so clear

and explicit on this point, the main theme in their discourse was that if China did not want to be bullied in a military crisis, it needed to not be scared by the prospect of a nuclear exchange. This meant that nuclear weapons were not only considered as a deterrent tool but a war-fighting tool as well. “Without the prerequisite that nuclear weapons could possibly be used in a real war, then nuclear weapons cannot be political tools and have deterrent value. If we do not have the determination and real capability to dare to implement a nuclear attack on the enemy through powerful retaliation, then our nuclear power loses its deterrent value in constraining the outbreak of nuclear war” (Zhao and Zhang quoted in *ibid.*: 16).

What appeared to worry Chinese policymakers in this period was the same problem that already had plagued US strategists in the early 1970s and 1980s. In America, the responses to the question of “what if deterrence fails?” were the Schlesinger doctrine in the first half of the 1970s²⁶ and, in the late 1970s/early 1980, the elaboration of a doctrine to win a general nuclear war by scholars such as Colin Gray and Keith Payne.²⁷ To be sure, the ideas of Schlesinger, Gray and Payne were representative of a maximum theory of deterrence alien to Chinese military thought. However, the idea to leave a pure strategy of deterrence by denial and of re-inserting in Chinese military thinking an element of war-fighting was in line with the traditional Chinese military doctrines that stressed the decisive role of deterrence by defence: make life hard for a prospective attacker and do not only threaten to punish him. This approach to nuclear doctrine can be named, according to Johnston, “limited” deterrence. It occupies a middle position between the classical strategy of minimum/existential deterrence and the more aggressive strategy of maximum deterrence based on a first strike capability. Limited deterrence doctrine contemplates the possibility of using selective nuclear strikes on the battlefield.

²⁶See Chapter 2, Section 2.4.

²⁷Gray and Payne (1980) traced the conditions to wage and win a general nuclear war. According to the two strategists, to prevail in a nuclear war, it was necessary to try to destroy or degrade the enemy’s arsenal (to have a first strike capability) and develop a robust strategy of damage limitation. This was part of the rationale for the development of an anti-ballistic missile system (the SDI), which according to President Reagan should be used to make nuclear weapons obsolete, and conversely, for nuclear strategists, it should be used to reduce American casualties during a nuclear war.

In the mid-1980s, the Second Artillery published the first comprehensive textbook on nuclear war: “the Science of Second Artillery Campaign” (Fravel and Medeiros 2010: 67–68). According to Fravel and Taylor, the Second Artillery textbook did not present a radical departure from the previous analyses about nuclear weapons and their employment. The two scholars consider the textbook as a confirmation of the traditional approach of China to deterrence, based on a pure retaliatory role of nuclear weapons. “Consistent with this view, the book describes only one kind of operation for China’s nuclear forces, a ‘nuclear counter-strike’” (ibid.: 68).²⁸ Different on this point is the position of Johnston, who presents a list of operational tasks contemplated by the Second Artillery’s textbook that, according to him, clearly testified to a new orientation (Johnston 1995/1996: 20):

To strike enemy strategic missile bases and weapons stockpiles, major naval and air bases, heavy troop concentrations, and strategic reserve forces, and thus destroy the enemy’s strategic capabilities;

To strike at the enemy’s theater through strategic political and military command center and communications hubs, thereby weakening its administrative and command capabilities;

To strike the enemy’s strategic warning and defense systems;

To strike the enemy’s rail hubs, bridges, and other important targets in its transportation network;

To strike basic industrial and military industrial targets;

To strike selectively at several political and economic centers so as to create social chaos; and

To launch warning strike in order to undermine the enemy’s will to launch nuclear strikes, and thereby contain nuclear escalation.

²⁸Actually, in another part of their article, Fravel and Medeiros acknowledge that the 1987 textbook includes elements not consistent with a minimum deterrence posture: “The 1987 volume identified a range of countermilitary and countervalue targets for retaliation. More recent texts and teaching materials also highlight the value of striking counterforce targets as well as countermilitary and countervalue ones. These texts develop the view from the 1987 work that nuclear counterstrikes serve primarily to shock an adversary into submission in the hopes of de-escalating a conflict. Analysts who characterize China’s strategy as one of minimum deterrence have overlooked this feature of China’s strategy and instead focused on its small force structure” (Fravel and Medeiros 2010: 76–77).

This list of targets was a long way off the blind targeting approach of the nuclear doctrine of the previous 25 years.²⁹

Because the no-first-use doctrine remains the official declaratory policy of China today,³⁰ and the development of the Chinese arsenal has not followed a path consistent with a more assertive doctrine (Lewis 2007, 2014), it is right to have doubts about the effective translation of these prescriptions into an operational doctrine.³¹ However, this is not the main point of present analysis. What is more interesting here is to demonstrate how the change in the domestic environment allowed for an in-depth debate on nuclear targeting and weapons employment that the hard factionalism of the Cultural Revolution period prevented (right when such a debate—due to the strategic predicament—was more needed).

The passage from debate to operational doctrine is a long way away, and the technical capabilities of a state can prevent this fact from coming true. However, for this research, it is more interesting that a lively debate about nuclear targeting, war-fighting strategy, intra-war deterrence, and limited counterforce options was possible in Deng's China. A similar debate was simply unthinkable in the aftermath of the first atomic test, when debating nuclear doctrine meant to question Mao Zedong political-military thinking: a sure path to political disaster for any policymaker. The more stable domestic environment of the reform period (at least until the Tiananmen incident) and the high level of consensus within the political elite allowed Chinese policymakers to tackle in a more in-depth and sophisticated manner the international security situation.

²⁹See also Godwin (1996: 471–472): “[...] China’s missile forces have conducted exercises in which they prepare for ‘nuclear counter-attack operations’ during manoeuvres primarily designed to test the PLA’s preparation for limited conventional war, including the 1988 exercises. Furthermore, some military analysts suggested that improvements in the accuracy of delivery system and lower warhead yields increase the probability that nuclear weapons will be used in local war”, i.e., in a tactical way.

³⁰See Chapter 3.

³¹This is a point underlined by Johnston, too. As Fravel and Medeiros note: “Alastair Iain Johnston’s work on Chinese debates about adopting a doctrine based on the Chinese concept of ‘limited deterrence’ (youxian weishe) indicates that potential changes were discussed, but were also rejected” (Fravel and Medeiros 2010: 78).

Table 5.2 The making of China’s nuclear doctrine during the reform era

	<i>Balance of power</i>	<i>Intra-elite relations</i>	<i>Regime vulnerability</i>	<i>Policymakers’ perceptions</i>	<i>Policy outcome</i>
1978–1989	Moderately threatening	Non-conflictual	Low	Consistent	A more sophisticated nuclear doctrine

Proposition P 1 is inconsistent with the empirical evidence presented in this chapter. Proposition P 2.1 is partially consistent with the empirical evidence (the less threatening international environment and the more optimistic leaders’ perception would have to alleviate the pressure for a revision of nuclear doctrine) (Table 5.2).

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Conclusions

Abstract The conclusion provides a summary of the main research findings. The explanations of the Chinese nuclear doctrine, which analyse separately international factors, strategic culture, and leaders' belief systems have several shortcomings. The model used in this work, based on neoclassical realism, consents to solve the puzzles inherent to the studies presented. It combines both international variables and unit-level variables to explain the way a country reacts to international threats/opportunities.

Keywords Neorealism · Neoclassical realism · Traditional realism

This study sought to explain the evolution of China's nuclear doctrine and contribute to the theoretical debate in IR, showing the utility of neoclassical realism to explain the formation of states' military doctrines.

The neorealist baseline proposition (P 1) is not supported by empirical evidence. As I have tried to show in the first chapter, the explanations of the Chinese nuclear doctrine, based on models which focus on adaptive responses of state to international environmental pressures, have several shortcomings: the situation of severe international danger notwithstanding, China was reluctant to explicitly address the issue of targeting and the definition of operational rules for the use of nuclear weapons in the period 1964–1971.

Even more puzzling is the fact that greater attention to operational concepts occurred at a time when the country was still largely underdeveloped and slowly recovering from the economic and political disasters of the Cultural Revolution.

A third puzzling aspect, from a neorealist viewpoint, is the adoption by Chinese policymakers of a posture of No-First-Use, a doctrine not consistent with a position of inferiority—both in conventional terms and non-conventional ones—of the PRC vis-à-vis the two superpowers (Powell 2015).

Thus, even if external threats are central to explain the interest of China and, first of all, of Mao Zedong for the development of nuclear weapons (China's international predicament in the mid 1950s was the main stimulus to the PRC's decision to launch the nuclear programme),¹ the neglect of a clear and articulated formulation of a doctrine tailored to the needs of a poor country, internationally isolated, and with powerful nuclear enemies, remains untheorized.

A partial response to these puzzles comes from the studies that stress the impact of cultural tradition on Chinese nuclear posture (Lin 1988). The cultural traditions of a country affect the way policymakers think about international events—the conflictual or peaceful image of world politics—and their reactions: accommodating behaviours, defensive or offensive strategies. “[...] strategic culture refers to collectively held preferences, and analysis focuses on collectively produced and shared cultural artefacts” that affect states’ attitude towards the use of force (Johnston 1995a: 48 note 31).

The Chinese strategic culture presents traits of different traditions of thought that amalgamated over time, creating a complex system of principles, symbols and behavioural attitudes. The first tradition was Confucianism, an expression of a pacifist philosophy; the second was “Legalism”, a tradition oriented to behaviours more centred on the principles of *realpolitik*. The third one was Marxism–Leninism (Deillos 1994; Johnston 1995b; Ching 2004; Ivanhoe 2004).

According to Lin, traditional strategic culture affected the contemporary Chinese nuclear doctrine. The strategic ambiguity surrounding China's nuclear doctrine would be the result of the application of the concepts of extra-military means, integrated dualism, flux and fluidity,

¹The Korean War, the Indochina War, and the crisis in the Taiwan Strait presented the possibility of a nuclear attack against mainland China (Lewis and Xue 1988).

minimalism and negativism—which are hallmarks of Chinese traditional military thought—to the management of nuclear weapons.

The strategic culture approach has much to say about military behaviour,² but because culture, by definition, changes very little over short/medium periods of time, its contribution to the explanation for the attitude of the PRC's leaders towards nuclear weapons in the two periods considered in this study is limited: there is not a great gap between the strategic culture of the Maoist and post-Maoist periods (Scobell 2003).

The third type of explanation for China's inadequate attitude towards the nuclear doctrine refers to the military thought of Mao Zedong. There is no doubt that Mao's scepticism towards military technology, in general, and nuclear technology, in particular, played a significant role in determining the position of the PRC. The prominence of Mao in the Chinese political system meant that his ideas had a much more important role than any other leader. All the main foreign policy decisions made by Communist China in the first ten years of its existence were, more or less, influenced by the revolutionary ideas of Mao and his vision of the role of China in the world. The idea of nuclear weapons as "paper tigers" was not only a colourful image used by Mao to play down the significance of a technology of which China was lacking, but it was also a rational response to an international situation in which China had to face much stronger countries from a position of economic and military disadvantage.

The problem, then, is not to discuss whether the ideas of Mao had a role in determining the choice of China. They had a strong effect indeed: first, producing an underestimation of the utility of this type of

²Neorealists' approaches disregard completely the role of cultural variables. Conversely, neoclassical realism considers strategic culture one of the most important intervening variables to explain leader perception and decision making/implementation processes (Ripsman et al. 2016: 66–70). For a neoclassical explanation of the role of ideas in grand strategy formation, see Kitchen (2010: 13): "Actors within states may hold competing operational ideas about which means are most appropriate to address particular threats. For example, within militaries, the different forces tend to hold competing ideas about the effectiveness of their respective methods. Elsewhere within the state, some actors may consider that particular goals require the use of economic sanctions and military 'sticks', whereas other actors prefer to rely on the 'carrots' of trade and softer elements of power. Not only do actors hold different ideas about which means will work, there exists a competition of ideas concerning which means are ethically acceptable. Correspondingly, actors will have different ideas about which means are appropriate, which may reflect both long-standing cultural factors and prevailing domestic political attitudes".

weapons, and, later, spurring the launch of a crash program to provide the PRC a nuclear arsenal. The real problem is that these ideas cannot explain the timing of the programme and particularly the changes in the Chinese leadership towards these weapons. In fact, as indicated by Fravel and Medeiros, ideas cannot explain the adjustment that occurred during the period of reforms, as Deng's ideas about nuclear weapons were substantially similar to those of Mao Zedong (Fravel and Medeiros 2010).

As I have tried to show in the course of this study, the real variation between the Maoist and post-Maoist periods was not about the beliefs of the paramount leader in the field of nuclear weapons, but the different domestic political situations. In the period following the first nuclear test, China precipitated into the vortex of the Cultural Revolution: a political infighting during which any decision—from the management of educational institutions to the choice of opera plays to the role of nuclear weapons—was evaluated in light of its relationship with the thought of Mao and its ideological purity. Nuclear policy, in this period, was “hostage” to the struggles within the political elite.

In the second period, by contrast, a more relaxed domestic climate and a new political balance and neo-centrist consensus emerging around the figure of Deng permitted the development of a wider and more in-depth debate about the role and use of nuclear weapons. The model used in this work, based on neoclassical realism, consents to explain the puzzles inherent to the explanations presented above. It combines both international variables and unit-level variables to explain the way a country reacts to international threats/opportunities.

According to neoclassical realism, at the centre of the explanation are states and the way they manage threats/opportunities originating in the anarchic international system. Foreign policy is primarily a response to stimuli from the international system (changes in the balance of power). However, the way in which states respond to these inputs is influenced by variables located on individual and domestic levels. In particular, according to neoclassical realism, the response of states to international events is mediated/conditioned by a number of intervening variables grouped into three broad clusters: the perceptions of policymakers, the decision-making process, and the implementation process. The perceptions of leaders, decision-making and

policy implementation are influenced by the images (belief systems) of individual leaders, the national strategic culture, the state-society relationship, and the characteristics of political institutions (Ripsman et al. 2016).

To analyse the making of China's nuclear doctrine, a comparison between two critical periods in the history of the PRC has been conducted. The first period proceeds from 1964, the date of the first nuclear test, to 1971, the year of Lin Biao's death, when the Chinese regime—after reaching the highest point of internal crisis—headed towards a phase of normalization. The second period is that of the reforms, which proceeds from 1978—the year of the consolidation of power of the new leadership under Deng Xiaoping—to 1989, the year of the dramatic events in Tiananmen Square, when the regime was again under heavy stress, due to both international facts (the rapid dissolution of the Socialist regimes in the world) and internal events (students' protest).

As I have tried to demonstrate, the two periods do not show great differences from an international point of view, although the former presents a far greater danger to China's security and the second was marked by a much more sanguine leaders' perception. What had radically changed was the internal environment, the context in which political decisions were made. The consolidation of a reformist leadership, in which extremists on both sides had been purged, the removing of the *aura* of inviolability of Mao and his ideas—following the critical review process of the Cultural Revolution—and the restructuring of military institutions meant that in the second period it was possible to freely discuss nuclear issues, without the awkward presence of the fetish of the “People's War” doctrine. In the second period, in other words, nuclear policy ceased to be the prisoner of the internal political debate and the struggle between factions (red *versus* expert). The neoclassical propositions (P 2.1 and P 2.2) are partially consistent with the empirical evidence.

On one important point, however, this study contradicts Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro. In their latest book (Ripsman et al. 2016), in fact, the three authors assert that the possibility of domestic intervening variables to influence a country's policy responses to international stimuli is more likely when the international system presents a permissive strategic environment: i.e., when there is not a clear and immediate

danger.³ The case of the Chinese nuclear doctrine, however, shows how the unit-level intervening variables can weigh in situations of a restrictive international system, too. Indeed, even in the case of the “Order Number One”, issued because of an alleged imminent Soviet nuclear attack on Chinese territory, the factor that weighed more on the evolution of the situation was the strained relations between Mao and his designated heir and Minister of Defence, Lin Biao. What was supposed to be a confrontation between Moscow and Beijing, turned into a show-down within the Chinese leadership on the definition of the command lines and the ultimate source of authority in Beijing, contributing decisively to seal the fate of Lin Biao.

These events are more consistent with the position of realist scholars such as Jonathan Kirshner (2015), who considers international systemic variables *always* indeterminate in their effects on state responses.⁴ To be sure, this aspect deserves further investigation.

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³“The distinction between permissive and restrictive strategic environments relates to the imminence and the magnitude of threats and opportunities that states face. All things being equal, the more imminent the threat (or the more enticing the opportunity) the more restrictive the state’s strategic environment is. Conversely, the more remote the threat or opportunity and the less intense the threat and or opportunity, the more permissive the strategic environment is” (Ripsman et al. 2016: 52).

⁴“In sum, the balance of power (and changes to it) and the systemic pressures generated by an anarchic political order more generally, inform the environment in which all states act. In that context, however, all states, and especially great powers, enjoy considerable discretion with regard to how they pursue their goals and what sacrifices they make in the face of constraints. It is thus impossible to understand and anticipate the behaviour of states by looking solely at structural variables and constraints. To explain world politics, it is necessary to appeal to a host of other factors, including domestic politics, history, ideology, and perceptions of legitimacy” (Kirshner 2015: 162).

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