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China's Nuclear No-First Use Policy: An Appraisal

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Abstract: *China announced a No-First Use (NFU) policy as a coherent, and normatively meaningful element of the Chinese nuclear doctrine in contrast to the ambiguous or aggressive nature of other nuclear powers. With the increasing geopolitical tensions and the fast development of nuclear arsenals in the global south, the credibility, strategic rationale, and international implications of the Chinese commitment to NFU requires an intense examination. This article provides a critical review of doctrinal developments and operational position of the China's NFU policy. Although, the critics doubt about its sincerity, transparency, and adaptability during any crisis but the NFU doctrine promulgated by China is based on minimum deterrence and centralized command. Grounded on the comparative analysis, expert doctrinal materials, and empirical observations, this article contends that China's NFU policy can be deployed as both an essential element of the Chinese deterrence policy and a possible example of nuclear responsibility in an increasingly unstable international strategic environment.*

Introduction

China has had a formal commitment since the time it detonated its first nuclear device at the Lop Nur test site on October 16, 1964 that it would never be the first to utilize nuclear weapons in whatever circumstances. This policy is called the No-First Use (NFU) doctrine, and it is a central part of the Chinese nuclear policy and what makes it different in comparison with other nuclear-armed countries (Zhao, 2022). Interestingly, China is the sole permanent UN Security Council member that has been able to maintain such a policy for more than 6 decades. Conversely, the United States and Russia keep the option open to employ nuclear arms in certain situations (Mount, 2024). In 2024, China is estimated to have 500 nuclear warheads by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), making it the third-largest nuclear power in the world. Nevertheless, despite its growing arsenal and modernization program, China still maintains an official military doctrine that is founded on a defensive strategy, which takes the form of minimum deterrence and assured retaliation (Chambers, Milne, Hutton, & Williams, 2022). In successive defence white papers and by statements made by the Central Military Commission, China has repeatedly affirmed its NFU policy most recently in the face of increasing tensions in the Indo-Pacific and its growing conflict with the United States (Ai, 2021). This study is a critical appraisal of the NFU policy of China not to question its validity but to test it rigorously based on its strategic reasoning, historical basis, doctrinal coherence, and long-term applicability. With

the pace of the nuclear delivery systems race, such as hypersonic glide vehicle, MIRVs (multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles), and sea-based deterrents, the question of whether the NFU policy of China is credible and stable or whether it has become a rhetorical instrument with no operational value, is growing among the scholars and policymakers. This research will be justified by the fact that there is an overall academic and strategic necessity to determine whether the NFU policy of China is a source of stability or a comfortable story hiding the underlying hidden offensive potential. China has stated that it is only following its restraint policy in a multipolar nuclear world with arms control treaties falling apart, including the United States withdrawing from INF Treaty and the future of the New START Treaty is unclear, it is important to question not only what this new restraint policy can say about Chinese intentions, but also what it can add to international nuclear norms (Havrén, 2023). This article approaches this goal by way of critical appraisal of the NFU doctrine of China based on historical documentation, strategic theory, military publications, and the opinions of experts to argue that the policy is a strategically rational and normatively valuable cornerstone of the Chinese national defence policy. International observers, particularly those of a competing power, are sceptical of NFU and its implementation, but factually, NFU is not tokenistic and has been built into command hierarchies, nuclear posture, and strategic thinking in China (Costlow, 2021). In a more volatile geopolitical environment, learning about the endurance and potential of the Chinese NFU policy provides imperative information about nuclear risk reduction, crisis management, and the feasibility of arms control diplomacy in the 21st century.

Conceptualizing No-First Use: Origins and Meaning

Defining NFU

The concept of No-First Use (NFU) is a declaratory position of a nuclear-armed country in which it commits not to use nuclear weapons first except in case of a nuclear attack on it in the first place. NFU is also an essentially restraint doctrine that is intended to minimize the likelihood of nuclear war through deterring pre-emptive or preventive attacks and strengthening the concept of deterrence based on retaliation instead of aggression (Talmadge, Michelini, & Narang, 2024). NFU initially became internationally popular during the Cold War, especially as part of peace movements and the non-aligned movement, in opposition to massive retaliation-versus-flexible-response policies promoted by superpowers. The Soviet Union temporarily took an NFU position (1982-1993) but eventually gave up on it in the wake of perceived NATO conventional superiority (Sadiq, 2021). Among nuclear armed states only few have declared an NFU posture, with the majority of them allowing themselves the discretion to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear threats. The significance of NFU lies in its potential to shape nuclear doctrines around de-escalation and moral restraint. As a policy, it can function both as a military strategy—minimizing the risk of nuclear miscalculation—and as a diplomatic tool that signals responsible behaviour within the international community (Muhich, 2024).

China's NFU in Global Context

China is not only the nuclear power to have committed to NFU in both duration and absolutist form, but it is also the only nuclear power to have committed to No-First Use during the cold war era. On the very day that it had test-fired its first nuclear bomb, China came out with a statement that it would never be the first to use nuclear weapons under any circumstances and at any time. This commitment was repeated in Chinese defence white papers (especially in 2006, 2010, 2013, and 2019), and continues to be a central principle in Chinese nuclear doctrine (Woolf, 2021). As opposed to the US and NATO, the NFU policy in China is not conditional, unlike their doctrines of calculated ambiguity and flexible response that permit a possible first use in a case of extreme conventional or cyber conflict. Likewise,

Russia retains the right to use pre-emptive nuclear attack in the case of an existential threat; India has witnessed increased ambiguity in the NFU doctrine over the past few years, whereas China is relatively categorical and publicly consistent (Akiyama, 2022).

The U.S. Congressional Research Service described the Chinese NFU posture in 2021 as being comprehensive and without conditions, one that sets Beijing aside as an outlier among the nuclear weapon states. Moreover, the 2022 Position Paper on Nuclear Disarmament by China re-confirmed that, "China has pursued the policy of no-first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under no circumstances and has made the unambiguous commitment not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones" (ANDLEEB, AHMED, & KHAN, 2024).

Such absolutist NFU stance has multiple strategic and normative roles to play. In a more strategic sense, China blanket NFU declaration is clear in crisis situations, and this will eliminate the possibility of miscalculation, misinterpretation, or unintentional escalation, especially in theatres with higher sensitivity like the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea (Lee, 2025). Normatively, it supports the moral legitimacy of its policy by fitting into the Chinese more general foreign policy discourse of peaceful development, whereby its nuclear posture is primarily seen as defensive as opposed to the more assertive and unclear policy of flexible response so prevalent amongst western powers (Zhang, 2021).

The diplomatic value of the NFU position is its ability to increase the credibility of China with the countries of Global South and non-nuclear weapon states, most of which understand NFU as a normative path to global disarmament. This has enabled China to exercise its influence at the international disarmament bodies like Conference on Disarmament and participate actively in discussions regarding the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) despite the fact that it has not even signed the treaty (Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, the 2024 Yearbook of SIPRI affirms that although the number of warheads in the Chinese arsenal is increasing, it is currently at an estimated strength of 350 warheads (2020) and will reach about 500 after 2024, there is still no publicly available indication of a doctrinal change towards NFU. It is also assumed that China maintains its warheads de-mated with the delivery systems in peacetime conditions, which essentially makes its force posture second-strike (Hanson, 2022).

Historical Context and Doctrinal Foundations

Mao Zedong's Strategic Minimalism

The origins of the Chinese NFU policy are rooted in the ideology and strategic thinking of Mao Zedong, who once defined nuclear weapons: they may look terrifying, but they are quite impotent in terms of political effectiveness. This analogy was because Mao did not think that the power of nuclear weapons ensured military or moral superiority. Rather, he paid attention to political will and mass mobilization as the primary tools of national power (Nayan, 2021). The Chinese relative economic backwardness and asymmetric status regarding the two superpowers of the Cold War influenced the way Mao viewed nuclear weapons. The nuclear arms race was economically unrealistic to China in the 1960s and was also unnecessary in terms of strategy. This led Mao to promote what came to be called minimum deterrence, that a small, but survivable, nuclear force, capable of attacking the opponent, was adequate to discourage nuclear attack (Mengsun, 2020).

Such a strategy of minimalism influenced the early Chinese nuclear posture. Throughout the period between its first successful nuclear test in 1964 and the completion of its first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the DF-5, in the early 1980s, Chinese arsenal was small and limited. As an illustration, twenty years after its initial test in 1984, China was estimated to have had no more than approximately

160 nuclear warheads, as opposed to more than 23,000 in the American stockpile and nearly 34,000 in the Soviet stockpile (Jash, 2023). The minimalism upon which the doctrine of Mao was based also implied that the nuclear weapons could not be regarded as a war fighting weapon but as the political means of deterrence. This is ideally opposed to the U.S. and Soviet doctrines of the day, which made nuclear options a part of the battlefield planning by way of such constructs as flexible response and escalate-to-deescalate. Such aggressive postures were rejected by the strategic culture of China, which was informed by Maoist ideology and a sense of strategic vulnerability (Haynes, 2020a).

Nuclear Development and NFU Formalization

On October 16, 1964, the very day after conducting its first nuclear test, China made a public statement that it would never be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time or under any circumstances. This statement became the official implementation of the NFU doctrine and established the pattern for the further decades of nuclear policy (Santoro, 2023). During the subsequent years, the Chinese NFU was not a mere talk; it was institutionalized in China's national defence plans and repeated at each major milestone of its doctrines. NFU was reaffirmed as a permanent and unconditional commitment by the 1995 State Council White Paper on arms control. The 2006 Defence White Paper spelled out further that China, "observes the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons in any circumstances at any time; and does not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones" (Van Robays, Reynolds, Jackson, & Hammerle, 2023).

Although geopolitical tension between the two powers have been increasing, including the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995-1996, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by the USA in 1999, and the situation in the South China Sea in recent years, China has not changed its NFU policy. Such doctrinal consistency is especially striking in view of the changes in nuclear policy in other leading powers. As an example, The United States has never accepted NFU and 2018 Nuclear Posture Review clearly provides the U.S. with an option to employ nuclear weapons against "significant non-nuclear strategic attacks" (Woolf, 2021). Russia has shifted into a more aggressive doctrine which is evident in its official policy of 2020 which allows the use of nuclear weapons in the first use in response to conventional attacks that are aimed at the existence of the state. India, which was once a fervent proponent of NFU, has cast uncertainty on its stance by making political declarations that it will reconsider the doctrine, especially following the Pulwama-Balakot crisis in 2019 (Akiyama, 2022). But, India yet to announce any alternative to its NFU policy.

Unlike other major powers with an aggressive nuclear doctrine, China has been doctrinally conservative and strategically restrained. Although undergoing serious modernization (including the expansion of its nuclear triad, road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), e.g., DF-41, as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs)), Chinese leadership still justifies all such moves in the context of the so-called credible minimum deterrence and its traditional NFU policy (Cunningham, 2023). By 2024, China is estimated to have around 500 warheads in its nuclear arsenal (SIPRI Yearbook 2024), still very much below those held by the United States (5,244) and Russia (5,889). Also, in a 2023 report, the Federation of American Scientists observes that China keeps the greatest number of its warheads de-mated in peacetime, with its delivery systems a posture compatible with second-strike capability and another way of reinforcing its NFU pledge (ANDLEEB et al., 2024). Such a strategy also ensures the safety of security of its nuclear arsenal.

Strategic Logic behind China's NFU Policy

The NFU doctrine of China is not just a declaratory policy to be sold to the international community but one embedded firmly in a strategic rationale to be consistent with the ancient Chinese defense

philosophy of deterrence without provocation. Essentially, the nuclear policy of China is conservative, defensive, and balanced in such a way that it will not engage in arms races, minimize the threat of nuclear war, and host a perception of a responsible nuclear power (Chappell, 2021). This logic is based on two principles: minimum deterrence and asymmetric strategic thinking.

Minimum Deterrence and Strategic Sufficiency

The Chinese nuclear policy revolves around what is known as the minimum deterrence approach, which is a belief that holding a small, safe, and survivable nuclear force is enough to deter any enemy form nuclear attack. It is not to command nuclear warfare situations but to make sure China will be able to retaliate with unacceptable incursion on the event of an attack. This is strategic positioning that accords perfectly with an NFU policy (Lee, 2025). Because China does not use nuclear weapons to engage in war fighting or coercion, the strategy behind its deterrence model is based on the promise of retaliation and not initiation. First use would be in essence the opposite of the concept of minimum deterrence which is based on restraint and second-strike capability.

The existence of the minimum deterrence policy can be traced according to the size of the Chinese nuclear forces as well as the deployment patterns. As indicated in the SIPRI Yearbook 2024, China has around 500 nuclear warheads compared to 5,244 warheads that are in the possession of the United States and 5,889 warheads that are kept by Russia. China has a modest arsenal compared to its peers despite the rapid modernization (Zhang, 2021). The warheads that China has are thought to be demated in peacetime, taking time to launch. This habit slows down the response time, but it strengthens the idea that China does not have a mind-set ready to make the first use. Survivability, no first-strike capability, is the intended design of the deployment of road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), including the DF-41, and nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) including the Type 094 (Harding, Heaston, & Peters, 2025). China exercises strategic patience by not using hair-trigger alert systems or launch-on-warning doctrines but instead insists on assured retaliation instead of pre-emptive strike preparedness. As noted by Jeffrey Lewis, one of the most prominent arms control researchers, China's nuclear posture is not aimed at an attack but at survival. Also, such strategic restraint helps China to escape arms race that destabilizes (Hanson, 2022). For example, even though the U.S. has deployed missile defence systems in East Asia, i.e. THAAD in South Korea, Chinese responses to these deployments have not been accompanied by nuclear build-up or first-use doctrine change. Rather, it has been preoccupied with survivability and credibility not numerical equivalence of its weapons (Nayan, 2021).

Asymmetric Strategic Thinking

Chinese asymmetric strategic thinking is indicative as a whole, in which China does not subscribe to the logic of counterbalancing its opponents with weapon-to-weapon. Instead it aims to manipulate the security environment using moderation and normative power. As opposed to the U.S and Soviet Union, which actively pursued Cold War strategies of mutual assured destruction (MAD), both of which relied on the idea of balanced nuclear parity, China has always opted to prioritize qualitative over quantitative defence (Mengsun, 2020). This imbalance in the Chinese nuclear posture cannot be construed as a sign of weakness, but an explicitly made strategic decision that has a number of purposes. It allows China to prevent the expensive arms race, which might cause overloads to the economic resources and hence disrupt the regional security situation. Simultaneously, it enables China to maintain its reputation as a responsible nuclear power in the international arena, especially in a multilateral context like Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conferences and United Nations Disarmament Committees (Jash, 2023). Moreover, such restrained posture empowers China to exercise political and normative pressure

on competitor nuclear states, by reminding them of their dependence on first-use doctrines or ambiguous deterrence policies, thus augmenting the distinction between China and others in terms of declaratory transparency and strategic opacity.

In this respect, NFU of China turns into a military stance as well as into a means of diplomacy. It assists in portraying China as a state that is interested in nuclear restraint, a narrative that is appealing to the Global South countries that promote nuclear disarmament. This strategic thinking is also popular in the management of perception in the event of regional tension. In particular, in the case of the Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-96), though China conducted missile tests and stepped up military signalling, it did not resort to any nuclear threats (Santoro, 2023). In the same way, as the U.S.-China rivalry is increasing in the Indo-Pacific, China has abstained from introducing tactical nuclear weapons or use nuclear war fighting rhetoric, further supporting the effectiveness of its NFU policy. The critics can mention recent Chinese developments in hypersonic glide vehicles (e.g., DF-17), Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs), as evidence of a developing counterforce strategy (Van Robays et al., 2023). But the technologies can also be seen as survivability efforts to maintain the ability to retaliate against future developing missile defence systems-not as a sign of an abandonment of NFU.

Evidence Supporting China's NFU Commitment

Although some Western strategic experts remain doubtful about it, the evidence, both in multi-layered and compelling form, does exist and points to the fact that the NFU policy that China adheres to is not a rhetorical tool but rather a doctrine deeply ingrained in its strategic culture, military planning, and command structure. This part will discuss three important dimensions namely, doctrinal consistency, force posture, and nuclear command and control which in combination augment the credibility of Chinese NFU pledge (Rajagopalan).

Doctrinal Consistency

The NFU commitment of China has been stagnant in terms of doctrine since the past five and a half decades. China has repeatedly stated that it would never be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances since the country has conducted its first nuclear test in 1964 (Radzinsky, 2021). This has been repeated in all major national defence white papers since 1995 and was last reaffirmed in the 2019 Defence White Paper that said: China will never start nuclear weapons first and never will under any circumstances and at any time. China has not amended or retracted this commitment even in instances of increased tension in the regions or the world in general (Miller, 2020). In the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, when the U.S. sent two aircraft carrier battle groups into the area near Taiwan in reaction to missile tests by the PLA, China did not make any references to nuclear threats and had not amended its NFU stance. Following the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict with India, notwithstanding the mounting militaristic and nationalistic rhetoric, China did not resort to nuclear threats or talk about the usefulness of first-use options (Zeb, 2025).

This doctrinal continuity is especially remarkable in comparison with other nuclear powers. As an example, the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review published by the United States reiterated that the country rejects NFU and would not even consider adopting such a policy unless it could do so in a manner that could enable strategic stability and credible deterrence to the United States and its Allies and partners (Einhorn, 2021). According to the Russian nuclear policy guidance, published in 2020, it expressly permits the first use of nuclear weapons in response to conventional threats that present an existential threat. India, which was a strong proponent of the NFU, has since 2016 injected ambiguity by issuing political statements that said that its doctrine is subject to change given the circumstances. The steadfastness of the Chinese position in the community, therefore, makes it different from other powers

in nuclear weapons and gives the NFU policy a stronger sense of credibility (Sethi).

Lack of First-Use Preparations

The other major measure that reflect on the true commitment of China to NFU is on the organization and positioning of its nuclear forces. Analysts like Jeffrey Lewis and Gregory Kulacki have expressed the view that the force posture adopted by China is based on the retaliatory approach rather than the pre-emptive or war fighting approach. China is said to maintain separation of its nuclear warheads and the delivery systems when at peace. This position seriously impairs the capability of a quick first strike and is also in line with the retaliatory-only policy (Ogilvie-White, 2022). China does not field or develop tactical nuclear weapons that are supposed to be used in battle like the United States and Russia. This omission implies a doctrinal exclusion of nuclear weapons as a weapon that can be used in a conventional conflict situation.

All of China, in terms of its investments in road-mobile ICBMs (such as the DF-41), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) on the Type 094 Jin-class submarines, and developing hypersonic glide vehicles (such as the DF-17) signifies the desire to be in a more survivable position, not a pre-emption. These are capabilities that are meant to make China capable of responding following the absorption of a nuclear strike, which is the core of any credible NFU-based posture. In 2021, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) also reported that China does not, as presently believed, maintain any nuclear-armed aircraft on standby status, and found no publicly available indication of the existence of launch-on-warning capabilities, which is also usually consistent with a first-use orientation (Niu, 2025).

Absence of Delegation in Nuclear Command

One of the most important factors that can make the NFU policy of China more credible is the high degree of centralization of nuclear command and control in the Central Military Commission (CMC) chaired by the President of China. This is centralized power, which means that the decision to launch an operation is not pre-delegated to local commanders or regional military units even in situations of high tensions or in wartime (Sokolski & Center, 2021). Consequently, nuclear weapons must be authorized by the top political leadership, in effect, which makes China doctrine of nuclear weapons as political weapons of last resort as opposed to tactical military weapons. This structure lowers considerably the chances of wrong or accidental utilization, making the NFU posture even more secured (Rajagopalan, 2025). The Second Artillery Corps of the PLA (nowadays reorganized as the Rocket Force in 2016) has traditionally been placed under civilian control so that the deployment of nuclear weapons is under strict control. The 2020 Science of Military Strategy, the official book of the PLA, repeats that nuclear forces are being operated under the strict peacetime control and the launch control is highly centralized and politically directed (Chang, 2020). This model of command is highly contrasting with doctrines in other countries such as Russia and the United States where pre-delegation situations and early-use alternatives have been discussed or even adopted to make deterrence credible in battle situations.

The NFU policy of China is supported not only by the declaratory consistency, but also by the physical attributes of its arsenal, the structure of its system of nuclear command, and the way it acts during crises. Although certain analysts take to task the issue of doctrinal change in the event of nuclear modernization, no solid evidence, yet, has been provided to challenge the inherent base of the NFU doctrine of China (Haynes, 2020b). Quite the opposite, its force posture, strategic signalling and internal command structure all remain conducive to an NFU strategy of deterrence by retaliation rather than escalation.

Counter-arguments and Critical Concerns

Although China has consistently stated that it practices NFU of its nuclear weapon, there seem to be

doubts, especially among India and the United States, concerning its military modernization, crisis behaviour and strategic secrecy. Such criticisms are valid; they are likely to be based on theoretical scenarios as opposed to real changes in Chinese doctrine. This part takes a critical look at these rebuttals.

Ambiguity in Crisis Scenarios

One of the most cited concerns is that China may be tempted to back out of its NFU commitment in the event of an acute conventional threat, particularly those situations where there is a threat to the survival of its political or strategic apparatus. As an example, a US precision strike on Chinese nuclear command and control, a blockade or large military conflict over Taiwan, or a coincidental conflict against India at the western border may create strong incentives for Chinese policymakers to contemplate early nuclear use in order to de-escalate or deter further aggression (Kristensen, Korda, Johns, & Knight, 2024). Critics argue that given that the strategic assets of China i.e. its missile silos, mobile launchers and command nodes are relatively few and prone to pre-emptive strikes, China might seek to operate in an NFU mode under pressure and eventually switch to a launch-on-warning or even a pre-emptive position. These arguments are also informed by the works of Chinese military strategists such as Major General Yao Yunzhu who wrote in the early 2010s that China would perhaps have to strengthen the credibility of its deterrent posture in view of the emerging threats (Savelyev, 2020a).

Nevertheless, the official literature of the Chinese military, as well as its force posture, does not show any empirical evidence that it is making a formal doctrinal change towards renouncing NFU. The 2020 and 2022 public statements of China, made at the time of high tensions around Taiwan and the growing U.S. Indo-Pacific military presence, reaffirmed its NFU without any alteration. In addition, the move to a first-use posture would be inconsistent with the long-term strategic culture of restraint in China and risk escalation, which Chinese leaders consider strategically and politically undesirable (Robles, 2020). The institutional characteristics that constrain China to take pre-emptive action even in cases of crisis are, lack of launch-on-warning capability, warhead-delivery system separation and high-level centralized command.

Modernization and Hypersonic Missiles

The second top issue is the expanding nuclear modernization of China, which incorporates the use of MIRVs and hypersonic glide vehicles as well as dual-capable delivery systems. As an example, hypersonic missile DF-17 developed by China and announced in 2019 is an alarming weapon because of its speed, manoeuvrability, and the possibility to evade missile defences (Schneider, 2020). DF-41 is an intercontinental ballistic missile that can carry up to 10 MIRVs and it greatly increases the effectiveness of China defeating the U.S. missile defence. These technological changes have made some commentators wonder whether China is throwing over its minimalist approach in favour of a counterforce capability, the latter potentially permitting first-use strategies (Riqiang, 2021).

Nevertheless, such systems may be also viewed in another way, as the systems that increase survivability, rather than the means to realize a first-use. In an environment where the adversaries have very competent missile defences, real time ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) capabilities and prompt global strike doctrines, it is necessary that there is penetration and retaliatory effectiveness in order to have credible second strike deterrence (Montgomery & Yoshihara, 2022). The modernization of China, as has been argued by Dr. Fiona Cunningham and Dr. M. Taylor Fravel, is in line with sustaining a credible deterrent based on retaliation rather than shifting toward nuclear war fighting. Furthermore, the number of nuclear weapons that China holds is not large (Kristensen & Korda, 2020). China also remains cautious in using tactical nuclear weapons, which is the major instrument of first-use doctrines

observed in Russian and NATO militaries.

United States and Indian Apprehensions

The third of significant challenge to the NFU doctrine of China relates to the scepticism that still exists in India and the United States. The opaqueness of the Chinese nuclear doctrine, failure to be transparent in the deployment of forces, and the lack of confidence-building mechanisms are some of the reasons given by Indian strategic planners to put the NFU pledge into question (Bawa, Pandey, & Kocchar, 2024). For example, the Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval has on more than one occasion pointed to the necessity of counting both the declared and the actual postures when evaluating Chinese strategy. This distrust is heightened by the tense border situation in Ladakh, whereby China and India fought bloody battles in 2020. Indian analysts believe that the technological progression of China is a sign of an even stronger nuclear posture.

Similarly, the United States is also cautious. In its 2023 China Military Power Report, U.S. Department of Defence indicated that it was concerned that China is increasing the rate of its nuclear development and possibly moving toward a launch-on-warning posture (Iqbal, 2023). The same report acknowledges, however, that no formal Chinese doctrine has ever been found to be inconsistent with the NFU principle and that such judgments are made on worst-case scenarios as opposed to hard-and-fast facts. One should also take into account the strategic rationale of these suspicions. Both the U.S. and India follow doctrines that either deny NFU (U.S.) or have put NFU on a conditional basis (India). To some extent, they are also influenced by their own mistrust, which is dictated by their nuclear policies and their inability to confidently trust a competing power with whom there are very few formal agreements on arms control or transparency. The burden of proving a doctrinal reversal is still on the critics. However, China has not threatened first-use to date, or conducted nuclear tests during crises, or deployed forces so as to be inconsistent with its declaratory NFU policy (Binnendijk & Gompert, 2023).

Comparative Appraisal: NFU Policies Worldwide

Nuclear doctrines worldwide are diverse, with the reaffirmation of the Chinese NFU contrasting with the more ambiguous or offensive postures of India, Russia and of the U.S./NATO. This part brings out the fact that the NFU policy of China is a stabilizing exception in a world that is increasingly becoming volatile.

India's Shifting NFU: From Clarity to Conditionality

India used to be a firm supporter of NFU. After its nuclear tests, India officially introduced a NFU doctrine in 1998 and stated that it will not be the first to launch nuclear attacks but will retaliate massively in case of an attack. This stance was enshrined in the Indian Nuclear Doctrine of 2003 that read: India will never be the first to use nuclear weapons but will use punitive retaliation in case deterrence fails. But over the last few years, the NFU position in India has been hit with increasing ambiguity (A. Singh, Singh, & Adhichwal, 2021). The credibility and sustainability of the doctrine have been questioned by the statements of some important Indian defence officials and political leaders. Remarkably, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said in August 2019: What is to happen in the future is dependent upon circumstances, which means that the NFU might be revisited according to the situation. In a 2016 book, Choices by a former National Security Advisor, Shivshankar Menon, notes that the Indian NFU may not extend to the cases of chemical or biological weapons, implying a more conditional meaning (A. Singh et al., 2021).

Such developments have prompted strategic analysts both at home and abroad to wonder whether India is slowly moving towards a first-use contingency posture, especially with the increased tensions with Pakistan and China. Conversely, such doctrinal ambiguity has not been witnessed in the case of

China in its NFU position. Chinese military publications and white papers, regardless of regional rivalries and modernization, have repetitively affirmed an absolute NFU pledge. Moreover, China has not taken up the counterforce rhetoric or deployment of battlefield nuclear weapons which could be similar to the strategic changes of India. The increased doctrinal difference between India and China on NFU has some strategic implications particularly in the Himalayas and beyond in terms of crisis stability.

Russia's Escalate-to-Deescalate Doctrine: Pre-emption as Strategy

Russia is the other pole of NFU. Contrary to China, Russia has explicitly retained the rights to use nuclear weapons as a first strike in response to a wide range of threats. Russian Federation official policy (2020) added that nuclear weapons could also be used in response to conventional aggression which threatens the existence of the Russian state, and in case of attacks on Russian nuclear command and control infrastructure (Doyle, 2021). This has been widely known as the escalate-to-deescalate approach an idea that small nuclear use in a local war would pressure the opponent to de-escalate on Russian conditions. Some attention has been paid to this doctrine in case of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Vladimir Putin has made several nuclear threats (direct or indirect) especially in 2022-2023 as the West stepped up its support to Ukraine (Abbasi & Khalid, 2021). Conversely, China has never used the threat of nuclear use in the conflicts with neighbors, such as Taiwan or the South China Sea. It has been maintaining that its nuclear force is of a defensive nature and has enshrined in a doctrine of minimum deterrence and NFU. This is a sharp contrast that highlights the normative restraint of China as opposed to the coercive use of nuclear signalling by Russia (Brown, 2021). In addition, Russia has thousands of tactical nuclear weapons, which indeed are supposed to be used in battlefield scenarios, thus signalling not only a hypothetical but an operational first use.

The United States and NATO: Strategic Ambiguity and Rejection of NFU

The US and its NATO partners have always opposed NFU. Although the U.S. administrations have occasionally reconsidered the potential adoption of such policy most recently in 2022 under President Joe Biden, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) still supported the old policy about the right to use nuclear weapons as the first resort in an extreme situation when it is necessary to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners (Propper, 2022). American refusal of NFU is based on the concept of strategic ambiguity, i.e. the failure to declare the line beyond which nuclear weapons will be used is believed to have the effect of strengthening deterrence because the enemy is confused. Nevertheless, opponents note that this strategy raises the risks of nuclear miscalculation, escalation, and reduces the nuclear war threshold (Hiim, Fravel, and Troan, 2023). The NATO policy is very much associated with that of the U.S and is characterized by flexible response strategies and forward deployment of nuclear forces in Europe. This stance was reinforced at the 2022 Strategic Concept of NATO, which reaffirmed the importance of nuclear deterrence in the face of an increased competition of great powers. The NFU in China is one form of normative and strategic challenge to Western nuclear maximalism in this global context (Turashvili). China stands out of the U.S.-led strategy by proclaiming and following NFU and tries to establish itself as a responsible nuclear power that supports the objectives of non-proliferation and disarmament of countries worldwide.

China has also tried to leverage its NFU pledge at a diplomatic level, in the form of appealing to the non-nuclear weapon states and Global South, in terms of promoting universalization of NFU. As an illustration, in the 10th NPT Review Conference in 2022, China called again on all nuclear powers to follow its lead and implement NFU, positing its own policy as an example of international restraint. In comparison, the NFU policy of China can be characterized as most consistent, unconditional and strategically restrained policy of all the nuclear powers in the world (S. Singh, 2020). Whereas the NFU in

India appears to be eroding, Russia has adopted first-use as the key element of its strategy and the US is still refusing to adopt NFU and instead maintaining flexibility in its deterrent options. It is against this background that the Chinese adherence to NFU does not only increase the credibility of their country but also in a normative sense, adding to the global debate on nuclear risk reduction and strategic stability (I. Hussain, 2024). When maintained under further modernization, the NFU doctrine in China can be used as an example of future arms control measures and trust-building process not only in Asia but also in general.

NFU and Global Nuclear Norms

Norm Entrepreneurship: China as a Restraint Advocate

The China's NFU policy has a long history, and it is not simply a statement of doctrine; it is a norm entrepreneurship process: an attempt to create an expectation that countries will not use nuclear arms first. China's NFU is emerging as a counter-norm in a world where the doctrine of pre-emptive nuclear use and ambiguity-based deterrence is becoming increasingly popular. The nature of the Chinese NFU is in its predictability, strategic discipline, and legal-moral signalling (Talmadge & Rovner, 2023). China has endeavoured continually to reinforce the more comprehensive normative discourse on responsible nuclear behaviour through its NFU status. As an example, during the 10th NPT Review Conference in 2022, China urged all nuclear-armed states to adopt NFU and repeated its commitment to not use and not to threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or in nuclear-weapon-free zones. This stance is quite appealing to Global South states, a majority of which are demanding less nuclear salience and the move towards disarmament (Haloho, Nugraha, & Maulani, 2020). The NFU policy of China also helps in the international pressure on nuclear armed states to define and restrain their nuclear policies. As compared to the strategic ambiguity that the U.S. and NATO are engaged in, the declaratory position of the Chinese makes the voices of transparency and accountability louder. Other scholars like Nina Tannenwald have observed that the pledges of NFU although not legally binding, are critical in creating the so called nuclear taboos and in the adjustment of the nuclear states (McKeon & Melamed, 2021). By upholding NFU, China stands out as the contrast to assertive stances of other powers and strengthens itself as the state interested in strategic stability rather than coercion.

Role in Arms Control and Disarmament: A Cautious but Credible Player

Although China has always been reserved towards the formal arms control agreements, its NFU doctrine offers a moral and political motive as to why it should promote global disarmament structures. It is notable that China is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and, still, it supports its three-pillar system non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful nuclear energy (Knopf, 2022). China is not a signatory to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), but its rhetoric has shown support of the objectives of nuclear disarmament, and it has not disclaimed the validity of the treaty like U.S., UK, and France, which have explicitly opposed the treaty (McKeon & Melamed, 2021). China has also engaged in multilateral negotiation processes like P5 Process which is a confidence building process between the five nuclear-weapon states that are recognized under NPT. China reaffirmed its NFU pledge and urged the lessening of the significance of nuclear weapons in national security strategies in the 2021 joint statement of P5.

More importantly, the arms control negotiating position of China is usually motivated by the fact that China is a late-comer in the nuclear exclusive club. China is worried about the asymmetry in the nuclear forces and the missile defence systems, the result of which will be a reduction in its retaliatory power in the event of premature commitment to binding disarmament measures based on an arsenal that is much smaller (Blackaby, Goldblat, & Lodgaard, 2020). However, the normative leverage that the arsenal

of China, with its relatively moderate and survivability-oriented capabilities, gives to China is its NFU doctrine. It enables China to pursue what it calls arms control in a posture of restraint: the promotion of risk reduction and crisis stability even before it is involved in quantitative reduction negotiations.

Strategic Implications and Regional Security

Stability in East Asia: Reinforcing Predictability

The NFU policy of China has been of great use in strategic stability in East Asia, especially with Japan and South Korea who are the closest allies of the United States and potential hotbeds of nuclear proliferation. Although Japan is a non-nuclear weapon state in the NPT, has a well-developed civilian nuclear energy program coupled with the technical possibility to weaponize in case of security threats (R. Hussain, 2020). The presence of China's NFU assists Japan in reducing its fears of imminent nuclear attack and it also relieves the internal pressure to amend its Three Non-Nuclear Principles. In the same fashion, South Korea has been affected by the dialogue on nuclear armament within the state in opposition to the developing capabilities of North Korea. The Chinese NFU pledge of consistency can contribute to the diminution of a two-front nuclear threat (both Pyongyang and Beijing), which will decrease the incentive of nuclearization in the region (Bugos, 2021). China NFU helps to prevent the proliferation of the security dilemmas in East Asia where historical animosities and military rivalries can easily trigger into a full-blown conflict. It also helps in Track II dialogues and crisis de-escalation mechanisms, which are the key tools of managing flashpoints in the region (Holdren, 2020).

Cross-Strait Deterrence and Taiwan: Avoiding Nuclear Signalling

The Taiwan Strait is still one of the most dangerous security hotspots in the world. With the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and the PLA Navy carrying out more and more flights and ship visits around the island in recent years, culminating in a record 1,700 incursions into Taiwanese ADIZ in 2023, according to Taiwanese Ministry of Defence, there has been an increased fear of escalation (Hiim, 2024). But even with all this tension, China has never engaged in nuclear signalling under Taiwan. China has not resorted to nuclear rhetoric as Russia did when invading Ukraine in its invasion of Taiwan during military exercises or political crises.

Further, the NFU of China increases the plausibility of its argument that it aims at peaceful reunification, since a first-use posture would be inconsistent with the internal rhetoric and the foreign promotion of sovereignty and non-intervention. As much as it is known that Beijing is in an ongoing military build-up across the Taiwan Strait, its decision not to resort to a nuclear rhetoric aid in the larger regional stability. This is opposed to American nuclear ambiguity that still leaves room to use nuclear weapons to defend allies, a factor that has led to a misperception and counter-escalation cycle (Leveringhaus, 2022).

Implications for U.S.–China Strategic Stability

In the larger context of the U.S. and China relations, the NFU policy of China acts as force of stability against the growing distrust and strategic competitiveness. Even the 2023 China Military Power Report published by the U.S. Department of Defence recognizes NFU as one of the factors that help stabilize the situation, despite the increasing unease about the growing Chinese nuclear weapons force (Ikeda, 2023). China NFU mitigates the possibility of accidental or unintentional nuclear escalation in possible hotspots like Taiwan, the South China Sea or cyber-related conflicts by strengthening the message that its nuclear forces are not designed to be used pre-emptively. This stance brings in more predictability and creates avenues of crisis communication and strategic risk mitigation between the two powers (Logan & Saunders, 2023). Moreover, NFU also can be a useful bargaining chip in the future arms control negotiations. China can increase its adherence to NFU as its capabilities expand and it extends its international presence, which may lead to trust in bilateral talks and increase mutual deterrence

through the elimination of worst-case assumptions of both sides. Combined, the NFU policy of China is both a component of its nuclear policy and a normative and strategic resource with an extensive scope of application (Twomey, 2021). It helps advance nuclear restraint values worldwide and enable stability in East Asia and minimize the likelihood of a U.S. and China nuclear confrontation (Loretz, 2023). China has maintained a stable NFU policy, which remains one of the most important sources of nuclear risk mitigation, strategic predictability, and peace in the region, at a time when geopolitical uncertainty is rising, and arms control architecture is in decline.

Conclusion

Although the nuclear No-First Use (NFU) policy of China has been faced with critical evaluation in policy circles as well as the academic discussion, it comes out in this critical assessment as a very stable, consistent, and strategically rational aspect of its nuclear doctrine. Founded on the doctrines of minimum deterrence, centralized command and control, and a declared policy of restraint, China NFU doctrine is a long-standing policy of nuclear stability and not opportunistic signalling. Beijing has been standing out against the worldwide tendency of vague or menacing nuclear policies almost since the end of the Second World War. Contrary to the escalate-to-deescalate approach of Russia, the increasing conditionality of India's NFU, or the abhorrence of NFU held by the U.S. China has had a clean and unconditional promise: it will never initiate nuclear weapons use under any circumstance. This doctrine has remained resolute even amidst crisis-such as military tensions between the two countries with India, the growing confrontation with Taiwan, and the proliferation of American missile defence systems in the Indo-Pacific-giving credence to the claim that China NFU is not an empty political play, but a doctrinaire strategic precept.

It is reasonable to have certain doubts, especially about the Chinese nuclear modernization, the black-box nature of PLA command, and possible crisis behaviour, these observations tend to be hypothetical or speculative, instead of being based on empirical data of evolving doctrine. Altogether, Chinese real force structure, warhead deployment, and political signalling all support the credibility of Chinese NFU position. As the world experiences a new great power rivalry, crumbling arms control accords and high rates of technology disruption, China NFU policy will not only reassure its region, but it may establish a normative basis of nuclear restraint in the future When maintaining its NFU doctrine and advancing it, China not only distinguishes itself within the nuclear order of the world but also participates in non-proliferation activities, confidence-building, and risk reduction discussions.

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